

# First thoughts: Recalling the lost First Romantics



## Magnificent Rebels: The First Romantics and The Invention of the Self

Andrea Wulf  
John Murray,  
£25

Review:  
Alannah Hopkin

**T**HIS compelling account of the 'first Romantics' is very welcome, and long overdue. The work of the generation of German thinkers and poets who emerged in the late 18th century and had such a strong influence on the English Romantic poets is very little known among English-language readers.

Coleridge learnt German and wrote enthusiastically about contemporary poets and philosophers, but he was the exception. The relative ignorance of their work persists to this day. So it is good to see this substantial book, aimed at the general reader, arrive garlanded with praise from historians, biographers, and other writers, including Richard Holmes (biographer of Shelley and Coleridge), Amanda Foreman, Robert MacFarlane, Ruth Scurr, and Andrew Roberts.

The book is beautifully produced, with contemporary maps, engravings, and portraits of its stellar cast including Goethe in a fatherly role, and the younger generation of poets, Schiller, Schlegel, and Novalis, the scientific von Humboldt brothers, philosophers, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, and at the centre of it all, the formidable and free-spirited Caroline Michaelis-Böhmer-Schlegel-



Author Andrea Wulf's 'Magnificent Rebels' is a rare intellectual landmark, expanding our literary knowledge of the oft overlooked German Romantics.

Picture: Antonina Gern

tuals, there were feuds, and most of the women loathed each other. Nevertheless, the term 'Romantic' was coined from discussions between the poets, philosophers and pioneering scientists.

Andrea Wulf's group biography of 'the Jena Set' is an impeccable piece of writing, putting the many lives into context both intellectually and in their personal relations, with an emphasis on the lives of the women.

The marriage of Caroline and August Schlegel, for example, was primarily in order that Caroline could have the place in society that was denied to her as widow with a scandalous past.

Caroline was one of the few women to be credited in her lifetime for her own writing: she and her husband collaborated on the first translations of Shakespeare into German. Her sister-in-law Dorothea Schlegel published under her husband Frederic's name, while Sophie, the inspiration of Romantic novelist Novalis, died after a long illness aged 16.

Wulf's narrative ends with a clear and cogent account of the influence of the work of these pioneering Romantics on American and European thought and literature. It travels via Wordsworth and Coleridge to the younger English Romantics — Keats, Shelley, and Byron — the American Transcendentalists — Thoreau, Emerson, Whitman, Hawthorne, Poe, and Melville — concluding, most convincingly with James Joyce and *Finnegans Wake*.

*Magnificent Rebels* is one of those rare books that is truly an intellectual landmark, expanding the reader's literary knowledge by introducing a fascinating new context.

Schelling, her names acquired from her father and her three husbands.

As a young widow, Caroline Böhmer was imprisoned, along with her seven-year-old daughter, in the old fortress of Königstein as a sympathiser of the French revolution. The daughter of a celebrated university professor, at 29 she was unusually well-educated and spoke several languages fluently. In prison she discovered she was pregnant following an encounter at a ball with a young French officer. Among the people she wrote to seeking help was the poet, August Schlegel, a devoted admirer, whom she married in 1796, three years after her release.

All these characters lived in Jena

periodically between the 1790s and 1806, when Napoleon defeated the Prussian troops at the Battle of Jena. Now a thriving city, back then Jena was a medieval walled town some 150 miles southwest of Berlin, and a day's ride from Weimar, Goethe's home.

At Jena's ancient university, censorship was more lenient than elsewhere in Germany so it attracted young, progressive teachers and open-minded students, who provided their lecturers with a much-needed income.

This was the main reason why the 'magnificent rebels' of this book's title gathered there. Inevitably, with a cast of such highly-strung intellec-