

Introduction

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Alone of all the volumes in the *New Cambridge History of English Literature*, this one is named after the reign of a monarch. To identify a literary period in this way is necessarily problematic, and the utility of the label ‘Victorian’ has long been contested.¹ On the other hand, it has endured – albeit with shifting sets of connotations. Not least among the reasons for this endurance is the apparent precision offered by the bounding dates of the Queen’s reign (1837–1901), with the latter of these years more or less coinciding, conveniently, with the end of a century. Yet even before Queen Victoria’s demise, her long tenure of the throne had encouraged many commentators to look backwards, thus accentuating the notion of her reign as marking a distinctly defined era. Both her Golden and Diamond Jubilees stimulated evaluative retrospectives – such as Alfred Russel Wallace’s *The Wonderful Century. Its Successes and Failures* (1898) – of all that had been achieved (the emphasis was almost invariably teleologically framed) over the preceding decades, whether in politics or industrial invention, the physical sciences or the field of culture.

The sense that Victoria’s accession marked a very useful, clearly defined starting point was, of course, in many ways constructed in hindsight, a product of the lengthy reign of a monarch who had attracted a good deal of attention right from her accession, due to the combination of her youth and the fact of her being a woman. This was accentuated as a result of an expanding popular press that exploited these circumstances, then her marriage to Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha in 1840, and then her rapidly growing family.² But other, less monarchically centered factors allowed late

- 1 An extensive discussion of these debates, as well as some compelling arguments for the period label ‘Victorian’ to be retained, is offered by Martin Hewitt, ‘Why the Notion of Victorian Britain Does Make Sense’, *Victorian Studies* 48:3 (2006), pp. 395–438.
- 2 See John Plunkett, *Queen Victoria. First Media Monarch* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). For more on the cultural and literary impact of Queen Victoria, see also Margaret Homans, *Royal Representations: Queen Victoria and British Culture*,

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Victorians to look at the decade of her coming to the throne as a starting point, whether they considered the beginnings of the railway system (which was to make a yet greater sociological and economic impact on the country in the 1840s); or the impact of the 1832 Reform Act, and the questions it raised concerning democracy and suffrage; or the ideological and material repercussions of the passing of the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act. In terms of literature itself – to take just three examples – the publication of Tennyson's *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* (1830), signalled the emergence of a writer who, whilst clearly building on the works of the second-generation Romantics who had preceded and pre-deceased him, was perceived over the decades to come as giving voice to many of the period's most pressing private and public concerns. The writings of Thomas Carlyle (*Sartor Resartus* (1833–4); *The French Revolution* (1837–48); *Past and Present* (1843)), similarly, incorporate elements from German Romantic philosophy in his experimental ways of addressing the relationship of the visible and invisible, the material and spiritual worlds, and in reconceptualizing both the interrelations of earlier and contemporary times, and the problems of historical perspective. The appearance of Dickens's *Sketches by Boz* (1836) and *Pickwick Papers* (1837) could, likewise, be seen as indicating not just a new voice in prose writing, but as pointing towards new modes of interaction with a rapidly expanding reading public, whether through prose that simultaneously commemorated and critiqued contemporary society (the transformation of the occasional essay into investigative journalism), or through the creation and commercialization of new habits of reading.

At the other end of Victoria's reign, 1901 provided a strong sense of a break for many commentators of the time, even if the relatively arbitrary cross-over point between 'Victorian' and 'modern' cultural formations has subsequently been repositioned in various ways, with the emphasis increasingly falling – as in this volume – on a whole period of transition, rather than on some neat date. The new generation of writers were keen to emphasize their dramatic rupture with the previous century, and their own attempts to provide a symbolic date for the end of the Victorian era have fed into the periodization of literary history – none more strongly than Virginia Woolf's well-worn formulation concerning the change in 'human character' that allegedly took place at the end of 1910, the year that saw the death of Edward VII, whose brief reign marked what historian G. M. Young called the Victorian period's 'flash Edwardian epilogue'. Yet even when one

1837–1876 (University of Chicago Press, 1999), and Adrienne Auslander Munich, *Queen Victoria's Secrets* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

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considers the social impact of the suffrage movement, the shock to the artistic system offered by the first Post-Impressionist Exhibition at the Grafton Galleries in December 1910, or the importance of the issues behind the constitutional crises that provoked the two General Elections of that year, each of these areas may be seen as a culmination of trends as well as a decisive severance with what had preceded them.³ And the rupture was by no means absolute: others have preferred to see the social watershed of the First World War as signifying the true end of the period.

Yet the social and stylistic volatility of the late nineteenth century has led some critics and historians to see the transition away from 'Victorianism' as occurring somewhat earlier. One obvious point of comparison and contrast with this *Cambridge History* volume is Philip Davis's impressively thorough and immensely readable *The Victorians*, volume VIII of the new Oxford English Literary History (2002). Davis ends at 1880. But however reasoned this concluding point (whether determined by the author's own arguments concerning religion or literary form, or by the over-arching decision of his series editor), to cut off one's definition of what constitutes the Victorian period at this point is to miss many opportunities, not least to see the later Victorians chafing against the earlier decades of the century in formal, as well as ideological terms.

The 1916 *Cambridge History* – this volume's ancestor – solved the problem of how to construct a period divide by confining its definition of a Victorian writer to include only those who were already dead. Henry James passed away just in time to be included in the bibliographies, if not in the main body of the text, but his literary career, to take but one example, is suggestive of many of the themes and stylistic challenges that were explored in the later years of Victoria's reign: the indeterminacy of language and, indeed, of literary interpretation; concerns with internationalism and national identity; issues of sexual identity, freedom of expression, repression and control; the relationship between the aesthetic and the commercial; the ability of narrative prose to capture the life of the mind, with all its contradictions; the continual interchange between immediate sensory perception, memory, and

3 G. M. Young, *Portrait of an Age. Victorian England* (1949; Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 184. For 1910, see Peter Stansky, *On or About December 1910: Early Bloomsbury and its Intimate World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996). Virginia Woolf's comment that 'on or about December 1910 human character changed' can be found in her 1924 essay 'Character in Fiction' (later revised and reprinted as 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown'), in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Andrew McNeillie, vol. III (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988), p. 421.

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the workings of the unconscious, and so on. The final two decades of Victoria's reign can now be seen as bearing a peculiarly close relationship to late twentieth-century theoretical concerns – with performance and style; with the politics of the imperial and the global; with anxiety about the nature of democracy and representation; with eugenics and genetics; with new and rapidly developing technologies in the media. This fact was doubtless in part responsible for the proliferation of work on the cultural history of this later part of Victoria's reign during the late twentieth century – scholarship that, in turn, helped to complete the scholarly rehabilitation of Victorian literature, and that rendered our understanding of what constituted 'the Victorian' considerably more complex.

In other words, although this volume retains the label 'Victorian', it does so in the full and alert awareness that it is a label of convenience – as well as a term that carried some very precise connotations for those who were its immediate successors, and who could use it as an aesthetic rallying call for all that they wished to be seen as standing against. Yet the chapters that follow seek to break down – as has been the case with much recent scholarship – any sense of reductionism in the term. They emphasize, rather, the way in which these sixty-four years, with their dramatically shifting and expanding markets for print, were a crucible for literary experimentation – stylistic and thematic – as writers sought to give expression to major changes within society. Many chapters point, too, to the impossibility of drawing strict cut-off points – whether at the beginning or end of the supposed period – when it comes to the topics and writers whom they are treating.

Porosity, indeed, is a significant characteristic of literary scholarship when it comes to addressing the Victorian period. The emergence of cultural studies as a significant force within university English departments over the past couple of decades – something which has called into question what may be said to constitute the boundaries of literary history themselves – has been particularly noticeable in relation to Victorian literature. A number of factors are responsible for this: they range from the abundance of source materials to the continued existence of a very large number of physical objects and edifices as well as institutional practices, and perhaps, above all, our fascination with an age still so relatively close to our own, which, despite its significant differences, seems to have shared – or at least been responsible for producing – so many of our cultural preoccupations. Jay Clayton discusses these admirably in *Charles Dickens in Cyberspace* (2003), his examples ranging from evolution/genetics to the relationship of the human to the machine. Clayton reminds one, moreover, that the twentieth century's disciplinary division between the two cultures of arts and science

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was one which only slowly gained currency within the nineteenth century, and has been disrupted again by today's digital age. If the Victorians were responsible for the growth of the archive, and the consolidation of a whole range of classificatory schemes; if the period saw the development of a range of discreet disciplinary and audience-determined discourses, they were simultaneously amassing a huge, humanly inexhaustible amount of textual and material evidence. The relative accessibility (both archivally and linguistically) of this evidence has allowed not just for extensive documentation of research, but for the tracing of discursive patterns across disparate fields. Such cultural exploration has therefore been in a symbiotic relationship with those approaches that have emphasized discourse theory rather than biography or individual intentionality, and that have foregrounded that critical Holy Trinity of class, gender, and race. Nor is that an arbitrary order of categories, but one that corresponds to the successive, if rightly overlapping waves of emphasis in Victorian literary studies over the last four decades of the twentieth century: decades that did so much to establish the terms in which Victorian studies became popular, even fashionable. Moreover, the breadth and variety of print culture in the period has enabled the contextualization of the 'literary' within the growth of consumerism, and within the growth of those very institutions (whether of literary criticism and reviewing, or of academic study), that have enabled and demanded the consideration of what constitutes the 'literary' in the first place.

There is, however, nothing very new in the association of interdisciplinarity with Victorian literary studies. In his Introduction to *The Dickens World* (1941), Humphry House noted that

For some years past, criticism – and more particularly what is called 'Literary History' – has been becoming more sociological . . . The emphasis of literary history has shifted from 'influences' traced as a kind of genealogical descent from one major writer to another, to biography which seeks out sources of creation in the psychological details of each writer's life; and it is shifting now again to the sociological and economic environment in which particular works have been produced.⁴

He illustrates this with reference to Bonamy Dobrée and Edith Batho's *Introductions to English Literature*, and in particular to their volume *The Victorians and After* (1938). What one might say has shifted again is the fact that psychology has re-entered Victorian studies, whether in relation to questions of gender, or,

4 Humphry House, *The Dickens World* (Oxford University Press, 1941), p. 15.

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more broadly, in company, say, with the dynamics of desire and repression; and that scholars have begun to re-assess the importance of life-writing, incorporating both biography and autobiography into getting a stronger purchase on the Victorians' understanding of themselves, and on the narratives which they constructed in order to make sense of their lives and times.

Yet in foregrounding the cultural emphasis of literary studies of the Victorian period over the past couple of decades, this volume will also respond to the amount, and to the type, of attention that has, nonetheless, been paid to individual authors. Those critical emphases on class, on gender, and on race have, indeed, led to a significant re-appraisal of the Victorian canon: to far greater attention being paid, above all, to women writers, but also to working-class male authors (such as Chartist poets), and to the voices of writers from the regions and from the colonies. Beyond this, the significant editorial work which has been performed during the past forty or so years on authors already regarded as major, and the publication of their letters, of journalistic pieces and occasional writings, and other forms of archival work have added to, and in some cases challenged our understanding of these writers. This volume brings out the relationship of literary figures to one another, whether that relationship be one of personal friendship, of shared literary circles, or one of intertextuality.

The daunting amount of material that could potentially be covered by this volume is indicated by the fact that two of the three nineteenth-century volumes of the original Cambridge History – each amounting to 600+ pages – are devoted to the Victorians. The first of these volumes is very definitely biographical in its organization. In dividing up its chapters to deal, in rough chronological order, with Carlyle; the Tennysons (Charles and Frederick, as well as the Poet Laureate); Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning; Matthew Arnold, Arthur Hugh Clough, James Thomson; the Rossettis, William Morris, Swinburne; lesser poets of the middle and later nineteenth century; the prosody of the nineteenth century (from *Ossian* and Percy's *Reliques*, through Blake, the Romantics, and theorists of prosody); nineteenth-century drama; Thackeray; Dickens; the political and social novel (Disraeli, Charles Kingsley, Mrs Gaskell, 'George Eliot'); the Brontës; lesser novelists (including Bulwer Lytton, Trollope, Mrs Oliphant, Wilkie Collins); and George Meredith, Samuel Butler, George Gissing, it brings out the importance that earlier scholars placed on literary biography, on the ways in which individuals, rather than social or intellectual or cultural movements, defined the literary taste and production of a period. Although the chapter headings in the second of the two Victorian volumes

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suggest a more generalizing approach (they range from ‘Philosophers’, and ‘Historians, Biographers and Political Orators’, through ‘Caricature and the Literature of Sport’ and ‘The Literature of Travel, 1700–1900’), the internal structure of each of these chapters almost invariably becomes a chronological, author-based survey. By contrast, this volume places its emphasis firmly on ideas, on themes, and on connections. Like its 1916 predecessor, it considers ‘literature’ as a very wide category. It is premised on the belief that the intellectual and cultural movements of the Victorian period are particularly well suited to modes of approach that foreground not just interdisciplinarity, but that trace the importance and impact of these movements across, as well as within, particular genres, and that closely examine the links (and divergences) between different linguistic, rhetorical, and formal modes of treating analogous subjects.

The volume falls into six sections. The first, ‘Authors, Readers, and Publishers’, sets up the contexts in which writing was produced, disseminated, and consumed, for, as with any period, the history of literature in this period is inseparably bound in with the histories of publication and readership. To look at the history of the book – as this sub-discipline has come to be known – is to be reminded of the material reality involved in the production and consumption of books. It involves considering such issues as the development of new and cheaper technologies of printing and paper manufacturing; the growth and characteristics of publishing houses and their particular specialties (books for overseas markets, for drawing-room display, for railway bookstalls); the reasons lying behind different modes of volume publication, including three-decker novels, series, reprints, anthologies, and abridgements; the ways in which books were advertised and sold, and the actual appearance of texts and what they feel like to hold and touch.

But the materiality of texts is only part of the picture. The proliferation of printed material in the Victorian period must be understood side by side with the expansion of the reading public, and the growth of particular ‘niche’ markets. It has to be seen in relation to the conditions of authorship: the different pressures faced by female and male writers; questions of anonymity and pseudonymity, lionization and fame; financial pressures; the mental and physical demands of serialization; and the degree to which it was possible (and often necessary) to combine writing with other occupations – in other words, the rewards and the tensions associated with publication, or with attempting to get published. Necessarily, authors are continually in dialogue with their readership, or projected readers: to understand this relationship means considering how books were

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encountered (in libraries – whether private, including the phenomenon of the circulating library, or public and as private possessions); where and how they were read (aloud within a family group; in solitude; greedily; dutifully; as part of formalized or self-directed education; passed from one person to another in a workplace); and exploring the concerns about reading that were publicly expressed, whether such concerns involved the possibility that print would corrupt morals, or would inflame readers politically.

Not all printed material was consumed in book form, by any means. The periodical exercised an enormous influence over Victorian literary and cultural life: as an outlet for writers (of both non-fictional prose and imaginative works); as a format for the circulation of new developments in science, philosophy, history, politics, economics, and other emerging disciplines; as a means of disseminating all kinds of information (whether at the level of ‘useful knowledge’, in publications aimed at artisans and members of the lower middle classes, or in the form of travel writing); and as a forum for reviews. Whilst the period saw the growth and emergence of a number of intellectually influential publications, such as *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, the *Fortnightly*, and the *Westminster Review*, it was also important for the development of more widely circulating magazines which relied above all on the appeal of the fiction that they included, such as *Household Words*, *All the Year Round*, *Temple Bar*, the *Cornhill*, and *Longman’s Magazine*. Weekly publications were important and influential, too, in terms of the literary reviews and advertisements that they contained (especially the *Spectator*, the *Saturday Review*, and the *Athenaeum*), and the period also witnessed the emergence of general scientific and anthropological journals, satiric periodicals (not just *Punch*, but such publications as *Fun* and *Judy*); and publications aimed at specific audiences (whether *The Girl’s Own Paper* or the relatively radical *Shafts*, the *Magazine of Art*, or *Cycling*). The expanding outlets for print were supported, moreover, by technologies that led to the inclusion of an increasing number of illustrations. The implications of having text, picture, and non-editorial material such as advertisements in potential dialogue with one another is just one of the many areas in which we see the History of the Book intersecting with developments within visual culture.

Without the material presence of books and periodicals, and readers to buy, borrow, and consume them, there would be no literary history, which is why the volume gives precedence to this material. The second section, ‘Writing Victoria’s England’, offers a more traditional approach to Victorian literary history. It breaks down the long period into three sections. Running through each of these is the theme of literature and national identity,

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something that is of crucial importance to the volume as a whole. They set up the question of what might be the relationship of literary writing with England's – and Britain's – perception of itself, and its relationship to the rest of the world, including its expanding colonial possessions. These broad-based accounts provide a set of contexts alongside which the later chapters may be read.

The next category, 'Modes of Writing', is the most radically conceived section of this volume. Without doubt, the Victorian period saw the significant growth and development of various genres and sub-genres. Discreet genres were used to group texts for the purposes of both reviewing and advertising, and these distinctions have often been maintained by sub-categories of the discipline of literary study throughout the twentieth century. But these chapters explore the idea that modes of writing – lyrically, or epically, or melodramatically – very often function across generic boundaries, and that acknowledging this fact opens up new practices of understanding what is peculiarly Victorian about the ways in which these writers thought about their material, intellectual, and spiritual environments. Their preoccupations are here openly linked to both conventionality and experimentalism in language and in form, as a means of investigating how ideas spill over and are transformed, between one genre and another.

This section is followed by one – 'Matters of Debate' – that highlights some of the most controversial and contested areas of Victorian life and thought, whether these involved spiritual beliefs or sexual conduct, economics, education, or aesthetics. An emphasis on *why* these specific topics should have mattered so much, and what was at stake – and for whom – when it came to the energy that was invested in debating them links these thematic concerns to the literary forms that gave them imaginative currency. The contexts in which these discussions took place, however, were not just cerebral ones, and the idea of the Victorian environment and its topographies is developed in the next section, 'Spaces of Writing'. Building on the idea that there are correspondences between mental space and social space – whether the latter is figured in terms of room, or streets, or fields, or countries – this part of the volume examines the ways in which spaces, both literal and figurative, are constructed within literature. The chapters not only look at the importance of urban, rural, and regional locations to Victorian literature, but they set out to place Victorian writing in relation to the wider world.

'Spaces of Writing' is organized like a series of circles that radiate ever outwards from the organizing idea of spatiality, and it necessarily raises

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the issue of what constitutes the ‘English literature’ of the *Cambridge History*’s title. Whereas some of the earlier chapters draw readily on examples from the whole of the British Isles, it is also important to distinguish what is distinct about Scottish, Welsh, and Irish writing in this period, as well as writing from different English regions. Colonial writing presents a more complex question, particularly at a time when national literatures in English were starting to develop in Britain’s possessions, with a greater or lesser degree of reaction against – or homage to – the seat of empire. The earlier *Cambridge History* contained discreet chapters on Anglo-Irish literature; Anglo-Indian literature; English–Canadian literature, the literature of Australia and New Zealand, and South African poetry. Each of these is still an extraordinarily useful bibliographic resource: indeed, the tendency of every chapter in this volume’s predecessor to aim for a condensed package of factual information ensures that both the chapters themselves, and the attendant bibliographies, are still exceptionally good starting places for research. Yet given how much could be said, in fact, about the literature produced within these different countries, it was a reluctant editorial decision to retain an Anglocentric position. Even if spillage in the contents and discussion of these chapters towards works that were written outside Britain’s shores was both inevitable and desirable – demonstrating how writers and books themselves travelled and returned – the emphasis falls on texts that were written by those primarily domiciled within the United Kingdom and Ireland. This is an emphasis that has allowed, too, for due weight to be given to literature’s involvement, during the period, with both American and European concerns.

The final section examines what may be called – following the inspiration of John Kucich and Dianne Sadoff’s 2000 volume, *Victorian Afterlife* – ‘Victorian Afterlives’. The Victorian volumes of the previous *Cambridge History* offer an intriguing set of glimpses into how the Victorian period came to be evaluated by its inheritors. Whilst many of the sections in the two volumes are relatively reverential, one also encounters value judgments that explicitly pit a self-conscious sense of modernity, in form as well as in content, against the writings of the previous century. Thus we are told, for example, that ‘Relying, in the Victorian manner, upon variety rather than upon concentration of interest, Collins’s books have a ponderous air (some of his shorter tales excepted) as compared with the economical technique of Poe, or with modern forms of the detective tale which turn upon quick deductions from meticulous detail, discard lumber and aim at a consistent