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0521372577 - Contesting Cultural Authority: Essays in Victorian Intellectual Life

Frank M. Turner

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This volume of essays by a leading scholar of Victorian intellectual history reflects research, teaching, and writing carried out over more than twenty years. Five of the essays are new; seven, although published previously, have been revised for this collection. The essays cover an extremely wide spectrum of Victorian thought, including the issues of secularization, cultural apostasy, the crisis of faith, Victorian scientific naturalism, the conflict between science and religion, the relationship of science and politics, and the Victorian attitudes towards the ancient world. Taken as a whole the essays constitute a major revisionist overview of the Victorian intellectual enterprise which will be of interest to scholars in a wide variety of fields.

A theme that runs throughout the volume is the manner in which various groups within the Victorian intellectual elite attempted to wrest or to protect cultural dominance for their particular professions, academic disciplines and philosophical outlooks. The author is concerned with the manner in which these struggles determined the social organization of British thought, education, and general intellectual endeavour. He draws important parallels between developments in fields as different as Victorian science and classical studies. In that regard the essays are designed to speak to one another and to draw the reader into frequently unfamiliar byways of Victorian thought.

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# CONTESTING CULTURAL AUTHORITY

Essays in Victorian Intellectual Life

FRANK M. TURNER

*John Hay Whitney Professor of History, Yale University*



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*For*

*Michael Finnerty*

*Terry M. Holcombe*

*Charles H. Long*

*Dorothy K. Robinson*

*Sheila W. Wellington*

*Friends and Colleagues in Good Causes*

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0521372577 - Contesting Cultural Authority: Essays in Victorian Intellectual Life

Frank M. Turner

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Contents*

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page xi</i>
I SHIFTING BOUNDARIES	
1 The religious and the secular in Victorian Britain	3
2 Cultural apostasy and the foundations of Victorian intellectual life	38
3 The crisis of faith and the faith that was lost	73
4 The secularization of the social vision of British natural theology	101
II SCIENCE AND THE WIDER CULTURE	
5 Victorian scientific naturalism and Thomas Carlyle	131
6 Rainfall, plagues, and the Prince of Wales	151
7 The Victorian conflict between science and religion: a professional dimension	171
8 Public science in Britain: 1880–1919	201
III MODERNS AND ANCIENTS	
9 British politics and the demise of the Roman republic: 1700–1939	231
10 Ancient materialism and modern science: Lucretius among the Victorians	262

Cambridge University Press

0521372577 - Contesting Cultural Authority: Essays in Victorian Intellectual  
Life

Frank M. Turner

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

x

*Contents*

11	Virgil in Victorian classical contexts	284
12	The triumph of idealism in Victorian classical studies	322
	<i>Index</i>	362

Cambridge University Press

0521372577 - Contesting Cultural Authority: Essays in Victorian Intellectual Life

Frank M. Turner

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## *Preface*

The essays in this volume, composed over a period of twenty years, reflect portions of my exploration of Victorian intellectual life. I commenced that effort as a graduate student suspicious that many of the categories used to understand the Victorians were inadequate and misleading. As I read further Victorian writers, I repeatedly encountered passages that did not fit the patterns of interpretation that then generally predominated. As time passed, I came to the firmer conviction that the history of the nineteenth century whether in Great Britain or elsewhere was still to be written. So long as Victorian scholars tended to interpret their field largely according to the categories and values bequeathed them by Victorian writers themselves, the scholarly enterprise could not extend beyond the intellectual and cultural boundaries established by the nineteenth-century writers for their own purposes. Those boundaries have now begun to shift as new categories have been introduced, as Victorians previously unread by scholars have become read, and as the contemporary polemical purposes of Victorian writers have been recognized. As a consequence, the experience of the Victorians and their intellectual activity can no longer be regarded as unproblematic, inevitable, or quaint.

A theme that unites virtually all of these essays is the attempt of various groups of Victorian intellectuals to establish foundations for new mental outlooks, to challenge existing cultural authorities, to propose themselves as new authorities, or to resist the challenge of newcomers and to preserve earlier ideas and values in novel guises and institutional arrangements; hence the title of the collection. By the close of the century a remarkable diversity of intellectual outlooks existed in Great Britain within a wide variety of institutional settings. Such had not been the case in 1800. At that date science was suspect; Roman Catholicism was regarded with both



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0521372577 - Contesting Cultural Authority: Essays in Victorian Intellectual Life

Frank M. Turner

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xii

*Preface*

suspicion and prejudice; the study of the ancient world upheld a conservative social and intellectual order. The thought of both Germany and France had made only marginal impact. The major intellectual authorities remained overwhelmingly Anglican. Much of the history of Victorian intellectual life, as has become evident through the research of the past quarter century, was embodied in the process whereby groups advocating different ideas came to the fore, claimed the right to be heard, and established institutions that fostered their own ideas and values. Those who sought to preserve more traditional ideas and values did likewise. It is this process as manifested in a variety of situations that I have addressed in these essays.

My own research has probed two apparently diverse arenas – the relationship of religion to more advanced modes of thought and the Victorian encounter with the cultures of ancient Greece and Rome. Although these appear disparate and unrelated, I have found them to be mutually illuminating. The former obviously deals with ideas directly associated with modern thought. Paradoxically, classical scholarship does also because it provided a vehicle for debating modern developments and introducing modern or advanced ideas into the educational curriculum and the larger culture. The disparate paths of science and the classics also illustrate the manner in which the social organization of intellectual life influenced the dispersion of particular ideas.

I have divided the essays somewhat arbitrarily into three sections illustrating separate though not wholly unrelated themes. In Part I, I examine some of the categories through which scholars have explored Victorian intellectual life and the manner in which categories employed by the Victorians themselves to interpret their world changed in their own hands. Part II examines aspects of Victorian scientific naturalism and the manner in which Victorian advocates of science challenged both clerical and liberal democratic culture. In Part III, I provide four studies of the uses to which the Victorians put the ancient world and the manner in which those discussions permitted debate over modern or contemporary topics several of which relate to issues in Part I and II. Another theme that unites several of these essays is the manner often unrecognized by historians in which idealism and religious categories persevered throughout much of the century.

Five of the essays in this volume are new though two of those draw

Cambridge University Press

0521372577 - Contesting Cultural Authority: Essays in Victorian Intellectual Life

Frank M. Turner

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface*

xiii

extensively on ideas and research that I have published previously in different contexts. The other seven essays have been previously published, but appear here in somewhat revised and updated versions. I have attempted to remove passages that would be repetitive to the reader who wishes to read the volume from start to finish rather than selecting individual essays. I have also consolidated and somewhat condensed the footnotes, removed many secondary references which are still available to scholars in the original formats of the essays, and attempted to provide references to more recent historical literature on the various issues examined.

During the two decades that witnessed the writing of these essays I have accumulated a number of scholarly debts. All of my work is rooted in the teaching and intellectual friendship that I received from Franklin Le Van Baumer. No graduate student ever encountered a better teacher and no young scholar, a better friend. During a time when most of my energies were devoted to academic administration, my wife Professor Nancy Rash encouraged me to pursue the publication of this volume so I might not forget the larger scholarly purposes that lie behind administering a university. As a help in preparing my previously published essays for revision and publication, Professor Bernard Lightman generously reread and criticized them. He was also responsible for organizing conference sessions in which several essays originated as papers. His own scholarship has been important in reshaping my understanding of Victorian agnosticism and other forms of unbelief. At various times Professor Jeffrey Von Arx provided important conversations as did Dr David Spadafora. Over the years colleagues Donald Kagan, Steven Ozment, Jaroslav Pelikan, Joseph Hamburger, Gordon Williams, John Herrington, Sidney Eisen, Peter Gay, Linda Peterson, Bernard Semmel, Arnold Thackray, Ramsay MacMullen, Hugh Lloyd-Jones, Harry Stout, Lee Wandel, Martha Garland, James Livingston, Lori Ann Farrell, and Cyrus Vakil offered advice on one or more of these essays. The editors of the journals in which several of these essays originally appeared as well as their anonymous readers improved the early drafts.

I am indebted to conferences or lecture invitations at the Yale Center for British Art, the University of Leicester, the National University of Australia, Drew University, Boston University, the City University of New York, the University of Toronto, the University of Wisconsin, and Tulane University for the opportunity

Cambridge University Press

0521372577 - Contesting Cultural Authority: Essays in Victorian Intellectual Life

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

xiv

*Preface*

to work through ideas that later appeared in these chapters. Sessions at the American Historical Association, the Conference on British Studies, the Virgilian Society of North America, and the Northeast Victorian Studies Association provided other venues for the presentation of papers.

Research for these essays was made possible by the generous leave policy of Yale University, grants from the Griswold Fund of Yale University, and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Guggenheim Foundation.

I would also like to thank Josie Broude and Donna Del Buco for help in the preparation of the manuscript and for good humour and warm friendship along the way.

*F.M.T.*