

## REVIEWS

### **Greening the Victorian City**

***Secure from Rash Assault: Sustaining the Victorian Environment*, by James Winter. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999.**

James Winter's study of the centrality of environmental issues to nineteenth-century understandings of the land and landscape is both a timely and erudite contribution to an expanding field of Victorian studies. In recent years ecology as both a material practice and a persistent theme in the work of a wide range of nineteenth-century writers and artists has become an area of increasing interest to literary scholars and cultural historians. *Secure from Rash Assault* thus provides a much needed insight into the rise of popular ecological debates in the Victorian period. What emerges from Winter's study is a more complex portrait of how the Victorian public negotiated with and at times actively resisted the incursions of technology and industry into their everyday lives. In contrast then to the passive victims of modernity which cultural prophets of a more apocalyptic bent, such as the Ruskin of *Fors Clavigera* portrayed, the subjects of Winter's study are revealed to be practical and articulate advocates for ecological reform.

Winter draws on an extensive and eclectic range of archival sources as the basis for his detailed and convincing analysis of the "shifting balances" between ecological conservation and technological transformation in Victorian culture. Rather than mobilising the conventional Manichean oppositions between nature and culture, urban and agricultural spaces, Winter reveals a more subtle and textured history of the relationship between technological advances and the conservationist anxieties of a range of surprisingly ecologically aware urban and rural dwellers. For example, in contrast to the conventional account of the violence wrought by the incursion of ever-expanding railway and tourist networks into rural areas, advances in transport and tourism are shown to play an important role in securing the delicate ecology of large swathes of the English countryside. This was apparently achieved by constraining the movements of an increasing numbers of day-trippers and vacationers along "narrow channels to resorts and recreation grounds built purposely for leisure."

One of the more fertile sections of Winter's study is his account of the ways in which the inhabitants and designers of nineteenth-century urban environments responded to the retreat of the restorative influence of nature from urban spaces. The establishment of public parks and gardens, such as Victoria Park, London's first "people's park," are possibly the better known examples of these early attempts to arrest urban development. It was hoped that walking and other contemplative pursuits undertaken in these lush open spaces would improve both the moral and physical health of an urban populace who struggled daily with the exigencies of rapid urbanisation. Urban reform also found its way into the private gardens of the city's residents and even extended to the window boxes that gradually became common fixtures of urban and suburban domestic architecture. Winter describes both singular and collective efforts of

concerned citizens to “green London,” such as the “Window Horticulture” program, in detail. This worthy enterprise encouraged estate planners to make their window ledges wide enough to hold window boxes. Publications devoted to urban planning suggest that such programs were embraced with enthusiasm. One correspondent wrote to the trade periodical the *Builder*, for example, to express his anger at the “ignorant vandalism of modern builders” who deprived urban dwellers of “pleasant oases in a wilderness of slovenly abominations in brick and cement.” Such ardent calls for environmental reform at a grass-roots level convey a much more dynamic image of the typical Londoner of this period who, rather than accepting industrial progress as destiny, actively resisted the denaturalisation of his or her world. The careful inter-weaving of such engaging anecdotal material with sociological description is the strength of Winter’s study.

As my comments thus far suggest, there is little to criticise in this formidable and useful cultural history. There are however limitations to such an inclusively descriptive mode, which as Winter himself notes in his slightly whimsical introduction, “conforms to the folds and undulations found in so much of the British countryside.” Whilst Winter’s work does draw attention to fundamental contradictions in Victorian attitudes to geomorphologic concerns at home and abroad, the non-specialist reader needs to be challenged to think, as well as informed about, these debates. There are very few references, for example, to the considerable research into the relationship between emerging nationalisms, imperialism and landscape in his discussion of these questions. Description, rather than conceptual analysis and argument, prevails throughout. There is also little attempt to address the sociological implications of these changes outside the terms set by Victorian ecological debates. Clear parallels between the concerns of the ecological movement and darker Malthusian-inspired anxieties about racial degeneration and fears of over-population, for example, remain largely unexplored. Likewise, a more rigorous discussion of the role gender plays in conceptions of ecological reform and the clear correlations between conservation and theories of moral and social hygiene would have provided Winter with a richer backdrop for his accounts of various individual feats of ecological activism. Unfortunately it is up to the reader to unravel the cultural and ideological implications of the rich flow of historical examples that Winter wends his way through.

In conclusion *Secure from Rash Assault* reveals the limitations of conforming “to the folds and undulations found in so much of the British countryside” as a methodological approach. The fascinating world that Winter’s extensive research reveals to us ultimately demands a more conceptually active method than that of the genteel intellectual roaming far and wide across the Victorian cultural landscape. Specialists in the field of nineteenth-century ecological history will nevertheless find Winter’s study a rich and often eloquent resource, whilst literary scholars and cultural historians will hopefully recognise the exciting possibilities Winter’s study maps out for more rigorous theoretical and aesthetic debates.

**Helen Groth**

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