Introduction

The buried life of things

The Victorian drawing room is an immediately recognizable stereotype of the profusion of things: the mantelpiece with its knick-knacks, tables with their ornaments and lace, books, mirrors, sideboards, flowers, lamps, vases, work-baskets, boxes, cards ... For the modern historian, such a room speaks insistently not simply of a history of taste, but also of the interconnected forces of the industrial revolution, which changed the modes of the production of things, and the imperial project, which changed the modes of the circulation of material objects and their owners. The market for things altered fundamentally in the nineteenth century.[1]

For the nineteenth-century novelist, the drawing room was a stage of moral and cultural value through its things. Mrs Gaskell's controversial best-seller *North and South* has the inequalities of industrial production as its explicit and polemical frame. When Margaret, the novel's heroine, enters the drawing room of the Thorntons, the mill owners, she has a moment to look around: 'It seemed as though no one had been in it since the day when the furniture was bagged up with as much care as if the house was to be overwhelmed with lava, and discovered a thousand years hence. The walls were pink and gold: the patterns on the carpet represented bunches of flowers on a light ground, but it was carefully covered up in the centre by a linen drugget, glazed and colourless.'[2] The tastelessness of the room is imaged through an archaeological metaphor, as if the distance Margaret feels from it makes her into a historian excavating a lost and buried culture, like Pompeii. Even the carpet is covered by a 'glazed and colourless' drugget, as if the floor-cover itself needs uncovering to be properly seen. 'Glazed and colourless' will slide easily into a metaphor of the indifference to the sufferings of others which marks out the mill-owners' unblinking response to industrial production.

The description continues: 'The whole room had a painfully spotted, spangled, speckled look about it, which impressed Margaret so unpleasantly that she was hardly conscious of the peculiar cleanliness required to keep everything so white and pure in such an atmosphere, or the trouble that must be willingly expended to secure the effect of icy, snowy discomfort.' Cleanliness may be next to godliness, but in this room cleanliness is an icy

rejection of life and comfort; the decoration is there to be preserved not enjoyed as beauty. It is not hard to predict that Margaret's encounter with Mrs Thornton will not go well, and that such an iciness will be embodied in her moral attitude to the workers of the mill as well as to her son's personal life. The Thorntons' cleanliness can be set in telling contrast with Mrs Gaskell's portrayal of the Brontës' parsonage in her celebrated biography of Charlotte Brontë, as she brilliantly reclaims the shockingly coarse Brontë girls for propriety and fame: 'Everything about the place tells of the most dainty order, the most exquisite cleanliness. The door-steps are spotless; the small, old-fashioned window-panes glisten like looking-glass. Inside and outside of that house goes up into its essence, purity.'[3] This is the truly high-minded cleanliness of moral and social purity: 'spotless' as opposed to 'painfully spotted', 'dainty' and 'exquisite' as opposed to 'icy . . . discomfort'. In biography as in narrative fiction, the house and its things form the physical embodiment of the owner's moral values, an image of a cultural identity. Things, we know, tell a story.

This book is about how things become a way of telling the story of history in the nineteenth century. It is clear enough that things can be treated as fetishes, icons, objects of lust or fashion, aestheticized, ritualized, symbolically exchanged, and can transform the world through technological innovation (at least).[4] 'One universally acknowledged truth about the Victorians is that they loved their things.'[5] I have not set out here on the crazed adventure of trying to write a history of things in all their various guises and transformations and politics in the nineteenth century. Nor have I turned even to the restricted but culturally expressive genre, which goes back to antiquity, where an object like a coin or a bible is given a voice and a narrative, which allows an oblique perspective on human activity, from a material otherness, as it were – though it is certainly one way in which a thing can tell a story.[6] Nor have I set out to trace the construction of historical sites, an inventive process of genealogy and heritage that has transformed particularly the tourist experience of history from the nineteenth century until today, through a combination of texts, buildings and mementos, although the increasingly dominant intellectual field of historiography, the practice of leisured travel, and the fascination with historicized material remains will run as thematic links through each chapter of what follows.[7] Nor is there any extended analysis of how one author or one novel makes things a dynamic signifying system within their writing, reflects on commodification, or collects curiosities, although novels are quoted and discussed in every chapter.[8]

Rather, I am interested in the multiform practices whereby things become invested with historical meaning, are made to tell history, take on political, religious or intellectual significance – and consequently are intensely fought over – because of the history they are understood to embody. This book hopes to uncover this shifting life of things, as they flare into significance (and become forgotten), are excavated to reveal an extraordinary shift in understanding (and are discarded or reburied), become the object of passionate historical controversy to the point of requiring parliamentary intervention, only to pass into indifference. The relationship between the materiality of history and the stories of history turns out to be remarkably unstable and fractious.

The book begins with a single pair of unique and individual objects – identified and labelled human skulls – and explores how they became objects of display and what this display betokened within nineteenth-century culture. These skulls from Edward Bulwer Lytton's house at Knebworth in Hertfordshire, England, were dug up in Pompeii and are identified as the skulls of named figures from his celebrated novel, *The Last Days of Pompeii*: real skulls, but of fictional characters. These objects become thus a way of articulating the contested boundary between history and fiction, genres anxiously attempting to define spheres of authority, not least through the reception of Scott, Macaulay, Renan and Bulwer Lytton himself. As phrenological exhibits they bring contemporary science to the fore as a new technology of comprehending the physical world. They are still on display today at Knebworth, but, without explanation, remain objects of no more than passing exoticism or disregard to the tourists trailing through the house.

If the first chapter takes unique and even outlandish objects to explore the key arena of fiction and history as competing authoritative discourses, the second chapter takes three religious objects, each of which has some claim to paradigmatic status: a Roman mosaic discovered in Frampton, Dorset, with a Christian symbol built into it; a stone altar erected in a church in the university city of Cambridge; and a chasuble, a ritual robe, woven by a leading architect for the founder of a new religious order, established at Oxford after the crisis of the Oxford Movement. Nineteenth-century religious conflict in Britain was as intense as at any other period since the Reformation, and its violent disagreements often focused precisely on the history of the Church, in a way which modern Christian institutional thinking has largely obscured. The general questions that seemed most insistently pressing to mid-Victorian religious controversy turned precisely on critical history. Was the life of Jesus as represented in the authoritative

texts of scripture historically accurate? Should the early Church be determinative of modern religion, and, if so, how? Did the Anglican Church have a significant history before the Reformation? Could the history pronounced by Church authorities be reconciled with the history pronounced by modern sciences such as geology, or with modern history's sense of what constituted adequate evidence? Each of the objects discussed in this second chapter might seem typical of a general class of things: there is now a lot of Roman archaeology which can be visited in Britain and seen on television;[9] it is unlikely that any visitor or parishioner in a modern Anglican church would find the presence of a stone altar in a church an abomination sufficient to imprison the incumbent who allowed it; a chasuble worn for a religious service can now be happily viewed both as an acceptable part of the splendour of religious worship and even as an aestheticized item in a museum.[10] Yet in each case, when Victorian religious sensibilities came into contact with these things, spiralling historical invention, bitter theological and political wrangling, and intricate acts of rebellious artistic representation took place. This remarkable explosion of how things mean, as history and religion clash, is what the second chapter seeks to explore.

Chapter 3 moves from individual objects to large classes of objects, and, in particular, the thousands of photographs of Jerusalem and the Holy Land which were produced in the nineteenth century. The new technology of photography engaged with the new science of archaeology to produce a new vision of the Holy Land. As the first chapter is concerned with archaeology's discovery of reality in things, and as the second chapter is concerned with how nineteenth-century religion envisions the materiality of the world, so the third chapter is concerned with biblical archaeology, its claim to determine the real of the Bible authoritatively, its ability to represent the history of things in material form. The intense fascination with the truth of the Bible, the strident claims of new sciences in Victorian culture, and the commitment to the ideological expectations of the imperial project make biblical archaeology the archetypal test case of the buried life of things in nineteenth-century culture. Photography's claim on the real was informed consistently by a 'biblical gaze', whereby the contemporary landscape, buildings, people of the Middle East, as well as scripturally significant sites, become a sort of living testimony of an ancient history, contemporary proof of a biblical past's physical truth. The circulation of these photographs of biblical lands was ordered into professionally produced albums, which structured an ideologically determined itinerary to position the visitor or viewer within a particular religious and political perspective. This political positioning is revealed most vividly by photograph albums produced by the

Ottoman court for western consumption, which explicitly aim to produce a counter-view to the western Orientalist construction of the East as backward and old-fashioned. The Sultan wished to rewrite western history of the East by producing his own version of a resolutely modern empire. Photographs circulated, that is, as objects in a politically and religiously charged conflict over the representation of the present and the past, and photographic images of the present, as the embodiment of modernity or antiquity, became the means and matter of this conflict. Photographs as things and of things brought the Bible, history and politics into sharp contention.

Chapter 4 takes us out of the nineteenth century in that its focus is on the planning and building work of the Mandate in Jerusalem. Yet C. R. Ashbee, the civic advisor in Jerusalem who did so much to determine the early policy of the British in Palestine, was intellectually formed in the late pre-Raphaelite and early Garden City movements and heavily influenced by William Morris, the Arts and Crafts movement, and Edward Carpenter. He brought a fully articulated nineteenth-century aesthetic to Jerusalem – and with it changed the material appearance of the city. This chapter is concerned with how history is made on the ground. It traces how the Holy City's physical form was reconstructed to embody a view of the city's history. Chapter 3 traced how an image of Jerusalem and the Holy Land was produced in and by photographs; chapter 4 shows how this image in turn informed the planning policies of the imperial authorities in Jerusalem, with lasting effect. Ashbee made things tell the history that he wanted to become visible.

The final chapter develops directly from this discussion of the rebuilding of Jerusalem, and also looks back to the church politics of the second chapter, by investigating how restoration and reconstruction became central metaphors for Victorian thinking, especially but not solely with regard to material culture. Restoration and reconstruction are key expressions of how the past can be expressed in and by contemporary things. Restoration requires human agency and intent to move through the present to an idealized model of the past; reconstruction requires the rebuilding of a fragmentary or ruined present. Both are ways of embodying a material history. Both are ways of challenging the present in the name of history.

There are evident thematic and narrative links between these chapters. The Bible and classical antiquity are dominant models of the past for nineteenth-century culture and consequently provide a constant framework for understanding how history and religion take shape through things. The birth of Jesus and the composition of the New Testament in the Roman

Empire provide a necessary if combustible connection between these two genealogies. Classics – Greek and Latin – formed the basis of elite Victorian education; Christianity from the start remained obsessed with its obstreperous genesis and incremental accommodation within Greco-Roman culture – 'What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?', as Tertullian railed in the fourth century – and nineteenth-century Britain repeatedly strove to negotiate the tension between its classical learning and its Christian ideals.[11] Material culture, from archaeology to architecture to art, played a formative role in this process of accommodation. Each chapter is also concerned with how things are used to make what is invisible visible – whether it is theology, history, fiction or the truth of the self. The material and the spiritual, the physical and ideological, the real and the imaginary, come together, as the buried lives of things are narrated. This book traces how the nineteenth-century pursuit of historical truth seeks to find a grounding in physical reality. Each chapter discusses also how individuals and their cultural formation, ideological commitments, and personal foibles actively engage with the process of making things speak. The power of objects lies in their uncanny ability to make it seem that *saxa loquuntur*, as Freud famously said of Pompeii: 'The Rocks Speak'.[12] Uncovering the processes of this objectification – how objects become treated as if their meaning were not the construction of human interactions – is a running theme of this book. Each chapter also explores how things are uncovered as sites of contest and then fade into a newly buried life of obscurity (although often with strange trailing clouds of influence). *Das Ding an sich*, as Kant establishes at the fountain-head of nineteenth-century philosophy, is unknowable.

It is certainly possible to find antecedents of such questions and concerns throughout cultural history, not least in antiquity and the scriptural records themselves. But it seems to me that there is something specific to the nineteenth century about the organization of knowledge I am tracing in this book. First of all, the nineteenth century witnessed a radical and rapid change in the understanding of the material world through the swift and all-embracing reach of the sciences of geology, chemistry, physics, astronomy, archaeology. The intense rate of technological innovation, iconic of the nineteenth century's self-awareness of progress, did not merely foster such intellectual advances, however. Rather, technology was part and parcel of the contest over how the material world should be understood to reveal history. So, as we will see in chapter 3, the innovative technology of the steamship brought more and more Europeans to test their new technology of photography in the Holy Land, to produce images which contributed to the new science of archaeology, which was itself seeking to show that the

Bible was grounded in reality, against the challenge of geology's and critical history's different understandings of the past. What is more, the Empire and the nation state, specifically nineteenth-century contexts, provide unparalleled frameworks not just for the stories of identity that things can tell, but also for the very material possibilities for revealing the buried life of things: it is the shifting geography of nineteenth-century empires too that brings so many Westerners to explore the Holy Land, or which makes the story of Roman Britain a freshly significant genealogy. The combination of new material sciences, new technology, and the new political and social opportunities to exploit things, creates a nexus of forces specific to nineteenth-century culture.

Nineteenth-century material sciences quickly came up hard against inherited textual authorities. Geology and Bishop Ussher could not both be right about the dating of the earth, although there were awkward attempts to ameliorate the evident clash. Could the flood recounted in Genesis have taken place over the whole world but left no trace in the physical record? If Jerusalem was a glorious city of gold, why did it look like a small, backward, dirty Middle Eastern hill-top town without a decent water supply? Again and again this book tells the stories of travellers whose journeys brought them face to face with a material reality that challenged their imagination and their expectations of the world formed through what they had read and been taught. Textual authorities about things had been significantly challenged. In the wake of the French Revolution, institutional power too in the nineteenth century was repeatedly threatened by revolutions of authority, and fought back accordingly.[13] My question of how things come to matter for history has to be seen within this broad and specifically nineteenth-century cultural narrative of unstable political identities and shifting strategies of representation.

What follows are necessarily essays towards a history of how things tell the past in nineteenth-century culture: a full account would be prohibitively long and beyond the scope of a single scholar. The book is intended rather to explore significant and telling examples of a fundamental nineteenth-century cultural phenomenon and to provide paradigms of the potential of what might be called an interdisciplinary approach to such a phenomenon: it treats high and low texts, texts of very different types, from novels to treatises to poems to graffiti and inscriptions; it discusses art, architecture, archaeology, clothes, technologies, gestures of self-presentation – the full gamut of verbal and material culture. The time-frame is what we keep calling the long nineteenth century, from the French Revolution through to the First World War. The range of subjects is also larger than is often seen

in a short monograph, with evident consequences for the possibility of including certain sorts of historical detail: the footnotes and more than usually extensive bibliography are designed to direct the interested reader towards further background discussion, where it is particularly relevant and has informed my analysis, and thereby to maintain the focus of the book.

The first chapter is developed from its first outing in *Representations* 119 (2012), and materials from the fourth were also used in *From Plunder to Preservation*, edited by Peter Mandler and Astrid Swenson (British Academy, 2013); the final chapter will appear, I hope, in shorter form in a forthcoming book co-written with Jim Secord, Clare Pettitt and Peter Mandler. The scope of the book, however, is partly a product of having had the good fortune to work as the principal investigator in two inspirational and supportive interdisciplinary research groups over the last decade, 'Abandoning the past in an age of progress', a fifteen-person team funded for five years by the Leverhulme Trust, and 'The Bible and Antiquity in Nineteenth-Century Culture', an eleven-person team funded for five years by the European Research Council. It is a pleasure to be able to thank my colleagues from both teams for much help and criticism over many years, especially, for this book, Clare Pettitt, Peter Mandler, Jim Secord, Astrid Swenson, Scott Mandelbrote, Michael Ledger-Lomas, Gareth Atkins, Brian Murray and Kate Nichols. For intense theoretical conversations, I couldn't have been more fortunate in having Miriam Leonard, Brooke Holmes and Constanze Guthenke as interlocutors and friends. Several chapters or parts of chapters have been tried out on audiences in Princeton, Berkeley, Chicago, London, and I thank my hosts and audiences there. Other debts are too numerous to list here.

1 A writer's things

Edward Bulwer Lytton and the archaeological gaze

Knebworth House is the seat of the Lytton family. The original red-brick Elizabethan manor was extensively redesigned in the mid-Victorian period by its most celebrated owner, Edward Bulwer Lytton, who continued the work started by his mother, in a high Gothic style, complete with turrets, gargoyles and a decorated hall with minstrel gallery, armour and an inscription of welcome around the wall just beneath the embossed and chandeliered ceiling – creating out of the actual Elizabethan house a building that looks more like an Elizabethan house should look for a successful historical novelist of the nineteenth century.[1] The interior was in turn redecorated again in 1905, to lighten the wood and to bring more openness into its sepulchral gloom, under the ownership of Edward's son, Robert Bulwer Lytton, who was a popular poet under the pen-name Owen Meredith. The work was undertaken by Sir Edwin Lutyens, already the most distinguished of modern British architects, the designer of New Delhi – where Robert Bulwer Lytton had been Viceroy of India. Edwin Lutyens was also Robert Bulwer Lytton's son-in-law, although, by the time of the commission, the marriage, opposed by the parents when first proposed, had already collapsed. The house itself encapsulates a history of Victorian architectural politics, and the engagement of that politics in the history of Empire and, more surprisingly, in a history of (familial) literary endeavour, as the building expresses the changing image of its owner's public self-presentation.

Inside the house, as is the way with such stately homes today, there is a series of small exhibitions, one of which focuses on the most famous Bulwer Lytton, Edward, who wrote not only *The Last Days of Pompeii*, one of the best-selling Victorian novels which founded the genre of toga fiction – more than 200 novels about the Roman Empire were published in the eighty years following – but also a string of best-selling novels in his long and hugely successful career as a novelist, politician (though he was removed from office after a funding scandal), and widely influential figure, who prompted public scorn as well as admiration.[2]

The exhibition is intelligently composed, even if it cannot wholly escape a tinge of the hagiographic. It duly records that Bulwer Lytton was responsible

for phrases such as 'the pen is mightier than the sword', and 'It was a dark and stormy night'; it collects wonderful examples of versions of *The Last Days of Pompeii*; and it decorously refers to his violent and abusive relationship with his wife, Rosina, acted out in a blaze of recriminatory publicity from them both, and includes some of the scandalous, prurient and outraged pamphlets circulated at the time that Edward forcibly committed Rosina to a lunatic asylum for speaking against him at a political husting. The hagiography could easily be paralleled from contemporary sources. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in 1859 declared that Bulwer Lytton is 'now unquestionably the greatest living novelist'. Margaret Oliphant regarded him as 'the first novelist of his time', surpassing Dickens and Thackeray.[3] The exhibition does not record the equal and opposite reaction of intense hatred that Bulwer inspired as a person and as a writer. Kingsley dismissed him as 'a self-sustained, self-glorifying hot house flunkey'.[4] Thackeray, in a long campaign of disdain, vilified him as 'bloated with vanity, meanness and ostentatious exaltation of self'[5] and christened him the 'Knebworth Apollo'.[6] Bad reviews and personal violence seem only to have increased his sales.

There is one tiny part of the exhibition in a case on the landing that almost no-one looks at with any attention today. This is a pity, because it actually provides an extraordinary glimpse of Victorian display that goes back to Bulwer's time, and indeed the identification labels are still rather curly Victorian paper slips in a distinctive nineteenth-century hand. It is also a pity because what this exhibition puts on display is quite remarkable. Inside the standard, large, upright display cabinet is a smaller Victorian glass case, designed to sit on a desk. There are two skulls in it, which are labelled as the skull of Arbaces and the skull of Calenus. That is, the visitor is presented with the bodily remains of two of the leading characters of *The Last Days of Pompeii*.

Being faced by these skulls is a decidedly weird and macabre moment that bursts through the piety of the shrine of the house with a shock of laughter and confusion. The bones of literary inventions? How can the skulls of characters from a novel be on display – or how can they still be on display without explanation? How did they arrive there? Who put them in a glass cabinet in Bulwer's home? And, above all, what does this display tell us about the interplay of fiction and science, and about the construction of archaeology, in the nineteenth century?

In exploring these immediate questions, this chapter will bring together three particular contemporary critical concerns, which are all too often allowed to develop separately. The first concerns things and their display