



## *Romanticism on the Net*

### **Wood**

Fiona Stafford  
University of Oxford

#### **Abstract**

This essay attempts to see the wood *and* the trees by considering a selection of entries in *RÊVE (Romantic Europe: The Virtual Exhibition)*. Living trees in the landscape are here included alongside products fashioned from timber to draw attention to the often-neglected dimensions of wooden items. While the sources of wood are rooted in particular places, objects made from timber are able to move and accrue meaning through use and association. The essay moves from the Selborne Yew, made famous in the Romantic period by Gilbert White, to a tea caddy derived from another contemporary literary celebrity, Yardley Oak, before considering travel boxes owned by Teresa Guiccioli and Byron and the implications of furniture fashions for the survival of rare arboreal species. The essay is concerned with different kinds of value, as influenced by commercial markets, fashion, quality, literary and historic association, and environmental concerns. It thus considers a Stradivari violin and an Ayrshire fiddle, a Mauchline ware binding and a literary monument set among living trees.

#### **Biographical Note**

Fiona Stafford is Professor of English at the University of Oxford and a Fellow of the British Academy. She has wide interests in the Romantic period and is also a nature writer and broadcaster. Recent books include *A Brief Life of Flowers*; *Jane Austen: A Brief Life*; *The Long, Long, Life of Trees*; *Reading Romantic Poetry*; *Local Attachments*; and *Time and Tide: The Long, Long Life of Landscape*.

1. When we encounter wood in museums, it is usually fulfilling the same role. Admittedly, it is a very varied role, unconfined by size or shape and adapted to many different purposes. Whether it takes the form of a chair or a chariot, chess set or settle, a spear shaft or pencil,

***Romanticism on the Net #80–81 (Spring–Fall 2023)***

a parrot umbrella head or a Pierrot puppet, a decorative door or a duck decoy, a harp or a harpsichord, cradle or coffin, a bowl, a ball or a bed, wood is serving its age-old function of providing material for humankind. Among the world's oldest surviving artefacts are tools that once incorporated wood and were probably used for chopping it up – axe heads, fashioned 45,000 years ago, and thought to have belonged to an early style of hatchet. (Hiscock et al.). Around the globe, across the centuries, basic human needs for shelter, fuel, and transport have been met by wood – so it is unsurprising to find it featuring within almost any museum in the world. In a virtual museum, the potential of wood as an object of fascination is even broader. For not only can an electronic exhibition display any artefact of interest, but also living phenomena – including the kind of wood that has yet to become material for human beings to reshape. Wood, in its pre-crafted, pre-timber state, is better known as a tree. One of the many virtues of the virtual exhibition is that a tree can be photographed and uploaded just as easily as a table. Anyone anywhere who has access to a screen can scrutinise a distant object or scene on their own desk – at once, something firmly rooted in the material world acquires global mobility. And this makes wood an especially resonant subject for *RÊVE (Romantic Europe: The Virtual Exhibition)*.

2. In the English language, the original meaning of *wood* was “A tree” (“Wood n.1,” def. 1.1a). Only secondarily, as far as the records of Old English informing the *OED*'s definition indicate, the meaning of *wood* was then transferred and applied to objects made from trees or their branches, such as a ship, a spear, or the Cross. These meanings are now obsolete, but the dual meaning of *wood* continued to include both the “substance of which the roots, trunks, and branches of trees or shrubs consist; trunks or other parts of trees collectively

(whether growing or cut down ready for use)” and, from 1300, “as prepared for and used in arts and crafts” (“Wood n.1,” def. 2.6a; 2.6b). To refer to something made from wood as *wood* only appears some centuries later, in 1683. When thinking about *wood* in relation to the virtual exhibition then, it all begins with a tree.



Fig. 1. The Selborne Yew. Fiona Stafford, “The Selborn Yew,” *Romantic Europe: The Virtual Exhibition (RÊVE)*, 6 November 2020, <https://www.euromanticism.org/the-selborne-yew/>.

3. [The Selborne Yew](#) (fig. 1), the subject of my first entry in *RÊVE*, makes a good starting point for thinking about wood more broadly. It is one of the few individual trees alive and growing in the Romantic period for which a detailed description and a visual representation survive. Gilbert White’s account and the accompanying illustration in *The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne* show the great yew as it was in the 1780s, with a spreading girth and vast canopy of dark branches and needles, large enough to obscure much of St

Mary's Church. Despite this vivid portrait of the natural wonder at a particular time, the tree would never be described as *late eighteenth century*. Unlike a contemporary wooden pulpit or pew, the churchyard yew is at once of White's time and beyond time – belonging to the present and the past, possessed of powerful immediacy, while reaching into the dim distance, the vanished years and those to come. White himself captures the yew's natural resistance to temporal placing by including it not under "Natural History," but in the second half of his book, along with all the other "Antiquities" of Selborne.

4. The Selborne yew is a natural antiquity: it is something of an oxymoron, if we take "antiquity" to mean an ancient artefact, object, monument, or building. Can something that is alive be an antiquity?<sup>1</sup> Is it really an object? Or has the old tree a claim to be a subject, with a life of its own? During the eighteenth century, "it-narratives" became an established subgenre, but often traced the story of a man-made object such as a coin or a shoe or lock of hair (Blackwell; Blackwell et al.). A tree does not require fictional animation, because it is already alive, even though routinely treated as an inanimate object by human beings. The separation of subject and object is complicated by *wood* because the word refers to live branches and trunks as well as the timber cut from the living tree to be burned or shaped into objects. Material can change physically through natural processes, or through practical human interventions, but may also be transformed through subsequent associations, depending on what forms it takes and the fortunes of those forms. The meaning of *wood* is as unstable as the material itself is firm. A "wooden narrative" then has the potential to be unpredictable and resistant to any fixed perspective.

***Romanticism on the Net #80–81 (Spring–Fall 2023)***

5. The Selborne Yew is rooted in place, but not in time. It lived for many centuries, until its final demise in a severe winter storm in 1990. As the stump of an ancient tree, it is now dead; and yet what remains is bursting with life – with ivy and brambles and all the masses of insects and birds and fungi that a rotting tree stump supports. Once again, the boundaries between animate and inanimate, subject and object are unsettled – the yew tree is at once dead and alive because it sustains so many forms of life, real and metaphorical. This is a tree that has lived in the pages of White’s perennial bestseller as well as in the churchyard at St Mary’s, Selborne. It will continue to be alive as long as White attracts fresh readers (and providing the “Antiquities” section is included in modern editions). Richard Mabey’s fascination with both Gilbert White and the Selborne Yew has boosted the tree’s more recent reputation, while the burgeoning arboreal interests of today ensure fresh growth (*Nature Cure* 5, 166–74; *Gilbert White*). This is at once a subject for Romantic-period writers and a romantic object.
  
6. Though rooted and immovable, the yew is capable of mobility – and not just through the words of its many admirers. Once separated from the living trunk, yew wood is ready to metamorphosise and move. There is a great polished slice of the trunk just inside the church – other parts of the fallen tree were turned into wooden objects and sculptures. Richard Mabey, who witnessed the chaotic aftermath of the great tree’s collapse, saved a couple of logs. Over a decade later, when he left his home in the Chilterns to start a new life in East Anglia, they were among the few essentials he took with him and eventually had made into an artwork by a Norfolk sculptor. The rooted tree, so often an emblem of rootedness, wholeness, unity, and connection, has the capacity to move, to fragment, to metamorphose

***Romanticism on the Net #80–81 (Spring–Fall 2023)***

into mobile wooden objects. These may carry meaning from their origins, valued for the quality of the material or the source, or they might accrue new meanings from their new forms, as they pass from the bench or studio to owners, perhaps on to grateful recipients or new owners, until eventually finding permanent homes in museums. Nor is this the last chapter – since many pieces of wood have found fresh life in the virtual museum.

7. The contradictory character of *wood* as both tree and essential material, as something fixed in place and yet routinely turned into ships and sailed far away is more obvious with an oak than a yew. The seemingly endless metamorphoses of wood caught the imagination of Gilbert White's contemporary, William Cowper. His great blank verse poem "Yardley Oak" meditates on the many stages of an ancient tree – starting life as an acorn – "a bawble," "a cup and ball," before turning into a seedling, a twig, a sapling, which then grew steadily through centuries to become King of the Woods, "a giant bulk of girth enormous" (lines 17–50). Then followed the slow decline into rottenness, though even in decay the oak offers a home to other life forms – "a cave for owls to roost" (line 52). Even as the wood starts to disintegrate, the root remains "sound as the rock."



Fig. 2. Painting of Yardley Oak, Cowper and Newton Museum, Olney. Author's own photograph.

8. "Yardley Oak" was not published until after Cowper's death, when his friend and biographer William Hayley found it among his papers. Hayley concluded *The Life and Posthumous Writings of William Cowper* with the splendid discovery, presenting it to readers as an "Exquisite Fragment of a poem on a Vegetable Subject" (4: 433–50). Since he also included John Johnson's report on Yardley Oak, we know the tree's exact size and shape in 1804: 22 feet and 6.5 inches around the girth (4: 447–49; fig. 2). Johnson also noted that there were two oaks at Yardley, one sound, the other "quite in decay, a pollard

***Romanticism on the Net #80–81 (Spring–Fall 2023)***

and almost hollow.” Cowper’s meditation was probably inspired by observing both trees and their current condition.

9. Although firmly fixed in the spot it has occupied for centuries, the giant oak in his poem has lost limbs, which have been used for nothing more dignified than firewood. “Yardley Oak” is a fable of survival against the odds, not least the contemporary demand for oak timber. Ironically, the very process of rotting now keeps Yardley Oak safe from shipbuilders – “At thy firmest age,” Cowper acknowledges,

Thou hadst within thy bole solid contents  
That might have ribbed the side or plank’d the deck  
Of some flagg’d Admiral, and tortuous arms,  
The shipwright’s darling treasure . . . . (lines 94–97)

The timber from mature oaks was needed not only for the main body of the ship (some two thousand trees went into a flagship such as HMS Victory), but also for the brackets and angles of the interior. Their immensely strong, twisted limbs provided ready-made “knee timber,” for slicing into the required pieces. The poem was written in 1791, towards the end of a century of naval warfare and global trade which relied entirely on oak-built ships. Yardley Oak’s survival in this timber-hungry period is miraculous, which may account for some of the reverence evident in Cowper’s poem.



### ***Romanticism on the Net #80–81 (Spring–Fall 2023)***

10. During the Romantic period, wood was in demand for numerous purposes – timber from oaks, poplars, elms, pines, ashes, beeches, sycamores, holly, or hawthorn was needed for decorative, luxury, and household items, building materials such as doors, floorboards, and beams, as well as logs and boats. Such practical demands often endangered the lives of trees, but sometimes extended them, as with the practice of pollarding, which involved slicing through branches rather than felling, turning a tree into a sustainable supplier of timber.
11. The metamorphosis of a piece of wood from tree into human artefact often secured its future too – a well-made wooden door or floor can last for centuries, as can a valuable carving or high-quality piece of furniture. The survival of certain old wooden objects, though, results from their acquired associations rather than the quality of the original workmanship – on their imaginative, rather than practical, value. The little Summer House in Cowper’s garden at Orchardside in Olney (fig. 3), with its old wooden seats, floorboards, and door might have stood little chance had it not been for Cowper’s writings.
12. Literature and memory can claim to be the most effective kinds of wood preservative, as Nicola Watson explores in her discussion of “Furniture” in *The Author’s Effects*. As with Jane Austen’s “battered, undistinguished, and rather rickety” writing table, an object glowing with the association of a great writer can have a shelf life far in excess of other pieces of the same style and vintage – especially if sited in its famous owner’s home or garden (105).



Fig. 3. William Cowper's Summer House, Orchardside, Olney. Author's own photograph.

13. Writers have the power to give new life to wood – whether in the old sense of a tree or the more familiar modern sense of objects made from its timber. William Hayley not only published Cowper's "Yardley Oak," he also had a piece of oakwood from the tree made into a [tea caddy](#) (fig. 4). The beautiful polished oak box is on display in the poet's former home, now the Cowper and Newton Museum (Brant). Inlaid marquetry allows a suitable line from Cowper's *The Task* to set the mood: "the cups that cheer but not inebriate" (bk 4, 39–40). Unlike alcohol, tea was an innocent beverage, ideally suited for facilitating friendship and keeping gloom at bay – and, as far as Hayley was concerned, a perfect

reminder of William Cowper and his quiet intimacies. The tea caddy is a casket of literary conviviality, deepened by the realisation that the line from *The Task* draws directly on George Berkeley's *Siris, A Chain of Philosophical Reflexions and Inquiries Concerning the Virtues of Tar Water* (1744): writers and readers share their cheering cups imaginatively as the caddy opens up.<sup>2</sup>



Fig. 4. William Hayley's Tribute Tea Caddy, Cowper and Newton Museum, Olney. Clare Brant, "William Cowper's Tribute Tea Caddy," *Romantic Europe: The Virtual Exhibition (RÊVE)*, 1 June 2020, <https://www.euromanticism.org/william-hayleys-tribute-tea-caddy/>.

14. The box derives directly from Yardley Oak – the tree with the deepest personal significance for Hayley because of his admiration and affection for Cowper. It is akin to a sacred relic, or perhaps an Aladdin's Lamp, since a cup of tea brewed from its contents would surely be more than merely cheering. Cowper had been inspired to the heights of poetic creation by Yardley Oak, so what might be the effect of a caddy made from its wood on those lucky

enough to imbibe? It is as if Cowper's muse is residing in the dried tea leaves, waiting to spring to life and refresh his poetic heirs.

15. The more obvious content of the caddy depended on oaks too – those pollarded or felled for the shipyard and bound for the furthest reaches of the globe. Whether the box was filled with desiccated leaves from India or China, the cups of cheer steamed with aromas redolent of the East. The polished oak caddy, cosy, local, quintessentially English, signals to another kind of Englishness altogether – a more adventurous, entrepreneurial, imperial kind. The immediate source was Yardley Oak, but the tea caddy harks back to Pope's *Windsor Forest*, too, and an eighteenth-century vision of peace built on world trade. The tea caddy mingles the local and the global, just as oak trees did in the age of sail. It is now at Olney, where it belongs, but as a portable item, it also demonstrates the power of wood to travel. Yardley Oak might have remained rooted, but oak wood went far and wide.



Fig. 5. Teresa Guiccioli's travelling chest, Istituzione Biblioteca Classense, Ravenna. Diego Saglia, "Teresa Guiccioli's Travelling Chest," *Romantic Europe: The Virtual Exhibition (RÈVE)*, 11 October 2019, <https://www.euromanticism.org/teresa-guicciolis-travelling-chest/>.

16. Hayley's sturdy polished tea caddy bears some resemblance and fruitful comparison with another item in the virtual exhibition. Teresa Guiccioli's travelling companion – [a wooden box](#) (fig. 5; Saglia) for keeping her toiletries and personal items, including love letters and body parts from Lord Byron. It is a portable safe for precious treasures, now safely housed within the Istituzione Biblioteca Classense in Ravenna. Originally, the chest was a practical item for the early-nineteenth-century traveller, strong enough to withstand the shocks and knocks of a carriage ride. This again demonstrates the mobile capacity of strong wood, robust and ready to travel. But, like the Cowper Tea Caddy, the Guiccioli chest is a kind of reliquary, smooth on the outside and yet filled with memories. Packed with material touched by her great poet and lover, its purpose was to keep alive a love cut off, a life lamented. The travelling box is at once a coffin and a casket, and a kind of cradle too, nurturing and protective. Unlike Hayley's caddy, with its invitation to share a cheering cup, the contents of the chest were private, the memories residing within, belonging only to the poet's bereft lady. Where the caddy at Olney seems open to any sympathetic visitor, the travelling chest in Ravenna makes viewers feel like voyeurs.

17. Despite some outward similarity, Teresa Guiccioli's box is not made of oak, but mahogany – an exotic import, deep red, expensive, sophisticated, and utterly befitting the countess and her lost love. It is made from the same kind of wood as [the case containing Byron's decanters and glasses](#) (fig. 6) at Newstead Abbey. A gift from the "Banker Poet" Samuel Rogers, the decanter set is suitably extravagant and the height of fashion, with its polished mahogany container (May). More sociable than the travelling chest, these are spirits intended to cheer *and* inebriate – a different kind of poetic fraternising from Cowper's

modest tea parties. The mahogany decanter case smacks of wealthy, well-to-do dinners, anecdotes, politics, and literary opinion exchanged among well-fed gentlemen.



Fig. 6. Case containing Byron's decanters and glasses, Newstead Abbey. Charlotte May, "The Decanters Samuel Rogers Gave to Lord Byron," *Romantic Europe: The Virtual Exhibition (RÊVE)*, 25 September 2020, <https://www.euromanticism.org/the-decanters-samuel-rogers-gave-to-lord-byron/>.

18. Mahogany, a deeply coloured wood, which develops a rich red-brown sheen when polished, was far more desirable in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe than many of the more easily available local timbers. In Britain especially, the demand for mahogany furniture was insatiable (Bowett). Since it was extremely strong as well as beautiful, the tropical hardwood was the perfect material for making high-quality, long-lasting travelling

***Romanticism on the Net #80–81 (Spring–Fall 2023)***

chests and cases. The mahogany tree, *Swietenia*, is native to the Caribbean and Central and South America, a region stretching from Mexico to Cuba, from Florida to Peru. Spain was early to seize the advantage of mahogany timber, felling thousands of trees for ship building. After Britain took Jamaica from Spain in the seventeenth century, mahogany timber was one of the high value resources to be exploited. As Elaine Freedgood emphasises in her perceptive analysis of Jane Eyre's choice of furniture, when the first mahogany planks arrived in Britain, the "beauty of the wood was so striking" that demand for items made from the Jamaican timber soared. The enormous popularity of mahogany in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries eventually led to the depletion of vast forests that had been thriving for centuries. Although "mahogany" continues to be harvested from a variety of commercially grown tropical hardwoods in other parts of the world, the timber regarded as "true mahogany" comes from *Swietenia*, which is now on the international "At Risk" register – or, as it is officially known, the Appendices of the Convention of International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES 74; the Appendices list the world's Critically Endangered species). Trade in *Swietenia* is heavily regulated and banned in some countries, but continues illegally. One of the unhappier legacies of the Romantic period is the widespread deforestation of Jamaican mahogany stands to feed British demand for beautiful furniture. In an irony of history, tastes turned against "brown furniture" at the start of the twenty-first century, rendering the solid, mahogany chairs, tables, and desks that graced Georgian and Victorian dining rooms unfashionable. Domestic fashions can lead not only to the stripping of ancient tropical forests but also to the destruction of the items made from the imported timber. The narratives of wood can take tragic as well as sentimental turns.

19. The mahogany cases treasured for the past two centuries as sacred relics of Lord Byron may be acquiring a new kind of rarity value as the wood from which they were made becomes largely unobtainable. Though not yet viewed as negatively as ivory, growing awareness of the vulnerability of *Sweitenia* may gradually change perceptions of mahogany items. In the twenty-first century, the travelling box and the decanter set may accrue unwelcome associations with extractive industry, species loss, and global warming – not to mention the slave labour involved in the eighteenth-century timber trade. These troubling implications may in turn raise broader questions about the different kinds of value represented by museum pieces.
20. As evident from the objects discussed so far, wood was an indicator of wealth, class, and taste during the Romantic period. Imported timber, which inevitably incurred high costs on its long journey from Jamaican forests to European drawing rooms, was an easily readable sign of a comfortable income. Indigenous timbers also varied in price, depending on the relative abundance or rarity of different tree species or on the purposes for which the wood could be used. Oak wood, with its unparalleled strength, beauty, and status, commanded high prices, while sycamore, though also strong, was far less highly prized. Sycamore wood tended to be turned into items for the kitchen rather than the grand dining room, while other plentiful trees such as hornbeam ended up as fuel for ovens rather than material for decorative items (Stafford, *Long, Long Life*). Cherrywood, on the other hand, was highly sought after for aesthetic reasons: the beautiful colour, grain, and quality of the polished wood.



21. As the virtual museum demonstrates, however, the value of a wooden object also depends on who got hold of the timber. A Regency decanter set in a sturdy mahogany case still commands a respectable sum at auction, but a Regency decanter set belonging to Byron makes the figure soar. The longer narrative of wooden objects is greatly determined by their owners: anything belonging to Byron is likely to be treasured and therefore preserved.



Fig. 7. The “Messiah” Violin, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. Robert Samuels, “The ‘Messiah’ Violin,” *Romantic Europe: The Virtual Exhibition (RÊVE)*, 7 February 2020, <https://www.euromanticism.org/the-messiah-violin/>.

22. Although a literary or celebrity association will always add value, it will not necessarily trump every consideration. If we compare two examples in *RÊVE*, competing kinds of value, as determined by international markets, intrinsic quality, manufacturer’s reputation, cultural interest, historic or national importance, are immediately evident. Both items are highly valued, which is why they are included in a virtual as well as real museum, and both

***Romanticism on the Net #80–81 (Spring–Fall 2023)***

have ostensibly similar functions. The first object is [the Messiah violin](#) (fig. 7; Samuels) made by Antonio Stradivari at the height of his powers. The second is [a fiddle](#) (fig. 8; Morin) owned by Robert Burns's dancing master, William Gregg. The Stradivarius is on display in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, the fiddle at the Robert Burns Birthplace Museum in Alloway. The violin was preserved by Stradivari himself, as a showpiece for his art, before being left to his son for safekeeping and then descending through a long line of admiring collectors (Samuels). The Scottish fiddle remained in the Gregg family for many years until discovered by William Galbraith in 1995 and restored for active service in the Ayrshire fiddle Orchestra before finally being given to the Burns Museum (Morin).



Fig. 8. Fiddle owned by Robert Burns's dancing master. Robert Burns Birthplace Museum, Alloway. Cameron Morin, "The Fiddle that Taught Robert Burns His Manners," *Romantic Europe: The Virtual Exhibition (RÊVE)*, 18 January 2019, <https://www.euromanticism.org/the-fiddle-that-taught-robert-burns-his-manners/>.

23. Both instruments are now treasured, but for different reasons – neither entirely dependent on the choice of wood. The Messiah is made from spruce and maple, while the Ayrshire

***Romanticism on the Net #80–81 (Spring–Fall 2023)***

fiddle is pine. Undoubtedly, Stradivari's choice of timber is the best for violins, but it is the astonishing skill of its creator that has secured its fame as a perfect musical instrument. The interest of the Ayrshire fiddle, on the other hand, resides not in the reputation of the instrument maker but in a rather tenuous association with a great poet. Which is more valuable? This may seem a redundant question given Stradivari's worldwide reputation as the finest violin maker of all time and the associated auction prices commanded by his work, but the answer may nevertheless depend on how much Robert Burns means to the individual.

24. Pine may be a less expensive wood and less likely to produce acoustics as fine as maple and spruce, but it could hardly be more fitting for Caledonia's Bard. Scots Pine, like Robert Burns, is not only native to but has become a symbol of Scotland. The pine used for the fiddle is not an expensive imported wood, but a material grown locally: a common tree for an instrument played by and used to entertain the common man. What could be better for the great Scottish poet whose famous songs include "A Man's a Man for a' That"? The homely quality of the wood, the decoration, the sound of a fiddle all evoke rural Scotland and Scottish tradition, both essential aspects of the object's appeal. What's more, the Ayrshire fiddle was made to be played, unlike the Messiah, which Stradivari kept and which remained in the possession of collectors until it was given to the Ashmolean in 1939 (Ashmolean Museum).

25. The Ayrshire violin has a sociable, down-to-earth, rustic character, in keeping with nineteenth-century notions of Burns. Even if the poet never took more than a student's

### ***Romanticism on the Net #80–81 (Spring–Fall 2023)***

notice of the tunes and rhythms issuing from it as he concentrated on his steps, the fiddle has survived largely on his account. Robert Burns's contemporary fame endowed any objects or places with which he was associated with a special aura, especially in the wake of his untimely death. This was a very advantageous to William and Andrew Smith, who began manufacturing attractive snuffboxes in Mauchline during the 1820s and whose business rapidly grew to keep pace with the Scottish tourist trade. Mauchline boxes, mostly made from sycamore wood, could be decorated with local Ayrshire scenes, familiar near and far from Burns's poems and the story of his life. According to J. S. Buist, some of the light oakwood products were made from trees in Gavin Hamilton's Garden or, better still, sourced from "the house in Mauchline which was the first home of Robert Burns and Jean Armour after their wedding in 1788." Such an origin was guaranteed to enhance Mauchline products: these were unbespoke versions of Hayley's Yardley Oak tea caddy, less expensive but aimed at a larger market. The Smiths were a Mauchline family, but their business benefitted greatly from the years Burns had spent there on his farm.

26. Mauchline ware, which enjoyed great popularity in the nineteenth century, was by no means limited to sons of Ayrshire and their followers, as evident in another item from *RÊVE*. Instead of the hand-tooled leather bindings favoured by gentlemen for their family libraries, [the Mauchline ware cover](#) (fig. 9; Bell), with its light, polished wood, grounds a standard Victorian edition of Scott's *Marmion* in the Scottish landscape. The gift volume, now part of the collection of the National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh, not only has a carefully created rustic charm designed to appeal to a later nineteenth-century audience, but also links Scott with Burns through the Mauchline association (Bell). Although the

***Romanticism on the Net #80–81 (Spring–Fall 2023)***

sycamore tree from which the cover derives may well have been felled in Ayrshire, the cover image of Abbotsford encourages the idea that it is made from timber cut beside the Tweed. The small detail at the foot of the wooden cover “from the Banks of the Tweed” could be interpreted as a reference to the source of the wood or to the spot from which the picturesque view of Scott’s tall, gabled mansion was taken. As with Hayley’s tea caddy, the suggestion of a material connection to the poet is once again implicit – and strengthened by Scott’s great reputation as a tree planter. Since the book cover dates from the 1880s, it would not be difficult for the owner to imagine that the poet who planted a thousand trees might have been responsible for the one that had now yielded wood for this decorative cover.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, those who recognised the cover as Mauchline ware, might find Burns’s presence enhancing their enjoyment of Scott’s home and this poem.

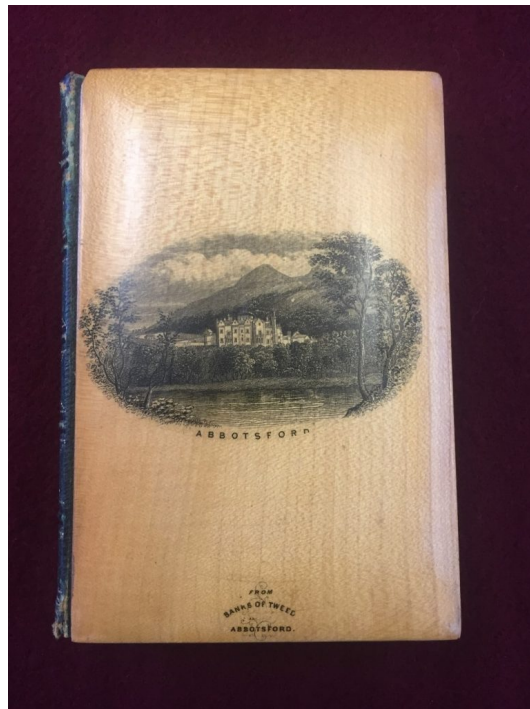


Fig. 9. A gift volume of Walter Scott’s verse in a Mauchline binding. Bill Bell, “A Mauchline Binding,” *Romantic Europe: The Virtual Exhibition (RÊVE)*, 12 February 2021, <https://www.euromanticism.org/a-mauchline-binding/>.

27. The gift book, like so many other items of Mauchline ware, was perfect for the Victorian tourist, but since Scottish tourism was so indebted to Scott and Burns, it was appealing on many levels. As a souvenir of Scott and Scotland, the book was also ready for being carried far from Abbotsford or Mauchline, revealing once again the mobility of wood. Through this object, part of Scott's physical legacy could be purchased and taken away, to remind lovers of Scottish poetry and scenery of the land that fostered genius. The Mauchline ware book carried Scott's narrative poem on its own wooden narrative journey.
28. Scott is often credited with putting Scotland on the tourist trail, when he published *The Lady of the Lake* in 1812, but he was building on tastes that had been growing for the previous half-century (Brown; Kelley; Watson, *Literary Tourist*). The influence of William Gilpin's signature vignettes, with framing trees and rivers flowing through the foreground, is immediately obvious in the oval portrait of Abbotsford on the book cover. The idea of visiting sublime or beautiful landscapes had been pioneered by the father of the picturesque in his popular series of late eighteenth-century *Tours*. Gilpin also integrated literary allusions and favourite quotations into his distinctive descriptions of the views he most admired. The numerous tourists who followed in his footsteps were thus conditioned as much by Gilpin's literary influences as by his firm advice on how best to see what was in front of them (or rather behind, if they were travelling with a Claude Glass). Picturesque tourism was a poetic as well as visual experience – the landscape was viewed through oval lenses and enhanced by memorable lines. Gilpin did not live long enough to incorporate Scott's poetry into his travel writing, but in his *Observations Relative Chiefly to the*



*Picturesque Beauty ... of the Highlands of Scotland*, he was frequently reminded of Robert Burns and included the whole of “The Cotter’s Saturday Night” as an example of the uncomplaining character of the Scottish peasant (1: 215–21). He also took issue with what he regarded as Samuel Johnson’s “peevishness,” especially in relation to Scotland’s trees, praising the beauties of Scots pines and firs (2: 119, 123–24).



Fig. 10. Ossian’s Hall, Perthshire. Jonathan Falla, “Ossian’s Hall,” *Romantic Europe: The Virtual Exhibition (RÊVE)*, 20 February 2019. <https://www.euromanticism.org/ossians-hall/>.

29. Among the highlights of Gilpin’s highland tour was his visit to Ossian’s Hall at the Hermitage, just outside Dunkeld. [Ossian’s Hall](#) (fig. 10), on the banks of the River Braan in Perthshire, was originally built as a summerhouse in 1757 for the Duke of Atholl, but was remodelled in 1782–83 when the fashion for Ossian was at its height (Falla). Gilpin was rather taken aback by the coloured glass that made the falls below appear to turn

### ***Romanticism on the Net #80–81 (Spring–Fall 2023)***

different colours, but his account still encouraged subsequent travellers, intrigued by what he had seen. William and Dorothy Wordsworth visited the Hermitage on their Scottish tour in 1803, when they were given a tour by the gardener, who was keener to show them the larch trees that had been introduced on his master's estate. The Duke of Atholl's well-known interest in trees make this an important site for this essay and what is of particular interest in relation to this "object" in *RÊVE* is the setting of Ossian's Hall. Here is an object resonating with literary significance, created for imaginative transport, and set in the midst of a living landscape. The Romantic building is surrounded by living trees – birches, Scots pines, Douglas firs. The living trees are part of the virtual museum, not on their own account but by virtue of their situation beside the cultural site. Historic and environmental heritage meet at the Hermitage.

30. These are not particular trees like the Selborne Yew, with literary and historical associations. They are living trees, with every probability of experiencing future growth. What will happen to their timber is as yet unknown. They may continue to grow and fulfil their natural life cycles, or they may be pruned or felled, should they begin to pose a threat to Ossian's Hall or its visitors. Their timber may one day provide material for future objects that may in turn acquire imaginative life, depending on whose hands or homes they end up in. Wood from these trees might be turned into items that belong to a great writer of the future.

31. Whether as paper, pencils, chairs, or desks, or as the inspiration for a key image or setting in a poem, play or novel, once associated with a leading writer some of today's living tree



### ***Romanticism on the Net #80–81 (Spring–Fall 2023)***

trunks may become tomorrow's museum items. Conscious of this, the contemporary artist Katie Pattison has created a *Future Museum* in Norway, where today's literary giants are depositing manuscripts with a view to being published in a hundred years' time and printed on paper made from the spruce trees currently being planted in the forest.

32. To reflect on the physical origins of objects treasured for their associations with creative artists – to think about the prehistory of the wooden desk, tea caddy, box, or violin and their journeys away from living trees – entails thinking about the fortunes, or fates, of trees more broadly. Beneath their beautifully polished surfaces, mahogany items from the Romantic period carry a hidden history of the perennial human hunger for natural resources – and the difficulty of restraining such appetites. Reflection on wooden objects also encourages speculation on the afterlife of trees. If we follow the cycle from living organism to wooden object, as Cowper did in “Yardley Oak” – and as Hayley did in his tribute tea caddy – we can see that the caddy is not an end in itself, but part of a long narrative which may well continue as later writers seek inspiration from cheering cups of tea or visits to the Cowper and Newton Museum or the virtual exhibition. Trees are routinely felled for timber, but their wood acquires new life through association with those who respond variously and imaginatively to their legacy. Seen in this light, the virtual museum is a kind of loose epic or long novel, bringing together numerous individual narratives, which take new turns as they move into different contexts. It is an evolving, rather than static space, full of virtual mobility, a museum that makes its visitors look forward as well as into the past.

***Romanticism on the Net #80–81 (Spring–Fall 2023)***

**Works Cited**

- Ashmolean Museum Oxford. "Messiah Violin, by Stradivari." *Ashmolean*, <https://www.ashmolean.org/messiah-violin-stradivari>. Accessed 5 September 2022.
- Baird, John D., and Charles Ryskamp, eds. *The Poems of William Cowper*. Clarendon Press, 1980–95. 3 vols.
- Bell, Bill. "A Mauchline Binding." *Romantic Europe: The Virtual Exhibition (RÊVE)*, 12 February 2021, <https://www.euromanticism.org/a-mauchline-binding/>.
- Blackwell, Mark, ed. *The Secret Life of Things: Animals, Objects and It-Narratives in Eighteenth-Century England*. Bucknell UP, 2007.
- Blackwell, Mark, et al., eds. *British It-Narratives, 1750–1830*. Routledge, 2012. 4 vols.
- Bowett, Adam. "The English Mahogany Trade 1700–1793." 1996. U of Buckingham, PhD dissertation. Core, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/288218482.pdf>. Accessed 5 September 2022.
- Brant, Clare. "William Cowper's Tribute Tea Caddy." *Romantic Europe: The Virtual Exhibition (RÊVE)*, 1 June 2020, <https://www.euromanticism.org/william-hayleys-tribute-tea-caddy/>.
- Brown, Ian, ed. *Literary Tourism, the Trossachs, and Walter Scott*. ASLS, 2010.
- Buist, J. S. "Mauchline Ware." *Burns Chronicle*, 1977, pp. 16–22.
- Burns Robert. *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*. Kilmarnock, 1786.
- Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). "Appendices." *CITES*, <https://cites.org/sites/default/files/eng/app/2023/E-Appendices-2023-05-21.pdf>. Accessed 5 September 2022.
- Cowper, William. *The Task*. London, 1785.

***Romanticism on the Net #80–81 (Spring–Fall 2023)***

- . “Yardley Oak.” *The Poems of William Cowper, 1785–1800*, edited by John D. Baird and Charles Ryskamp, Clarendon Press, 1995, pp. 78–79. Vol. 3 of *The Poems of William Cowper*.
- Falla, Jonathan. “Ossian’s Hall.” *Romantic Europe: The Virtual Exhibition (RÊVE)*, 20 February 2019. <https://www.euromanticism.org/ossians-hall/>.
- Freedgood, Elaine. “Souvenirs of Sadism: Mahogany Furniture, Deforestation, and Slavery in Jane Eyre.” *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive meaning in the Victorian Novel*, U of Chicago P, 2006. <https://doi-org.ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/10.7208/chicago/9780226261546.003.0002>.
- Gilpin, William. *Observations Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty, Made in the Year 1776, on Several Parts of Great Britain, particularly the Highlands of Scotland*, London, 1789, 2 vols.
- Hayley, William. *The Life and Posthumous Writings of William Cowper, New and enlarged edn.* London, 1806. 4 vols.
- Hiscock, Peter, et al. “World’s Earliest Ground-Edge Axe Production Coincides with Human Colonisation of Australia.” *Australian Archaeology*, vol. 82, no. 1, 2016, pp. 2–11.
- Historic England. *Heritage and the Environment 2020*.  
<https://historicengland.org.uk/content/heritage-counts/pub/2020/heritage-environment-2020/>. Accessed 5 September 2022.
- Kelly, Stuart. *Scott-land: The Man who Invented a Nation*. Polygon, 2010.
- Mabey, Richard. *Gilbert White: A Biography of the Author of the Natural History of Selborne*. Century, 1986.
- . *Nature Cure*. Penguin, 2005.

***Romanticism on the Net #80–81 (Spring–Fall 2023)***

- May, Charlotte. “The Decanters Samuel Rogers Gave to Lord Byron.” *Romantic Europe: The Virtual Exhibition (RÊVE)*, 25 September 2020, <https://www.euromanticism.org/the-decanters-samuel-rogers-gave-to-lord-byron/>.
- Morin, Cameron. “The Fiddle that Taught Robert Burns His Manners.” *Romantic Europe: The Virtual Exhibition (RÊVE)*, 18 January 2019, <https://www.euromanticism.org/the-fiddle-that-taught-robert-burns-his-manners/>.
- Oliver, Susan. *Walter Scott and the Greening of Scotland*. Cambridge UP, 2021.
- Saglia, Diego. “Teresa Guiccioli’s Travelling Chest.” *Romantic Europe: The Virtual Exhibition (RÊVE)*, 11 October 2019, <https://www.euromanticism.org/teresa-guicciolis-travelling-chest/>.
- Samuels, Robert. “The ‘Messiah’ Violin.” *Romantic Europe: The Virtual Exhibition (RÊVE)*, 7 February 2020, <https://www.euromanticism.org/the-messiah-violin/>.
- Stafford, Fiona. *The Long, Long Life of Trees*. Yale UP, 2016.
- . “The Selborne Yew.” *Romantic Europe: The Virtual Exhibition (RÊVE)*, 6 November 2020, <https://www.euromanticism.org/the-selborne-yew/>.
- Watson, Nicola. *The Author’s Effects on Writer’s House Museums*. Oxford UP, 2020.
- . *The Literary Tourist*. Palgrave, 2006.
- White, Gilbert. *The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne in the County of Southampton*. London, 1789.
- “Wood n.1.” *Oxford English Dictionary Online*. Oxford UP.  
[https://www.oed.com/dictionary/wood\\_n1](https://www.oed.com/dictionary/wood_n1). Accessed 26 February 2024.

<sup>1</sup> A debate that is currently exercising those in the new field of environmental heritage (Historic England).

<sup>2</sup> George Berkeley: “whereas the luminous spirit lodged and detained in the native balsam of pines and firs is of a nature so mild, and benign, and proportioned to the human constitution, as to warm without heating, to cheer but not inebriate, and to produce a calm and steady joy like the effect of good news, without that sinking of spirits which is a subsequent effect of all fermented cordials” (*Works*, 5 [1953] 105), as noted by Baird and Ryskamp (2: 381n.)

<sup>3</sup> Susan Oliver has explored the literary and environmental significance of Scott’s tree planting and broader arboreal interests.