

Victorian Subjects: Introduction

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Who were the Victorians, and how did they make sense of their world? How to address such questions is perhaps less obvious today than it was for earlier generations of historians and cultural interpreters. "The history of the Victorian Age will never be written: we know too much about it," quipped Lytton Strachey. Certainly we now know more about the nineteenth century, and yet it has become less familiar. In part, this is because we face a diminished sense of immediacy as the Victorian world slips from us. Strachey and the Bloomsbury set disclaimed the Victorians for having propagated a false and hypocritical moral code, but Bloomsbury's intellectuals were themselves born and bred in the Victorian twilight.¹ G. M. Young sought to redress the balance in his *Portrait of an Age* (first published in 1936), still an elusively protean sketch of the period's variegated intellectual, cultural, and political tones. But Young was born in 1880, the year of Strachey's birth.² Even after 1945, when there was a boom in Victorian studies, it was still plausible to view developments in terms of the nineteenth century, as a progressive coming to terms with the claims and tensions of a society based on industrial growth, imperial supremacy, urban life, mass culture, and liberal democracy.³ In contrast, Mrs. Thatcher's call for a return to Victorian values drew most tellingly on a sense of loss. As Raphael Samuel writes, "Victorian Britain was

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¹ Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians* (1918; New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, n.d.), p. vii. See Gertrude Himmelfarb, "A Genealogy of Morals: From Clapham to Bloomsbury," chap. 2 in *Marriage and Morals among the Victorians and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage, 1987).

² See Asa Briggs, "G. M. Young: The Age of a Portrait," in his *The Collected Essays of Asa Briggs*, vol. 2, *Images, Problems, Standpoints, Forecasts* (Brighton: Harvester, 1985), pp. 253–71. "I am one of the few men who can not only write but think Victorian," wrote Young in 1948.

³ See David Cannadine, "Welfare State History," chap. 16 in his *The Pleasures of the Past* (London: Collins, 1989).

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constituted as a kind of reverse image of the present . . . a measure of absence."⁴

We continue to use the term "Victorian" loosely as a shorthand description, even if we are less sure what it is shorthand for. The period of Queen Victoria's reign, 1837–1901, is not particularly useful for purposes of periodization, missing as it does the eighteenth-century roots of important religious, social, and economic forces: the revival of evangelicalism, the forging of middle-class identities, and the gradual processes of industrialization. Moreover, the late nineteenth century saw important changes in social organization that carried on deep into the twentieth century. Perhaps the concept of a "long" nineteenth century is in order.⁵ "Victorianism" is even more problematic, implying a core of consensually held moral values and shared experience. The term itself dates from mid-nineteenth century and is often taken to indicate a new self-consciousness, reflecting an extended moment of supposed equipoise against which the early and late Victorian periods are then contrasted.⁶ Yet even in the "age of equipoise," contemporary understanding of key values, for example, that of "respectability," varied according to class, gender, and region. And even within the mid-Victorian middle class, the classic site of "Victorianism," private experience may well have deviated significantly from public pronouncement and advice.⁷

The articles brought together in this issue of *Journal of British Studies* rework key Victorian cultural and social themes—class, empire, gender, religion, social anxiety, anti-Semitism, liberalism—casting familiar subjects in new light. Three of the four authors re-

⁴ Raphael Samuel, "Mrs. Thatcher's Return to Victorian Values," in *Victorian Values*, ed. T. C. Smout (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 18.

⁵ See Richard Price, "Historiography, Narrative, and the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of British Studies* (in press); also José Harris, *Private Lives, Public Spirit: A Social History of Britain, 1870–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁶ Compare Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830–1870* (1957; New Haven, Conn., and London: Yale University Press, 1975), p. xiii. Houghton argues that there was a "common culture" for which the term "Victorianism" is appropriate, but he restricts his classic study to "artist-thinkers." Himmelfarb writes: "Mid-Victorian England was more moral, more proper, more law-abiding than any other society in recent history" (p. 21).

⁷ Thus, e.g., the "bourgeois style" in sexuality and love may not easily fit stereotypes of Victorian prudery and passionless marriages. See Peter Gay, *The Bourgeois Experience*, vol. 1, *Education of the Senses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984); Françoise Barret-Ducrocq, *Love in the Time of Victoria*, trans. John Howe (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), for sexual relations among the laboring poor; Michael Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexuality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). For the sexual crisis of the late nineteenth century, see Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (New York: Penguin, 1990).

present eminent Victorians, including John Ruskin, F. D. Maurice, and Benjamin Disraeli. Peter Hansen for his part offers an interpretation of why mountaineering became so popular during midcentury, raising “the broader significance of mountaineering to the construction of new middle class and imperial cultures.” Picking up on P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins’s argument that the imperial mission represented “the export version” of and the “ultimate testing ground” for the idea of gentlemanly order and the performance of duty, Hansen sees the gentlemanly vogue for mountaineering as part of an ongoing process of cultural reconstitution.⁸ He links the ethos of character building to the contingent nature of middle-class identities and to shifting definitions of masculinity, gentility, and national character. Albert Smith’s immensely popular one-man show featuring a theatrical recreation of his ascent of Mount Blanc helped to pave the way for the more aggressive activities of the “gentlemanly capitalists” of the Alpine Club. The language of exploration and imperial adventure endowed the sport of Alpine climbing with the properties of manly patriotism.

John Ruskin was a late convert to the opinion that the dangers of mountain climbing contributed to the formation of “manly character.” He is, however, usually regarded as deeply concerned with defining and defending manliness. It is Ruskin who thus gave classic expression to the ideology of separate spheres, seen as central to the formation of Victorian middle-class identity. In his famous lecture “Of Queens’ Gardens,” delivered in 1864, Ruskin declared that woman’s power was “for rule, not for battle,—and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision.” Her power was contrasted to that of man, “the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender” who must encounter the dangers of the “open world.”⁹ However, as Jennifer Lloyd argues here, Ruskin’s views were a good deal more complex and idiosyncratic than such oft-quoted snippets convey. Lloyd provides a challenging counterreading of Ruskin’s view of women that requires a familiarity with all his works, an appreciation of his deep social fears for England, and a knowledge of his relation-

⁸ P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism: Innovation and Expansion, 1688–1914* (London and New York: Longman, 1993), pp. 31–35, and chap. 1 more generally.

⁹ John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies* (1865; London and Toronto: J. M. Dent, 1907), p. 69. See Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), for a comprehensive and nuanced analysis of the formation of early Victorian gender ideology and practice. For doubts about the usefulness of the concept of separate spheres, see Amanda Vickery, “Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women’s History,” *Historical Journal* 36 (1993): 383–414.

ships that goes “beyond the lurid details of his failed marriage and his predilection for adolescent girls.” The distinction between the private and public, the supposedly female and male spheres, she argues, was not always sharply drawn in Ruskin’s writing or practical activity: domestic virtue was to be exercised both in the household and in the world, turned against the destructive impulses of political economy and mammon.

Ruskin was a secular prophet, but his warnings about social and aesthetic decay resonate with the devout Protestantism of his upbringing, a Christian evangelicalism common to the early nineteenth century. F. D. Maurice shared many of Ruskin’s moral and social fears, but he chose to stay within the church and work for social and spiritual change. Maurice and the Christian socialists are the subjects of Cheryl Walsh’s contribution. By midcentury, the problems of the Church of England were acute. The established church continued to hold a special position in the life of the nation but had clearly failed to win the hearts and minds of the people. Walsh reexamines the theological and social program of the Christian socialists, who tried to reinvigorate the Church of England. In contrast to the evangelical theology of atonement that had dominated the early Victorian period and was more congruent with a social philosophy of laissez-faire individualism, Maurice’s view of the church as “a fellowship constituted by God Himself” opened the way to social activism. Maurice himself held a strong belief in the reality of the Incarnation—a firm conviction that God had become human in the person of Jesus Christ. The Christian socialists thus fit into what Boyd Hilton has identified as a midcentury paradigm shift from the age of atonement to the age of incarnation and the emergence of more ameliorative social and economic attitudes.¹⁰

Lukewarm or brimstone hot, however, in Victorian Britain as in earlier centuries Protestantism was closely tied to the construction of national identity.¹¹ During the nineteenth century, the nation’s imperial and economic supremacy confirmed Britain’s status as an elect nation, providentially chosen for greatness. More than any other politician, Benjamin Disraeli was responsible for making the Conservatives the party of England and empire. The election of 1847 and Disraeli’s reforming ministry vindicated his confidence in the nation and the nation’s confidence in the Conservative party under his leadership. Disraeli’s own “Englishness” was, however, never above suspicion. As

¹⁰ Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1795–1865* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

¹¹ See Linda Colley, “Britishness and Otherness: An Argument,” *Journal of British Studies* 31 (1992): 309–29.

Anthony Wohl superbly demonstrates in his article on “Disraeli as Alien,” the casual anti-Semitism to which Disraeli, who was Jewish by descent but a member of the Church of England from childhood, had been subjected throughout his public career was transformed into virulent prejudice during the Bulgarian atrocity campaign of 1876, the greatest effusion of liberalism’s nonconformist conscience and the most successful of William Gladstone’s “wars of religious liberalism.” The “expressibility” of such prejudice intensified during the 1870s, with Disraeli and Anglo-Jewry portrayed as the malignant, oriental “Other” against which Christian England and Europe were defined. Under stress, Victorian liberalism succumbed to antirationalism, revealing its own populist dark side.¹²

Dina Copelman’s and Gail Savage’s review essays provide a fitting coda to this issue on “Victorian Subjects.” Surveying some of the most recent work on Victorian culture, Copelman explores the differing ways in which these books raise questions about “the historical formation of personal identity” and highlight many of the tensions, the continuities and discontinuities, in our understandings of Victorian culture and society. Savage reviews a series of books on marriage and the law that illustrate the interaction as opposed to the separation between the private and public domains and reflect concerns about how “to construe the meanings of texts and to understand larger systems of signification or discourses.” History “from below,” feminist history, history informed by psychoanalytic theory, postmodernism, and the so-called linguistic turn have combined to erode the coherence of settled historical categories. It is not just that the Victorians seem more remote from our experience or that the Victorian preoccupation with “great men” is at odds with our more sociologically based modes of historical analysis. We have, as Savage concludes, become less confident about how to tell the story itself.

¹² Compare W. D. Rubinstein, “British Radicalism and the ‘Dark Side’ of Populism,” in his *Elites and the Wealthy in Modern British History: Essays in Social and Economic History* (Brighton: Harvester, 1987), pp. 339–73.