Anxieties about decline were a prominent feature of British public discourse in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. These anxieties were borne out repeatedly in books and periodicals, pamphlets and poems. Tracing the reciprocal development of Romantic-era Britain’s rapidly expanding literary and market cultures through the lens of decline, Jonathan Sachs offers a fresh way of understanding British Romanticism. The book focuses on three aspects of literary experience – questions of value, the fascination with ruins, and the representation of slow time – to explore how shifting conceptions of progress and change inform a post-Enlightenment sense of cultural decline. Combining close readings of Romantic literary texts with an examination of works from political economy, historical writing, classical studies, and media history the book reveals for the first time how anxieties about decline impacted literary form and shaped Romantic debates about poetry and the meaning of literature.

This series aims to foster the best new work in one of the most challenging fields within English literary studies. From the early 1780s to the early 1830s, a formidable array of talented men and women took to literary composition, not just in poetry, which some of them famously transformed, but in many modes of writing. The expansion of publishing created new opportunities for writers, and the political stakes of what they wrote were raised again by what Wordsworth called those “great national events” that were “almost daily taking place”: the French Revolution, the Napoleonic and American wars, urbanization, industrialization, religious revival, an expanded empire abroad and the reform movement at home. This was an enormous ambition, even when it pretended otherwise. The relations between science, philosophy, religion, and literature were reworked in texts such as Frankenstein and Biographia Literaria; gender relations in A Vindication of the Rights of Woman and Don Juan; journalism by Cobbett and Hazlitt; poetic form, content and style by the Lake School and the Cockney School. Outside Shakespeare studies, probably no body of writing has produced such a wealth of comment or done so much to shape the responses of modern criticism. This indeed is the period that saw the emergence of those notions of “literature” and of literary history, especially national literary history, on which modern scholarship in English has been founded. The categories produced by Romanticism have also been challenged by recent historicist arguments. The task of the series is to engage both with a challenging corpus of Romantic writings and with the changing field of criticism they have helped to shape. As with other literary series published by Cambridge University Press, this one will represent the work of both younger and more established scholars, on either side of the Atlantic and elsewhere.

See the end of the book for a complete list of published titles.
THE POETICS OF DECLINE IN BRITISH ROMANTICISM

JONATHAN SACHS
For Cecily and Sasha
Contents

List of Figures page viii
Acknowledgments ix
List of Abbreviations xiii

Introduction 1

1 From Morals to Measurement: Scaling Time, Anticipating the Future, and Quantifying Decline in Gibbon, Smith, and Playfair 33

2 The Decline of Literature: Acceleration, Print Saturation, and Media Time 70

3 The Politics of Prediction: Anna Barbauld and the Ruins of London 103

4 On Ruins: Contingency, Time Parallax, and “The Ruined Cottage” 119

5 Coleridge’s Slow Time 142

6 Fast Time, Slow Time, Deep Time: Decline, Extinction, and the Pace of Romanticism 161

Notes 180
Bibliography 209
Index 221

vii
Figures

0.1 Joseph Gandy, Architectural Ruins — A Vision (1798; 1832)  page 2
1.1 Joseph Priestley, A New Chart of History. (London, 1769).  51
1.2 William Playfair, “Chart of Universal and Commercial History,”  54
plate 1 of Inquiry into the Permanent Causes of the Decline and Fall of
Powerful and Wealthy Nations. London: printed for Greenland and
Norris, 1805.
1.3 William Playfair, “Chart Showing the Amount of the Exports
and Imports of England, to and from all parts from 1800 [sic] to
1805,” plate 1 of The Commercial and Political Atlas, Representing
by Means of Stained Copper-Plate Charts, the Progress of the
Commerce, Revenues, Expenditure, and Debts of England, During
the Whole of the Eighteenth Century. 3rd ed. (London: printed for
Greenland and Norris, 1801)  55
1.4 William Playfair, “Exports and Imports to and from France,”  56
plate 6 of The Commercial and Political Atlas, Representing by
Means of Stained Copper-Plate Charts, the Progress of the
Commerce, Revenues, Expenditure, and Debts of England, During
the Whole of the Eighteenth Century. 3rd ed. (London: printed for
Greenland and Norris, 1801)
6.1 From Charles Darwin, On the Origin of Species by Means of
Natural Selection. London: John Murray, 1859.  178
Acknowledgments

This book took shape as a series of talks. I hope that its present form maintains the accessible and conversational tone of those occasions and that readers will use it as a book to “think with” and will feel welcome to take its ideas in different and unexpected directions. That I think so much about writing in relation to conversation is no doubt a reflection of the concern of so much Romantic writing with orality. But it is also a reflection of how vibrant and multivocal the field of Romantic studies remains – of how much I have learned from talking to students and colleagues and how much I want to say to them and hear from them in return. Indeed, this book would have been impossible without so many occasions for talking, from annual conferences to themed workshops, from graduate and undergraduate courses to invited lectures and seminars, not to mention the various cafes, restaurants, and bars where this book really took form.

Despite all of these opportunities for engagement, this book simply would not have been possible without considerable institutional support, from my home institution in Montreal and beyond. The book began during a visiting fellowship at Clare Hall, Cambridge and continued during a subsequent visiting fellowship at Trinity Hall, Cambridge. Thanks to the Masters and Fellows of both colleges for their support and to Martin Ruehl for initiating the Trinity Hall gig. The initial drafting of this book was completed at that paradise for scholars, the National Humanities Center in North Carolina with the support of a Benjamin N. Duke Fellowship of the Research Triangle Foundation; its final copy edits and proofs were corrected at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, during the first weeks of a Membership at the School of Historical Studies. Thanks to both institutions for the kind of unparalleled working conditions that make scholarship possible and pleasurable. Throughout, this project has received generous research support from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.
Further institutional support has come from many libraries and the Cambridge University Press. Thanks to Vince Graziano at the Concordia University Library. Extra special thanks to Brooke Andrade and Sarah Harris for a magical year of bibliographic ease at the National Humanities Center with its always to be missed and never to be forgotten library resources. Thanks also to the John Soane Museum, Boston Rare Maps, and the Cambridge University Library for permission to reproduce the images from their collections. A shorter version of Chapter 1 was published in *Modern Intellectual History*, while an earlier version of Chapter 3 appeared in the *European Romantic Review*. Cambridge University Press has been a welcome home for this book, from its commissioning by Linda Bree and James Chandler to its rigorous and thorough review by Ian Duncan and one further anonymous press reader.

Beyond this institutional support there are so many individuals to whom I owe such considerable debts, but it seems wrong not to begin by giving what Cordelia Flyte would call her special love to those who have commented on a number of the chapters and given my work such thoughtful attention in recent years and especially in the later stages of the project in both formal and informal contexts: Andy Franta, Paul Keen, Deidre Lynch, Jonathan Mulrooney, Anahid Nersessian, and Andy Stauffer. Each is a tremendous scholar in his or her own right and my debt to them is a pleasure to pay back in daily installments. What Jim Chandler has taught me since even before I started graduate school could fill a book of its own and will certainly be seen on every page of this one. Late in the game two further mentors came on board, and this would have been a very different book without the lessons, support, and encouragement of Jon Klancher, to whom I cannot overestimate the scale of my debt, and Jo McDonagh, whose presence out there sustains my faith in the field. My Montreal writing group of Omri Moses and Andrew Piper has possibly read every word of this book in multiple drafts. Kevis Goodman and Andrew Piper (again!) shadow every sentence of this book. Not only the model of their impeccable scholarship, ever fresh and new, but also their conversation and general support have shaped the way I think and pushed me again and again both to clarify and to complicate my ideas as they exposed me to new insights and helped me to grow my arguments in directions I otherwise might not have dared.

Four groups, “thought collectives” in the greatest sense of those words, have marked aspects of this book from memorable conversations rooted prior to its beginning to anticipated conversations that I expect will continue long after its publication: the Nineteenth-Century Writing
Acknowledgments

Group at the National Humanities Center (Noah Heringman, Jo McDonagh, and Yasmin Solomonescu); the Montreal-Ottawa Working Group on Romanticism (with particular thanks to my co-convener Ina Ferris, but extending also to those who have shared so many conversations, meals, and drinks for over ten years now: James Brooke-Smith, Frans de Bruyn, Ian Dennis, Lauren Gillingham, Paul Keen, Sara Landreth, April London, Julie Murray, Mark Salber Phillips, Andrew Piper, Fiona Ritchie, Peter Sabor, and Michael Sinatra); the Multigraph Collective (Mark Algee-Hewitt, Angela Borchert, David Brewer, Thora Brylowe, Julia Carlson, Brian Cowan Susan Dalton, Marie-Claude Felton, Michael Gamer, Paul Keen, Michelle Levy, Michael Macovski, Nick Mason, Tom Mole, Andrew Piper, Dahlia Porter, Diana Solomon, Andrew Stauffer, Richard Taws, Nikola von Mervelt, and Chad Wellmon – may our blood oath long continue); and, finally, the Interacting with Print Research Group, a subset of the above, but deserving special mention nonetheless: Susan Dalton, Peggy Davis, Tom Mole, Andrew Piper, and Nikola von Mervelt.

In addition to these groups and individuals, there have also been informal conversations with too many people to name. The list is long, long enough to make me wonder if I deserve to put my name alone on the cover of this book. With apologies to those whom I may have overlooked, I want to thank a phenomenal and supportive group of scholars, Romantic and otherwise, for their insights and conversation: Alan Bewell, Scott Black, Chris Bundock, Miranda Burgess, Tim Campbell, David Collings, Alex Dick, Angela Esterhamer, Joel Faflak, Mary Fairclough, Mary Favret, Libby Fay, Dino Felluga, Tom Ford, Sean Franzell, Tim Fulford, Billy Galperin, Marilyn Gaull, Kevin Gilmartin, Amanda-Jo Goldstein, Evan Gottlieb, Devin Griffiths, John Hall, Jill Heydt-Stevenson, Sonia Hofkosh, Noel Jackson, Colin Jones, Paul Keen, Terry Kelley, Maggie Kilgour, Greg Kucich, Celeste Langan, Nigel Leask, Tina Lupton, Mark Lussier, Charles Mahoney, Tilar Mazzeo, Brian McGrath, Maureen McLane, Rob Mitchell, Jesse Molesworth, Jeanne Moskal, Michael Nicholson, Matthew Ocheltree, Danny O’Quinn, Emma Peacocke, Adam Potkay, Padma Rangarajan, Arden Reed, Alexander Regier, Chris Rovee, Matthew Rowlinson, Chuck Rzepka, John Savarese, Stuart Sherman, Charlotte Sussman, Elisa Tamarkin, Patrick Vincent, Andrew Warren, Paul Westover, Dan White, Matthew Wickman, Laurence Williams, Karen Wiseman, and Tristram Wolff. I also want to thank all of my colleagues in the English Department at Concordia University, especially Danielle Bobker, Nathan Brown, Greg
Acknowledgments

Ellerman, Mary Esteve, Marcie Frank, Omri Moses, Sina Queras, Kate Sterns, Darren Wershler, Jason Camlot, Jill Didur, and Andre Furlani. These last three served successively as chairs through the book’s composition and helped make possible the occasions for its research and writing. And last but not least at Concordia, Craig Melhoff stepped in at the last minute and heroically helped assemble the book’s index.

I also want to acknowledge the many audiences who heard versions of these chapters, including groups at the University of Bristol, the University of Glasgow, McGill University, York University (UK), the California Institute of Technology, Oxford University, Cambridge University, the University of Essex, the University of Western Ontario, Harvard University, the UCLA Romantics Group, the University of Colorado at Boulder, the CUNY Graduate Center, the University of California, Berkeley, University College Cork, the University of North Carolina, the University of Victoria, the University of Toronto, the University of Indiana, and the New York Public Library. Some of this was also delivered as conference papers at several gatherings of NASSR, the MLA convention, ASECS, and BARS. Particular thanks to Liz Prettejohn and Charles Martindale for nominating me for a Benjamin Meaker Visiting Professorship at the University of Bristol in 2010, where so many of the ideas here began. In addition to those who heard and responded to these talks, thanks are due to all who generously extended invitations and organized the talks listed above, with special mention in this context for the hospitality and camaraderie of John Brewer, Jeff Cox, Claire Connelly, Kevis Goodman, Anne Mellor, Susan Oliver, Jake Risinger, Tilottama Rajan, Terry Robinson, Ian Thomas-Bignami, and Nancy Yousef.

Closest to home I want to thank friends and family in and out of the academy, especially, David Baumflekt, Tamara Griggs, Tinka Piper, Ara Osterweil, Neda Ulaby, and Anya Zilberstein; Colette Camden and Will Pryce, shelter always despite my decadent eccentricities; Susan Lato and Erik Hilsdale, for the roof and so much more; and Sora and Marvin Sachs, well, for everything thus far.

Finally, Cecily Hilsdale: If I cannot imagine what this book might have been without all of those mentioned above, then I cannot imagine what my life would have been like without her. This book is dedicated to her. And to Sasha, whose arrival split the book’s process of composition neatly in two and whose early morning shouts of “Daddy!” carry me instantly from text to world. These days his steady nightly request is for “something to help me go to sleep.” Maybe someday he’ll read this book, but for now I know just what to give him.
# Abbreviations

For works frequently cited in the text, the following abbreviations are used.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Editor(s)</th>
<th>Publisher</th>
<th>Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
List of Abbreviations


