INVENTING THE VICTORIANS

“This is a profoundly stimulating and entertaining book.”
Sunday Times
INVENTING THE VICTORIANS

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INVENTING THE VICTORIANS

Matthew Sweet

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Suppose that everything we think we know about the Victorians is wrong. That, in the century which has elapsed since 1901, we have misread their culture, their history, their lives – perhaps deliberately, in order to satisfy our sense of ourselves as liberated Moderns. It comforts us to imagine that we have escaped their influence, freed ourselves from their corseted, high-collared world, cast off their puritanisms and prejudices. But what if they were substantially different from the people we imagine them to have been? What if they were more liberal and less neurotic than us? Had more fun than us, and were less hypocritical about sex than us? What if the popular images of the Victorian period – straitlaced patriarchs making their wives and children miserable, vicious showmen beating their freak exhibits, whaleboned women shrouding the piano legs for decency’s sake, then lying back and thinking of England – obscure a very different truth?

This book is an attempt to re-imagine the Victorians: to suggest new ways of looking at received ideas about their culture; to distinguish myth from reality; to generate the possibility of a new relationship between the lives of nineteenth-century people and our own. It aims to break up the stereotypes which have shaped our thinking about the Victorians for the last hundred years: the belief that they were forced into silence on certain subjects; that they led secret lives; that their culture was defined – to an extent which ours is not – by a divide between its respectable surface and dark underworld. It aims to surprise by exhuming Victorian texts which question our preconceptions about the culture that produced them: the bisexual pornography in which the two heroes indulge in guiltless sex with each other before climbing into bed with the two heroines; the
movies, the amusement arcade, the roller-coaster, the crime novel and the sensational newspaper story. They were engaged in a continuous search for bigger and better thrills. The Victorians took their pleasures in private fetish clubs and at terrifying magic lantern displays. They watched death-defying tightrope acts, played mechanical arcade games and were dazzled by the spectacles offered by panoramas, dioramas, neoramas, nauroramas, physioramas and kinematographs. The Cremorne Gardens — a pleasure park near Battersea Bridge — were more of a meat market than the sleaziest twenty-first-century club. The sensation drama — a theatrical genre reliant on spectacular stage tricks — created high-tech simulations of waterfalls, burning buildings, horse races and avalanches over a century before the ‘helicopter moment’ in Miss Saigon. The Burlington Arcade was a swanky mall where sex and shopping were pursued with equal enthusiasm — and transvestite boys were its speciality. Sensation novels — books such as The Woman in White (1859) and Lady Audley’s Secret (1862) — offered pleasures so intense that their detractors claimed they could drive you to drink, insanity or copycat crime. Newsgagents sold pin-ups of serial-killers; chemists dispensed mind-altering drugs, no questions asked. If Queen Victoria wasn’t amused, then she was in a very small minority.

We think of the Victorians as racists, yet they had no anti-immigration laws and elected Britain’s first Asian Members of Parliament. We think of them as religious, yet church attendance figures fell just as dramatically in the nineteenth century as in the twentieth. We think of their society as violent, yet their crime figures were lower than ours. We think of them as misogynist, but — with the shameful exception of the Contagious Diseases Acts, which subjected suspected prostitutes to forcible medical examination for venereal disorders — the statute books describe a fairly linear narrative of female emancipation. We think of them as royalist, when the period was the zenith of British republicanism. We think of them as puritanical, and when mountains of evidence are produced to the contrary, we insist that they were forced to conduct clandestine sex lives and use it to amplify their reputation for hypocrisy. We can just about bring ourselves to give the Victorians the credit for building the houses in which we live, the railway tunnels through which we commute, the pubs in which we drink, the sewers which funnel away our excrement, the museums and galleries in which we spend our Sunday afternoons. We are less inclined to acknowledge their responsibility for an almost uncountable number of other important innovations: both for
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concepts which are often believed to be ahistorical – such as the inherent goodness of children, homosexuality and heterosexuality, the notion that family members, ideally, should look like each other and for a huge roster of inventions usually assumed to be of more recent origin. Blame them, or thank them, for the suburban housing estate. For the fax machine. For the football league, political spin-doctoring, heated curling tong; vending machines, the electric iron, the petrol-driven car, feminism, the London Underground, DIY, investigative journalism, commercially-produced hardcore pornography, instantaneous transcontinental communications networks, high-rise public housing, plastic, free universal education, product placement, industrial pollution, environmentalism, fish and chips, X-ray technology, sex contact ads, paper bags, Christmas crackers, junk e-mail (by telegram, but still just as annoying), global capitalism, interior design and Sanatogen – the stuff that surrounds us in the early twenty-first-century world, both the good and the bad. Despite such evidence, we have chosen to remember the Victorians not as our benefactors, but as sentimentalists, bigots, jingoists and hypocrites. The Victorians invented us, and we in our turn invented the Victorians.

Sexuality was the principal territory upon which this body of myth and misinformation was constructed. 'Lie back and think of England' is a phrase often used to characterise Victorian women's attitude to sex - despite the fact that its first recorded instance is in a private diary from 1919. That old chestnut about draped piano legs is quoted with even greater regularity. The Victorians, the orthodox view goes, were so afraid of the power of sexuality that they felt compelled to cover up the legs of their pianos; they obscured signs of the body even where they existed only by inference. It has become the perfect exemplum of their prudishness, cited with impressive regularity in both popular and scholarly writings.

The piano leg question took on its emblematic status in 1947, when it was debated in a series of radio programmes which aimed to summarise nineteenth-century ideas and beliefs. The socialist historian H. L. Beales, addressing Victorian attitudes to sex, pictured nineteenth-century housewives in a state of panic over the rudery embodied in their home furnishings: 'Out came the drapings for the piano-legs - was it the high polish which was vulnerable, or were legs just such things that should not be seen? A conspiracy of silence was established on the subject of sex which has never been completely broken up.'

The following week, the psychoanalyst Edward Glover returned to the same subject, taking issue with Beales's conclusions but adding a Freudian flavour which only served to intensify Beales's repressive hypothesis: 'The woman who draped the legs of her piano, so far from concealing her conscious and unconscious exhibitionism, ended by sexualising the piano; no mean feat.' Glover's interpretation is alive and well today. An article in the Radio Times, publicising a similar BBC radio season marking the centenary of Queen Victoria's death, asked, 'Does it not take a mind somewhat preoccupied by sex to imagine knickers on a piano?'

This fiction, so attuned to post-Victorian prejudices about the nineteenth century, continues to proliferate, not just in popular journalism and gossip, but in the work of serious-minded academics and historians. Rosemarie Morgan in her Penguin edition of Thomas Hardy's Far from the Madding Crowd (2000), asserts that, for the Victorians, the 'specific curvature of a piano leg [was] matched to the erotic body.' Stephen Bayley's book General Knowledge (1999) argues that 'The icons of the modern movement were as historically specific as the nineteenth-century obsession with modesty, which led the Victorians to dress table legs in pantaloons. Just as they felt it necessary to disguise household apparatus and buildings, so the modern movement demanded the clear articulation of an internal mechanism through external forms.'

Richard Sennett, in The Fall of Public Man (1986), traces a similar argument. 'The idiocy of such prudery can so cloud the mind that its source is forgotten,' he writes. 'All appearances have personal meanings: if you believe that little gestures with the eyes may involuntarily betray feelings of sexual license, it becomes equally rational to feel that the exposed legs of a piano are provocative.' Sennett argues 'that cultural change, leading to the covering of the piano legs, has its roots in the very notion that all appearances speak, that human meanings are immanent in all phenomena.'

The voice of this particular appearance, however, is an act of historical ventriloquism. There is no evidence that the custom was ever practised in the period, except as a means of protecting valued furniture from damage - in much the same way that antimacassars defended upholstery from dirt and hair-cream. Moreover, this little paradigm of prudishness existed for the Victorians much as it exists for us - only they told it as a joke against the perceived over-refinement of middle-class Americans. British readers were introduced to the idea by A Diary in America (1899), Captain Frederick Marryat's credulous and antagonistic account of life in the New
World. Marryat describes how he visited Niagara Falls with a female friend, who slipped on a rock and grazed her shin. "Did you hurt your leg much?" he asked.

She turned from me, evidently much shocked, or much offended; and not being aware that I had committed any very heinous offence, I begged to know what was the reason of her displeasure. After some hesitation, she said that as she knew me well, she would tell me that the word leg was never mentioned before ladies. I apologized for my want of refinement, which was attributable to my having been accustomed only to English society, and added, that as such articles must occasionally be referred to, even in the most polite circles of America, perhaps she would inform me by what name I might mention them without shocking the company. Her reply was, that the word limb was used; "nay," continued she, "I am not as particular as some people are, for I know those who always say limb of a table, or limb of a piano-forte."  

Marryat was even more surprised when he encountered the limbs of a piano at a seminary for young ladies. His guide informed him that the mistress of this establishment, in order to demonstrate the care to preserve in their utmost purity the ideas of the young ladies under her charge... had dressed all these four limbs in modest little trousers, with frills at the bottom of them.

Back home, the Captains anecdotes were adopted as proverbial examples of American reserve. On the stage of the Haymarket Theatre, London, a satirical song in J. R. Flanches burlesque Mr Backstone's Voyage Round the Globe (1854) declared:  

"To the West, to the West, to the land of the free -
Which means those that happen white people to be -
'Where a man is a man -' if his skin isn't black -
If it is, he's a nigger, to sell or to whack...
Where the legs of the table in trousers are drest:
Away, far away, to the land of the west."

On 29 December 1856, the naturalist Richard Owen wrote to John Murray, the publisher, complaining that the editor of the Quarterly Review was being unreasonably squeamish about the terms used in an article about sexual reproduction in bees and moths. "This sensitiveness," Owen grumbled, "truly akin to the Yankee nether-clothing of the pianoforte legs, is shutting out a vast and rapidly increasing store of most interesting and important knowledge." By the following decade, the image was transforming into a standard satirical shorthand for the notion of prudery - an 1868 cartoon attacking the conservatism of the author Eliza Lynn Linton, for instance, depicted her at an ease whose legs were wrapped in frilled pantaloons.

Was this practice ever pursued, even in America? Probably not. The most likely explanation for the origins of the story is that the Captains friends were simply pulling his limb. Marryat himself was doubtful about some of his conclusions, suspecting that he may have been deliberately misinformed by those hoping to undermine his work. After the publication of Frances Trollope's Domestic Manners of the Americans (1832) and Harriet Martineaus Society in America (1837), few were minded to help another English writer libel their country. If they have the slightest suspicion that a foreigner is about to write a book, he reflected, "nothing appears to give them so much pleasure as to try and mislead him." More evidence that Marryat was the victim of a hoax comes from a knuckle-headed parody of his work, Lie-ary on America, with Yarns on its Institutions (1849) by Captain Marry-It. The pseudonymous American author rewrites the Englands account in the most ludicrous manner, but seems satisfied to rehearse the grazed knee incident at Niagara Falls more or less as Marryat tells it, describing how the L-word ruined a pleasant afternoon of sightseeing: "Sink my hull if she didn't instantly capsize in a swoon; and her mamma told me never to mention that wugger thing "leg" in the presence of a Yankee female, or I might endanger their lives and their modesty for ever." The joke is essentially unchanged, suggesting that most American readers would find this geniusphobia as ridiculous as those in England. Whatever the case, the synecdochic relationship that now exists between Victorian sensibilities and the clothed piano leg is wholly fraudulent. It persists, however, because the story is useful as a way of dismissing the Victorians' experience as less honest, less sophisticated, less self-cognisant than our own.

How did the Victorians fall victim to what E. P. Thompson called "the enormous condescension of posterity"? It was a speedy and subtle process, the most visible aspect of which was a battle fought in the early years of the twentieth century between the more ironical members of the Bloomsbury set and an ageing cohort of nineteenth-century survivors. The opening shots were fired in Eminent Victorians (1918), Lytton...
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Strachey's persuasive and witty debunking of four nineteenth-century worthies: Cardinal Manning, Florence Nightingale, General Gordon of Khartoum and Dr Thomas Arnold, headmaster of Rugby - a group of sacred cows which Strachey determined to milk for laughs. To ensure that his subjects appeared sufficiently silly or callous, he even produced a few fictional anecdotes. He decided that Manning never spoke of his wife after her death. He claimed that Arnold's legs were 'shorter than they should have been'. He implied that Gordon was a drunkard (but chose not to elucidate his sexual interest in young men - perhaps because he shared it).

It was Arnold's granddaughter, Mary Ward, a novelist, born in Tasmania in 1891, who led a feeble resistance movement against the book, condemning its 'coarse caricature' and 'sheer brutality' from the pages of the Times Literary Supplement. For those in and around the Bloomsbury circle, bashing her in print then became a kind of team sport. 'How this lights up the stuffy world of the first class railway carriage that she lives in!' shrieked Virginia Woolf, momentarily forgetting, perhaps, her own distaste for travelling in the same compartments as the working classes. The Bloomsberries' contempt for Ward killed her posthumous reputation. Today, she is chiefly remembered as an opponent of women's suffrage, but it is not perverse to argue that Ward made a concrete contribution to the advancement of women's rights as the iconised author of A Room of One's Own (1929). Ward was an active member of the committee that brought women students to Oxford University, established an education centre for working Londoners in Gordon Square, set up a network of child-care facilities for the capital's working women, founded Britain's first school for disabled children, and became the first female journalist to file a story from the trenches of the First World War. Now relocated to Queen Square, the Mary Ward Centre remains an important adult education institution, but the guides who escort crocodiles of tourists on walks around literary Bloomsbury prefer to concentrate on the numerous shifts in Woolf and Strachey's living arrangements than on the transformative effect Ward exerted upon the lives of the working-class women with whom they shared a postal district.

Bloomsbury's poison-pen letter to the past arrived at the perfect moment. The reviews were extremely positive - although one in the TLS introduced an element of doubt which reflects one of the key themes of this book: 'We live in a world that they [the Victorians] built for us, and though we may laugh at them, we should love them, too.' Strachey's opinion of the Victorians as a set of mouthing bungling hypocrites was, however, being echoed throughout Edwardian culture. Growing awareness of Freud's work, which offered the twentieth century a system of sexual signification unavailable to its predecessor, amplified the belief that the Victorians were fundamentally ignorant about the workings of their own sensibilities. As Michael Mason notes in The Making of Victorian Sexuality (1994), the epithet 'Victorian' had already begun to acquire a pejorative edge by the time Strachey's book was published. Eminent Victorians, however, did more than any other text to fix the twentieth century's attitude to the nineteenth - and the indignant counterblasts came quickly. In 1919, the poet and MP J. A. Bridges took issue with 'the slighting way in which people, who very likely know little about the matter, are accustomed to write and talk about the Victorian era, as if everything done during that period by those whom we had been brought up to honour and respect was quite futile and absurd.' He suspected that 'probably the same class of people will - if the earth should last so long - in the twenty-first century be disparaging and sneering at the present era, with as much or as little reason.'

From this point on, it was open season on the Victorians. They became the favourite comic stereotype of the age. In Grace James's musical comedy The Pork Pie Hat (1922), a phalanx of nineteenth-century schoolgirls chorus their adherence to a twentieth-century caricature of Victorian virtue:

First Boarder: I am a genteel, good Victorian child,
Obedient, patient, modest, meek and mild.

Miss Pinkerton: Speak when you're spoken to and then be quiet
Content with simple joys and simple diet.

Second Boarder: Dear ma'am, I'll always try to do my duty,
Morality attracts me more than beauty.

Less Eminent Victorians (1927) parodied Victorian mores in limerick form:

There was a young Lady of Dover
Who started to read Casanova.
She hadn't gone far
When she told her papa
That she felt she was blushing all over.
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American-accented detective, and cheered the extinction of old-style villainy. The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes (1939) became the first Conan Doyle adaptation to portray Holmes in a specifically Victorian London. With the period setting came Nigel Bruce’s bumbling, fuzzy, Stracheyite Watson: an image that subsequent incumbents of the role would find hard to erase. British films with nineteenth-century subjects reinforced the association of the period with themes of brutality and hypocrisy. In 1935, Slaughter’s company made a surprisingly successful transfer to the cinema, mining their repertoire to furnish material for a number of 1930s quota quickies. Slaughter’s posturing, lip-smacking, moustache-twirling characters were all of the same type: monsters of hypocrisy. In The Crimes of Stephen Hawke (1931) – a pastiche described by Slaughter in the film’s prologue as ‘a new old melodrama’ – the titular character is a respected money-lender who lives a double life as a murderous burglar named The Spinebreaker. In Maria Marten or Murder in the Red Barn (1935), he plays William Corder, an outwardly respectable man exposed as a seducer and a killer.

As Jeffrey Richards has noted, Slaughter’s films established a critique of Victorianism that was developed with enthusiasm in the popular cinema of the following decades. In Great Expectations (1946) and Oliver Twist (1948), David Lean imported the techniques of German Expressionist film-making into the depiction of Victorian narratives, and created a kind of nineteenth-century noir that remains a touchstone for any director tackling stories set in the period. It was the Hammer horror cycle, however – which rolled from the late 1950s to the mid-1970s – which did the most to shape the popular perception of Victorian sensibility. The Curse of Frankenstein (1957) and Dracula (1958) were the first versions of these narratives to be set firmly in the nineteenth century. The Universal horror films from which they were remade have no obvious period content: the lab equipment in Frankenstein (1931) was high-tech enough to be reused in the sci-fi epic Flash Gordon five years later. Hammer used the historical setting to tell parables about the pleasures of the Permissive Society, which it dramatised as a battle between the promiscuous Undead and conservative Victorians – which is why the company took such delight in stories involving lesbian vampires in nineteenth-century Swiss finishing schools and light-laced virgins being transformed into carnal monsters after a nocturnal visit from Christopher Lee. The subtext of these movies doesn’t lie very deep below the surface: when Hammer transported Dracula to Swinging

Mrs Cameron: Oh, dear, if her papa hadn’t been such a clever physician and amused himself teaching Caroline a lot of things she ought never to have known, she wouldn’t have dreamed of following that unprincipled Nightingale woman to the Crimea and then got married to a black man! (Hysteric). 39

In the 1930s and 1940s, the nineteenth century became a popular setting for highly satiric sentimental fiction, such as The Frozen Heart (1939) by Amy Strachey, widow of Lytton Strachey’s cousin, Catherine Gayton’s Those Sinning Girls (1940) and Amy Jay Baker’s Those Victorians (1947) – hindsighted romantic sagas cluttered with embroidered nob caps, bamboo work boxes and knowingly rebellious heroines. Self-consciously period thrillers also appeared. In 1925, the actor-manager Tod Slaughter took over the Elephant and Castle Theatre in south-east London and initiated a programme of emphatically retro revivals of Victorian melodrama standards. In doing so, he nurtured – or perhaps even created – the popular notion of what constituted the nineteenth-century theatre’s melodramatic style. Patrick Hamilton’s play Angel Street (1928) brought a more understated version of Slaughter’s Victorian hypocrite to the West End and Broadway, and when it was filmed (for the second time) as Gaslight (1944), cinemagoers saw Charles Boyer’s high-collared, cravat-wrapped tyrant undone by Joseph Cotten’s dickie-wearing;

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London for the final film of the series, he became high priest of an orgiastic gang of vampire hippie bikers.

By the time the Count came to Carnaby Street, voices dissenting from Hammer's view of the nineteenth century had long fallen silent. Even in the aftermath of the publication of Eminent Victorians, protests against anti-Victorianism were weak and marginal. In 1958, the poet and prominent anti-vivisection campaigner Stephen Copley complained in his volume of personal reminiscences that 'We ... are a little apt to look back at the Victorians with a superior smile.' The title chosen by the illustrator James Thorpe for his own memoirs, Happy Days: Recollections of an Unrepentant Victorian (1931), suggests that surviving Victorians were expected to be apologetic about the age into which they were born. In the year of his death, the architect, clubman and aristocratic roisterer Ralph Nevill published an account of nineteenth-century pleasures, The Gay Victorians (1930), with the explicit intention of debunking the debunkers who characterised his youth as a time of austerity and prohibition. Victorian London was 'much more free in its life and amusements' than its 1930s counterpart, run by the 'hypocritical [and] canting present generation'. He blamed 'Ultra-respectability, the great fetish of modern England' and 'Parian fanatics' for this sad decline. Nevill, with the roseate nostalgia of a dying man looking back at past hedonisms, recalled a world of pre-Edwardian all-night partying: music hall lounges; free and easy supper places; Barron's Oyster Rooms on the Haymarket; the Alhambra on Charing Cross Road, with its obliging chorus girls; the Shades, a club which stood in Leicester Square on the spot now occupied by the Empire cinema, where the cutlery was stamped 'Stolen from the Shades'; the Gardenia Club around the corner, where 'five shillings to the porter and any name you fancied scribbled in a book made you free of the place, as long as you did not throw glasses about, or quarrel with lady members'. Nobody listened to him, however. As the Canadian historian Herman Ausubel reflected in 1955, 'Anti-Stencheshite Victorians have failed notoriously, for Eminent Victorians gives every sign of enduring for a long time.'

Now that over a century has elapsed since Queen Victoria's death, it is time to rethink our assumptions about life in her reign; to question the validity of texts that we have decided typify nineteenth-century attitudes; to test our beliefs about the era against comparable phenomena in our own times. A whole canon of morally prescriptive writing, for instance,
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sexual equality – equality which most of us would be unwilling to relinquish. A political adaptation of that same nostalgia was deployed by Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Party in 1983, when it made enormous electoral capital from its invocation of a mythic nineteenth century of Tory content: a utopia of personal thrift, ruined by the foundation of the welfare state and the promulgation of Keynesian economics. However, most of those people who voted for the Tories throughout the 1980s remained part of a broad consensus which celebrated the modern world's distance from an age in which women were unenfranchised and, it is imagined, tyrannised by their husbands and suffocated by their underwear.

Readers hoping to find any right-wing nostalgia in these pages will, I hope, be disappointed: it is not my intention to suggest that the nineteenth century was a low-tax, free-trade paradise from which we have all been expelled by social democracy. What follows is an attempt to undermine the orthodox views of the nineteenth century offered by progressive and reactionary traditions; to suggest how we might liberate the Victorians from Stracheyite, Thatcherite and Freudian prejudices; how we might learn to live with them on better terms. It is not a conventional history book; not a comprehensive survey of the period, decade by decade, social class by social class. It is an attempt to conjure up the excitement, the permissiveness, the sense of pleasurable velocity that was central to the Victorian experience; to demolish the notion that the nineteenth century was an era best characterised by reticence, sobriety and conservatism. Some members of the cast of characters who populate this book – Lucia Zarate the celebrity dwarf, Ah Sing the Stepney opium master, William Dugdale the Chartist pornographer, Dr William Palmer the serial killer – will be unfamiliar to many readers. Others – Aubrey Beardsley, Josephine Butler, Oscar Wilde, Queen Victoria – will, I hope, seem unfamiliar in the light of its contents. The fieldwork on these pages, which has taken me to (among other places) the edge of the Niagara Falls, a strip club in Sheffield, a freak show on Coney Island and a concrete housing block in Shadwell, aims to expose the Victorian-ness of the world in which we live; to demonstrate that the nineteenth century is still out there, ready to be explored. A less obviously geographical journey will be described in the progress of the chapters, which follow the Victorians as they engage with their popular culture, go shopping, gossip, visit the movies, eat dinner, redecorate their homes, take drugs, have sex, negotiate the daily business.

of their lives. And, as the story moves on, the connections between the hundreds of disparate anecdotes, histories, texts and lives recorded in this book will, I hope, begin to make a broader claim about the nature of Victorian sensibility.

By the time you've read this book, I believe you will be convinced of a number of relatively minor points: that the exhibition of human oddities had its positive side; that recreational drug use in the nineteenth century was widespread and socially acceptable; that far from being a Modern marooned in the past, Oscar Wilde was – sexually at least – a fairly typical Victorian man. I hope you will also be convinced of some rather wider assertions: that Victorian culture was as rich and difficult and complex and pleasurable as our own; that the Victorians shaped our lives and sensibilities in countless unacknowledged ways; that they are still with us, walking our pavements, drinking in our bars, living in our houses, reading our newspapers, inhabiting our bodies.
CONCLUSION

Liberating the Victorians

I know that there are many historians, or at least writers on historical subjects, who still think it necessary to apply moral judgements to history, and who distribute their praise or blame with the solemn complacency of a successful schoolmaster. Oscar Wilde, Pen, Pencil and Poison (1899)

There are places where the Victorian past will rush to meet you. The ruins of the Crystal Palace at Sydenham, where the Vegetarian Society held its annual meetings, where the first English game of baseball was played and the first lick of asbestos paint was applied, where the Sacred Harmonic Society performed Haydn’s Creation with two hundred violas and violins, ninety violoncellos and double basses and 2,500 voices, and where Queen Emma of the Sandwich Islands, General Tom Thumb and Tsar Alexander II strolled past rows of exhibits. The car parks behind the video shop in Rugeley, where you can gaze up at the window of William Palmer’s bedroom, in which he and his wife slept soundly before he killed her. And Soho—Soho above all. At night, Old Compton Street and Rupert Street, Wardour Street and Greek Street are luminous with a sense of the 1890s. The pavements carry a mixture of media darlings, fashion victims, rent boys, pimps and shiftless ne’er-do-wells. The homeless wait hopefully outside the theatres. Knives and forks clatter in Kettner’s, where Wilde feasted with the ‘panthers’ who were used to bring him down: Soho characters such as Alfred Taylor (a brothel-keeper who was sentenced with Wilde at his trial), Sidney Mavor (a prostitute who later became a Church of England priest) and Maurice Schwalbe (a nephew of the then Solicitor-General). Sitting in its stubby-gentle dining room, it’s hard not to speculate what Wilde would think if he were suddenly to return to his usual table. He would miss the pink lampshades and note the poor state of the paintwork. He would have to content himself with feasting on pasta. But around the corner in Old Compton Street, he would still find plenty of teenage escorts and lawyers’ sons waiting to be cruised. He would find noodle bars done out in his favourite kind of Japonaiserie, absinthe on sale at the bars, and glammed-up wannabes trolling down the middle of the road, talking loudly about themselves. If he walked further south, however, past the Palace Theatre (where Salome with Sarah Bernhardt didn’t quite happen), past Lisle Street (where Jack Saul, the most celebrated male prostitute of the 1880s, had his lodgings) and over St Martin’s Lane to Charing Cross, he would—were he not dead already—get the shock of his life.

Here, within sight of the martyr’s memorial, sits Maggie Hambling’s sculpture A Conversation with Oscar Wilde, depicting the playwright emerging from his sarcophagus, fig in hand, ready to begin gossiping. I attended its unveiling in November 1998, joisting in the crowd of public servants, literary types, B-list celebrities and hacks who had assembled to do homage to a writer whose name could not easily be mentioned in public for the best part of the twentieth century. (E.M. Forster’s Maurice, for instance, describes himself as one of the ‘unspeakables of the Oscar Wilde sort.’) The actors Nigel Hawthorne and Judi Dench played a short scene from A Woman of No Importance, the culture secretary Chris Smith announced that it was fitting that there was at last a memorial to Wilde ‘on the fringes of London’s Theatredom’ and members of the crowd—former Conservative ministers, a gaggle of critics and an actress from Coronation Street—applauded politely. Stephen Fry, who played the title role in Brian Gilbert’s biopic Wilde, talked gently to gathered reporters about how he knew many gay Tory MPs who were afraid to come out, because it would break their mother’s heart. The journalist Matthew Parris—who had his wrists slapped by the BBC for alluding to the homosexuality of the Labour minister Peter Mandelson during a news programme—hovered on the sidelines, as far away from Chris Smith as possible. The jazzy singer George Melly, in a strange parody of Aesthetic gear (canary yellow fedora, black pinstriped suit and purple Tellyubby badge) signed autographs for ladies of a certain age. As Merlin Holland, Wilde’s grandson, suggested to Channel Four News later that same day, some of the people most eager to sweet-talk him at this event were the very types who sent his grandfather to Reading Gaol. Only a few hours later, Nigel Hawthorne was silenced during a live BBC broadcast because he had made the mistake of suggesting that Wilde’s situation was ‘not a million miles away’ from that of Peter Mandelson. For the course of the day, liberal Britain schmoozed the carcass of Oscar Wilde, and as the celebrations continued, its conservative counterpart attempted to stamp on the coffin lid.
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His behaviour often hovered dangerously close to being that of a paedophile," noted the Daily Telegraph, and these assertions were quoted gleefully on the website of the far-right British National Party."

Merlin Holland’s essay “Biography and The Art of Lying” (1997) illustrates how the memory of his grandfather has been appropriated by charting the accumulation of myths around one well-known incident in the Wilde life story: the playwright’s wobbly moment outside Swan and Edgar’s department store. Wilde scholars will know it from Richard Ellmann’s Oscar Wilde (1987), which describes how its subject was struck by an overwhelming sense of dread as he emerged into the street from the shop and caught sight of “the painted boys on the pavement.” The story dates back to 1930 and Ada Leverson, who probably heard it from Wilde’s close friend Reggie Turner. In Leverson’s version, a curious, very young, but hard-eyed creature appeared, looked at him, gave a sort of laugh, and passed on. He felt, he said, “as if an icy hand had clutched at his heart”. He had a sudden presentiment. He saw a vision of folly, misery and ruin. The sex of this ‘creature’ remains unstated. Hesketh Pearson’s 1946 biography of Wilde assumes it to be a woman. Stanley Weintraub’s 1965 biography of Turner, however, transposes the event inside Swan and Edgar and reinvents the ‘creature’ as a gang of young male shop assistants. Richard Ellmann returns to the payment counter front of the shop, and decisively envisages the passer-by as a gang of rouged rentboys. Brian Gilbert’s film, the script for which was based on Ellmann’s biography, depicts a group of unainted male prostitutes lolling against some railings. Scouting for a cab, Stephen Fry’s Wilde makes eye contact with one of their number. “Looking for someone?” asks the lad (helpfully identified as ‘Rent Boy’ in the closing credits). Fry stares helplessly across the street. His expression is unreadable. Is he mortified? Aroused? Confused? Wilde the Novel (1997) - a prosaic adaptation of Gilbert’s script by Stefan Rudnicki - helps to clarify the moment:

Oscar wanted to turn away, to ignore the lad, but the handsome rentboy looked at him so knowingly, so openly, that Oscar for a moment couldn’t so much as move... The easy camaraderie he had always enjoyed with younger men was an admitted fact, but there was something happening here that did not fit the mould Oscar sought.

Before his eye passed a panorama of destruction. He saw the edifice of his life, which he had so carefully raised, crack and split and crumble, only to expose another image behind it: this raised eyebrow, this knowing face, this mere rentboy. Impossible.

In the telling and retelling, a vague premonition has become a terror-struck homosexual awakening. An edition of the BBC arts programme Omnibus transmitted to coincide with the opening of Gilbert’s film went even further, claiming that Wilde ‘caught a glimpse of the rentboys – the boy prostitutes – leaning against the railings of Piccadilly... It was as though he knew he’d be hooked into the world of homosexual prostitution.’ We even got to see a shot of the railings.

Obliging as a late-Victorian telegraph boy, Oscar Wilde will be anything you want him to be: Irish nationalist, postmodernist, socialist, socialite, pedagogue, paedophile, playwright, major-minor writer, a saint iconised on bookmarks, notelettes, calendars, T-shirts and fridge magnets. Most of all, he is a locus for our anti-Victorianism. In the press notes for Gilbert’s film, Stephen Fry applauded Wilde’s epigrams as ‘reversals of Victorian platitudes’. The back cover blurb for an anthology of quotations, Nothing... Except My Genius (1987), described Wilde as ‘lampooning the starchy morality of Victorian society’. Fry’s preface asserts that Wilde’s ‘imprisonment allowed late-Victorian England to roll up into a sack the work he had done and hurl it like a posed odalisque into the Bosphorus... A hundred years later it is Victorian life that is disgraced in our eyes, and Wilde now stands as the Crown Prince of Bohemia.” In the introduction to his play St Oscar (1989), Terry Eagleton celebrated Wilde as ‘a remorseless debunker of the high-toned gravitas of Victorian England’. Oscar Wilde, the honorary Modernist, too ironic, too desiring, too like us to be considered a bona fide Victorian.

Just as Wilde has been conscripted into the cause of post-war liberalism, those other Victorians – the ones who didn’t walk down Piccadilly with a lily in their hand – have been mobilised to fight the battles of the right. The nineteenth century has become a rich source of rhetoric for the enemies of the left, and those in the centre attempting to resist the ideological polarities that dominated the twentieth century. In 1983, Margaret Thatcher famously declared her allegiance to the works of Samuel Smiles, appealing to a spirit of self-discipline that she believed had been eroded by the welfare state. In 1996, Tony Blair described himself as a Christian Socialist, in order to create a continuity between...
New Labour and a progressive political tradition that predated the formation of his own party. In the wake of these remarks, commentators at both ends of the political spectrum suggested that, in the post-Cold War world, British politics was in the process of assuming an explicitly Victorian form, reorientating itself around a new liberal consensus. The debate has been taking place on both sides of the Atlantic. In the United States, the right has looked to the Victorians for justification and inspiration. Taking his cue from Gertrude Himmelfarb’s nostalgic celebration of Victorian self-reliance, *The Demoralization of Society* (1995), the former speaker of the House of Representatives, Newt Gingrich, celebrated the ‘moral leadership’ of the Victorians: their willingness ‘to look at people in the face and say, “You should be ashamed when you get drunk in public; you ought to be ashamed if you’re a drug addict.”’ Himmelfarb backed him in these assertions: “The Victorians were, candidly and proudly, ‘moralists’.” In recent years, that has almost become a term of derision. Yet contemplating our own society, we may be prepared to take a more favorable view of Victorian moralism.”

Applying these ideas to his doomy brand of speculative demography, Charles Murray has predicted a western world divided into a resolute underclass (‘new rabble’) and an economically and morally self-sufficient overclass (‘the new Victorians’), which he regards as “an optimistic forecast for those who share in it.”

This attitude to the Victorians is a form of sentimentalism, the expression of a desire to go back to the past, to return to a world uncomplicated by welfare, feminism, multiculturalism. In Britain, it has merged with a less fundamentalist attitude to the past, a conservative nostalgia visible on the streets in the form of faux-Victorian litter bins and lamp posts, and legible on the supermarket shelves, where tokens of the Victorian age are used to confer a bogus sense of tradition upon mass-produced food products. Factory lines such as Bendick’s Victorian Mints and Brontë Biscuits use retro packaging to invoke an attractive homely quality that has no connection with the mechanical processes which are truly responsible for their existence. Mrs Beeton’s Cakes, for example, uses a famous Victorian name to suggest reassuring domesticity, when in fact these E-number-stuffed confections are constructed on an industrial estate on the outskirts of Cardiff. (“Our mission [is] to bring interest to the cake fixture,” snaps the rather less fanciful promotional material of their parent company, Memory Lane Cakes.)

You can trace this attitude back to John Betjeman – though he cannot be blamed for its consequences. From the 1950s until his death, Betjeman was an advocate for Victorian architecture and poetry. His work was cute and valuable, but it was also a form of willful perversity, a rebellion against the prescriptive good taste of the prevailing orthodoxy. He was enthusiastic about Gilbert Scott and Henry Newbolt in the same way that some people go wild for Barbie dolls or Elvis mirrors. That said, his objections to modernity were undogmatic and nuanced – he was, after all, a paid-up member of Modern Architecture Research, the English section of CIAM, the Comité International d’Architecture Moderne, an outfit founded by Le Corbusier and his acolytes. Betjeman’s attitudes, however, disseminated throughout a long career in television, achieved a strong resonance with the resurgent middle-classes in the 1980s – the retrogressives of the dwarf consumer belt, people who fantasised that the nineteenth century was a place where being as mean-minded, greedy and philistine as they were was broadly celebrated. For these people, Victorian Britain was a Tory paradise ruined by the arrival of Walter Gropius, the blacks and the gays, but which, with enough diligence, could be recreated on their own Tudor-ethan close, behind PVC leaded windows, blindfolded with a copy of the *Daily Mail*. The bad standing of the Victorians with Britain’s liberal intellectual classes exists in an inverse ratio to the vague approval which they receive from the inhabitants of Llandrindod Wells.

**What is to be done? Is there any way to liberate the Victorians from this position? To extricate them from the approval of reactionaries and the hindsighted moralism of the progressives? Only perhaps to say that, one day, when the Victorians are no longer needed to fulfil this role, it will happen to us. In the next few decades of the twenty-first century, the stereotypes about the twentieth will begin to accrue and ossify. At the moment, we are near enough to the last century to perceive social and cultural differences in the character of each decade. In 1906, the same was true of the nineteenth century. By 1918, such distinctions had become fuzzy. What stereotypes will our grandchildren and great-grandchildren use to punish us for our shortcomings? Here are a few suggestions. They will shake their heads at our long cold war and two hot wars. They will deride the empty language of the free market, of management theory, of consumption, that has colonised much of public utterance, just as we deride the religious and patrician language that seems so prevalent in Victorian culture. They will roll their eyes at TV clips of crankily
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Thatcherite head teachers referring to their pupils as 'customers', and believe that this was widespread practice. When Britain elects its first black prime minister, she and her wife may denounce us for imagining that the twentieth century achieved anything in the field of racial equality, and highlight the glaring inconsistencies in our laws dealing with immigration, gender and sexual orientation. And the litany of clichés will accumulate. The New Wilhelmines will imagine, perhaps, that their forebears all wore red braces, slurred champagne and dealt on the stock exchange via mobile phones the size of a house brick – and classroom material such as Wall Street or Bonfire of the Vanities will back up the assertion. They will stroll through the tumble-down ghettos of the post-war suburbs and wonder how people could have consented to live in such dismal, kitch environments. They will shudder at our reliance upon fossil fuels, our use of radiotherapy, the Cambridge Diet, chemical anti-depressants, Angel Theology and The Road Less Travelled. Just imagine what future academics, pursuing the arguments of the twenty-first century through the textual detritus of the twentieth, could do with editorials from middlebrow tabloids and selective quotes from Mary Whitehouse, Enoch Powell, Paul Johnson and Laura Doyles. Imagine what they might make of a period of British history that produced factory farms, football hooliganism and the Moors murderers. Whatever form it takes, their derision will be nasty. And, as is demonstrated by the experiences of those Victorians who found themselves living on voiceless, in the twentieth century, there will be nothing we can do to stop it.

When Lytton Strachey declared that 'The history of the Victorian Age will never be written: we know too much about it,' he was only half-right.12 Certainly, one of the problems of working with Victorian-cultural is that so much of it survives: a jungle composed of records, documents, handbills, books, pamphlets, newspapers, diaries and wax cylinders awaits the researcher. And, to follow that analogy, those working in the field have tended to stick to the paths cut by those who have already passed the same way. However, as I hope this book has demonstrated, a secondary problem exacerbates this: we have systematically forgotten many of the most interesting and distinctive aspects of the period, and much of what we think we know about it is utterly false, fabricated in the twentieth century and long ago accepted as truth ever since.

There is a mass of material in archives, libraries, private collections, waiting to be dragged back into public cognisance – a world of exciting, utterly forgotten stories, a huge cast of equally neglected personalities. I have tried to accommodate some of these disregarded people and events in this book, but there are thousands of others whom we have lost, whom judicious biographers and historians might restore to the nineteenth-century narrative. Why is Arthur Wharton, the first black British professional footballer, who kept goal for Sheffield United, Preston North End and Rotherham throughout the 1880s and 90s, not a national hero? Who remembers Captain Thomas Mayne Reid, a political revolutionary who created the Wild West genre and built himself a hacienda in G errards Cross? Why has obscurity swallowed up Mary Seacole, a Jamaican nurse who, at her own expense, set up a hospital service at Balaklava and was as celebrated in her day as Florence Nightingale? Or Thomas Peckett Prest, the hack who created the murderous character of Sweeney Todd, and who died penniless in Islington? Who remembers the Blodin Donkey, the lauded tightrope-walking mule of the 1880s? (No editor of The Diary of a Nobody has ever noticed that it is this creature that Charles Pooter is impersonating during a game of charades.) Why is it not more widely known that, by 1873, the Kentish Town branch of Sainsbury's had a coin-operated vending machine nicknamed the 'mechanical cow' that dispensed milk to after-hours shoppers? That the first colour illustrated newspaper was published in the 1850s? That in 1869, the world's first international cricket match was played between an English side and an Australian team composed entirely of Aboriginal players? Or that in 1869 there were image-capable telegraphs?

What prevents these facts from circulating more widely when so many baseless clichés about the Victorians have enjoyed such vigorous life? There is a simple answer to this question. The Victorians are the people against whom we have defined ourselves. We are who we are because we are not the Victorians. And if we concede that they moulded our culture, defined our sensibilities, built a world for us to live in – rather than being the figures against whom we rebelled in order to create those things for ourselves – then we undermine one of the founding myths of modernity. This is why we so rarely see the several extant photographs of Victoria laughing like a drunk, why she is most famous for a quote she never said, why the bogus story of her ignorance of lesbianism has to be repeated over and over again, why chintz-swathed piano legs and Ruskin yelping at the sight of his young bride's pubic hair are commonly invoked to

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characterise the period. If the Victorians are caricatured as cruel, hypocritical, repressive, intolerant, prudish and cheerless, then it makes all post-Victorian wife-beating, child abuse, social injustice and personal dullness more easy to cope with. If you think hard enough about the deprivations suffered by the crossing sweepers who slept in doorways on nineteenth-century city streets, that allows you to recognise Big Issue sellers as something else entirely. Millions of us still occupy the streets of Victorian Britain. Commuters are discharged through the same underground tunnels, reading many of the same newspapers and novels. Colonies of graphic designers and HTML programmers have established themselves in the bodies of Victorian industrial units and Board Schools. Their theatres and music halls are still our places of entertainment. Most of our museums, libraries and universities are theirs. Our cities are theirs. A bus pass is all you need to explore Victorian Britain. Stand in the High Streets of Dewsbury or Didsbury, dawdle down the Pentonville Road or Sauchiehall Street, and raise your eyes above the level of the shop windows, and you are looking squarely at the Victorian past. Legions of dead Victorians, men and women as smart as you or I, lived in these lighted rooms.

I can see them: Alc Sing and Hannah Johnston, lying back on their divan and breathing in the poppy fumes of Shadwell; Joseph Merrick and Tom Norman, splitting a tidy day's takings on the Whitechapel Road; Blondin in his retirement at Ealing, turning a little somersault for a passer-by who remembered, long ago, gazing up at his tiny figure, pushing a lion across the tightrope; William Dogdale, proofing another page of pornography and dreaming of a British Revolution. And beyond these figures, the unknown and unknowable dead, moving through the same brick tunnels which take me to work, scrumming for a drink in the same crush bars, gazing into the same shop windows, walking the same pavements, having the same desires, and feeling less bad about having them. Why do we hate these people? Or if not hate them, patronise them with our contemptuous sentiment? They made us - good and bad - what we are today. We are the Victorians. We should love them. We should thank them. We should love them.

Notes

Introduction

1 'I am happy now that Charles calls on my beadchamber less frequently than of old. As it is, I now endure but two calls a week and when I hear his steps outside my door I lie down on my bed, close my eyes, open my legs, and think of England.' Lady Hillingdon, private journal (1912), quoted in Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy, The Rise and Fall of the British Navy (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1979), p. 71. The phrase is commonly attributed to Queen Victoria: 'As Queen Victoria advised her daughter on the eve of her wedding, 'Lie back and think of England.'', Steve Payne, 'Lie Back and Think of England', Toronto Sun (29 December 1999), p. 92. '... changes in sexual communication from Queen Victoria's discrete [sic] advice to newlywed brides - "Just lie back and think of England" - to the swarm of TV crews lighting up the intimate affairs of princesses and presidents', press release for TV documentary series Sexual Century, first broadcast on the History Television channel, 14 February 2000.

2 A few examples: 'We got in just in time for a quick Scrabble game before supper ... I was soon slotting in edd and vum with the best of them although when ax went down I found myself quickly adding an e, like a Victorian prude wrapping a skirt around the piano legs', Jenny McLean, 'Wordplay round the Cotswolds', Independent (4 May 1999), p. 19. 'Just as the Victorians were so prudish they covered up piano legs with skirts, some old-line woodworkers were offended by the sight of end grain', Jack Warner, 'Woodworking: Changes in the weather can affect boardroom edge', Atlanta Journal and Constitution (30 January 1999), p. 15. 'I think they are more like Victorian matrons, aghast at Mr. Clinton's rampaging piano leg, and preferring simply to draw a discreet veil over it', Mark Steyn, 'The shape of things to come', 'Comment', Sunday Telegraph (29 October 1997), p. 1. 'The very thought may send the current Congressional majoriy reeling like so many Victorian young ladies confronted with the sight of an unscrupulous piano leg', Martin Walker, 'Butter and Guns: America's Cold War Economic Diplomacy', Washington Monthly (1 April 1997), p. 58. 'Here was a world in which not just ladies' ankles but the legs of their dressing-tables must remain always concealed, for fear not only that such a sight would arouse men, but also that it should upset women, for whom sex was a taboo', Deborah Orr, 'Sex in the 21st Century', Independent (6 March 2001), Review, p.1
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