

Institution: University of Leeds		
Unit of Assessment: 27		
Title of case study: Using British Romantic literature to increase understanding of extreme weather events and their relationship to global climate change in affected communities		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2016-19		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Professor David Higgins	Professor of Environmental Humanities	2006–present
Dr Tess Somervell	Research and Teaching Fellow	2016–20
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2017-19		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>Research led by Professor David Higgins resulted in greater understandings of extreme weather events, their historical underpinnings, and their complex relationship to global climate change. The research inspired a rich variety of creative responses among children and adults in regional, national, and international communities affected by climate change and associated extreme weather events. Undertaken in collaboration with the Poetry Society (PS) and the Wordsworth Trust (WT), both of which benefited from increased levels of participation, the research achieved impact in four principal areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i) Increased instances of schoolchildren in the UK, and young people in 19 countries worldwide, writing poetry to explore their feelings in response to imaginative literature about extreme weather events; ii) Changes to secondary school educational practices, especially those involving expanded approaches to teaching and writing poetry; iii) Adapted learning programmes at the WT, including creative exploration of climate change issues through the Arts Award scheme and diverse outreach activities; iv) Improved community wellbeing through creative participation and shared experiences of contemporary and historical extreme weather events. 		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)		
<p>Funded through an AHRC Leadership Fellowship (GBP211,447) awarded to Higgins, 'British Romantic Writing and Environmental Catastrophe' (2016–17) was the first major investigation of environmental catastrophe in Romantic-period literature, adding significantly to a growing body of work that seeks to chart local cultural responses to extreme weather events in the context of global climate change. Timed to coincide with the bicentenary of the period from 1815–1818, during which the world experienced major climate change following the eruption of the Indonesian volcano Mount Tambora, research by Higgins and PDRA Dr Tess Somervell has expanded scholarly perceptions of Romantic representations of weather and climate and their legacy, advancing understanding of the cultural history of climate change. Higgins' research demonstrates that one of the lessons of Mount Tambora and its aftermath is how vulnerable humans continue to be to environmental catastrophe: the devastating consequences of a single volcanic eruption clearly indicate that it does not take a big shift in global climate to have terrible effects [1].</p> <p>Romantic scholarship has tended to concentrate on the rejuvenating power of localised nature. By contrast, Higgins' research reveals a more complex picture of Romantic nature</p>		

writing than is generally understood, showing how nature is often portrayed as threatening rather than restorative, and examining its concern with larger-scale and potentially disruptive natural phenomena. **Higgins** argues that anxieties about the precariousness of the human species first emerged in the Romantic period, showing that the representation of extreme weather events, such as volcanic eruptions, in Romantic writing foreshadowed contemporary debates on global climate change by simultaneously emphasising human power to shape the environment and human vulnerability to environmental change [1, 2].

Against some recent scholarship, **Higgins** contends that the Anthropocene ('Human Age') does not represent a sudden recent shift in human influence on the environment and knowledge of that influence. Rather, it should be understood in relation to a long and complex history of human-nonhuman interactions [1]. He shows how key tropes in Romantic writing feature in later writing on climate change, influencing current debates about human agency in the Anthropocene. His case studies reveal how so-called natural disasters do not represent an incursion into human life by an externalised 'Nature', but are complex processes in which nature and culture, experience and representation, are profoundly enmeshed [1, 2].

For **Higgins**, the notion of environmental disaster is problematic in so far as 'natural' disasters like earthquakes take place within wider socio-political contexts, and the damage they cause may vary widely according to people's individual standards of living as well as the nature and level of institutional response. Earthquakes are not just visitations from Nature: there is always interaction with our own human structures and arrangements. Recent research has shown that the natural and the cultural, the human and the nonhuman, are profoundly entangled, but **Higgins** reveals that the Romantics were already interested in that entanglement. He also draws attention to how the Romantic period saw the beginnings of a key irony of modernity: how the study of nature was separated from culture at the very time humans were having unprecedented impact on the earth system through the exploitation of fossil fuels.

Somervell's research on Romantic representations of flooding similarly shows that literature of the period attributed agency and vitality to nonhuman environmental forces [3, 4]. She argues that Romantic representations of the biblical Deluge anticipate contemporary discussions of the Anthropocene in the ways they attach moral meaning to geological history. Her study of Wordsworth's writing about the Deluge further reveals Romantic poetry's capacity to imagine positive (rather than apocalyptic) outcomes from environmental catastrophes, including the fostering of connections between human communities and even sympathetic relations between humans and destructive nonhuman forces. **Somervell's** analysis of Romantic narratives [4], in addition to her broader climate-related work in collaboration with Nigel Clark and **Higgins** [5], highlights the importance of storytelling as a way of coping with environmental change and finding hope in human-nonhuman entanglements, providing opportunities for readers to develop their own narratives in turn.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

1. Higgins, D. (2018). *British Romanticism, Climate Change, and the Anthropocene: Writing Tambora*. Palgrave Pivot.
2. Higgins, D. (2019). 'British Romanticism and the Global Climate'. In A. Johns-Putra (ed.), *Cambridge Critical Concepts: Climate and Literature* (pp. 128-143). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
3. Somervell, T. (2019). 'The Seasons'. In A. Johns-Putra (ed.), *Cambridge Critical Concepts: Climate and Literature* (pp. 45-59). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
4. Somervell, T. (2019). 'Wordsworth and the Deluge'. *Studies in Romanticism* 58, 1, 183-208.
5. Higgins, D., Somervell, T. & Clark, N. (eds.) (2020). 'Environmental Humanities Approaches to Climate Change'. Special issue of *Humanities*. ISSN 2076-0787

Grants

Higgins, D, 'British Romantic Writing and Environmental Catastrophe', AHRC, May 2016–October 2017, [GBP211,447 FEC], AH/N006526/1.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Higgins' and **Somervell's** combined research led to the development of two major creative initiatives: (i) an international poetry competition in partnership with the PS's Young Poets

Network (YPN); and (ii) 'Weather Words', a sustained collaboration with the WT's education and community engagement teams resulting in multiple creative events and workshops for children and adults. Impacts arising from both projects were as follows:

i) Young people's creative responses to climate change

Higgins' and **Somervell's** research directly inspired the international poetry competition 'I am the Universe: Writing Climate Change' (1 March - 23 April 2017). Adjudicated by the award-winning English poet Helen Mort, the competition invited young people up to the age of 25 to build on the legacy of Romantic authors to 'write their way through' contemporary climate change [C]. Specific insights from **Higgins'** and **Somervell's** research on how Romantic writers attributed agency to the nonhuman world through particular poetic images inspired Mort's creative prompts for competitors to combine Romantic and contemporary representations of environmental catastrophe, the natural world, and human impact upon it. **Higgins** and **Somervell** provided interpretative guidance for each prompt and contributed to Mort's introductory brochure for the competition. Mort summarised the importance of the competition's themes to the young poets involved by observing that they each 'took a slant look at shifting landscapes [in order to make] the issues relevant to their own lives' [C].

The competition generated 239 entries from 211 young people in 19 countries across five continents [D]. It attracted an unusually high number of young men, who made up a third of all entrants, 'a big achievement and a stronger showing than the YPN challenge average' [E]. A poetry pamphlet featured the winners' work alongside a newly commissioned poem by Mort, with 3,000 copies distributed to teachers at education fairs and at PS events for young people. The pamphlet was also published online (26 September 2017) and has since been read over 1,200 times, generating over 11,900 impressions [E]. **Higgins'** and **Somervell's** partnership with the PS was cited in Arts Council England's Environmental Report for 2017–18 as an example of good practice in stimulating creative responses from young people to climate change, a subject of increasing concern to them [F]. The partnership's success also led the PS Director, in September 2019, to consult **Higgins** and **Somervell** about Romantic texts to be featured in a Department for Education national recitation competition in schools <http://www.poetrybyheart.org.uk/>. Reflecting positively on the original collaboration, the PS Director stated, 'I think the climate change angle is a wonderful way to get young people interested in looking at Romantic poets' [I].

'Weather Words', a separate 2017 collaboration with the WT, drew on project research to inspire a wide range of creative responses from children and adults to the historical underpinnings of climate change. **Higgins** and **Somervell** compiled and interpreted a range of sources, including Romantic poems, images and items from the WT's collections and provided critical commentaries, gleaned from their own research, that highlighted the agency of the nonhuman environment and the capacity of extreme weather events and other environmental catastrophes to produce attitudinal change. These sources in turn provided the stimuli for a WT outreach programme – immersive weather walks, poetry and creative writing workshops – involving 198 pupils from three primary schools (two in Yorkshire, one in Cumbria) and one secondary school in Cumbria. The programme's focus on Romantic poetry inspired pupils to write their own nature poems, fostering a greater historical awareness of global warming and the extreme weather events that are directly or indirectly associated with it. These events are commonly misconstrued as manifestations of the present, but in fact have roots stretching back into the past. One student used Byron's poem 'Darkness' to inspire her own poem, while another shared his realisation that 'climate change is real and isn't just happening now, it's been happening for a long time' [B]. The WT's Education Development Manager described the programme's impact as 'far reaching', having 'opened many children and young people's eyes to the possibilities of poetry and Romanticism, and [having] also given them a vehicle to understand the less recent history of climate change' [B]. Engagement with 'Weather Words' also gave pupils new opportunities for personal development through the WT's delivery of the Arts Award scheme, resulting in 39 of the cohort achieving an Arts Award Explore and 139 achieving an Arts Award Discover [A]. The Education Development Manager noted that the children involved had experienced a markedly positive 'effect on their own wellbeing, of suddenly being switched on to poetry, or of feeling that writing it was within their grasp, but also of the impact on their confidence, pride in themselves and maybe even their future contributions' [B].

ii) Adapting secondary school teaching practices and WT educational programmes

'Weather Words' emphasis on children writing poetry themselves triggered changes to English teaching practices at one of the participant schools, Queen Katherine Secondary School in Kendal. Its Head of English remarked that these changes had allowed teachers to be 'more creative' in their approach to poetry and had impressed upon them 'the importance of writing poetry as well as studying it'. The project also led them to reflect that 'poetry had largely fallen out of [the] KS3 curriculum' and that their teaching had 'fallen into the trap of preparing students for the GCSE skills during KS3 at the cost of a well-rounded and broad curriculum'. Teaching staff were duly prompted to 'address this area of weakness', implementing permanent changes to the curriculum so that it 'now encompasses a holistic approach to English teaching: developing our [own] voices as writers with the text at the heart of every lesson.' The weather-themed poetry activities were 'recycled' for three separate study events at the school, and a direct and enduring legacy of the project is that poetry, both written and read, now features in the curriculum for every year group from Y7-13 [J].

Project research also improved the content, quality and reach of the WT's programme for schools, as its Education Development Manager confirmed in 2020: 'We are carrying out a weather/climate change Arts Award programme with three [new] schools in Cumbria which has evolved from [this] project'. The same programme was also offered to six schools during the 2017–19 period, with a total of 141 Discover and 176 Explore Arts Awards being achieved [A]. The project helped to raise the profile of the WT's work with schools, with media attention from the likes of the *Westmorland Gazette* (22 July 2017) leading to an increase in the numbers of both onsite and outreach engagements. From March 2017–March 2018, of the WT's 6,602 onsite and offsite education engagements across Key Stages 2-3, 10% were directly due to 'Weather Words' [A].

iii) Strengthening communities and improving wellbeing through creative participation

Creative workshops and other activities delivered as part of 'Weather Words' resulted in an improved sense of wellbeing and belonging amongst numerous adult community groups in Cumbria. There were 143 individual engagements with community participants across the range of outreach events [H]. These events, directly stimulated by **Higgins'** and **Somervell's** research findings, supported participants to produce poetry, photography, creative writing and art in response to extreme weather and other environmental catastrophes. For example, **Somervell's** research into Wordsworth's writings about floods informed the selection of writing prompts, and their inspiration was visible in the outputs produced by community participants, who tried to make sense of their own experiences of recent extreme flooding in Cumbria through their own creative work.

Some participants had their work exhibited throughout 2017 at Dove Cottage, the Old Courthouse in Shap, and the Solway Arts Annual Summer Show, with a combined visitor attendance of 499 [G], while the WT education team reported that the events continued to inspire people to share their 'wild weather' stories, generating new artistic responses long after the lifetime of the project [G]. Community participants also read their writings aloud at a public 'Words on the Weather' day at Dove Cottage (15 July 2017), alongside contributions from **Higgins** and **Somervell**, who spoke about their individual research and collaborative project work. Audience feedback included: 'The poetry was stand out for me and so incredibly moving. What talent hidden in the fells!'; 'Thought that poetry was so special yesterday. Listening to those accounts of their flooding experiences'; and 'It is comforting to see how humanity rises to meet these challenges' [G]. The WT Curator and Head of Learning highlighted these events as 'testimony to why such projects matter', underlining their benefits to social cohesion and the local community: 'Many tens of people's lives have been affected ... and each of these engagements seems to have been meaningful. People have made new friends and new connections and shared this through the readings and the exhibitions' [A].

Participation in these shows inspired some community members to form a new monthly art and writers' group in Shap, developing sustainable engagement with the WT and linking their own creative work to its collections and exhibitions [A]. One participant commented that these monthly sessions had reinvigorated her own creative practice, getting her 'back in the painting zone', and inspiring her to begin delivering regular 'steadily attended Art 4 All' sessions for local

villages as 'direct spin-offs' from the project's sessions. Another recorded the 'exhilarating' effects of these activities, while still another noted: 'This project has given an outlet for ordinary people [...] to express a depth of feeling that would have otherwise remained dormant' [G]. Others observed that 'I am only one of many touched by this project which has provided so many stimulating situations that have enriched our lives', and that 'the project inspired so many adults and children to express themselves in ways that they might not have discovered otherwise'. Independent WT evaluation also noted how the project improved wellbeing amongst older people: for example, two women in their 80s with no experience of painting since their schooldays, produced 'remarkable work – strong and distinctive'. These women had spent their lifetimes focusing on raising families and felt that 'now was their time' [G]. The numerous positive outcomes of 'Weather Words' serve to confirm one of **Somervell's** key critical insights, that creative responses to imaginative literature about environmental change, such as those produced by schools and other communities in Yorkshire/Cumbria in relation to local flooding, can support individual understandings of the history of extreme weather events and lead to better connections between the communities themselves [4].

'British Romantic Writing and Environmental Catastrophe' was selected as one of nine case studies featured in *A Unique Contribution*, a 2017 AHRC report highlighting research projects that provide new perspectives on environmental issues and explore how people can be engaged in caring for and protecting their environments (<https://ahrc.ukri.org/documents/project-reports-and-reviews/ahrc-environment-report/>). The public reach of the research was further extended by **Higgins** and **Somervell's** national media contributions, including **Higgins'** two articles for *The Conversation* (12.9.16) and *The Independent* (14.9.16); an interview he gave on the BBC Radio 4 Today Programme (2.9.16), which was subsequently excerpted for BBC News Online; and a co-authored article for *The Conversation* (10.2.20), which has received over 20,500 views to date.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- A. Statement (30.9.20) & emails (17.7.17–2.1.20) from WT staff.
- B. 'Weather Words' School Evaluation Report by Education Development Manager, WT, Nov 2017.
- C. 'I am the Universe' competition writing challenge and prompts; feature on the Poetry Society website; anthology of entries with notes by David Higgins and Helen Mort. The anthology is available on request as a QuickTime file.
- D. 'I am the Universe' Entrant Statistics and Project Report compiled by the PS.
- E. Emails from Education Officer and Education Co-ordinator, the PS (10.5.17; 14.3.19).
- F. Arts Council England Environmental Report for 2017/18 (p.12).
- G. Community Responses to 'Weather Words' & evaluation collated by WT Education team.
- H. 'Weather Words' Community Outreach Activity statistics compiled by WT.
- I. Emails between Higgins and Director, the PS (27.9.19–1.10.19).
- J: Email from Head of English, Queen Katherine School, Kendal (5.1.20).