FRANCIS O'GORMAN

1

Introduction

The facts of the past have a habit of confounding intellectual speculation. It is as well never to forget that surprise may wait around a corner to mock the best endeavours, the most serious and learned efforts to analyse history. Why might the Prime Minister William Gladstone have demurred about recommending to Queen Victoria that Alfred Tennyson, her poet laureate, be offered a baronetcy? Perhaps, in 1883, Gladstone might have wondered if literature was really a dignified enough career – if 'career' it was – to deserve such an honour. Could writing poetry really qualify one to speak in the House of Lords? Perhaps he felt that Tennyson's political poems were no ample recommendation for actual involvement in politics. Perhaps the poet's famous religious uncertainty might be too controversial for the Bishops in the upper chamber. None is a poor suggestion. But Hallam Tennyson records in his *Memoir* (1897) of his father the real reason. 'The only difficulty in Gladstone's mind', Hallam remembered, 'was that my father might insist on wearing his wide-awake in the House of Lords.'[1] It is a ludicrous turn, a confounding of serious explanations by the comical practicality of a hat. That hat *was* a difficulty, no doubt. But Hallam's account is awkward all the same, for it is not comfortable to find such trivialities in the heart of sober matters. Tennyson's wide-awake is worth remembering, though. It has a point to make, however unlikely that may seem, which is relevant to a compendious project of the current kind. It might best be recollected as a quirky reminder of how quickly history, the business of trying to understand and analyse the past, can slip out of our hands. It is as well to test the grandest theory against the humblest of facts; to make some space for the sudden and strange and unpredicted; to remember that grave argument and deep thought are hardly the only motivators of human behaviour; and that

intellectually coherent analyses of the past are not guaranteed merely because they are intellectually coherent.

Neither yielding to the temptation of over-confidence, nor forgetting the importance of going beyond the expected, historical analysis is always engaged in the curious task of trying to understand the past without all the data to hand. That is always to be running-up against a kind of defeat. It is as well to be frank about this as well as rigorous. But that failure does not mean the historian's efforts are forever fruitless, or that the terms by which we might make attempts to understand the past are always already out of order. It means simply that we must be candid about what the historian – literary or cultural historian included – is doing. We must not claim to know too much; we must retain some scepticism and readiness to change; be doubtful of what look like accepted terms that have not been thought about for a long time; in particular be doubtful about metonymy, about making single events or instances stand without qualification for larger wholes; be doubtful of coherence that persuades only because it *is* coherent; be wary of plausibility that resides only in rhetoric and not in the concepts the rhetoric is struggling to describe. A permanent look-out for evidence that does not fit in with grand narratives, or expected routes, is a great ally. Readiness for surprise, readiness to admit that not everything has been taken into account: these are not the worst attitudes with which to approach the difficult business of understanding the past.

In endeavouring to discuss 'the Victorian period', this collection of essays does not, at least in one headline matter, claim too much. What weight can be put on 'Victorian' as an interpretive category? What is to be gained in looking at *Victorian* as opposed to *nineteenth-century* culture? The period label, of course, is enabling and distracting. Currently, it is attracting renewed attention, not least because our own relationship with the nineteenth century shifted both significantly and subtly with the arrival of the new millennium. Suddenly the nineteenth century became *two* centuries away, and that accidentally created a new opportunity to rethink the Victorian just as anniversaries of individual deaths can sometimes be the starting point for real re-assessments. Richard Price, in the stimulating study published just before the new millennium, *British Society, 1680–1880: Dynamism, Containment and Change* (1999), suggested historians were wrong to think of the Victorian period as a period not least because key matters of government, economics and social organization remained intact from the end of the seventeenth century to the seventh

decade of the nineteenth. Martin Hewitt replied with a prize-winning essay in *Victorian Studies* proposing an argument that the Victorian period *did* make sense viewed, at the least, from the perspective of economic history, relations between metropolis and province, cultural geographies, visual regimes, 'dogmatic doubts' and conceptions of time.[2] The *Journal of Victorian Culture* ran intriguing discussions alongside this about when the period began and when it ended.[3] Some authors have rejected the title altogether and some academics prefer to avoid it even to the point of the celebratedly awkward – and probably mythic – job advertisement for a 'Lecturer in Nineteenth-Century British Literature (Not Romantics)'. The problems with 'Victorian' are not hard to find. The adjective is parochial. It is monarchical, too – it suggests an aristocratic history rather than one about all classes and social divisions. It is plainly fortuitous rather than necessary: why should the reign of a single constitutional monarch, albeit a long one, cover a period that was distinctive from what went before and what came after?

For others, there is more to be said on the side of 'Victorian'. It has never lost its champions. Among the literary critics, there have been more than elsewhere. Such scholars have generally been more comfortable with the distinctiveness of some *Victorian* literary forms and practices of writing – the realist novel, the dramatic monologue, the ghost story, naturalism – than some historians are with the idea that historical change occurs in the nineteenth century to a degree sufficient to define a discrete period. But what the literary critic sees is discipline specific. It is not necessarily what the musical historian, or the analyst of the development of electric-powered technology, or the historian of fashion, or the scholar of the development of empire, or even the student of the tumbler pigeon, so suggestive to Charles Darwin, sees. What is important is the object of analysis and what narrative of period it will sustain. And therein is the guiding assumption of this collection of essays, for 'Victorian' is defined as a *post hoc* category, an idea that exists in the critical analysis of critics subsequent to its end. And how one defines the Victorian – whether one finds it useful at all – depends on what story is being told about the period, not the other way around.

The 'Victorian' as a historical category does not exist in any meaningful way prior to the set of knowledges from which it is derived. As a historical category, it is continually being redefined by critics examining different aspects of an exceptionally diverse set of possible knowledges. 'Victorian' has local aptness or inaptness primarily. This *Cambridge Companion to*

Victorian Culture accepts that writing history starts with a set of choices. It is always a matter of paths followed or not. What is 'history', what makes up the contents of a 'historical' account, is the product of after-the-event decisions about the objects of analysis: 'history' as a discourse is created by the act of drawing out a narrative or structuring an argument from particular sets of data, from particular objects of concern. There are always, only, different histories, different ways of conceiving the past – and, accordingly, different 'Victorian' periods or arguments about why there is not a Victorian period. The specially commissioned essays comprising this collection are not to be read as accounts of different aspects of the same 'period'. They are not offered as if somehow they add up into a coherent, organic whole that reveals to the reader a single, consistent and defining idea about what the Victorian age was. There are Victorian *periods*, and there are notions of the nineteenth century that do not find the label 'Victorian' useful at all.

Such mobility does not absolve the historical critic from the requirement for rigour, coherence, exactness. It does not mean that history, or 'the Victorian period', is merely whatever one thinks it is or would like it to be. The idea of the period – or otherwise – must arise from the careful analysis of a set of data. The essays here have different notions of how the nineteenth century might be understood in period terms. But difference does not mutate into indifference. A consciousness of the local and provisional nature of an idea of a historical period does not become a casualness, an off-handedness about the way in which time might be divided into phases, spans, eras. Neither does that consciousness mean casualness towards empirical fidelity, analytical credibility. Implicitly and explicitly, authors here are conscious of the integrity of their notion of a period, through the careful analysis of their particular object of knowledge, but they are also conscious that they are each offering but one way in. John Strachan's conception of part of the history of print culture moves seamlessly from the Regency into the mid-nineteenth century. Implicitly, he finds the 1837–1900 frame less enabling than one that recognizes a marked continuum between the first decades of the nineteenth century into the 1850s and 1860s, particularly in relation to the writing of Charles Dickens. Matthew Rubery finds a more specifically 'Victorian' period visible through the history – the rise, rise and rise – of the national newspaper. Bernard Lightman's investigation of the role of the scientific naturalists defines another way in which a 'Victorian' period can have a specific identity through, here, the struggle for

cultural authority of men including Charles Darwin, Thomas Henry Huxley and John Tyndall. Periods are negotiated as they are made: they are the offspring of retrospective tact.

One way in which the 'Victorian' might be understood is, certainly, through the notion of 'culture' itself. The idea of 'Victorian culture', indeed, has a unique aptness because the Victorians designed a powerful meaning *for* 'culture'. And they argued about who had, or should have, access to it. Matthew Arnold's conception of the healing and restorative power of an idea of 'culture' assumed a body of texts, a canon of writing, which, properly possessed, defined as it sustained a civilized mind. That canon was a bulwark against egotism, narrow-mindedness, *parti pris* and ignorance. Around Arnold's vision of a conflict between culture and anarchy – his *Culture and Anarchy* was published in 1869 – was a set of debates about the purposes of literary or humane knowledge and the objectives of education. Anna Maria Jones considers some of them in her analysis of Victorian 'literary theory' (a proleptic category, of course, but a useful one). One conception of the Victorian is, accordingly, of a period pursuing arguments about the identity of culture itself and discussing the continuing development of a division between high and popular culture; the relationship between a literary and a scientific education; the purposes of the ancient Universities of Oxford and Cambridge in relation to new institutions and their educational priorities; how class and sex and 'race' allowed or forbade access to particular forms of culture; the relationship between the ruling landed classes and culture; the claims of the ancient classics to form the texts of culture against modern writing. There were many questions that derived from such considerations and they are present in different chapters of this book. The volume is, in this respect, maintained by arguments about what and where 'Victorian culture' was.

If the Victorians regarded the matter of access to Arnoldian culture as inseparable from the sustainability of a civilized life, we in the twenty-first century still have to make up our mind about the status of such culture. Should we celebrate popular culture and encourage it as a formal part of education or should educators endeavour to make high culture available to all? Are educators in danger of perpetuating oppression by imagining that some sectors of a population can deal only with undemanding versions of popular culture and not with High Art? Arguments about 'culture' may be one way to define the Victorian period as a period. But they also indicate one of the multitudinous ways in which the

Victorian age had not ended. The Victorians in many different ways live on, not least because contemporary liberal societies wrestle with terms, arguments and irresolutions that still look like theirs. What is the relationship between an education based on skills-learning and a humane, liberal education? What are the merits of a scientific versus a literary education? What is the difference between education and training? Is 'high' culture necessarily accessible only to a few and in what ways is popular culture educative? Who should have access to culture – or education – and on what terms? What constitutes success in culture? Beyond these arguments is the panoply of Victorian 'afterlives', too, which are diversely intriguing journalists and critics at present. Do the Victorians still live? They are present in contemporary debates about ethnicity, gender, moral responsibility, the limits of religion, the idea of a city, the expectations of fictional realism, the structure of the British railway system, modern divisions of domestic space, ideas of justice, the romance of the English pub, the censorship of literature and media. The Victorians, or ideas imagined to *be* Victorian are, as Samantha Matthews indicates, everywhere.

But what is called 'culture' has now, in academic writing at least, conspicuously changed. Arnold's sense of a body of valuable literary knowledge is still present if more in private conviction than public, academic discourse. For some, it has been tainted with political anxieties about elitism, and for others, Arnold's canon of culture is a too distant and arduous ideal. But 'culture' has come to serve in contemporary academic discourse far from any Arnoldian sense. Historical critics once spoke about 'the history of x'. The implication was, perhaps, that there were extractable, discrete histories to be disinterred about whatever 'x' was: international relations, Judaism, the periodical press, beer. But human activities, understood through the compound analytical models of Marxism, cultural materialism, New Historicism, Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, are now perceived – even by those who have come to know this intellectual succession from a distance – as surrounded by, inscribed by and in continual negotiation with a 'culture'. That conception of culture is omnipresent in this *Cambridge Companion* which is, in this sense, about many different nineteenth-century cultures: oral culture, print culture, popular culture, the culture of the street musician, the culture of the dead, nineteenth-century reading culture. 'Culture' now in academic discourse means an irreducible and complex web of social forces and energies. It is necessary to speak of the 'culture of x', not simply its 'history'. 'Culture' means an environment – intellectual, material, economic, social – that

creates and negotiates with the individual thing or person or discourse or activity; that surrounds and defines human labour; that inscribes, makes possible and limits all categories of human endeavour. Without this matrix of culture – its limits hardly knowable, its actions and reactions hard to fix – neither individual actions nor human productions now make sense.

Of course, there are difficulties with this near-ubiquitous historical method. How much is the business of cultural history as it is now practised encouraging, accidentally, what Arnold found among the Nonconformists of the mid-nineteenth century: narrowness, one-sidedness, incompleteness? Such a result might seem the least likely outcome of a critical inquiry built on an acceptance of highly complex social networks and energies, the limits of which are barely knowable. But present-day cultural analysis is sometimes in danger of excusing itself from being a really serious attempt to understand the past *because* of that seemingly limitless conception of context or culture. Such analysis is too close to claiming that history is never really knowable because it is *too* multifarious, because context or culture are too vast and unwieldy. The contexts that need to be re-assembled are, it may be, beyond reach, and too provisional for certainty in the limitless polygon of what 'culture' is. The pattern is beyond our grasp. The cultural or literary historian in turn must now explore the interpretive power of a more limited selection of individual contexts and offer new readings of human productions based perhaps on one or two new contextual reconstructions. The sense that such readings are always limited, that they implicitly acknowledge their own narrowness, is always there. The narrowness is understandable and unavoidable. But the persistence of a historical method that recreates individual contexts because the whole web is too great must guard itself against parochialism.

With an intended audience comprising largely literary readers, this volume naturally examines forms of print culture in variety: satirical prints; the history of newspapers and periodicals; the variety of forms of print that comprise popular culture – from the ballad to the new popular daily newspaper and the 'sensation' press. Popular culture more widely defined cannot now be excluded from cultural history by the rubric of an Arnoldian canon that insists on writing that is not ephemeral but permanent. Literary history that remembers primarily those who read high art poetry and forgets the readers of the popular press or visitors to the music hall offers a curious, off-balance account of Victorian aesthetic

life. Dennis Denisoff provides a discussion of critical models of popular culture in the nineteenth century and of the models that have emerged in subsequent academic debate. His chapter analyses the dubiety that attended the development of popular-cultural forms at the end of the nineteenth century from, often, representatives of high culture. And popular culture, as Denisoff explains, attracts many myths. There was, for a start, no necessary alignment then (as there is not now) between 'popular culture' and the working classes, and neither was there then (as there is not now) any absolute divide between 'high' culture and popular.

Elizabeth Prettejohn considers the nature of Victorian painting in relation to the shape of culture too, arguing that, properly understood, Victorian art defined its own sense of modernity that was as robust as the modernity of the French schools, so often prized above the achievements of the British. Domestic crafts and arts – food, household decoration, fashion – comprised activities of growing significance for the middle-class woman in the period. Nicola Humble's chapter examines the development of arts of living – and their role in *defining* the new Victorian middle class. Much was at stake in the construction of ideas of home where women proposed an image of leisure even as they laboured to control the demands of domestic space: the middle-class home accrued to itself the expectation of social stability that was placed against a rapidly changing and risky public world. There were national dramas behind closed doors. Katherine Newey's essay offers a survey of some of the most engaging and important actual dramas: those acted on the nineteenth-century stage. Her topic is, in part, the responsiveness of the Victorian theatre – long regarded in critical prose as intellectually and aesthetically impoverished – to contemporary nineteenth-century life. Once again, issues about the nature of what would later be named an Arnoldian culture – access to it and state control of it – emerge in the relations between 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' theatre. If there is a myth of Victorian Great Britain as without the stage until Oscar Wilde, then there is a similar conviction that it was also a land without music. Ruth A. Solie contemplates this problem and suggests, against that perception, some of the lively forms of musical activity, and some of the ideological work that music undertook in a period in which, in fact, remarkable developments in home and public music-making took place.

In so many ways the Victorian world was becoming smaller. Another way of perceiving a Victorian period is through the changes to an individual's sense of connections with others. If space travel beyond the planet

was still possible only imaginatively, the movement of human meanings across huge terrestrial distances became a reality with the development of telegraph technology and the utilization of Samuel Morse's code, patented in 1840. This was a transformation in how an individual might understand himself or herself in relation to a greater web of human life. Darwin's celebrated metaphor of the tangled bank in *The Origin of Species* (1859) – his image of the interrelation of living things – has often been used to exemplify the Victorian period's new sense of the profound connectedness of things. But telegraphy suggested, at first primarily to the commercial and journalists' world, what it meant to communicate and to *live* in a complicated web, in a strange and new network of international relations. '[S]ound it far, from shore to shore,/To vibrate o'er earth evermore', wrote James Breeze of the news Morse could carry in *The Glory of the Age: The Atlantic Cable – A Poem on the Wondrous Achievements of Science* (1866), a poem confident that human progress came from technological invention.[4] Nicholas Daly examines some of the changes to Queen Victoria's world through such innovation and not only in the realm of communications technology. The telephone, electric light, train, camera, cinema, phonograph and the motor car were the products of the nineteenth century, with all their multiple implications and irreversible consequences for lived life and the shape, the *feel*, of Victorian modernity.

If the Victorian world was, through technology, becoming smaller, the Queen's armies knew in a peculiarly literal way how remote some of its borders still were. Conventional histories of the nineteenth century – concerned with politics, economic development and social change – have often omitted the history of the Victorians at war though, as Edward S. Spiers indicates, warfare across the terrain of empire was an almost constant feature of Victorian life. His chapter probes in particular the response of literary and artistic figures to war, as well as its conflicted ideological basis. Technology sustained Great Britain's advanced capitalist society, making the transfer of commercial news faster (including from the war front), the movement of goods quicker, the exploitation of new and remote markets more possible. Timothy Alborn discusses major facets of Victorian business and economics, a topic that has newly found a wider audience, including literary scholars, engaged in nineteenth-century analysis. By the middle of the first decade of the present century capitalism had become a less objectionable subject for many literary scholars of the Victorian period, a large number of them distant from the convictions – though not explanatory models – of Marxist critique. The

collapse of the Soviet Union had something do with that alteration in view; generational change, and the prosperity of the 1990s and early in the new millennium were relevant as well. Capitalism's apparent inseparability from democracy emerged morally in its favour, not least as the United States assumed the position of sole super-power. But this book is published in the midst of change. The consequence on the intellectual perception of capitalism following the fracturing of the global economy after the 2008 sub-prime crisis has yet to be seen. The 'New Economic Criticism' in the academy, not least, will need to digest what may be a huge re-orientation of perception about what capitalism can deliver and sustain. Historians of nineteenth-century banking, business and economics – the foundations of the contemporary financial world – have never interested readers more.

The relationship between aesthetic productions and science was a matter of considerable interest to the Victorians themselves. Science, in its full diversity, has now become one of the most revealing topics for cultural analysis in the period. And, of course, the study of science provides another way of defining the 'Victorian' period. The age of the scientific naturalists; the shift of authority in University education from the Anglican establishment to the men of science ('scientist' was not a widely used term in the nineteenth century); the assertion of the experimental method; the professionalization of science and its division into the disciplines and sub-disciplines that are still familiar today comprise some of the issues in Bernard Lightman's chapter, as he examines the breakdown of natural theology as the authoritative mode for reading nature in the nineteenth century. Throughout, connections with literary writing are examined and the place of scientific argument in ideas and practices of writing apparently distant from the world of Darwin, Tyndall and Huxley are drawn out. The history of Victorian science underlines, as many of the chapters here implicitly do, the deeply rooted nature of Christian theology, variously understood, in Victorian life. But that theology was changing and its authority altering. My chapter, on the Victorians and the dead, considers the retreating authority of Christian ideas of eternal life and resurrection, and examines how they were re-imagined and re-created in literary and visual texts and in ideas about how literary texts were, literally, readable.

These essays do not make up various facets of a single, complex but finally unitary claim about what constitutes 'the Victorian period'. They propose different possible avenues into the stretch of historical time