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## Fuel: an ecocritical history

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Fuel: an ecocritical history**, by Heidi C. M. Scott, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2018, 313 + viii pp., \$102.60 (hardcover), ISBN: 978-1-3500-5398-4

Heidi Scott's important, wide ranging survey of anglophone literary production offers its title term as a fundamental determinant for cultural life. *Fuel* proceeds from the correct presumption that all aesthetic objects, from cave drawings and flint spearpoints to advanced artifacts like, say, novels and poetry, derive in some way or another from a baseline relation to energy consumption, a ratio according to which caloric intake and expenditure sit in some relation. Early social forms, from bands of hunter-gatherers and slave societies like Homer's Greece to pre-industrial England of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, ran on biomass: plants, grain, wood, and the animal and human muscles sustained by those sources. In such societies, daily life was fueled by biotic materials one or two steps removed from the ultimate source of all energy on earth, the sun. This relation of relatively unmediated energy consumption meant that biomass societies operated at very close to subsistence levels, with surplus accumulating only to the very privileged few. For the rest, cultural rituals like harvest festivals "represented the seasonal joy of achieving a margin over the energy line," a momentary interruption of "low-energy biomass life" (291). Fossil fuels changed all that. Coal and petroleum archive eons of solar energy into portable shape. Because of this condensed quality, those fuels enabled human beings to achieve huge margins above subsistence, unleashing widespread energy surplus onto the world for the first time in the history of the species *homo sapien*. Seen this way, the fossil-fuel era, starting in England of the late eighteenth century and extending into our own moment of tight oil, hydraulic fracturing, and tar sands, becomes legible as a bizarrely extended feast-time—a two hundred and fifty year festival floated on caloric margins undreamed of in the age of ox-plows and hand threshing. This new, surplus-energy world is perfectly unsustainable, of course, and generated modern life in all its recognizable shapes, social forms appropriate to a world "designed to consume energy, not just to sustain life" (291). "By 1900," Scott informs us, "people in industrial culture were using more than twenty-two times the number of daily calories as ancestral humans. Between 1850 and 1970, Americans witnessed a 150-fold increase in energy consumption despite improvements in efficiencies" (4–5).

As *Fuel* convincingly shows, to call this a revolution is to underplay the transformations effected by the movement into this effulgent and doomed new world. Borrowing from work in the newly-formed subfield of the "energy humanities," Scott uses "energy ontology" to name what she persuasively suggests is the fundamental relation between fuel and life, with "ontology" meaning not the nature of being as such, but a particular mode of being or "shared way of life" (12). She suggests that one reason we might return to the archive of literary writing since the eighteenth century is to recover and perhaps learn from energy ontologies no longer our own. Since "literature records the historical continuum" of energy, it discloses as if in reverse how other energy lifeworlds have been experienced, known, and inhabited (295). Like other aspects of a psychic background state, energy sources are often taken for granted; for this reason, the work of reading-for-energy involves "[b]ackground – the material fuel – becom[ing] foreground" (17). This reversal of literary history's constitutive figure-ground relation Scott's book performs expertly. It scans an impressive range of canonical, hypercanonical, and noncanonical texts for what they teach us about the energy regimes that made them tick: *Black Beauty* (1877) and *The Windup Girl* (2009) disclose grass-based


worlds where animals, fed on plants, do work; Melville and Seamus Heaney give us the worlds of whale oil and peat, respectively; Charles Dickens, Emily Brontë, and George Eliot all adduce the transitional moment between biomass and fossil energy, while Jane Austen gives shape, just a few decades earlier, to a “time of timber scarcity and accelerating coal consumption.” In this world, aristocratic wealth is signified by roaring wood fires in *Pride and Prejudice* and Fanny Price’s poverty, in *Mansfield Park*, is revealed when her hearth burns coal (86–87). Later, Jack Kerouac’s romanticization of speed unveils oil culture at its highest octanes while, more surprisingly, the midcentury suburban gothics invoked by such different texts as John Updike’s *Rabbit* series and *Nightmare on Elm Street* show us the oil-intensive forms of life hiding in this no-space between country and city – tracts of single family homes accessible only by automobile that (in the words of poet Wendell Berry) “tak[e] in the world’s goods and conver[t] them into garbage, sewage, and noxious fumes” (qtd. 213). As this quick and incomplete survey of *Fuel*’s many eye-opening readings suggests, one achievement of this book is to synthesize a vast array of sources little cited in literary histories to this point – energy histories, environmental histories, histories of coal and oil and whale fat and the splitting of the atom – and to pair the story of energy thus reconstructed with a sensitive accounting of how energy history is mediated into the cultural record.

*Fuel* is divided into three main parts, “Biomass,” “Fossil Fuels,” and “Primary Energy,” devoted to renewable sources (this part subdivided into “Breeze,” [Water] “Flow,” “Star,” and “Atom”). The book’s account of the historically differential and uneven transitions among these genres of caloric sourcing importantly redescribes, as energy shift, a historical continuum we used to call “industrialization,” “modernization” or “the rise of capitalism.” Along the way are chapters devoted to more particular energy forms within the larger groups: Grass, Wood, and Charcoal in the Biomass section, “King Coal” and “Black Gold” in Fossil Fuel, with interludes on fracked liquid natural gas (LNG) and the energy logic and (thus) politics of food, the latter of which could be taught as a freestanding essay on this difficult topic. Each chapter arranges a series of relevant texts for close and (in sections sub-headed “In Depth”) even closer readings. Some of these readings could be usefully trimmed; all offer sensitive, wittily-presented and often surprising engagements with primary texts. If the organization of the book seems to track alongside an arc of historical development leading first to fossil fuels and then beyond them, Scott is careful to note that the energy history here told is “nondeterministic” (11): rather than retrace a lockstep march from “primitive” to “advanced” societies, *Fuel* asserts, and persuasively models, a claim that unravels any sense that our movement into the twentieth century’s heady and unsustainable fossil-fueled whirlwind happened “naturally”; things could have transpired otherwise, and probably should have. (The conclusion speculates on degrowth and solar powered scenarios that might meet us in the future.)

The speculative, surveying qualities of this book mean that it leans, in particular sections, on particular sources somewhat heavily: Stephanie LeMenager on oil, Barbara Freese on coal, Nye’s *Consuming Power*, “a classic inquiry into how shifts in fuel sources catalyze paradigmatic changes in the societies that adopt them” (10). One of the effects of this book is to induce a shock of defamiliarization, since it attunes us, in an astonishment that gathers over some 300 tightly-printed pages, to determining facts of social and cultural life that even people who think often about ecological matters have so far mostly ignored. It is ironic, then, that novelty is not the book’s aim, and Scott is judicious and instructive in her generosity towards prior sources. The bibliography becomes a reading list for the student of energy culture, a notebook for future thinking.

This synthesizing ambition means that the book’s ambit is wide and its list of covered texts a kind of syllabus for any number of future courses on the literature of energy, and the energies

of literature. (Fossil-Fuel Pastoral: discuss!) Some diffuseness of aim is a necessary corollary: Scott insists that the book is “about brute matter” and “focused on *the material cultures of fuel*,” with “fuel” chosen as an alternative to “energy” because the latter is allegedly more metaphorical (7). But the true contribution of the book is to put the history of material energy in a kind of running dialogue with the history of ideas or cultural production, and not to specify in advance the results of that encounter. This openness of approach encourages readers to speculate in new directions. An offhand allusion to Thomas Hobbes, for example (life in biomass societies was “[s]olitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” [291]), pushed this reviewer to wonder whether *all* early political theories should be reconsidered in light of their particular relationships to energy scarcity; and, if so, whether (as Dipesh Chakrabarty and Amitav Ghosh have both suggested) the personal freedoms developed by an emergent liberalism were tied fundamentally to the fantastic energy surpluses newly available in the age of coal – a train of thought that led me to wonder, further, whether Locke’s biomass contractual liberalism and Mill’s coal-powered personal autonomy might be reimagined along the lines of Scott’s analysis. But this is only one line of thought spurred by this rich, variegated, and unfailingly intelligent book: others will imagine other projects. That may be, finally, the lasting strength of *Fuel*. The elasticity of its approach to its primary texts, the generosity of its citation of prior work, and its solid organization all mean that it functions not just as a freestanding contribution in its own right, but as a kind of repository for other, future projects, an archive of possible critical production. In this sense *Fuel* will drive new work as though by a kind of hidden locomotive power, a generative capacity that we might as well call potential energy.

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