

Victorian Beginnings

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The Victorian epoch was not the dawn of a new era; it was a hasty, trial experiment, a gigantic experiment of the most slovenly and wasteful kind....

The nineteenth century was an age of demonstrations, some of them very impressive demonstrations, of the powers that have come to mankind, but of permanent achievement, what will our descendants cherish? ... will anyone, a hundred years from now, consent to live in the houses the Victorians built, travel by their roads or railways, value the furnishings they made to live among or esteem, except for curious or historical reasons, their prevalent art and the clipped and limited literature that satisfied their souls? (Wells, *The New Machiavelli*. Book I, chapter 2)

The words of the narrator of H.G.Wells's *The New Machiavelli* published in 1911 are an example of the great reaction against the Victorians which followed, or even preceded, the end of Victoria's reign. For Wells's new Machiavelli the Victorian period was a false dawn, a series of failed experiments, and of beginnings that went nowhere.

"Victorian Beginnings", the title of the AVSA conference in 2007, had a curious timeliness; in the last twenty years or so - perhaps longer - scholars have increasingly questioned long-held associations of 'the Victorian' with all sorts of beginnings or new directions. 2007 also marked the fiftieth anniversary of the inauguration of the journal *Victorian Studies*, an important landmark in the intellectual and scholarly project that brings scholars together under the auspices of AVSA in Australasia, of BAVS in the UK, and of NAVSA in the USA. I will return shortly to the mid twentieth-century origins of Victorian Studies as we have known it, but I will begin with the late twentieth-century interrogation of Victorian beginnings.

During the last twenty years or so, and the pace of the debates increased around the *fin de millennium*, a range of Social and Economic Historians repeatedly told us that we should dispense with the term 'Victorian' as it is neither useful nor meaningful as an historical category. As Rohan McWilliam reminded us in a recent number of the *Journal of Victorian Culture* there has been "a wave of revisionist writings" particularly in economic history, which has challenged the notion that a nineteenth-century industrial revolution transformed Britain between 1780 and 1830 (146). Richard Price has been part of that wave but has also sought to make sense of it. His contribution to a 1990 collection of essays in honour of Asa Briggs (one of the begetters of Victorian Studies as some of us first knew it) directly addressed the question of whether the idea of Victorian England makes sense. He answered it the negative and, indeed, he suggested that no-one has ever taken the period seriously as a period ("Does the Notion of Victorian England Make Sense?").

Price went on to clarify this negative answer in his *Journal of British Studies* article in 1996 ("Historiography, Narrative and the Nineteenth Century") and developed it at greater length in his 1999 book *British Society 1680-1880: Dynamism*,

Containment and Change, in which he argued in favour of abandoning both the Victorian as an historical category and the idea of the nineteenth century as a distinct period of historical transformation. In this latter study Price attempts to construct a new narrative framework for nineteenth-century history – one which would, in his view, better represent the new historiography of the nineteenth century which he had outlined in the self-consciously dramatic opening paragraphs of his 1996 essay:

At one time, not too long ago, the master narrative of nineteenth-century history seemed fairly straightforward. The nineteenth century raised the curtain on the modern age; its politics, economics, social relations, and culture presaged the world we know from our own times. (220)

The organising principle of this “old” historiography was “growth” and “change”, “generally of a progressive kind”. However, by the 1990s new stories were being told, and attention was being redirected to “themes of continuity that challenge[d] the representation of the nineteenth century as the moment of modernity”:

The touch of continuity is everywhere. ... Whereas the nineteenth century was once regarded as the age of the bourgeoisie, it is the landed elites and their various allies who now occupy center stage. ... Traditional historiography emphasised how class formation accompanied economic discontinuity; revisionist historiography has dispersed the collectivity of class into various other alliances, mainly of a cross class nature. ... [t]he politics of Victorian society have been inverted from the familiar steady march toward representative democracy to a world where theatre and spectacle remained the prime source of political legitimation until the advent of party organisation systematically closed public spaces for political participation. (220-1)

Price makes it clear that he is seeking to avoid simply substituting a typology of continuity for the typology of change which had characterised former constructions of “Victorian” Britain. However, he certainly seeks to dislodge the notion that the early nineteenth century was a time of social, economic and political transformation, an age of transition, and an age in which we can find the origins of modern society, indeed of modernity itself.

In short, Price’s nineteenth century is part of a *longue durée*, in this case stretching back to the 1680s. In recent years we have also become accustomed to reading of other *longue durées*; for example, the long eighteenth century that persists until 1832 or 1848 (according to preference), or the long nineteenth century that begins in the 1780s or 1790s, or even of what Margot Finn has described as “the very long nineteenth century”, which stretches from 1740-1914. Finn’s choice to extend the Victorian era forward to the first world war and backwards to the eighteenth century in her book on *The Character of Credit* was, as she has noted recently, motivated by her ‘desire to grapple with the question of modernity’ (192). This grappling with the question of modernity seems key to recent debates about the concept of the Victorian, and to the whole idea of Victorian beginnings.

Of course, it is not just social and economic historians who have interrogated the idea of the Victorian or folded the period of one of Britain’s longest reigning

monarchs into a long eighteenth or nineteenth century. For example, Francis O’Gorman, Katherine Turner and the contributors to their 2004 essay collection *The Victorians and the Eighteenth Century: Reassessing the Tradition* have reassessed the complexities of the Victorians’ “settlement” with the eighteenth century and their “creative relationship with the century before them” (3). Others have urged us to avoid some of the problems of occlusion caused by constructing boundaries around the beginnings and ends of monarchical reigns, to consider the continuities of what we have tended to bracket off as romantic and Victorian and to relinquish the idea that the nineteenth century began in 1830 or 1832. In a similar vein, some scholars working on the women’s writing of the last 20 or 30 years of Victoria’s reign have invited us to reconsider, or rediscover (even discover) its links to eighteenth-century writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft. However, I think that it is true to say that most students of the *fin de siècle* have been inclined to reconsider the usefulness of period boundaries from the other direction, and to suggest that the Victorian label is singularly unhelpful in seeking to understand the new aesthetics of *fin de siècle* writers (whether one defines “*fin*” as the 1870s, 1880s or 1890s), and that we must look forward to the twentieth century.

In some ways, literary and cultural historians have been even more insistent than economic and social historians in urging us to cast the concept of the Victorian into outer darkness. For example, Isobel Armstrong, writing in *Victorian Literature and Culture* in 1999, enjoined us to abandon “a general, all-embracing, unifying historical category, *the Victorians*”, arguing that “once we begin to break down this homogenizing concept and see how varied the period was, ideologically and ethically, how varied political and moral positions were, both between and within class groupings, the term *the Victorians* becomes almost useless. The corollary to this is that Victorian studies is not a helpful term either” (514). Many others have pointed to the limitations of the designation “Victorian Studies” for properly understanding the history of literary and cultural formations, or indeed the relations between nations and the operations of empire in the nineteenth century, or for exploring transnational cultures (see Sharon Marcus in *Victorian Studies* 2003). The Victorian studies designation might also be seen to be equally limiting in its capacity to address the Europeanism or Transatlanticism of English or British culture in the nineteenth century.

In the last few years this questioning of the usefulness of the term “Victorian” and the field designation “Victorian Studies” has reached epidemic, even pandemic, proportions. For example, at both the second and third NAVSA conferences in 2004 and 2005 – at least as represented in the papers gathered together in subsequent issues of *Victorian Studies* – the interrogation of the “Victorian” and “Victorian Studies” seems to have become a campaign requiring its audience to reflect on “the continued use or validity of the ... period concept of the Victorian” and to “engage with ... the question of the relation of the field of Victorian studies to the discipline of history and the practice of ‘theory’” (Brantlinger 151). Thus, Amanda Anderson, in “Victorian Studies and the Two Modernities”, questions the refusal of Victorian Studies to abandon the “all-too-apparent limitations of its own field designation” and in particular the limitations imposed (as she sees it) by the way in which the term “Victorian” performs a certain tacit insistence on literature and history as a privileged interdisciplinary dyad (195). The angle of vision which results from the literature/history dyad is one of the factors that has led, in Anderson’s view, to the

discipline of Victorian Studies adopting an “external vantage point” from which to practice a negative critique of bourgeois modernity, rather than “acknowledging that such critique was already a part of the society, voiced from within”. This tendency, added to what she argues is a “tendency to substitute aesthetic modernity for philosophical/ political modernity” has produced a critical blindness to a “submerged and more complicated tradition of ethico-political modernity that is itself conceived by its Victorian practitioners and theorists as a practice of the self, or as an ethos” (see her book, *Powers of Distance*). In her *Victorian Studies* essay, as in her recent book, *The Way We Argue Now*, Anderson develops a “two modernities” thesis, and argues that there needs to be “a fuller retrieval of the literary forms of political modernity” that have been occluded by “traditional accounts of literary history, and particularly by the accounts of the relations between Victorianism, modernity and modernism” (i.e. aesthetic modernity), which fail to acknowledge that “many Victorian writers were themselves exploring complex dialectical relationships between political and aesthetic modernity” (“Victorian Studies” 201).

I am not entirely persuaded by the two modernities thesis, nor by the notion that there is a widespread failure to note that Victorian writers were engaging in critique. Moreover, the Victorian Studies that Anderson is seeking to displace is something of a straw target: it is either a Victorian cultural studies that has shifted its focus to popular culture which it represents exclusively as the site of an aesthetics of resistance, or one that is locked into a Foucauldianism which sees the subjects of discipline everywhere; subjects who are simply producing or being produced by a discourse of power in which critique is (so to speak) just another side of the coin that is critiqued. Whatever one makes of Anderson’s case for changing the interdisciplinary focus on studies of the nineteenth century, she seems to be unable to jettison the term Victorian; rather she wants to look at different Victorians or the Victorians differently. Anderson’s *Victorian Studies* essay serves to illustrate the way in which the critique of the Victorian (and perhaps also of Victorian Studies) is part of the turn-of-the-twentieth and twenty-first-century discipline wars and the rethinking of disciplinarity, which is one of the ways in which ‘we’ proclaim our own difference and distance from the Victorians. It is also an attempt to rescue enlightenment thinking, particular forms of detachment, and the concepts of disinterestedness and liberalism from the blitzing of the postmodern.

In order to “demonstrate” her thesis about the privileging of the literature/history disciplinary dyad, Anderson returns to a particular beginning of the Victorian, the inauguration of the journal *Victorian Studies* in 1957, quoting from the prefatory note to its first issue in order to demonstrate that “characterising the field as devoted to an ‘era’ and an ‘age’ makes history seem its most natural disciplinary interlocutor”:

Victorian Studies hopes to capture something of the life of that era, to discuss its events and personalities, and to interpret and appraise its achievement.

This hope is more likely to be realized through the coordination of academic disciplines than in isolation. It is the tradition for journals to devote themselves to particular disciplines, but *Victorian Studies* will publish work addressed to all students of the Victorian age. (Quoted Anderson “Victorian Studies” 195)

Anderson is a little hard on the begetters of *Victorian Studies*. In fact in the original Prefatory Note to the first number of the journal, the above quotation is prefaced by the following sentence which acknowledged a certain arbitrariness in its own, as in all periodisations.:

Although the division of history into periods is an artificial procedure, certain times may have their own complex and individual characters; the Victorian period has such a character, and its importance can be seen now that the inevitable antipathies are passing. (*Victorian Studies* 1:3)

In fact *Victorian Studies* was - and is - as its current cover note indicates, “devoted to the study of British culture of the Victorian period [and] includes interdisciplinary articles on comparative literature, social and political history, and the histories of education, philosophy, fine arts, economics, law and science.” The journal’s project was (and continues to seek to be) admirably and openly interdisciplinary, although Anderson is probably right in her assessment that the response of the scholarly community to this call to interdisciplinary endeavour has been rather narrower than the editors would have wished.

Among the complicating factors in realizing the interdisciplinary ambitions of *Victorian Studies* or even of thinking through what the project means, were the advent of theory and the theory wars, the impact of New Historicism and the accompanying debates about inter- and post-disciplinarity. Moreover, we also need to historicise the *Victorian Studies* project in its historical moment of the post-war expansion of North American Academia and the growth of the cold war. The former, led, as George Levine has argued, to a new kind of academic from a wider range of class and ethnic backgrounds, who “moved uneasily into the high modernist formalism” that had dominated literary education in the immediate post-war USA, and either “sought to locate the aesthetic in places T.S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis, and others, had not been able to find it” or “insisted on a re-emphasis on history and an interdisciplinary approach to texts hitherto hermetically treated” (136). The post-war boom in American universities also brought with it growing resources with which to build new fields and start new journals. Victorian studies was one such field, and its development was aided by the growth of the cold war, a context which gave a particular freight to the study of Victorian society as “a peaceful, democratic model of modernization”, whose achievement was “the peaceful transition to an industrialized market economy” (Vernon 373).

However, an acknowledgement and understanding – even critique – of the nature of the particular social, economic and cultural conditions in which the Victorians were seized as the first moderns does not necessarily require us to abandon the study of the ways in which they articulated that modernity, nor does it necessarily vitiate our own attempts – when we make them – to reflect on or wrestle with our own modernity or post-modernity through interpretative encounters with Victorian representations and engagements. Kate Flint has recently argued that “our period” (i.e. the Victorian period) is important, because of its contiguity “in many recognizable ways, with the formation of our own world and in the development, which it witnessed, of a number of different modernities” (231).

It is to this sense of the contiguity of the Victorian with “our” own world that I want to turn next in my reflections on Victorian beginnings. For Victorian scholars of a certain age there is – or was – a real (almost lived) sense of the Victorian as our beginnings. Many of those who came to Victorian studies in the 1950s (like the begetters of *Victorian Studies*), or in the late 1960s (as in my own case) quite possibly started out from a preoccupation with the Victorians as the origins of “us”. Of course these Victorians who were the origins of us varied according to who “we” were and where we came from, and the Victorian age was variously the world that had made us, the world we had lost, thrown away or from which we had struggled free. Certainly in its early years the editors of *Victorian Studies* repeatedly argued that to study the Victorian era was to study modernity. This tendency is still with us: for example, the call for papers for the Northeast Victorian Studies Association 2002 Conference on “Victorian Origins and Excavations”, asserted that “Victorians sought knowledge through the study of origins: contemporary thinkers seek self-understanding through the search for our origins in Victorian culture.”

Modernity morphed as the twentieth century moved onwards and as the twenty first century loomed and then arrived. Those who were shaped by 1950s childhoods sought to understand the world that had made them by seeking to understand the nineteenth-century growth of industrial society and an urban working class, the change from a rural to an urban society; the growth of democracy (or at least the spread of the vote); the rise of trade unionism, the origins of the welfare state and mass education, the decline of religion, the rise of women, and so on. Many did this by investigating the Victorian histories of these things and/or exploring the ways in which they were represented and refracted in Victorian novels, poems and plays and in the social and ethical debates of what we used to call the Victorian Sages.

By the late 1980s and 1990s many students and scholars were looking elsewhere in the Victorian period for beginnings. The *fin de millennium* embraced the *fin de siècle* and the 1990s was more interested in the 1890s and the late Victorian begetters of metropolitan modernity - new women, aesthetes, homosexuals, gender benders, shoppers and shop-girls, clerks and typists. No matter how much we deplore presentism, our engagements with the past and the kinds of questions we ask of it do tend to be driven by our sense of ourselves. Hence the current debates about the Victorian and Victorian Studies are tied up with our varied attempts to make sense of a globalised new world order at the end or beginning of the millennium and also with our varied attempts to make sense of and function within the changing academy and the changing knowledge economy – what is sometimes referred to as the post-disciplinary world.

If we look again at the 1960s and 1990s from the perspective of the changing academy we can see another history of Victorian Studies. In the 1960s and 1970s there was a degree of commonality (but by no means uniformity) in the interests of historians and literary scholars of the Victorian period. We may not all have been Marxist humanists then but there was, as Catherine Gallagher has recently observed, a kind of coalescence around a series of questions about the cultural changes (broadly understood) that accompanied modernisation and the industrial revolution, and around a number of theoretical models through which they might be addressed. However, by the 1980s and 1990s literary scholars had become preoccupied with the textuality or sexuality of everything and were reading everything through the lens of

queer theory, or Foucauldianism (of one phase or another). This often meant that they were not talking to each other, or at least that they were not communicating very well. It also meant that many historians would not talk to literary scholars or despaired of having a mutually intelligible conversation. Alternatively literary scholars had carved out their own bit of the historical domain with New Historicism and, to borrow Catherine Gallagher's phrase, had become interdisciplinary all by themselves (254). Personally I don't see any harm in this if such interdisciplinarity is pursued with sufficient learning and methodological rigour. However, in some forms it has led to a kind of cultural history in which texts are the afterthoughts of contexts, and are overwhelmed by them.

But what of "the Victorians" themselves? Of course, they did not begin to refer to themselves, their doings or their artefacts as "Victorian" until several decades into Victoria's reign. Many of those who pronounced on the nature of their own age did so in terms which, as Richard Price has observed, treated it "as if it were prefigurative of the twentieth century". The idea that the early nineteenth century was the moment of modernity, the turning point from the "old" world to the "new" was itself an invention of the early Victorian intelligentsia, who typically described their era, as Walter Houghton pointed out fifty years ago, as one of "change *from* the past *to* the future" (1). And, of course, Victorian literature, particularly the fiction, is awash with references to change and new beginnings, watersheds, new epochs or eras, the destruction of old forms (material and social) and building or rebuilding. Reading Victorian novels, poems and essays brings us into a close encounter with the excitements, uncertainties and fears of transition, of what it is like to feel oneself wandering between two worlds, or to have burst through into the new age. When we read these texts we are surrounded by references to people or things being ahead of their time or cast adrift by the tide of history as it hurtles forward in great waves of futurity.

In recognising that the Victorians are themselves the begetters of the modernization thesis, we must take care that our attempts to "place" this thesis and our spirit of critique do not lead us to over-react against their claims. Do we need to jettison the concept of the Victorian, or the project (or even the possibility) of Victorian Studies? This is where the AVSA conference title or theme proves very useful. For scrutinising "Victorian Beginnings" does enable us to see that the years which happen to coincide with the beginning and (perhaps with a less neat fit) the end of Victoria's reign do constitute new beginnings, and perhaps in doing so they do create period boundaries of a kind. Certainly from the perspective of a literary and cultural historian, the 1830s and 1840s do seem to be associated with new beginnings and watersheds of one kind or another. To return to the fiction and periodical journalism of the first 30 years of Victoria's reign is to be confronted with numerous ways of registering a sense of modernity, a sense of living in a post-reform age, a world of factories, and slums, cities and suburbs, speed and steam, railways and the telegraph.

It is a nice irony that recent interrogations of the validity or usefulness of "Victorian" as a period designation and "Victorian Studies" as a field designation and the accompanying injunctions to jettison the field come just as scholars are being equipped to chart it in ways which could not be imagined fifty years ago. The digitisation of texts and artefacts has turned Michael Wollf's ambition to "chart the

golden stream” of Victorian culture into a reality (see Wolff “Charting the Golden Stream”). Systems are now being designed to enable us to perform searches we have not yet thought of doing, and to make, more or less instantly, connections that might only have made – or might never have been made – after years in the library. Of course access to this new wealth of information carries the risk that scholars in the twenty first century will simply be overwhelmed by information, as many Victorians felt themselves to be. I am reminded of Lytton Strachey’s assertion that the history of the Victorian age would never be written “because we know too much about it”. Strachey archly recommended ignorance as “the first requisite of the historian – ignorance, which simplifies and classifies, which selects and omits, with a placid perfection unattainable by the highest art” (9). Perhaps, in place of ignorance, we might aim instead for a new synthesis and Strachey’s other requisite for the historian, “careful curiosity”, as we return to Victorian beginnings.

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