VICTORIAN FICTION

An Exhibition of Original Editions
at 7 Albemarle Street, London
January to February 1947
arranged by

JOHN CARTER
with the collaboration of
MICHAEL SADLEIR

PUBLISHED FOR
THE NATIONAL BOOK LEAGUE
BY THE
CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
1947
CONTENTS OF THE CATALOGUE

Foreword, by Michael Sadleir  iv

Introduction to the Exhibition, by John Carter  vii

Acknowledgements  xii

Loans to the Exhibition  xiii

The Catalogue, in 23 sections (A–I functional, J–W by subjects)

A. Magazine Serials  1
B. Part-Issues  2
C. Three-Deckers  5
D. One-Volume Reprints  8
E. Fiction Series  10
F. Illustrators  15
G. The Railway Bookstall  17
H. The Parlour Bookcase  17
I. Current Reprints  18
J. The Giants  18
K. Historical and ‘Period’ Novels  20
L. Political Novels  22
M. The Irish School  24
N. Novels of Manners  26
O. Adventure Stories  29
P. Social Protest  31
Q. Sport and the Open Air  34
R. School and University  35
S. Tales of the Sea  37
T. Religious Themes  38
U. Sensation, Mystery and Crime  40
V. Some Popular Favourites  42
W. Some Dark Horses  44

Index of Authors  49
FOREWORD

BY MICHAEL SADLEIR

This exhibition—both externally and internally—may fairly be termed spectacular. As Mr Carter explains in his Introduction, the period covered (1837–1901) witnessed, in book-design and manufacture, the displacement of the pallid dignity of semi-permanent boards with paper spine-labels by brightly coloured cloths and lavish use of gold. Further, it saw the invention of woodblock printing in colours, which led to increasingly elaborate experiment with book-covers and book-illustrations. In consequence, as no one can deny, the exhibits add up to a colourful, vigorous and decorative ensemble.

In the second place (and on this also Mr Carter lays stress) only very few of the visitors to the exhibition will have had a previous opportunity of seeing what Victorian published fiction really looked like when it was new. Books of the board, board-half-cloth and cloth periods (the last-named especially) are nowadays virtually impossible to find in impeccable original condition. The organizers are fully aware that they have included in their show certain titles not in that condition. This they were driven to do because nothing better could be found. On the other hand, the number which (in the jargon of the craft of collecting) are called ‘mint’ or ‘very fine’ copies, is indeed phenomenal; and the sight of these as they appeared in the bookshops on publication will, it is hoped, cause many spectators to revise their opinion as to Victorian taste in decoration.

It will be noted that liking for ornament plots a rising curve from the sixties to the late eighties (a gentle one from the forties to about 1860, followed for another twenty years by unashamed exuberance) and then falls steeply, through a brief epoch of effeminate prettiness, to the comparative austerity of the one-volume novel. Publishers and binders had a gay time while the three-decker lasted; but a drop from a published price of anything from twenty shillings to thirty-one-and-six to a flat nominal six shillings (less trade discount, actually four-and-sixpence) meant counting pence where before one hardly counted shillings. At the time the new simplicity was thought very elegant, and the legend of Victorian ugliness was born. Bibliophiles of to-day, too often condemned to thin drab paper, grey ink, mean strawboards and cloth lacking quality and variety, may feel as nostalgic for opulent and glossy book-making as for the châteaubriand and fried potatoes, which in younger, braver days we fearlessly demolished.
Foreword

In the third place the exhibition offers, in terms of novel-writing, a panorama of a period in British history when perhaps more mental activity existed than ever before, when social contrasts were more violent, snobbery more widespread, dutiful well-doing more determined and self-effacing. All these—and twenty other aspects of the life and aspirations, the hypocrisies and the idealisms, the abnegations and the materialisms of Victorian England—find expression in the stories displayed and classified. There are great books among them, and books which, as literature, deserve to be forgotten; but there is not one which does not in some way tell—and from first-hand knowledge—of the pleasures, hardships, charity, selfishness, spiritual unease and complacency, of the long reign which enthroned our country, whether for good or ill, as seemingly the most powerful and established in the world.

Victoria’s sixty years were not, as is sometimes assumed, a period of unbroken and prosperous calm. Her first decade, culminating in the European convulsions of 1848, saw the country nearer to social disaster than ever before. It was saved by the joint disciplinary action of Evangelicalism and Utilitarianism—the two often in conflict, yet at one in upholding a moral stability based respectively on zeal for holiness and faith in reason. Various elements in this period of tension are here presented in novel form. The social revelations of Dickens and Mrs Gaskell, the constructive compromises of Disraeli and Charles Kingsley, the witty epitaphs of Mrs Gore on the grave of the tinsel aristocracy of the thirties—these reflect the turmoil and the sense of shifting foundations which, about 1850, suddenly jarred the solvent middle-classes to an awareness of the dreadful conditions of slum-life and the threat implicit in an underworld of poverty, dwelling in degradation and breeding recklessly. The fifties show this social consciousness at work; and the emergence, as dominant influence in the country and therefore as favourite theme of fiction, of a dutiful prudish bourgeoisie, taking its cue from a virtuous court surrounding a virtuous queen. Religious controversy now becomes an absorbing interest, to which during the sixties is added political theorizing and discussion of the ethics and systems of education. With the late seventies the intrusion into good society of stock gambling and company promotion marked the economic and, in consequence, social weakening of the aristocrats and gentlefolk, to whom personal integrity and duty towards their neighbours had been implicit in their caste. It was the first flush of imperialism, which foretold a mounting fever and the squalid tragedy of the South African War.

All the time the national genius for sport and sea-faring produces its own literature; the taste for sensation-fiction recreates the gothic romance in terms of Victorianism; and, most prolific of all, the novelists
Foreword

of social manners (among whom we now recognize Trollope as supreme) devise their infinite variations of polite love-making, tuft-hunting and pleasant domesticity.

So we come to the nineties and the final decade of our allotted period. It is tempting to take this epoch at one of its three face-values—as the climax of national power, permanence and peace of mind; or as an almost too perfect sunlit serenity, a ‘weather breeder’ which preceded a time of storms; or as witnessing the acceptance by literature and painting of the doctrine of Art for Art’s Sake. Rightly we must regard all three; and to that end appropriate novels are provided.

Let this brief summary of the purpose and significance of our exhibition conclude with a quotation from George Sampson’s Concise Cambridge History of English Literature, which admirably presents the British scene at the moment when we take leave of it.

Only those who were adult observers of life in the last dozen years of the nineteenth century can know the thrill and exaltation of that time. The country had Security. Science had shaken the foundations of biblical theology, but the foundations of religion stood fast; and those who had abandoned the traditional creeds, had not abandoned their belief in the permanence of moral order in the world. . . . Great Britain was indisputably the first of nations, and her Navy kept ceaseless watch on the Seven Seas. The Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria seemed such a natural demonstration of lasting security, that the Recessional of Kipling appeared to sound a note of warning almost untimely in its seriousness.

But already there was a cloud in the summer sky. The great Dock Strike of 1889 had changed for ever the relations between employers and employed. . . . Far away in South Africa affairs were going ill. . . . At the end of 1895 came the ignominious Jameson raid; in 1899 war was declared against the Boers. . . . The war left England without a friend in the world. . . . the might of Britain, impressively exhibited at the Jubilee, had proved to be almost ridiculously vulnerable, and the traditional calm of the English descended without shame to the hysteries of ‘mafficking’.

Finally a few sentences about Literature:

Literature, in the narrowest sense, had stood aloof from all causes other than the artistic. The writers of the ‘nineties were much concerned with ‘style’, and the ‘right word’ and the ‘authentic note’—with rhythm and significance and values. . . . But it is an easy mistake to suppose that the literature of the last Victorian decade was a literature of decadence. . . . Ernest Dowson was a poet of the ‘nineties; but so was Rudyard Kipling. The Picture of Dorian Gray was a novel of the ‘nineties; but so was The Time Machine. Hubert Crackanthorpe was an essayist of the ‘nineties; but so was George Bernard Shaw.

The view of the last decade of the nineteenth and the first decade of the twentieth as a period of florid opulence, luxuriating in traditionalism till awakened to realities by the rude shock of war, is ludicrously unlike the facts. . . . In tales, in poems and in essays, new themes and new styles were apparent. The shape of things to come was already foreshadowed.

vi
INTRODUCTION TO THE EXHIBITION

By John Carter

Literature as a constituent in the life of a people is something more than the words put together by writers. The student of the literature of any kind or period—in our case the fiction of the Victorian age—has to take account of printers, binders, publishers, booksellers, lending libraries and last but not least readers. It has therefore been our objective in this exhibition not to present a mere list, in the form of books, of the two hundred or three hundred ‘best’ or ‘greatest’ or ‘most popular’ pieces of Victorian fiction, but to give, in addition to an inevitably fore-shortened survey of a great and a prolific period of novel writing, some idea of the reading habits of the public, the various methods by which fiction was produced and distributed, and what the results looked like as they were handed out across the bookshop or bookstall or lending-library counter.

The ordinary reader of Victorian fiction to-day knows his favourites either in a modern reprint or in some earlier edition, probably well thumbed and usually rebound, inherited from his youth or his parents. The curious may have satisfied a feeling for the fitness of form to matter by the acquisition of a contemporary or even an original edition. But very few except serious collectors of Victorian novels have any clear idea of what they looked like, individually, let alone collectively, when they were new. For though our period ended less than fifty years ago, the circumstances of its fiction publishing and fiction reading were such as to impose very heavy odds against the survival in good original condition of more than a fraction of the enormous output. It is easier to-day to find a well-preserved copy of Fielding’s Amelia in original calf than of Thackeray’s Esmond in original cloth; yet the former is a hundred years older.

That it has been possible to show here a representative selection from that output not only in its originally published form but, also important for our purpose, almost all of it in a brilliant state of preservation, is due to the devotion and discriminating skill of a single collector, Mr Michael Sadleir, whose unrivalled library has provided all but a handful of the material on display. Only fellow-specialists, perhaps, will fully appreciate the exceptional character of this assemblage and the extreme rarity of many of the books in such condition. But this is not an exhibition for specialists; it is designed as an eye-opener for that great majority of us who perforce think of Victorian fiction as originally
Introduction to the Exhibition

published, if we think of it at all, in terms of half calf, shabby library copies of three-deckers, and tattered yellow-backs, because that is the way we normally encounter it. How different was the reality may be seen here.

The poor chances of survival in pristine state of the novels of the last century are due to the methods by which they were distributed. Most Victorian novels continued until near the end to be published in three (less often two) volumes: and the three-decker, which cost 31s. 6d., was meant to be borrowed from the library, not bought. The economic strangle-hold exerted on the fiction market by the lending libraries was, indeed, the legacy of an earlier era; but if it was more insolently flaunted in the Victorian period than ever before or since, it was not so much enforced as natural to a society in which book buying has always, alas, been confined to a few. That the attempts made by several mid-century publishers to break it by reducing the price of new novels were unsuccessful was primarily due to this inertia in the public: combined, however, with the loss of revenue to the author caused by the libraries’ boycott and reduced royalties, which in turn drove the price-breakers to inferior writers, translations, etc.

The novels of fashionable ‘society’ in the thirties to fifties—the ‘silver fork’ school—which were bought in fair numbers by fashionable society itself, do, it is true, survive with comparative (though only comparative) frequency in original state. At any date, the author of course gave away a few copies, and his more devoted friends bought a few more. Unsuccessful titles might be sold off and survive in presentable shape (George Eliot’s Felix Holt and Thackeray’s Philip are examples familiar to the experts). But in the main, the circulating library was the grave of the three-decker as a physical specimen: for in the boards-and-label period, and in the half-cloth period (ob. late fifties), it would be rebound or leather-backed; and in the cloth period it would be disfigured by labels. Moreover, even these copies which were bought outright were apt to be rebound by their owners during the first half of the century, while at all times more people are Johnsons or Lambs than are studious to preserve immaculate what are, after all, things of use. Small wonder, then, that three- or two- (or even one-) volume novels of the Victorian age seldom survive to-day in anything approaching the condition in which they were born.

The one substantial challenge to the three-decker tradition, until in the eighties it began to totter under its own weight, was offered by the ‘part-issue’. And it was in the very first year of Queen Victoria’s reign that a successful marriage was consummated between the two different types of part-issue inherited from the previous century—the expensive picture book (with subsidiary text) for the drawing-room table, and the
Introduction to the Exhibition

crude, cheap reissue, whether of entertainment or moral instruction, for the servant's hall and the school-room. For with the resounding success of *Pickwick*, publishers perceived that the public would spend their guinea or more to buy (not borrow) a novel by a popular author, almost always with plates by a popular illustrator, if if were issued on a sort of instalment system, in parts, at a shilling a month. The part-issue was chiefly suitable for established authors, since it would only pay if the printing could be a large one; but many of the novels of Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope, Lever, Ainsworth and other 'best-selling' writers were issued in this form before, in the seventies, it lost its last battle against the magazine serial.

Yet the odds against the survival in decent order of part-issued books are not in fact much shorter than with three-deckers. For it was the normal usage to bind up the paper-wrapped series when complete, whether in half or full leather or in the cloth case provided by the publisher for the purpose. Consequently, sets of 'original parts', which like boarded novels (or French fiction to-day) were only half dressed until more solidly bound, have survived intact only by accident. As for the cloth-bound volumes (whether one or two) in which these books were also published at or near the end of the issue of parts, the substantial number of pages plus the heavy plate paper of the illustrations were too often too much for the shapely survival of their containing cloth.

It must not be supposed that because the Victorians mostly borrowed new novels they did not also buy fiction they had decided to like, and in very large numbers. The fiction reprint series was a powerful factor in Victorian publishing, and examples of several of the principal series are shown here. In addition, most novels which had had some success but were not included in a series achieved independent republication, just as they do to-day; usually at 6s. and after a very short interval; with the 'yellow-back', usually at 2s., as the contemporary equivalent of the wrapped 6d. or 1s. reprint of the thirties, for the longer-lived titles.

The last decade of the century saw the decline and disappearance (save for a few freak examples) of the three-decker. With the increase of the reading public and the proof that new novels at 6s. (or 4s. 6d. cash) would be bought in sufficient numbers to show author and publisher a profit, the grip of the lending libraries and their insistence on three-volume format relaxed. Most of the novels of the nineties,

---
1 Exceptions were made in favour of such comic or satirical works as *Valentine Vox*, *Sylvester Sound* or *Christopher Tadpole*, which depended heavily on their illustrators.
2 This insistence was usually based on the argument that their subscribers were accustomed to value (i.e. bulk) for money; but it was reinforced by an ingenious method by which the customer was induced to subscribe for a minimum of three volumes at a time.
Introduction to the Exhibition

therefore, differ in appearance from those of the twenties and thirties only by virtue of their more individual, though hardly more elaborate, bindings. As for their contents, the relief from Procrustes’ bed rapidly produced very salutary results. Many a novelist who had had to ‘pad’ to fill three volumes, however thinly spread on the page, found his true form in the unhampered elasticity of the 6s. format.

Scope and Arrangement of the Exhibition

The strict confines of our period are 1837–1901; and it should be explained that just as we have excluded authors like Peacock, whose main but not complete output precedes the former date, so we have also excluded such authors as Galsworthy, Bennett and Conrad whose earliest novels precede the latter but whose floruit lies definitely in the present century.

Short stories have of course been admitted; but except for such writers as Kipling, who chiefly worked in this medium, they have normally yielded place to their authors’ full-length works. Children’s books as such have been avoided, since the genus has recently been exhaustively shown here. But the border line between books for boys and books for children is always a debatable one and we have not scrupled to trespass where the design of the exhibition called for it: as may be noticed particularly in the sections devoted to ‘Adventure Stories’ and ‘Tales of the Sea’, which (naturally, in view of our nautical tradition) themselves include some potentially interchangeable titles.

The exhibition is divided into two parts: the first functional, the second categorical. Sections A–H have been arranged to show what Victorian fiction looked like and how it was published, the examples being chosen primarily for their aptness as physical specimens and only secondarily for the interest of their contents. Sections J to the end are based on literary and historical criteria.

The latter half of the exhibition has been subdivided by subject, in order to show not only the diversity of Victorian fiction but also the strongly marked tradition found in certain categories. Yet a handful of the most important writers, though they will also be found represented in the subject-sections, clearly overtop any such categorization, and the first section (J) is accordingly devoted to ‘The Giants’. Here the selection, both of the writers and the books, was undertaken with special diffidence, for it was bound to be based on the literary judgement of the organizers, with which many good judges will no doubt disagree. It is hoped, however, that the substantial representation accorded elsewhere in the exhibition to the half-dozen ‘runners-up’ will at least dispell any suggestions of disrespect.
Introduction to the Exhibition

Display and Catalogue Technique

The typography of novels during our period, mainly undistinguished, exhibits so few developments of any interest by comparison with the constant and significant changes in their exterior dress that almost all the books are shown as they would be seen on table, bookshop counter or shelf—i.e. not open but closed. Minor exceptions are due to the occasional presence of author’s inscriptions, as in the case of the two books presented by their authors to Queen Victoria and now graciously lent by H.M. The King. The major exception is the section devoted to illustrators, whose work is also shown round the walls.

The catalogue descriptions have been stripped of all irrelevant bibliographical detail. Though notes to individual books seemed necessary, and may be found useful, in the functional sections, any profusion of literary comment would be impertinent in so well known a field; and beyond the brief introductory notes to the subject-sections and some comments in Sections V and W it has been generally eschewed.

No rigid consistency has been observed in the treatment of authors’ names, since our objective has been ready identification without fuss. Mrs Gaskell, for instance, is normally so called, so her ‘Elizabeth Cleghorn’ has been omitted; while less well-known writers are described either in full or by the style used on their own title-pages. Since the writing of fiction continued, well into our period, to be regarded by genteel persons as a frivolous, if not actually a degraded, occupation, many of the earlier novels shown were published either anonymously or as ‘by the author of such-and-such’: but their names have here been demuned, for simplicity’s sake, of the customary square brackets. Pseudonyms are followed by ‘(= real name)’: authors who, by marriage for instance, wrote under, or are known by, two names have the less familiar added in brackets.

Similarly, well known publishers like Longmans or Blackwood are given without trimmings and only the obscurer ones (e.g. John W. Parker) in full. London should be assumed in all imprints unless some other place is given. Sizes have been omitted altogether, since the visitor can see for himself, and will care little to be told which is crown octavo and which demy.

All books in Sections B, C and J–W are first editions in original state unless otherwise described.

1 We have been at no pains to look for ‘association copies’ and very few are shown.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Without the guiding hand of Mr Sadleir in the choice of titles for each section, this exhibition would never have got beyond the blue-print stage. As for his provision of the major share of the books themselves, fellow-collectors will understand the risk of damage to such delicate material involved in packing and unpacking for a long journey, and installation even under the tenderest care; and they will join me in valuing his generosity accordingly.

I am much indebted also to Mr Dudley Massey, of Messrs Pickering & Chatto, for his advice on the selection and for reading the proofs of the catalogue; to Miss Edmondston, Librarian of the National Book League, for preparing the index; and to Mr Osbert Lancaster for designing the Railway Bookstall.

The portraits of Queen Victoria and the Prince Consort, from the royal collections at Marlborough House, have been graciously lent by HER MAJESTY QUEEN MARY.

JOHN CARTER
LOANS TO THE EXHIBITION

For the loan of such proportion of material as was required by the design of this exhibition, but was not available from Mr Sadleir’s library, the organizers wish to record their indebtedness to the owners listed below. Thanks are specially due to the Librarian, Windsor Castle, and to the Antiquarian Booksellers’ Association, whose Committee accorded full support and facilities.

His Majesty the King
Mrs Richard Bentley
Mr John Carter
Mr Richard Jennings
Mr Richard Sadleir
Miss Martha Smith
Mr Simon Nowell Smith
Major Hartley Clark
Mr H. W. Davies
Mr Arthur Dobell
Mr P. J. Dobell
Messrs J. A. D. Bridger
Messrs J. & E. Bumpus
Messrs William Dunlop
Messrs Francis Edwards

Messrs Elkin Mathews
Mr G. G. Elliott
Messrs Halewood & Son
Messrs Maggs Bros.
Messrs Marks & Co.
Messrs John Murray
Messrs Myers
Messrs Pickering & Chatto
Messrs Bernard Quaritch
Mr Arthur Rogers
Messrs Charles J. Sawyer
Messrs Scribners (New York)
Messrs W. T. Spencer
Messrs Stevens & Brown

Except where otherwise stated in the catalogue, however, all books in the exhibition and all the pictorial exhibits on the walls have been lent by

Mr Michael Sadleir