In the nineteenth century, epic poetry in the Homeric style was widely seen as an ancient and anachronistic genre, yet Victorian authors worked to re-create it for the modern world. Simon Dentith explores the relationship between epic and the evolution of Britain’s national identity in the nineteenth century up to the apparent demise of all notions of heroic warfare in the catastrophe of the First World War. Paradoxically, writers found equivalents of the societies which produced Homeric or Northern epics not in Europe, but on the margins of empire and among its subject peoples. Dentith considers the implication of the status of epic for a range of nineteenth-century writers, including Walter Scott, Matthew Arnold, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, William Morris and Rudyard Kipling. He also considers the relationship between epic poetry and the novel and discusses late nineteenth-century adventure novels, concluding with a brief survey of epic in the twentieth century.

Simon Dentith is a Professor of English at the University of Gloucestershire.
Nineteenth-century British literature and culture have been rich fields for interdisciplinary studies. Since the turn of the twentieth century, scholars and critics have tracked the intersections and tensions between Victorian literature and the visual arts, politics, social organization, economic life, technical innovations, scientific thought – in short, culture in its broadest sense. In recent years, theoretical challenges and historiographical shifts have unsettled the assumptions of previous scholarly synthesis and called into question the terms of older debates. Whereas the tendency in much past literary critical interpretation was to use the metaphor of culture as ‘background’, feminist, Foucauldian, and other analyses have employed more dynamic models that raise questions of power and of circulation. Such developments have reanimated the field.

This series aims to accommodate and promote the most interesting work being undertaken on the frontiers of the field of nineteenth-century literary studies: work which intersects fruitfully with other fields of study such as history, or literary theory, or the history of science. Comparative as well as interdisciplinary approaches are welcomed.

A complete list of titles published will be found at the end of the book.
EPIC AND EMPIRE IN
NINETEENTH-CENTURY
BRITAIN

SIMON DENTITH

University of Gloucestershire
# Contents

Acknowledgements                                                                 vii  
Introduction                                                                 1  
   1 Homer, Ossian and Modernity                                               16  
   2 Walter Scott and Heroic Minstrelsy                                        26  
   3 Epic Translation and the National Ballad Metre                            48  
   4 The Matter of Britain and the Search for a National Epic                  64  
   5 ‘As Flat as Fleet Street’: Elizabeth Barrett Browning,                   84  
      Matthew Arnold and George Eliot on Epic and Modernity                    
   6 Mapping Epic and Novel                                                    105  
   7 Epic and the Imperial Theme                                               127  
   8 Kipling, Bard of Empire                                                   150  
   9 Epic and the Subject Peoples of Empire                                    175  
  10 Coda: Some Homeric Futures                                                 196  

Notes 219  
Bibliography 231  
Index 241
I wish to thank my colleagues at the University of Gloucestershire, who enabled me to complete this book. Above all I thank my friend and colleague Peter Widdowson, who has been endlessly encouraging and supportive and who heroically undertook to read the whole typescript; the book has immeasurably profited from his incomparable editorial eye, in addition to all his other help. Bill Myers read very substantial portions of the book at crucial stages in its writing; I am deeply grateful to him for his helpful advice and encouragement. Roger Ebbatson also generously undertook to read and advise on chapters of the book, and I thank him for his kindness and encouragement.

I am also grateful to the many colleagues in different universities who have heard and commented on sections of this book in earlier manifestations: Geoff Ward and Marion Wynne-Davis at the University of Dundee, Gavin Budge at the University of Central England, Pam Morris, Glenda Norquay, Elspeth Graham and Tim Ashplant at Liverpool John Moores University, Ian Baker and Robert Miles at Sheffield Hallam University, Richard Pearson at University College Worcester, Marion Thain at the Midlands Victorian Seminar, and Stan Smith, John Lucas and Sharon Ouditt at Nottingham Trent University. My thanks to all of them. For the love and support of my family during the writing of this book thanks are inadequate, but thanks are all I have.

‘Epic’ by Patrick Kavaragh is reprinted from Collected Poems, edited by Antoinette Quinn (Allen Lane, 2004), by kind permission of the Trustees of the Estate of the late Katherine B. Kavanagh, through the Jonathan Williams Literary Agency.