

Bell, David, and Porter, Gerald (eds.). 2008. *Riots in Literature*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

If you Google the word “riot” you get at least 8,500,000 hits. The term is clearly loaded with meaning, usually negative, synonymous with violence and uncontrolled crowd behaviour. Crowds run riot, noisily, yet their individual voices are usually silenced by what E. P. Thompson called “the enormous condescension of posterity”. Historians like Thompson have over the years sought to rescue riots and rioters from this condition of negative collective obscurity by revisiting the archives in search of the carnivalesque contribution of the common street crowd to the long march of everyman. It is within this democratic tradition of revisionist history-from-below that *Riots in Literature* should be seen.

This new collection of radically challenging essays differs, however, from these previous attempts to break through the collective silence of the street-fighting past in that the focus is shifted from historical to literary representations of riots and rioters. Such a literary turn proves to be as fascinating as it is fruitful, both in terms of the range of areas covered by the collection, as well as the revealing insights each of the contributions provide. Like the earlier “linguistic turn” in Chartist studies, the radical shift of emphasis in *Riots in Literature* represents a new and exciting redirection of research into the fractious link between literature and the discourse of power and popular unrest.

As Pascale Drouet points out in the first essay of the collection – “Popular Riot in Shakespeare’s *2 Henry VI*” – one of the key ideological issues at stake is that of representation and the relationship between “historical rebellion and fictional rendering” (1). In other words, how are the rioters portrayed and who’s doing the portraying? This is a recurring problematic that is explored in different ways in almost all of the contributions. It makes for fascinating and often politically contentious reading. In many cases, there is a clear dichotomy, as the editors also indicate in their introduction, between the negative image of rioters as an unruly “swinish multitude” and the more politically constructive one of a “legitimate gathering of rational beings exercising their rights” (xii). One classic starting-point in this context is, as Jukka Tiusanen reminds us in his essay, Carlyle’s *The French Revolution* (1837), which reflects a recurring ambivalence towards riots in history, as well as a more deep-

seated “anxiety about rapid social change” (21), not least the emergence of an organised working class.

Another very thought-provoking essay is Gerald Porter’s “Mythologizing the Imperial Project in Popular Narratives of the Indian Uprising of 1857”, where the focus is on “the reprisals carried out by members of the British army after the relief of Lucknow at the end of the rebellion, and their relation to representations in street literature of the rebellion and its suppression” (76). As can be inferred from the title, Porter turns the ideological tables as it were on the traditional concept of riots and explores instead the rampaging role of the British army, whose soldiers inflicted murder and mayhem on the rebellious city of Lucknow during the so-called “Indian mutiny”. Porter writes about the way this military mob rule was later celebrated in popular images of heroic British soldiers restoring law and order to a turbulent colonial people. As Porter suggests, this example of blatant ideological manipulation of the public perception of the ‘civilising mission’ of British forces abroad is not limited to the historical past, but continues today in the wars of intervention that are being carried out in postcolonial contexts today, such as Irak and Afghanistan.

A similarly critical interrogation of the riotous past can be found in Chloé Avril’s article, “Burn, Baby, Burn!: Walter Mosley’s *Little Scarlet* and the Watts Riots”, which contests the conventional view of this iconic event in Black American history as an explosion of mindless violence, seeing it instead as a more socially and politically motivated uprising against the racist structures of contemporary American society. Avril’s discussion forms part of a broader reappraisal of the history of the struggle for Black liberation in the U.S., not least through the work of Black writers of fiction like Walter Mosley. As Avril herself comments:

...perhaps more so than any other riot, Watts had the greatest impact on the national psyche and has remained a stark reminder to white America that the rage experienced by African Americans cannot always be contained. It is also significant to note that today many American writers still feel the need to return to this turbulent period in U.S. history. In terms of fiction, writers of crime novels, one of the most popular of literary genres, seem to have been particularly keen to engage with the issue of race riots in their work. (130)

There is, moreover, an important point raised in Avril’s article about these literary portrayals being able to throw new light on both the cause and effects of the riots, in particular through the dramatisation of these

104 *Reviews*

troubled events in terms of the thoughts and actions of the participants themselves. This is an insight that can be applied to many of the texts taken up in the other essays in the collection. What really happened? is the question that historians traditionally try to answer. The authors of this ground-breaking collection all point to a rich but neglected source of knowledge – literature – that can help us discern the articulation of voices, both individual and collective, that are normally blurred in the stereotyped roar of the crowd in history.

Ronald Paul
University of Gothenburg, Sweden