

Research Article

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Introduction: Victorians Like Us—Domesticity and Worldliness

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Introduction

In response to Lytton Strachey's remark that the history of the Victorian Age would never be written because we know too much about it (9), one can argue that the greater our temporal distance to the Victorians is, the more we appear to be interested in them. As Dianne F. Sadoff and John Kucich have noted about this persistent preoccupation, "the Victorian age [is] historically central to late-century postmodern consciousness" (Kucich and Sadoff xi). The continuous reiterations of the Victorian in popular neo-Victorian cultural artefacts have contributed to the establishment of the area of neo-Victorian studies, with the publication, in recent decades, of several books focused on millennial and post-millennial literary engagements with the Victorians.¹ Also growing out of this awareness that matrixes of modernity and postmodernity can be found in the Victorian period, an increasing interest in the sphere of domesticity has resulted in the uncovering of neglected archives. From novels to government reports, the Victorians attached unprecedented significance to domesticity. The household was a pivotal institution, and their occupants performed their different roles according to custom and circumstance. Within its sphere, gender, class, economic and political conflicts were played out as the household provided the background for significant social practices ranging from the kitchen to the parlour, from the street to the Houses of Parliament, from the colonial metropole to the British colonial outposts in Africa, Asia, Australia and the Pacific. The discourses of Victorian domesticity have been the subject of quite a few publications over the last decades.² These approaches stress the interdisciplinary potential for interpretation of the characteristics of the period and often underline the strands of radical thought which encouraged aspirations for upward social mobility.

The inquiry into the performance of domesticity and the management of privacy by, for instance, some of the leading figures of the Victorian period remains still rather an unexplored territory with untapped critical potential. Bringing domesticity into the big picture and foregrounding paradoxes of historical continuity and disruption, the articles in this issue uncover archives hitherto neglected for various circumstances. Either these were until now within the restrictive purview of private collections, or the texts under analysis here had yet to receive significant critical attention (such as the article on the social novel *Under the Arch of Life* penned by Lady Henry Somerset, regarded by critics as a minor fictional work and hence so far overlooked). Contributors have painstakingly collected, from private archives, images which so far remained inaccessible to the general public, such as pictures of the Collingwood family magazines. Furthermore, the collection reclaims texts that have been misinterpreted by earlier readings structured around the public/

¹ See, for example, *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009*, authored by Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn (2010), *Neo-Victorian Fiction and Historical Narrative: The Victorians and Us*, by Louisa Hadley (2010) and *Neo-Victorian Literature and Culture: Immersions and Revisitations*, edited by Nadine Boehm-Schnitker and Susanne Gruss (2014).

² See Strickland (1985), Cohen (1998) and Archibald (2002) for a sample of studies on domesticity and the Victorian novel published in the last decades.

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private and virtue/vice antinomies or focusing on the “cult of domesticity” in the Victorian period. The collection also brings the Victorians to the present by examining post-Victorian revisitations of earlier texts.

In sum, including analyses of both canonical and lesser-known Victorian authors, the articles investigate, across a wide range of literary, artistic, cultural and political texts, the various forms, objects and modes of circulation that have been invested in the Victorians’ unprecedented attachment to domesticity. The collection crosses disciplinary boundaries (literature and history; cultural, gender and film studies; English literature, postcolonialism and transnational contexts) and offers contributions from established scholars in Victorian studies and researchers who are newer to the field.

The burgeoning field of digital humanities has opened to the researcher the possibility of retrieving from oblivion masses of private documents shared by the Victorians in the form of letters, journals and other kinds of private papers. James Connelly’s article offers us a sneak peek into the artistic middle-class household of the Collingwood family of Lanehead, Coniston, in the Lake District. W. G. Collingwood, John Ruskin’s private secretary for the last years of his life, and his wife, Edith Mary Collingwood were artists; their daughters, Ursula, Dora and Barbara, were artists too, and their son, Robin, was an archaeologist and philosopher. As Connelly shows, this remarkably creative household was rural and relatively isolated on the one hand, and yet in many ways, it was at the centre of academic and intellectual Victorian life. The article is centred on the figure of Robin, who was sent to a preparatory school and later to Rugby School but educated at home for the first fourteen years of his life. Connelly shows this to be a house of determined self-discipline and incessant creative activity. The family’s life was characterised by mutual help and support, by learning through doing, by the writing and production of family magazines and the writing and reading of letters—letters themselves being an ideal form for family sharing that were intended to be read by all.

Through an analysis of the figure of Robin George Collingwood, particularly the ways the Collingwood family produced him as its representative, Connelly’s article explores the life of this late Victorian household which was at the same time local, rural and cosmopolitan. Another such artistic community, one that grew up on Freshwater Bay on the Isle of Wight around the households of Alfred Tennyson and Julia Margaret Cameron, is the subject of the next article by Kristine Swenson. Swenson offers close textual readings of Virginia Woolf’s play *Freshwater* (1923, 1935) and Lynn Trusse’s novel *Tennyson’s Gift* (1996), which reimagine the artistic hothouses of Tennyson’s Farringford and Cameron’s Dimbola, with the purpose of investigating post- and neo-Victorian female agency in these narratives. As Swenson notes, *Freshwater* benefits from Woolf’s personal connection to her great-aunt, Cameron—one sees beneath the farce a serious desire for generational change and artistic freedom. In the distorted Alice-in-Wonderland landscape of Trusse’s narrative, the central women of the Freshwater scene—Ellen Ternan and Cameron herself—become pathetic, unable to exercise the freedom that their talents warrant. Swenson observes that the comedy of both Woolf and Trusse depends upon the Victorians being not like them—most obviously, their versions of Freshwater maintain the gender and class dynamics of the conventional Victorian household notwithstanding its latent bohemianism. But despite remarkably similar structures, Swenson forcefully concludes, *Tennyson’s Gift* reads as *Freshwater* once removed, the Victorians viewed through the lens of Bloomsbury.

The Victorian period was one of a struggle for change. Ideas on “betterment” or “self-help” were expressed not only in politics, religion, literature and philosophy but also in innovative aesthetics and were sustained by the acts of previously—female, middle-class and/or subaltern—unheard voices. In particular, three articles in this issue make evident the indebtedness of twentieth and twenty-first-century attitudes to mid and late Victorian power struggles and achievements, in particular, those related to class mobility and female agency (brought about, for example, by the emergence of middle-class women into the public sphere). Focusing on classed and gendered contexts, the articles by Kathryn Ferry, Joanne Paisana and Flore Janssen investigate these struggles and achievements.

The Victorian household has been celebrated as a unique platform for the assertion of British middle-class values. Ferry links Victorian constructions of middle-class identity with the acquisition and display of stuff (or clutter) for the home, departing from the premise that it transmitted messages about wealth, status, as well as taste. The article examines popular decorative preferences and their relative worth according to the literature of the time. In the pursuit of this purpose, Ferry demonstrates that the middle classes used

clutter, a derogatory term to describe today Victorian interiors crammed full of furniture and ornaments, to suit their identitarian needs. According to Ferry, the idea of clutter implies an unintentionality in the amassing of possessions which were, in fact, often highly loaded with meaning. The taste-makers of the period—no longer the aristocratic amateurs of previous centuries, but belonging to a middle-class elite of professional architects, artists, designers and commentators—could be highly critical of the products emerging from factories, not to mention the purchasing motivation of members of the emergent middle classes. For example, the Aesthetic Movement of the 1870s of, among others, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Frederic Leighton and James McNeill Whistler (Prettejohn) reached out to a wider public through the concept of “Art within the Home” disseminated in the columns and books by Mary Eliza Haweis and Jane Ellen Panton, as Ferry duly documents. If the sensibility was different, the resulting trend was no less cluttered than its predecessors. The article shows how this idea was exploited by manufacturers who prefaced all sorts of products with the word “Art” to make them more desirable—the meeting point of designer-led fashion and ordinary middle-class homes.

The following article by Paisana introduces the underread Edwardian novel *Under the Arch of Life* (1906) penned by Lady Henry Somerset, famous in her time for her temperance initiatives though long forgotten today, showing how the novel presents, on closer reading, a veiled criticism of Somerset’s own upper class and the need for social reform. A resident of Eastnor Castle and one-time landlady of the London working class district of Somers Town, Somerset was best known for her temperance work and for defending a broad range of social initiatives, especially those related to women. In *Under the Arch of Life*, new-fangled “socialist” notions promoting working class self-reliance and protest are pitched against old-fashioned paternalism, and the gulf between the worlds of the rich and the poor appears unbridgeable. Paisana’s article examines how Somerset depicts the motives and methods for “doing good” in the slums of London, the nature of upper-class courtship, marital and extra-marital relationships, as well as the values of imperialism.

Somerset’s representations of and authorial comments on fin de siècle social improvement enterprises that Paisana considers, in particular regarding the middle and upper-class voluntaristic moral and social reform, act as a bridge for Janssen’s article on Annie Besant’s mid-Victorian campaign for the “democratisation” of birth control and its impact on the working-class household. As contemporary social concerns such as the “surplus women problem” undermined the notion that middle-class women’s ultimate destiny was to become a wife and mother, the persistent idea that the home was women’s proper sphere was gradually altered to allow middle-class women to extend the sphere of their activities and influence. Much of this influence nevertheless continued to be cast in terms of the wider community as an “expanded domestic sphere,” with the woman still characterised as maternal, caring and moral. As highlighted in the previous article with reference to Somerset’s critique in *Under the Arch of Life*, philanthropic work to benefit the working class came to exemplify this narrative. Presenting themselves as the natural intermediaries between the still under-represented working class and politically influential middle-class men, upper-class and for the most part, middle-class women used their campaigns for the “betterment” of working-class households while (and most relevantly) asserting their own social and political influence. Janssen’s article considers how these notions underpinned Besant’s campaign to make contraception available to working-class couples. It examines events surrounding the Knowlton Trial of Besant and Charles Bradlaugh in July 1877 to scrutinise how she combined economic reasoning and scientific authority with contemporary ideals of middle-class femininity and determines that Besant used these to justify her interference in working-class households as natural to a traditional female philanthropist operating in an expanded domestic sphere.

With a distinct focus on the British Empire and its afterlives, articles by Simon Magus and Iolanda Ramos consider authors and texts that have sustained our modern and postmodern relationships with the Victorians. These articles draw on two of the most protean figures of mid and late Victorian England, the adventure writer and fabulist, H. Rider Haggard, and the famous diplomat, explorer of Africa, linguist and translator of Arabic and Portuguese, Richard Francis Burton.

Magus’s article begins by examining in Haggard’s so-called imperialist romances, namely *Cleopatra* (1889), *Smith and the Pharaohs* (1921) and *She*, the Victorian projection of Christian domestic home life onto the Ancient Egyptian Royal court, specifically in the Amarna period. Haggard scholarship has tended to

follow two main trajectories—both polemical (the postcolonial perspective seeing Haggard as an *éminence grise*) and propagandist of Empire, and the feminist platform from which he is viewed as a misogynist and opponent of the emerging New Woman. This article redresses the balance, forcefully opposing, in Magus's words, "the common perception of Haggard as a dyed-in-the-wool imperialist dominant," by demonstrating that there are other more important influences on his fiction, namely those of the ideas circulating within the nineteenth-century occult milieu within which he wrote. This article addresses how the Egyptosophical theories in Haggard's literature reflect the agendas of the emergent discipline of Egyptology in the Victorian period. In keeping with the focus of this volume, these ideas are situated within the compass of an Egyptology embedded in British culture as a whole. Rather than being simple adventure novels of Empire, Magus contends that these narratives defy a straightforward interpretation by employing the motif of the Romantic, esoteric quest.

The last article, written by Ramos, examines Mark Hodder's *Expedition to the Mountains of the Moon* (2012) and *The Secret of Abdu El Yezdi* (2013), two novels inspired by Burton's biography, to explore how these works combine fact and fiction and use the steampunk and neo-Victorian literary conventions so as to re-frame the history of the British Empire. Therefore, Ramos discusses how the contemporary appropriation of Empire-building factual narratives is able to revise historical events by means of an alternate history perspective on the Victorian Age and the imperialist project. It is certainly the case that not only Haggard's but also Burton's texts are more nuanced than the dominant interpretation of their texts as colonialist rhetoric would have them.

The issue *Victorians Like Us: Domesticity and Worldliness* thus puts together seven essays that challenge twenty-first-century readers to question if the reason why we still like the Victorians is because we are, indeed, in many ways like them.

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