THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF

VICTORIAN

LITERARY

CULTURE
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VICTORIAN LITERARY CULTURE

Edited by
JULIET JOHN
In Memory of
Dan Jacobson (1929–2014)
and
Sally Ledger (1961–2009)
who each brought so much that is good to life and literary culture
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List of Contributors

James Eli Adams is Professor of English & Comparative Literature at Columbia University. He is the author of Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity (1995) and A History of Victorian Literature (2009), and the co-editor, with Andrew Miller, of Sexualities in Victorian Britain (1996). He is also the author of numerous articles, chapters, and reviews on Victorian literature and culture, and from 1993–2000 he co-edited the journal Victorian Studies.


Matthew Bradley is Senior Lecturer in English at the University of Liverpool. His research primarily focuses on Victorian culture and religion. His publications include the Oxford University Press World’s Classics edition of William James’s The Varieties of Religious Experience (2012), and a co-edited collection of essays, Reading and the Victorians (2014). He is currently writing a history of Victorian imaginings of the end of the world.

Patrick Brantlinger, former editor of Victorian Studies, is James Rudy Professor of English, Emeritus, at Indiana University. His most recent books are Taming Cannibals: Race and the Victorians (2011) and States of Emergency: Essays on Culture and Politics (2013).

Trev Broughton is Senior Lecturer in English and Related Literature at the University of York. She has a long-standing interest in nineteenth-century Life writing, has published Men of Letters, Writing Lives (1997) and edited the four-volume set of essays on Autobiography for the Routledge Critical Concepts series (2007). Her edition of some of Margaret Oliphant’s biographical writings, including selections from the Edward Irving, is published in the Pickering Chatto Selected Works of Margaret Oliphant. She is co-editor of Journal of Victorian Culture.

Carolyn Burdett is Senior Lecturer in English and Victorian Studies at Birkbeck, University of London. She is author of Olive Schreiner (2013) and co-editor of The Victorian Supernatural (2004). Her work on emotions and psychology includes editing.

Ayşe Çelikkol is Assistant Professor in the Department of English Language and Literature at Bilkent University, Turkey. She is the author of *Romances of Free Trade: British Literature, Laissez-Faire, and the Global Nineteenth Century* (2011). Her essays on nineteenth-century British and American literature have appeared in *ELH: English Literary History, American Literature, Victorian Poetry*, and *Partial Answers*. Her current book project explores the enchantment of modern life in Victorian Britain.

Jay Clayton is the William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor of English, and Director of the Curb Center for Art, Enterprise, and Public Policy at Vanderbilt University. He has published books and articles on Romantic poetry and Victorian novels, contemporary American literature, film and digital media, science and literature, and medicine, health, and society. His book, *Charles Dickens in Cyberspace: The Afterlife of the Nineteenth Century in Postmodern Culture* (2003), focused on the depiction of computers, information technology, and cyborgs from the Victorian era to the twenty-first century.


Kate Flint is Provost Professor of Art History and English at the University of Southern California. She is author of *The Woman Reader 1837–1914* (1993), *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination* (2000), and *The Transatlantic Indian* (2009), as well as many articles on Victorian and early twentieth-century cultural history, literature, and visual culture. She is currently completing ‘Flash! Photography, Writing, and Surprising Illumination,’ and working on two new projects: one on the ordinary and the overlooked, and the other on the transnational currents of art in the nineteenth century.
Hilary Fraser holds the Geoffrey Tillotson Chair of Nineteenth-Century Studies and is Dean of Arts at Birkbeck, University of London. Her most recent book is Women Writing Art History in the Nineteenth Century: Looking Like a Woman (2014). Earlier books include Beauty and Belief: Aesthetics and Religion in Victorian Literature (1986), The Victorians and Renaissance Italy (1992), English Prose of the Nineteenth Century (with Daniel Brown, 1997), and Gender and the Victorian Periodical (with Stephanie Green and Judith Johnston, 2003). She is currently writing a book for Oxford University Press on art writing. She is President of the British Association for Victorian Studies.

Melissa Free is an Assistant Professor of English at Arizona State University, where she teaches nineteenth- and twentieth-century British literature and postcolonial studies. Her essays have appeared in edited collections and journals, including Genre, Texas Studies in Literature and Language, and Joyce Studies Annual. New work is forthcoming in Victorian Studies and Conradiana. Her current project is a book-length study of gender, race, and generic innovation in British South African literature from the First Boer War through the First World War.

Holly Furneaux is Professor of English at Cardiff University. She is author of Queer Dickens: Erotics, Families, Masculinities (2009). She is also co-editor, with Sally Ledger, of Dickens in Context (2011) and editor of John Forster’s Life of Dickens (2011). Her next book, Military Men of Feeling: Emotion, Touch and Masculinity in the Crimean War (Oxford University Press) will be out in spring 2016.

Lauren M. E. Goodlad is the Kathryn Paul Professorial Scholar of English and Criticism and Interpretive Theory at the University of Illinois, Urbana where she is also Provost Fellow for Undergraduate Education. Her books include Victorian Literature and the Victorian State: Character and Governance in a Liberal Society (2003), the co-edited ‘Mad Men’, Mad World: Sex, Politics, Style, and the 1960s (2013), and The Victorian Geopolitical Aesthetic: Realism, Sovereignty, and Transnational Experience (2015). She is also the editor of Worlding Realisms, a forthcoming special issue of Novel: A Forum on Fiction as well as the co-editor, with Andrew Sartori, of The Ends of History (2013), a special issue of Victorian Studies.

Rae Greiner is Associate Professor of English at Indiana University, Bloomington, where she is editor of the journal Victorian Studies. The author of Sympathetic Realism in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction (2012), she is interested in the relation between history and literary form and in the vagaries of mental life. Her book in progress, Stupidity After Enlightenment, is a study of stupidity’s value for British scientists and authors circa 1750–1940.

Josephine M. Guy is Professor of Modern Literature at the University of Nottingham. She has published monographs on various aspects of nineteenth-century literary history and has edited a collection of source documents, The Victorian Age (1998, 2002); her most recent publications in this area (in collaboration with Ian Small) are The Routledge Concise History of Nineteenth-Century Literature (2011) and The Textual Condition of
Nineteenth-Century Literature (2012). She has also published widely on Oscar Wilde and since 2000 has been a contributing editor to the Oxford University Press edition of the Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, bringing out in 2007 an edition of Wilde’s critical writings (vol. IV); she is currently editing a volume of some of his plays.

Ian Haywood is Professor of English at Roehampton University, London. He has published widely on radical politics and popular literature in nineteenth-century England, including three editions of Chartist fiction (published by Ashgate), numerous articles on George W. M. Reynolds, and The Revolution in Popular Literature: Print, Politics and the People 1790–1860 (2004). His other books include Bloody Romanticism: Spectacular Violence and the Politics of Representation 1776–1832 (2006), The Gordon Riots: Politics, Culture and Insurrection in Late Eighteenth-Century England (2012; co-edited with John Seed), and most recently Romanticism and Caricature (2013). His current research interests include political caricature in the early Victorian period, the visual culture of Chartist, Spain and Romanticism, and literary illustration in the Romantic period.

Ann Heilmann is Professor of English Literature at Cardiff University, having previously held professorial chairs at Swansea and Hull. The author of New Woman Fiction: Women Writing First-Wave Feminism (2000), New Woman Strategies: Sarah Grand, Olive Schreiner, Mona Caird (2004), and Neo-Victorianism (with Mark Llewellyn, 2010), she has co-edited (also with Llewellyn) a critical edition of the short stories of George Moore (2007) and most recently an essay collection on George Moore: Influence and Collaboration (2014). She has also (co-)edited three other essay collections, as well as four multi-volume anthology sets, on Victorian to contemporary women's writing and Victorian to Edwardian (anti)feminism. The general editor of Routledge’s History of Feminism and Gender and Genre series, and the academic editor of a forthcoming database, Routledge Historical Resources: The History of Feminism, she is now working on a cultural history of James Miranda Barry in Victorian and neo-Victorian biographilia.

Alice Jenkins is Professor of Victorian Literature and Culture at the University of Glasgow and works mainly on the emergence of the knowledge economy in the nineteenth century. Publications include Space and the ‘March of Mind’: Literature and the Physical Sciences, 1815–1850 (2007) and an edition of Michael Faraday’s essays, Michael Faraday’s ‘Mental Exercises’: An Artisan Essay-Circle in Regency London (2008). She is the co-founder and first Chair of the British Society for Literature and Science.

Juliet John is Hildred Carlile Chair of English Literature at Royal Holloway, University of London. She is Director of the Royal Holloway Centre for Victorian Studies and was previously Director of the Glastone Centre for Victorian Studies, which she founded. She has published widely on Victorian literature and culture. She is the author of Dickens’s Villains: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture (2001) and Dickens and Mass Culture (2010). She has edited numerous books and editions, most recently (with Matthew Bradley) Reading and the Victorians (2015) and is Editor-in-Chief of Oxford Bibliographies: Victorian Literature. She is currently working on

**Amy M. King** is Associate Professor of English at St. John’s University, Queens, NY. She is the author of *Bloom: The Botanical Vernacular in the English Novel* (2003, 2007), as well as articles in journals such as *Common Knowledge, Victorian Studies, Victorian Review, Romanticism and Victorianism Online, Novel, ELN,* and *BRANCH: Britain, Representation, and Nineteenth-Century History, 1775–1925.* She is finishing a book project entitled *The Divine Commonplace: Natural History, Theologies of Nature, and the Novel in Britain, 1789–1865.*

**Mark Knight** is Senior Lecturer in the Department of English and Creative Writing at Lancaster University. His publications include *Chesterton and Evil* (2004), *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature: An Introduction* (with Emma Mason, 2006), and *An Introduction to Religion and Literature* (2009). He has edited several volumes, most recently *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Religion* (2016), and he is currently finishing a monograph, *Good Words: Evangelicalism and the Victorian Novel.*

**Lara Kriegel** is Associate Professor of History and English at Indiana University, where she is also the Director of the Victorian Studies Program. Kriegel is the author of *Grand Designs: Labor, Empire and the Museum in Victorian Culture* (2007), as well as several essays and articles on material culture, museum history, social class, and imperial formation. She is currently at work on a book called *War Without Heroes,* which considers the Crimean War and its afterlife.


**Ruth Livesey** is Reader in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Thought at Royal Holloway, University of London. Her publications include *Socialism, Sex, and the Culture of Aestheticism in Britain, 1880–1914* (2007) and the co-edited volume *The American Experiment and the Idea of Democracy in British Culture* (2013). She is currently completing a book entitled *Writing the Stagecoach Nation: Locality on the Move in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* and is an editor of the *Journal of Victorian Culture.*

**Mark Llewellyn** is Visiting Professor in English at the University of Strathclyde, Glasgow. His research interests are focused on the nineteenth century and contemporary literature and culture. His publications include *The Collected Short Stories of George Moore: Gender and Genre* (with Ann Heilmann, 2007), the collections *Metafiction and Metahistory in Contemporary Women’s Writing* (with Ann Heilmann, 2007) and

Teresa Mangum is Professor of Gender, Women’s, and Sexuality Studies at the University of Iowa where she also directs the University of Iowa Obermann Center for Advanced Studies. She is the author of Married, Middlebrow, and Militant: Sarah Grand and the New Woman Novel (1998) and numerous articles on representations of Victorian late life—human and animal—and the editor of A Cultural History of Women: Volume 5: The Age of Empire, 1800–1920. She co-edits a book series, Humanities and Public Life, for the University of Iowa Press.

Gail Marshall is Professor of Victorian Literature and Director of the Victorian Studies Centre at the University of Leicester. She is the author of Actresses on the Victorian Stage (1998), Victorian Fiction (2003), and Shakespeare and Victorian Women (2009), and has edited books on George Eliot, the fin de siècle, and Shakespeare and the nineteenth-century. She is currently working on a monograph on the literature and culture of 1859.

Emma Mason is Professor of English and Comparative Literary Studies at the University of Warwick. Her books include Women Poets of the Nineteenth Century (2006), Nineteenth Century Religion and Literature: An Introduction (with Mark Knight, 2006), The Cambridge Introduction to Wordsworth (2010), Elizabeth Jennings: The Collected Poems (2012) and Reading the Abrahamic Faiths: Rethinking Religion and Literature (2015). She is co-editor of The Oxford Handbook to the Reception History of the Bible (2011), and The Blackwell Companion to the Bible in English Literature (2009), and with Mark Knight, general editor of Bloomsbury’s series, New Directions in Religion and Literature.

Elizabeth Meadows is Senior Lecturer in English and the Assistant Director of Vanderbilt University’s Curb Center for Art, Enterprise, and Public Policy. Her current book project examines how various authors use marriage to problematize the social and material power of literary form in Victorian literature and culture. She thanks the American Council of Learned Societies for support enabling her to complete this chapter.

Alex Murray teaches in the School of English at Queen’s University Belfast. He is the author of Landscapes of Decadence: Literature and Place at the Fin de Siècle (2016) and edited, with Jason Hall, Decadent Poetics: Literature and Form at the British Fin de Siècle (2013). He is currently writing a book on the relationship between aesthetics and conservatism in the period 1880-1940.

Katherine Newey is Professor of Theatre History at the University of Exeter. She is a scholar of nineteenth-century British literature and culture, specializing in popular theatre and women’s writing, and has published widely on the Victorian theatre and culture. Publications include Women’s Theatre Writing in Victorian Britain (2005), and John Ruskin and the Victorian Theatre, co-authored with Jeffrey Richards (2010).


John Plunkett is Associate Professor in the Department of English at the University of Exeter. His publications include *Queen Victoria—First Media Monarch* (2003), the co-edited, with Andrew King, *Victorian Print Media: A Reader* (2005) and *Popular Exhibitions, Science and Showmanship 1820–1910* (2012), co-edited with Joe Kember and Jill Sullivan. He is currently working on a book of nineteenth-century visual entertainments, covering the panorama, diorama, peepshow, and magic lantern, provisionally entitled, *Picture Going: Popular Visual and Optical Entertainments 1820–1914*.


Sally Shuttleworth is Professor of English Literature at the University of Oxford. She was Co-Director of the *Science in the Nineteenth-Century* periodical project which produced an index to the science content of a range of periodicals (http://www.sciper.org/), and three books in the area. She has published extensively on Victorian literature and science. Her most recent work is *The Mind of the Child: Child Development in Literature, Science and Medicine, 1840–1900* (2010). She is currently directing two research projects on nineteenth-century science and culture: ‘Diseases of Modern Life: Nineteenth-Century Perspectives’ (www.diseasessofmoderntime.org) and ‘Constructing Scientific Communities: Citizen Science in the 19th and 21st Centuries’ (www.conscicom.org).

Julia Thomas is Professor of English Literature at Cardiff University, UK. She has worked extensively on Victorian visual and material culture and her books include *Victorian Narrative Painting* (2000), *Pictorial Victorians: The Inscription of Values in Word and Image* (2004), and *Shakespeare’s Shrine: The Bard’s Birthplace and the Invention of Stratford-upon-Avon* (2012). She is Director of the AHRC-funded *Database of Mid-Victorian Illustration* (http://www.dmvi.org.uk) and *The Illustration Archive* (www.illustrationarchive.cardiff.ac.uk).
Introduction

Literary Culture and the Victorians

Juliet John

When the idea of a Handbook of original essays on Victorian literary culture was first put to me by Oxford University Press, my first thought was to wonder about the proposed title. What might be understood by the phrase ‘literary culture’, and specifically ‘Victorian literary culture’? Did the Victorians have a ‘literary culture’ and, if so, how might it be characterized? The broad and generic title seemed fraught with difficulty, not least because in the key phrase ‘Victorian literary culture’, two unstable and contested adjectives work to qualify an abstract noun—culture—which is itself unstable and contested. As Raymond Williams demonstrated so brilliantly more than half a century ago, in the long nineteenth century, the meaning of the word culture underwent several changes, all tending to reinforce a shift from culture understood as ‘a culture of something’ to ‘culture as such, a thing in itself’.

The Victorian period witnessed the first serious attempts, in Isobel Armstrong’s words, ‘to conceptualise the idea of culture as a category’. Most memorably, Matthew Arnold’s momentous effort, in Culture and Anarchy (1869), to define culture as a ‘study of perfection’, as spiritual ‘sweetness and light’, accorded a special place to literature. Indeed Arnold, as the first Professor of Poetry at Oxford, left his imprint not only on cultural theory but also on the origins of English literature as a discipline, most notably on the writings of F. R. Leavis in the twentieth century whose own elevation of literature became the symbol for so much that seemed to be wrong with the discipline of English literature from the 1950s onwards. Contemporary constructions of literature and culture are thus rooted if not entangled in the uncertain soil of the Victorian period, even though in the 1830s, for example, when Queen Victoria came to the throne, the novel genre, which formed the basis of Leavis’s

‘great tradition’ of literature over a century later, did not feature in the ‘Literature’ reviews sections of newspapers. Non-fiction prose, so often omitted from university undergraduate Victorian literature syllabi today, was securely ‘literary’ but novels were not.3

The term ‘Victorian’, to the uninitiated, seems less abstract than the ideas of culture or the literary but the adjective carries with it a great deal of cultural, political, and emotional baggage in the contemporary cultural consciousness, within and without the academy. Victorian studies has never reached agreement on the idea that the adjective relates literally to the study of the reign of Queen Victoria. The rise of fin de siècle studies in the last thirty years has in some ways literalized our definition of the term ‘Victorian’ by allowing for the study of movements like Decadence and the New Woman which were part of the rich cultural tapestry of Victoria’s reign, but had previously seemed to pose such a challenge to traditional notions of Victorianism that they were routinely omitted from university courses. Fin de siècle studies is just one area of several that has worked to transfigure and expand definitions of the term ‘Victorian’—spatially, via notions of the cosmopolitan and the global, and temporally, through dialogue with modernism and the ‘neo-Victorian’. Writing at the millennium, John Lucas insisted that there is a strong case for arguing that, except in the most rigorously controlled of contexts, ‘Victorian’ and ‘Victorianism’ are terms we could well do without. […] ‘Victorian’ in particular is used to imply a cultural and political homogeneity which […] never existed.4

It is telling that only sixteen years after Lucas made this remark, the word ‘Victorian’ is very far from a byword for cultural and political homogeneity in the academy. Victorian studies today embraces heterogeneity; there is a generosity, curiosity, and inclusivity about its spirit. The corollary of this relaxed pluralism and indeed precondition for it, is a certain elasticity about spatial, temporal, and disciplinary parameters.

And yet if today’s Victorian studies has rendered itself accommodating by moving beyond some of the territorial debates of its past, why does the idea of ‘Victorian literary culture’ give pause for thought? Or even for discomfort. Why does it matter if the unstable triumvirate of terms that is ‘Victorian literary culture’ necessitates a willing suspension of pedantry on the student’s or critic’s part? Why does it matter that the notion of ‘Victorian literary culture’ demands an effort of critical will, first, to ensure that the phrase means something, and second, to accept that it means many things, to many different readers? Surely it is part of what feels like a new critical generosity to go with the flow. And yet there is something in the title of this volume that stops the flow. And that is the word ‘literary’. This may seem peculiar given that many (though by no means all) of this volume’s contributors have institutional homes in Departments of English and/

4 ‘Republican versus Victorian: Radical Writing in the Later Years of the Nineteenth Century’, in Juliet John and Alice Jenkins (eds), Rethinking Victorian Culture (Houndmills: Macmillan, 2000), 29–45 (p. 29).
or Literature. But it is the idea of the literary that invokes a long history in Victorian studies, and in English and cultural studies more generally, of intellectual conflict rather than cooperation.

The Victorian period gave ballast to the emerging academic discipline of (English) Literature, and as several of this volume's contributors attest, it did so by investing the idea of the literary with a moral and spiritual significance which aligned it with the immaterial and the religious, as well as (by an inflected process of association) the high cultural.5 ‘The cult of literature’, as William McKelvy has demonstrated, ‘developed in intimate collusion with religious culture and religious politics.’ 6 In the phrase ‘sweetness and light’, Arnold sought to associate culture with religion—which ‘enjoin[s] and sanction[s] the aim which is the great aim of culture, the setting ourselves to ascertain what perfection is and to make it prevail’—and with poetry (‘It is by making sweetness and light to be characters of perfection that culture is of like spirit with poetry’). 7 A century later, F. R. Leavis was the most vocal proponent of Arnold’s view that culture was in some ways ‘beyond religion.’ 8 Leavis positioned the discipline of English literature as ‘a centre of consciousness […] for our civilisation’, because he believed that it could preserve a ‘living culture’ against the fragmenting effects of the modernity. 9 Leavis’s belief that literature (as the most important manifestation of culture) was the supreme means of protecting civilization and civilizing individuals was more mainstream among literary critics than his maverick reputation can seem to suggest. What set him apart was the undisguised dogmatism of his supremacist claims for literature.

Leavis preached intensely about literature as the means to individual and social salvation because he perceived, rightly in many ways, that the elevation of the literary taken quietly for granted by many literary critics (even those outside the Arnoldian tradition) was under threat. Critics of Leavis would and of course did argue that he was the threat. In his open hostility to mass culture and his aggressively selective use of the term ‘Literature’ to describe authors that he deemed worthy of belonging to his self-fashioned ‘great tradition’, Leavis seemed to turn ‘literary culture’ into a battleground rather than a near sacred space. Cultural studies evolved to remedy the exclusion of popular culture from ‘literary’ study as well as the universalist, apolitical assumptions of Leavisite,

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5 The University of Edinburgh claims the oldest Department of English in the world, offering courses in ‘rhetoric and belles lettres’ in the eighteenth century—http://www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/literatures-languages-cultures/english-literature/about/department [last accessed 1 April 2016]. However, Charlotte Mitchell’s history of University College London’s English department makes clear both the importance of the nineteenth century in building English literature as a discipline named as such and how complex and gradual the emergence of English as a discipline was in the changing university context in the nineteenth century—http://www.ucl.ac.uk/english/department/history-of-the-english-department [last accessed 29 May 2015].

6 The English Cult of Literature: Devoted Readers, 1774–1880 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 35.


8 Culture and Anarchy, 48.

9 F. R. Leavis, Two Cultures? The Significance of C. P. Snow (London: Chatto & Windus, 1962), 30, 27.
New Critical, and liberal humanist traditions. The Marxist critic Raymond Williams is regarded by many as the founding father of British cultural studies, though his work grew out of, and in response to, the intellectual climate of the Faculty of English at Cambridge, where he studied and was Professor of Drama for some years. Cultural studies insisted that culture and its criticism were always subject to the workings of politics and power and, through a focus (post-Williams) on ‘mass’ culture, took seriously the tastes of the many which Leavis regarded as a threat to the values of traditional ‘civilization’.

Cultural studies was of course fuelled by the rise to mainstream prominence of critical theory more generally from the 1960s onwards. The advent of theory meant that the idea of the literary as a distinct and somehow transcendent space was everywhere under threat: feminism, Marxism, postcolonialism, New Historicism, Foucauldian criticism are just some of the theoretical schools that contested the values which had initially underpinned the Victorian establishment of literary criticism as a discipline. In her essay in this volume, Josephine Guy succinctly sums up the political objections that drove the backlash against the liberal humanist foundations of literary study:

the assumption that the domain of the literary is above or beyond the domain of the political looks naïve at best; at worst, it seems itself to be suspiciously political in that it conveniently disguises the ways in which literariness—or more accurately, the distinguishing of certain kinds of works as possessing a literary identity—may be deeply ideological insofar as such labelling serves the needs of particular interest groups by normalizing the values which those works embody. Denying the label literature to some kinds of writing could, after all, be a useful way of marginalizing them. (69)

The swing from a humanist tradition of literary criticism which positioned literature above politics through a theoretical turn which sees all literature as political (or often subject to politics as the greater force) gives some sense of why the idea of ‘literary culture’ is challenging—especially when deployed as the conceptual umbrella for a seminal volume of today’s Victorian studies scholarship. Ideological differences about what constituted literary and cultural study ran so deep that the parent discipline of English studies and its rebellious child cultural studies agreed to go their separate ways in many institutional contexts in the second half of the twentieth century. As recently as the millennium, in his foreword to Rethinking Victorian Culture, John Sutherland commented from his then vantage point as the Lord Northcliffe Professor of Modern English in the Department of English at University College London:

When he heard the word ‘culture’, Goering is supposed to have said, he reached for his revolver. Victorianists of my generation may feel much the same when they hear the term ‘cultural criticism’.

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10 See Leavis, Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture (Minority Pamphlet No. 1; Cambridge: Minority Press, 1930).
11 John and Jenkins (eds), Rethinking Victorian Culture, p. xv.
The aversion to the label ‘cultural criticism’ of a critic who has done much to expand notions of Victorian literary culture and its criticism, tells us a great deal about the extent of the tribal feeling and habits of self-identification which grew out of the formative debates in the establishment of English and cultural studies as disciplines, whatever the reality of critical practice.

It would be wrong, however, to suggest that the challenges posed by the idea of Victorian literary culture have been generated solely by querulous infighting among academics. Matthew Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy* was so titled because of the pressures he felt in his own day on his ideal of culture as a cohesive force. Q. D. Leavis devoted a chapter of her *Fiction and the Reading Public* to ‘The Disintegration of the Reading Public’ in the Victorian period, effectively blaming Dickens for what David Vincent calls ‘the collapse of a common literary culture’.¹² Josephine Guy’s comments on modern scepticism about the framing of the ‘literary’ as a metapolitical space are made in the context of observations about the ‘persistent and sometimes draconian attempts’ in the Victorian period ‘to police literary culture, activities which only make sense in a climate in which literary works were recognized to have significant social consequences’ (69). This is nowhere more obvious than in the division legally imposed by the 1737 Licensing Act for more than a century between the ‘legitimate’ theatres royal and the other ‘illegitimate’ theatres. Even after the 1843 Theatres Regulation Act officially ended this use of performance space to impose cultural division and hierarchy, plays still had to be submitted to the Lord Chamberlain for scrutiny. The phrase ‘legitimate’ Drama was still used by critics pining for the nation’s playwrights to produce higher quality or ‘literary’ work. For much of the nineteenth century, however, the impermanence of the theatre, as well as what Kate Newey calls its ‘thingness’ (Chapter 34, 661), seemed to contemporary observers to position its offerings outside the realm of the ‘literary’.

So the Victorian period did not represent any kind of golden age of ‘a common literary culture’ if by ‘common’, we mean homogenous, and Victorians were no more united in agreement over what constitutes a literary culture than we are. Q. D. Leavis is far from the only voice who argues that the period in fact witnesses not an age of cultural integration but the disintegration of a more cohesive culture. Sally Ledger and Paul Schlicke among other critics, for example, have pointed to the 1840s as witnessing a split which Ledger figures as between radical (minority) culture and commercial (mass) culture and Schlicke as a schism between ‘the old rural pastimes’ like fairs and rural markets and ‘large-scale spectator entertainments such as music-hall and professional sport’.¹³ The ‘disintegration of the reading public’ which Q. D. Leavis laments, refers of course not to radical or folk culture but to the canonical or ‘minority’ literary culture, to use F. R. Leavis’s term, which can be homogenous or common because it is common to a few, or

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more accurately uncommon. It relies on 'a very small minority', on whom 'the discerning appreciation of art and literature depend':

Upon them depend the implicit standards that order the finer living of an age, the sense that it is worth more than that [. . .]. In their keeping [. . .] is the language, the changing idiom upon which fine living depends, and without which distinction of spirit is thwarted and incoherent. By 'culture' I mean the use of such language.14

Such a language-based, hierarchical model of 'culture' of course thrives best when it is clear which art and literature is at stake and who has the 'discerning appreciation'. As John Plunkett makes clear in his essay for this Handbook, the huge growth of literacy and the literary marketplace which took place in the Victorian period gave rise to an expanded literary and cultural realm, and this 'went hand in hand with the creation of numerous distinct literary fields, each with their own conventions, authors, and readers' (543).

Cultural inclusivity is thus not the same as cultural cohesion. Indeed, the radical changes in the social, political, and economic structures of nineteenth-century Britain which moved the country towards a modern democracy had complex effects on the cultural sphere. Industrialization, the Reform Bills, the intensification of capitalism, the increase in literacy, the move to universal education, and changes to the legal system, are just some of the major historical developments which began or gathered pace in the early nineteenth century. These changes enabled a cultural revolution which gave more and more people access to 'culture', and developments in the publishing trade in the 1820s and 1830s meant that books and newspapers reached further down the social scale in the early Victorian period than ever before.15 Sharply falling book prices, for example, led to a broader readership, and a higher cultural status for the novel, partly impelled by the size of its readership. The novel thus rose up the literary generic hierarchy at the same time that it reached down the sociological ladder.

The cultural revolution did not confine itself to the book trade or to the fortunes of the novel, however. Chittick reports optimistically and in many ways accurately that 'the democratization of politics was not only reported but also reflected in the press'.16 Important in this process was the dramatic proliferation in the number of cheaper journals in circulation (many with intellectual aspirations), the advent of 'penny dreadfuls', cheap weeklies, and (by the end of the century) comics. Greater access and choice led to a more inclusive but variegated cultural marketplace. The paradoxical effects of this are familiar to twenty-first-century inhabitants of a more established mass culture: as Plunkett explains, the 'democratisation of the press' hailed by Chittick, resulted in 'a

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15 Until 1830, for example, the cheap fiction market had largely been left to small and disreputable publishers like the Minerva Press, but in June 1829 when Tom Cadell issued the Author’s Edition of the Waverley novels in five-shilling volumes, 'he inaugurated the vogue of inexpensive recent fiction imprints': Elliott Engel and Margaret F. King, *The Victorian Novel Before Victoria: British Fiction During the Reign of William IV, 1830–1837* (London: Macmillan, 1984), 5.
profession increasingly divided between a few “star” names and an undifferentiated “mass” of hack writers’ (557). And if the nineteenth century was the first age of literary celebrity, it did not follow that all ‘literary’ writers were celebrated or influential. Indeed, as Isobel Armstrong analysed so influentially in the early 1990s, poets in particular tended to experience a contraction of influence and a diminution of status as the market for culture expanded. In the new literary environment in which numbers of readers mattered as never before, the poet’s specialist craft struggled to compete with seemingly more accessible media. In *Victorian Poetry*, Armstrong describes the Victorian poet’s ‘modern’ consciousness of his/her ‘secondary’ role in a culture which was no longer the undisputed preserve of the elite: ‘To be modern’, as she puts it, ‘was to be overwhelmingly secondary.’

If there can be little doubt about the ‘difficult intangibility’ (Chapter 19, 369), to use Matthew Bradley’s term, of the idea of Victorian literary culture, it is this very difficult intangibility which makes OUP’s preferred title for this volume an inspired choice, particularly at this moment in the history of Victorian studies. While the combined insights of this volume offer the reader difficulty and multiplicity rather than simplicity and clarity, the Handbook nonetheless contends that the concept of Victorian literary culture is meaningful. It suggests that it is time to allow the prodigal idea of the literary to rebalance our critical conversations, as both distinctive and integral to a broader sense of literary culture as well as cultural formations. It is particularly important that we do so now, in the grip of a global economic crisis, when the market has proved itself other than sacrosanct but its logic, paradoxically, is everywhere being reinforced. A crude application of this logic doubts the value of the arts and humanities because they do not seem to fit models of utility and economic productivity which underpin notions of common sense that the market has naturalized. The long nineteenth century of course felt itself to be in the first throes of a clash between the logic of political economy and that of the arts, dramatized oppositionally for polemic effect by Dickens in *Hard Times* (1854) and to some extent propelling Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy*. Both these texts have been seen—rightly or wrongly—as promoting the superiority of what we might call artistic or cultured thinking over utilitarian or economic logic and in so doing to suggest a fundamental divide between two incompatible world views. Supremacist cultural logic is subject to accusations of elitism, simplification, or lack of realism and it is perhaps because of this that contemporary defenders of the arts have tended to be wary of revisiting the warnings, rehearsals, and indeed arguments of our nineteenth-century ancestors, so pertinent in many ways to current-day dilemmas.

Yet scholars of the Victorian period are in a position to play a leading role in articulating the value of the arts and humanities today, armed with the perspective of a particularly resonant retrospect. And there seems an emerging sense now that a case can and should be made for the distinctive value of literary culture, and that this can be done via a mode of

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17 *Victorian Poetry*, 3.
cultural analysis which is dialogic and historically situated rather than binary and universalist. The idea of ‘Victorian literary culture’ foregrounded by this volume’s title encourages this integral thinking and raises the key questions underpinning not only Victorian literary and cultural studies but also our historical understanding of modern cultural formations: for example, what was Victorian literary culture? How did the Victorians see ‘Literature’ and ‘Culture’? How do we? What makes the period so important to our understanding of the history of ‘literary culture’? How do Victorianists today justify the value of their work and the importance they place on the literature and culture of this particular era?

There are important claims we can make for the uniqueness of the Victorian period in the history of literature, culture, and literary culture. One is that it witnessed what Guy calls ‘an insistent questioning about what constituted literariness’ (Chapter 3, 74–5). The idea of ‘the literary’ mattered as never before and the period produced answers which have framed debate ever since. The same can be said about culture. It was in the Victorian period that culture became ‘a thing in itself’—except the ‘thing in itself’ that was culture was habitually defined in relation to the literary and vice versa. ‘Literary culture’ thus became the object of particular scrutiny, as Armstrong explains: ‘since the very notion of a culture was new, and the idea of the minority intellectual, this entailed constructing the idea of culture and defining in particular what a literary culture was’.18 It is thus perhaps no surprise that it was in the Victorian period that the study of post-classical literature and culture was consolidated in university education.19 One of the reasons they seemed to matter was that particular historical and material conditions conspired to allow a more pervasive and mainstream literary culture to exist than at any time previously or since. In the new age of literacy which had yet to experience the counter-attractions of the moving image and mass technological media, readers and writers wielded unrivalled power. What characterizes the period is not then some intangible quality that its literature possesses but the extent to which Victorian literature and the broader culture had to be integrated and mutually constitutive.

To argue for the unique breadth and power of Victorian literary culture is not to argue that its literary culture was cohesive; nor is it to posit one particular definition of the literary. But it is to argue the following: the broader culture was literary to an unrivalled extent; literature felt under a new pressure to be culturally porous if it was to avoid ‘secondariness’; it was for the last time possible to avoid ‘secondariness’, but only if attention was paid to the large numbers of readers who participated in competing constructions of the ‘literary’. It was possible, that is, for literary writers to have demonstrable and broad social impact. The extent to which literary culture in the Victorian period was integrated, constitutive, influential, and permeative was unprecedented and will not reoccur in a globalized, multimedia, mass culture. Victorians like Arnold were thus attempting to capture something new whose pastness was imminent. The attempted reification of the idea of culture in the period was therefore a centrifugal response to centripetal forces, a rhetorical attempt to invoke the idea of the literary as a mystical demarcator of

18 Victorian Poetry, 27.
19 See n. 5 above.
a special cultural sphere in the face of the reality of a literary culture which was in fact newly and temporarily pervasive.

There is a new appetite today for explaining why literary culture continues to matter in a changed context where its ‘secondariness’ rather than its centrality tends to be assumed. There is moreover a wholeness of approach to so doing which the rise of interdisciplinary study in the last thirty years has facilitated. The conflict between theory and humanism and the other oppositional debates which grew from it (history and politics vs. aesthetics, high vs. low culture, English vs. cultural studies, etc.) have given way to a less dramatic but more integrated, nuanced academic landscape. Critical theory has become naturalized in the arts and humanities, its insights informing the work of all literary and cultural criticism to a greater or lesser extent. Its assimilation has paradoxically allowed for the revisiting—and more importantly, re-evaluation—of concepts whose humanist or New Critical inheritance theory had persuaded many to distrust, avoid, or devalue: thus aesthetics, form, emotion, character, for example, are all back on the critical agenda. Less revisionist attention has been paid, interestingly, to the idea of the literary. The literary has been for too long the elephant in the room of an English studies more at home with an idea of itself as interdisciplinary than with the founding values of the literary discipline which led to its establishment.

This volume suggests that intellectual conditions are currently ripe for a reassessment of the idea of Victorian literary culture. In 2003, Josephine Guy identified with admirable clarity a binary habit which can attend approaches to literary history:

A certain sort of literary history can take as given a particular definition of literary identity and value and proceed to document and interpret in any one period those works which answer to such a label; alternatively, another sort of literary history can be conceived more critically, as a mode of analysis which seeks to uncover the historical processes whereby at any one moment in time only certain sorts of works come to be labelled and valued as literature. Choosing between these two possibilities in turn rests upon assumptions about the relationship between literary history and other accounts of the past, such as social, intellectual, economic or political history.20

The evidence of this volume suggests that contributors feel less pressure to choose between attaching a particular value or definition to the literary and acknowledging that the idea of the literary is always a historical construction. While there seems to be consensus that there are always historical processes in play ‘whereby at any one moment in time only certain sorts of works come to be labelled a literature’, there is an increasing willingness to claim, with Guy, ‘sympathy with the idea that there is a quality to aesthetic experience which cannot be collapsed wholly into the political or ideological’ and to explore the ‘literary’ dimensions to this experience.21 Not all contributors would


embrace this aesthetic turn but neither would they attribute its rise to a new Leavisite agenda. What is stirring is a desire to wrest the literary from its humanist past without denying that past. Discussions of the ‘literary’ inevitably involve a reaching for nebulous notions of belief, emotion, creativity, and imagination, which are steeped in an Arnoldian and Leavisite tradition—and indeed, as several contributors explore, in a religious past. The idea of the literary can also encourage value judgement, morally inflected critique which current critical orthodoxy tends to position as less sophisticated and ideologically aware (or less truthful) than political analysis. But there is no necessity that concepts should carry past ideological baggage in perpetuity: as theoretically informed literary and cultural critics, we should know that.

Some of the best new work today is on affect and religion, for example, two areas seemingly at odds with the historicist, politicized, and materialist approaches that have pervaded Victorian studies for some time. But the fact that they seem ‘at odds’ is in fact the source of their value. Much has been written in recent times about the need to replace a suspicious or ‘symptomatic reading’ in respectable critical practice with less cynical and adversarial reading practices. The most prominent model proposed to replace the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’—or our professional habit, post-theory, of reading against the grain—is the practice of ‘surface reading’ which tries to rediscover the grain. ‘Surface reading’ has had its detractors, most notably, one of the contributors to this volume, John Kucich, who has mounted a fine defence of the value of the hermeneutics of suspicion. The fact that several contributors to this Handbook, by contrast, seek to move beyond both suspicion and surface reading to discover a new ‘amicable reading practice’ (Chapter 17, 343), in Emma Mason’s words, suggests that Victorianists are far from united not just about what the literary is but also about how we should approach it. What is notable, however, is the interest in exploring concepts that seem at odds and the acceptance of difference.

In practice, moreover, the differences between Victorianists are less schismatic than headline arguments imply. Mason’s emergent theory of reading the Victorians, for example, is driven by a desire to respect and understand the terms in which Victorians understood their own religious and literary experiences as grounded in ‘compassionate and affective aspects of faith that are not objectively measurable’ (333). Her intention is to ‘complement historical and social perspectives’ (333) rather than to posit a naïve universality or apoliticism. Similarly, Mark Knight’s proposed practice of ‘sympathetic reading’

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23 Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus suggest a new practice of ‘surface reading’ in place of ‘symptomatic’ or suspicious reading in their ‘Surface Reading: An Introduction’, *Representations*, 108 (2009), 1–21.


25 Mason argues that we should read ‘with kindness and care’ (333). She is primarily referring to the reading of Victorian religious writing but she seems to suggest that ‘amicable’ reading should inform literary response more generally.
emerges not from a blanket rejection of critical suspicion but from his alertness to the ‘danger in allowing the hermeneutics of suspicion to be our exclusive or primary mode of interpretation’ (386). Kucich’s defence of suspicion is actually predicated on ‘a situated understanding of a text’s cultural difference’, construing suspicion as ‘an effort of sympathetic understanding’.26 His own account in this volume of ‘organic imperialism’ gives weight to literary alongside cross-cultural agency, arguing for novels’ ‘unique ability to demonstrate how models of social order were transformed through colonial encounters, because they particularize individual relationships to social structures’ (254).

What these Victorian critics are currently grappling with then is how far it is possible or desirable to make the leap of imagination, faith, or belief that allows us to understand in the most meaningful way a literary culture both at odds with our own and constitutive of it. The evidence of this Handbook suggests to me neither a dominant hermeneutics of suspicion, nor an abandonment of suspicion among Victorianists (nor indeed an acceptance of ‘surface reading’), but a critical practice which balances suspicion with affective and intellectual generosity. The volume is in fact characterized by a hermeneutics of integrity, a word which I use both because and in spite of its associations with moral earnestness, to suggest a wholeness of critical approach which allows not simply for a committed consciousness of one’s own moral, political, and aesthetics beliefs, but also for a willingness to inhabit and understand the beliefs of others. To adapt the words of Paul Ricoeur, ‘Perhaps I cannot incorporate the other’s interpretation into my own view, but I can, by a kind of imaginary sympathy, make room for it.’27 Victorianists today seem confident enough to be at odds—not to be at loggerheads, but to accept shared ownership of ideas through respect for, and recognition of, the views and agendas of others, other times, and indeed other selves. This is a wholeness of approach that interdisciplinary study should allow for but that disciplinary histories have sometimes seemed to work to block.

Thus, an acceptance of multiplicity and complexity, a post-tribalism, characterizes the new phase we are in. The possibility of a literary critical ‘third way’ consequently emerges in many of the essays in this volume which posits a model of literature as both dialogic and distinct. If we are thinking about politics, for example, then literature is both political and distinctive as a mode of experiencing and understanding (and we can equally discern this post-tribalism in attitudes to art or science, among other modes of perception or understanding explored along with the literary in this volume). The work in this Handbook all seems to be characterized by an impulse to be faithful to the then as well as the now. It seems to respect or believe in the force of the idea of the literary as a form of creative verbal expression whose parameters and boundaries are constantly in flux, subject to continuous disintegration and recreation under the myriad pressures of its own and surrounding impulses to innovate, critique, and imagine the world as otherwise. In the idea of ‘literary culture’ explored afresh here, the ideas of the ‘literary’ and

26 ‘The Unfinished Historicist Project’, 73.
the cultural are enmeshed and integrated; paradoxically, they are dependent on each other for the dual impulses to identification and self-definition or distinction which the twinned terminology of the label ‘literary culture’ seems to suggest. Self-definition will always of course be as elusive as achieved integration. In the idea of ‘literary culture’, the twin terms are necessarily together and at odds; drives to sameness and difference, integration and separation are held in a dialectic which is both cohesive and stressed.

The paradoxes underlying the idea of literary culture in many ways echo those underpinning interdisciplinary thought more generally. In the phrase ‘literary culture’, for example, ‘literary’ is an adjective and ‘culture’ is a noun: does this suggest that the idea of the literary, as the qualifying term, is secondary to the more substantive ‘culture’, or does word order give the word ‘literary’ primacy? Interdisciplinarity in Victorian studies (and the arts and humanities more generally) has become normative in research if not in institutional contexts; Victorian studies, for example, has internalized the findings and methodologies of cultural studies to the extent that, as in the Victorian period, literary and cultural thought is thoroughly interdependent. But interdisciplinarity nonetheless performs a process of integration which is by definition incapable of completion. As several contributors to this Handbook make clear, interdisciplinarity is a concept and practice which purports to wholeness but is always at odds. Alice Jenkins’s essay ‘Beyond Two Cultures: Science, Literature, and Disciplinary Boundaries’, for example, captures the intellectual and methodological challenges and possibilities that have preoccupied ‘literature and science studies’ as a ‘distinct and separately constituted body of scholarship’, which is nonetheless part of the ‘mainstream’ of Victorian studies (401). Her identification of ‘analogy’ and ‘causation’ as ‘two fundamental problems in the explanatory procedures of literature and science studies’ (401) could equally be applied to other interdisciplinary areas of Victorian studies: the relationship between art and the literary explored so consummately by Hilary Fraser, for instance, or that more specifically between illustrations and the texts in which they sit by Julia Thomas. Does one influence the other in a process of causation, and if so, what are the implications in terms of power of the order of cause and effect? And is analogy any less problematic a methodological model in avoiding the idea of origin and influence that propels causation, at eschewing the elevation of one mode of seeing or understanding over another?

The ‘inter’ in interdisciplinarity indicates, literally, a space in between, neither one ‘discipline’ nor another but a new linking sphere. Jenkins’s essay makes clear why any space between is never entirely distinct but always dependent for its modes of speaking and understanding on its origins in disciplinary thought, and indeed on the idea of origins. If the idea of analogy is more successful at avoiding causal thinking, it risks eliding difference with sameness and eliminating the possibilities of a new[er] space between. Where two terms or disciplines are yoked together, it is in fact impossible to avoid the visible shaping force of preference, priority, judgement, and power. There are limits even to sympathetic or ‘kind’ reading practices, for example, as there should be; otherwise, even what Mason calls ‘pastoral’ (333) response eschews criticism and judgement, undermining the values which constitute its claims to worth. The best current work in Victorian studies seeks to balance the exercise of preference with a ‘situated
understanding’ of the preferences of others. The essays in this Handbook wield judgement with integrity; they ‘make room’ for the opinions of others with diverse acts of ‘imaginary sympathy’ which suggest the exercise of individual taste and judgement within a surprisingly cohesive hermeneutics. Thus though Sally Shuttleworth and Alice Jenkins both embrace interdisciplinary literature and science studies, Shuttleworth advocates that the future of the field rests on ‘an essential partnership between science and the humanities’ (437), while Jenkins looks for anomaly, asking: ‘how do we draw the bounds of literature and science studies; is there any kind of writing in the nineteenth century that is not potential material for us?’ (415). Similarly writing about the relationship between visual and literary culture in the period, Fraser emphasizes that ‘the Victorian period was an era of extraordinarily fertile exchange between the literary and visual arts’ (639) while Thomas argues for an ‘emergent illustration studies’, which regards illustration as ‘a distinct object of criticism’ requiring specific critical procedures (621). Victorian studies has thought of itself for some time as habitually interdisciplinary but there is a growing mood of self-reflection about the nature of this interdisciplinarity and the ‘disciplines’ from which it purports to be constituted, as well as about the processes and languages adopted to merge and negotiate disciplinary paradigms.

Fraser draws on Walter Pater’s discussion of the German concept of *Anders-streben* to explore modern theoretical attempts to understand the ways in which ‘image/text interactions enable a transcendence of the dimensional limitations of each individual art form’ (654–5). Pater suggests the idea of a metamorphic continuum or spectrum within the arts:

> although each art has thus its own specific order of impressions, and an untranslatable charm, while a just apprehension of the ultimate differences of the arts is the beginning of aesthetic criticism; yet it is noticeable that, in its special mode of handling its given material, each art may be observed to pass into the condition of some other art, by what German critics term an *Anders-streben*—a partial alienation from its own limitations, through which the arts are able, not indeed to supply the place of each other, but reciprocally to lend each other new forces.28

The attraction of this idea for those attempting to rethink the idea of ‘literary culture’ within a predominantly interdisciplinary Victorian studies is that it allows for an effort to understand distinctiveness whilst refusing to reify or petrify difference. It makes room for an element of the ‘untranslatable’ in aesthetic experience whilst allowing for the shaping processes of cultural and indeed historical change. It enables an idea of literary culture which is the product not only of socio-historical conditions and philosophical will, but also of an aesthetic instinct or intelligence. For scholars wishing to further understanding of literary culture and indeed of aesthetic experience more generally, there has been an array of difficulties: the Arnoldian and Leavisite baggage of such discussions; the rise within the academy of a model of professionalism associated with rationalist and scientific paradigms; and the more general binary habits of debate which tended (until the

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relatively recent upsurge of theoretically informed interest in ‘intangibles’ such as affect) to associate an interest in the intangible with an apolitical and ahistoricist outlook.

Isobel Armstrong’s criticism has done a great deal to break down these binary assumptions within Victorian Studies. Her plenary talk at the 2014 British Association of Victorian Studies annual conference at the University of Kent was a forensic and passionate dissection of the ways in which in the rise of historicism in the last thirty years in Victorian studies has created a rather unbalanced practice of interdisciplinarity whereby texts are seen to be subject to the originary force of History (with a capital H), and aesthetic analysis has thereby occupied a secondary space as the product of historical forces. In arguing that it is time for a rebalancing which emphasizes the creative agency of the aesthetic, she is not relegating historicist modes or claiming to be able to evade the logic of causation explored in this Introduction, but neither is she invoking analogy. She is inviting Victorianists to show boldness and integrity in reinstating the aesthetic more prominently into our pictures of the Victorian past. The aesthetic is clearly important to rethinking the idea of literary culture but its movement in and out of focus in this volume suggests its integration or commingling in today’s Victorian studies with other ways of seeing.

While introductions such as this invite vision statements about the future of the field, the tendency of ‘visions’ to date suggests that a visual analogy may have more longevity than a vision. The kaleidoscope is perhaps the most evocative symbol for Victorian literary culture viewed through the ages, suggesting as it does its original meaning, ‘observer of beautiful forms’, invoking the machine age, and ‘constituted from pattern and randomness, freedom and repetition, order and chance’. It is fitting that the kaleidoscope was a nineteenth-century invention named so in 1817 by the Scottish inventor David Brewster, and first given figurative and literary life by Byron, who had received one as a gift from his publisher, John Murray. The union it suggests of beauty and new technology reminds us of the polymathic or ‘interdisciplinary’ map of the nineteenth century and partly explains its symbolic power during

29 The V21 Collective seeks to frame a ‘Victorian Studies for 21st Century’ by offering theoretical and formalist alternatives to ‘positivist historicism’, though the combative tone of its manifesto is somewhat at odds with its professed desire to interrogate ‘habitual oppositions’—see http://v21collective.org/manifesto-of-the-v21-collective-ten-theses/ [last accessed 2 June 2015].


31 The Oxford English Dictionary defines this figurative meaning as ‘A constantly changing group of bright colours or coloured objects; anything which exhibits a succession of shifting phases’, linking this definition to Byron’s use of the term in Don Juan (1819): ‘This rainbow look’d like hope—Quite a celestial kaleidoscope’ (II. xciii. 165). Oxford Dictionaries and others define the figurative use of the term more broadly to mean, ‘A constantly changing pattern or sequence of elements’—http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/kaleidoscope [last accessed 13 June 2015]. See Samuel Smiles, A Publisher and His Friends: Memoir and Correspondence of the Late John Murray, with An Account of the Origin and Progress of the House, 1768–1843, 2 vols (London: John Murray, 1891), i. 397–9, for the correspondence between Murray and Byron about the kaleidoscope.
the industrial era.\textsuperscript{32} Most memorably, seeking to capture the experience of modernity in ‘The Painter of Modern Life’ (1863), Baudelaire described the \textit{flâneur} among the crowd as ‘A kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness’.\textsuperscript{33} In cultural terms, the ways in which the centrifugal forces of the kaleidoscope attempt to impose shape, definition, and stasis in the face of centripetal forces which seek to decentralize and destabilize the picture invoke the forces that drove attempts like Arnold’s to ‘capture’ and centralize culture. In literary terms, the constant movement between the margins and the centre and out again suggests the processes, always subject to history, of canonicity.

The kaleidoscopic picture of Victorian literary culture to follow taps into the multiplicity and instability that both critical theory and period-based scholarship have foregrounded in Victorian models of identity and culture. Approaches such as feminism, Marxism, queer theory, psychoanalysis, postcolonialism, and New Historicism have enabled a metamorphic pluralism of research questions. Likewise, the application of information technology to literary study has begun a process of canon expansion which is potentially endless as texts become increasingly available and ‘new’ texts are published online. Electronic resources have, moreover, facilitated interdisciplinary study, enabling easier access to resources in the theatrical and visual arts, for example, and facilitating dialogue between print and other cultures. This collection aims to harness these developments without neglecting more familiar texts and debates, which are themselves subjected to emergent modes of critical scrutiny rather than simply reiterated. Again, though it seeks to reflect the impact of a variety of new ways of thinking about and viewing the Victorians, it also revisits the old with the benefit of academic hindsight. It brings ‘modern’ values to bear on the Victorians as well as demonstrating the Victorian roots of this modernity.

This Handbook aims to indicate, moreover, where theoretical or technological developments have had a particularly significant impact on Victorian studies. Work on Darwin and the history of science has been a major current of intellectual enquiry in the field; though such has been the focus on Darwin, as Amy King explains, that now ‘[t]he field increasingly seeks to disturb the centrality of Darwin’ (441). An interest in

\textsuperscript{32} All the figurative uses of the term listed in the \textit{OED} are from the nineteenth century. The literary and symbolic suggestiveness of the kaleidoscope has been discussed by Robert Crawford and Helen Groth among others. See Robert Crawford, \textit{The Beginning and the End of the World: St Andrews, Scandal and the Birth of Photography} (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2011), 7–8; and Helen Groth, ‘Kaleidoscopic Vision and Literary Invention in an “Age of Things”: David Brewster, Don Juan, and “A Lady’s Kaleidoscope”’; \textit{ELH} 74 (2007), 217–37, at 217. Crawford discusses Macaulay’s use of the invention ‘as an image for the poet’s consciousness’; for example, as its application to Turner, Holman Hunt, and Robert Chambers. Groth examines various metaphorical usages to suggest ‘the cosmopolitan gaze,’ ‘standardised market driven spectatorship’ (218), the age itself, and Byron’s own association between the kaleidoscope and a moment of potential transformation, a fleeting prophetic vision of hope and natural beauty that borders on the sublime (220).

\textsuperscript{33} In \textit{The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays} (London: Phaidon Press, 1964), 10. Armstrong argues that he used the image to convey ‘the ludic freedoms he sought to define as “modernity”’ (\textit{Victorian Glassworlds}, 255), though she reminds us later that ‘the kaleidoscope also thematises the limits of experience and change’ (342).
identity politics—national identity, class, gender, and sexuality—has been integral to thinking about this age of empire, reform, and early women’s rights agitation. There is a significant upswell of interest in place, space, and the urban, which brings the insights of cultural geography together with what Alex Murray calls the ‘city space provided by literary texts’ or, drawing on Robert L. Patten, the ‘hermeneutics of literary geography’ (313–14).34 The study of popular, material, and visual culture in an age of rapid cultural expansion has reshaped our sense of the Victorian field, as many of the essays published here attest. While the study of religion has at times been submerged by the revisionist tide, it is now making its voice heard, as the strong section on religion in this Handbook makes clear. The writings of Foucault have had an enormous impact on thinking about the nineteenth century in various fields (madness, bureaucracy, sexuality, prisons, surveillance), but most fundamentally in Victorian studies, perhaps, on conceptions of the individual. Interestingly, the influence of Foucault is implicit and naturalized rather than obvious in this Handbook, essays by Rae Greiner and Trev Broughton suggesting new ways of thinking about ‘the Victorian subject’ in its own terms rather than solely as a discursive and ideological construct. Jonah Siegel’s fine exploration of the historical, pre-Victorian roots of the problems attending current attempts to ‘recognize the aesthetic aspirations of the Victorians’ argues that in our inevitable inability to resolve them, ‘we may find more than failure. We may begin to recognize the form of our inherited Victorian aesthetics’ (579). There are surprises (war, old women), an expert section on politics and economics, and a concluding section on theatrical culture which suggests deep veins of unexplored territory in Victorian studies, unexplored because the theatre was so often excluded from the category of the literary.

The fact that theatrical and literary studies in the period have so often been constructed as ‘at odds’ means that this book does not conclude comfortably. It does not in fact purport to conclude but hopes to suggest, deepen, and provoke, to leave both trails and gaps. Some of those gaps were apparent and became more so in the years that it took this volume to grow to completion (if not conclusion). The Victorians’ place in time has become a resonant and multidimensional area of research, ‘neo-Victorianism’ in particular occluding the more familiar interest in the blurred boundaries between the Victorians and their immediate predecessors the Romantics or their modernist successors. Interest in how the Victorians have been constructed through today’s creative arts has become so widespread in fact that neo-Victorianism is already conflicted about its own status: is it a subfield of Victorian studies or closer to postmodernism? At the millennium, before ‘neo-Victorianism’ became the label formally attached to creative and self-conscious contemporary reworkings of Victorian material, John Sutherland identified ‘a strikingly new topic of critical discussion’ in such attempts.35 But do they, in fact,
represent a new field? Neo-Victorianism’s historicizing of the present echoes in some respects the prominent recent interest in the ways in which the Victorians constructed themselves as makers and objects of ‘heritage’ and fashioned their own past. Work in this area now goes beyond classicism and medievalism to an interest in the practices, politics, and affective significance of the heritage and museum industries today and in the Victorian period, which arguably witnessed the birth of the heritage industry as we now understand it. All this post-millennial focus on the Victorians and time has in common an interest in the framing of the Victorians by themselves and others as both subjects and objects of the historical (or heritage) gaze.

There is much to suggest that reading internationally is the expanded future of Victorian studies, with all the possibilities and challenges that this poses for new critical practices shaped by notions of sympathy and integrity. Where languages are unknown, academic cultures are only partly alike or understood, then the barriers to a ‘situated understanding’ are more than temporal. These challenges are worth the attempt, even if we can never fully overcome them. In the effort to do so, we may need to situate our tightly held notions of rigour, professionalism and scholarship more relatively. If we want to develop a better understanding of how George Eliot, for example, has been read in a global context, we may have to accept that the picture and quality of evidence will sometimes be patchy, ‘amateur’, and anecdotal. The expansion of the literary field enabled by reception studies can moreover engender a complex repositioning of the literary textual base as more remote and less familiar, even while translation studies draws attention back to the activities of language and the textual base which was perceived as the source of value in the first place. Literary study of the canon still underpins the survival and indeed popularity of Victorian literature in global classrooms.

The increasingly prevalent interest in immaterialism or the ‘intangible’ in the Victorian period has been driven by the renewed attention to affect as well as by the felt value of revisiting Victorian self-conceptualizations with the benefit of post-Victorian shifts in knowledge and understanding. It is thus perhaps inevitable that religion should once more have become a major current in Victorian studies. What will be interesting, however, given the ‘theologically lite’ (397) (to borrow Mark Knight’s phrase) inheritance of many of today’s students and indeed scholars, is whether renewed attention to Victorian religion among critics will result in more curriculum time devoted to this area in our universities. Ours is an age of information overload where we expect access to knowledge to be quicker and easier; the intellectual and reading stamina necessary for many students to access Victorian religious debate could mean that it remains an elite though cutting-edge area

of academic enquiry. Nineteenth-century theatre studies perhaps has more chance of a higher profile in the mainstream of Victorian studies as digital technology makes available an expanded archive of materials through which we can flesh out our cultural maps of the period. The factors which made theatre peripheral to literary culture—its commercialism and ‘thingness’—arguably make it accessible in the current age of mass culture.

Though Victorian studies has embraced materialism and science, there is no doubt more we can do in these areas. Eco-criticism has grown so much as to become established though it is certainly not exhausted. Mathematics, as Alice Jenkins has suggested, is an area of Victorian studies that is virgin territory for many excluded by the disciplinary barriers that still structure Western education. If Victorianists engage with science in very particular ways, at the other end of the disciplinary spectrum, Victorian critics appear to engage very little with artistic practitioners. In this respect, neo-Victorian artists are pioneering. Methodologically, would scientists and installation artists, for example, regard the staple offerings of Victorian studies as operating at the interdisciplinary cutting edge? This seems unlikely. There are still, it seems, limits to our interdisciplinary-ness as there are to our conceptualizations of disciplinariness.

As academic fields are so often self-defining, blind spots can occur which are more obvious to futurity and to those at a remove from debates and (inter)disciplinary histories which become naturalized. While much of this Introduction has focused on debates between academics within the Victorian research field, we should remember that the shape and future of the field looks different when we take full account of the fact that the reality of Victorian studies—even within the academy—is shaped by forces outside it. I am not talking here about the greater political forces of class, race, and gender which are so widely understood but about the ‘smaller’, more contingent influences of educational policy and institutional politics (with a small ‘p’). It is here that the fraught status of ‘Victorian literary culture’ comes sharply into focus. The controversial recent remodelling of the school syllabus in the UK by Michael Gove, the former Secretary of State for Education, made the study of ‘literary heritage’, exemplified in the main by Shakespeare and nineteenth-century literature, core to a new secondary school curriculum, particularly to public examinations taken at 16 and above. The forceful privileging of Victorian literature on the national secondary curriculum was in one way a vote of confidence in its public ‘value’. But this value was articulated as a conservative (with a big and a small ‘c’) response to the perceived occlusion of the literary in the classroom by identity politics and the downgrading of cultural ‘heritage’ beneath a trendy presentism. While the Leavisite echoes of this move were opposed by a large majority of teachers and educationalists, including Victorianists, in the UK, the move should give pause for thought. Politicians, teachers, students, and funders play a large role in shaping the curriculum as well as the canon and the Victorian period seems to have become an important battleground for competing visions of the future as well as the past. When viewed through the multiple perspectives which comprise this prism, conceptions of Victorian literary culture are so much at odds that the field of Victorian studies starts to lose even heterogeneous coherence.
For some conservative British politicians, the Victorian literary past and its ‘great’ works need saving. The compulsory foisting of heavyweight Victorian works on socio-logically mixed cohorts of students as young as 14 has of course been troubling to professional Victorianists well versed in the politics of canon formation and wary of the coercive veneration of a certain version of ‘national’ heritage attempted through this act of educational engineering. But for all that, attention to the literature of the Victorian period by future generations of students is not something that we can necessarily take for granted. The increasing avoidance of longer Victorian texts by students, and the refashioning of many university curricula to accommodate the decline in reading stamina, suggests that there is a decline in attention. While numbers of staff and students in Victorian studies are currently healthy, there is an increasing reluctance to support projects that are seen as ‘literary’ and this reluctance has largely gone unchallenged. Single-author research, similarly, is all too often assumed to be at odds with the prevailing spirit of interdisciplinarity, despite an acknowledgement of the polymathic world of the Victorian writer and the importance of the idea of authorship for the Victorians themselves as an organizing principle. The recent job search for a successor to John Jordan, the Director of the Dickens Universe at the University of California, Santa Cruz, for example, gained institutional approval under the title Professor of Nineteenth-Century English Literatures in Global/Transnational Perspective. The title suggests a gap between the perspective of the institution and that of the hundreds of Dickensians attracted to the Dickens Universe each year by interest in an author they know to be dead but whose works they believe to have transnational, global significance.

But literary culture and its organizing principles need not be positioned oppositionally in relation to the prevailing modes of interdisciplinarity in today’s academy, and presentism can work dialogically rather than deterministically as we seek to balance our own knowledge with that of the past. This balancing can never be assumed, however, and must always be self-conscious. Thus, while it is common to celebrate the expansion in knowledge of the past that new technology can enable, the information overload that can accompany the digital revolution can also mean that selective pathways through the mass of new text(s) are forged, often by academic experts or the priorities of institutions and funding bodies, to the detriment of paths not taken. There is also the danger of forgetting or of not wanting to know what the Victorians knew or valued. In this respect, the ‘expansion’ of our map of Victorian cultural landscape which my own research has worked to further has brought far greater attention to the cultural and historical margins but a diminished interest in, and understanding of, ‘high Victorianism’. The ‘sages’ or writers of non-fiction prose valued as teachers during the period are now largely passed over on undergraduate courses which tend to be packed with ‘identity politics’, but ‘lite’ on theology and indeed Classics. Even George Eliot, the high priestess of realism and the novelist who during her own period boasted the highest cultural capital, seems to be losing her automatic claim to prominence. While it seems difficult to imagine that Eliot will ever go unread, school and university syllabi increasingly give the long, heavy ‘great’ works like *Middlemarch* (1871–2) or *Daniel Deronda* (1876) a wide berth. It is tempting to argue that today’s ‘revolution’ away from Leavisite literary studies to a broader...
cultural studies represents a renewal in the sense of a return to the earlier interdisciplin- 
ary map of the Victorian period; but more accurately, today’s interdisciplinarity has 
evolved rather than revolved, submerging the polymathic map of the Victorian period 
beneath a rather different contemporary schema.

There is of course much to be applauded in the wholeness of critical approach that has 
allowed today’s heterogeneous and capacious field of Victorian studies to evolve. The 
challenges to Victorian ideologies and cultural hierarchies that have allowed multiple 
and marginalized voices to be heard have undoubtedly enriched our sense of then and 
now. But thinking and reading with integrity demands that we continue to be both self-
conscious and self-critical about our own efforts at ‘sympathetic understanding’. It is 
inevitable and desirable that we remake the past, but self-suspicion ensures that historic-
cism is always something other than narcissism. There are signs, as this Introduction has 
argued, of a growing self-consciousness among Victorianists of their uneasy neglect of 
the idea of literary culture; there are also signs of a desire to remedy this neglect. To do so 
is important partly because literary culture (and indeed the idea of literary culture) has 
provided Victorian studies with its base as well as its baggage. Yet there is much to imply, 
not least from the perspective of the coming future, that the literary culture which has 
sustained Victorian studies and given it much of its contemporary cultural force, is in a 
more precarious state than the prolific energies and rude health of work in the Victorian 
field would suggest likely.

At a time when the perceived value of the arts and humanities is increasingly ques-
tioned, it need not signify a return to Arnoldianism to remind ourselves that Victorian 
literary culture has been fundamental to Western industrial and post-industrial concep-
tions of literature and culture. The ironic after-effect of the tradition of critical human-
ism has been to effect an occlusion of the literary. The challenge for Victorianists today 
is to articulate the value of literary culture in ways that go beyond the humanist and 
heritage accounts which have historically colonized this territory. In its exploration of 
Victorian ways of being, understanding, and communicating, this Handbook is a collec-
tive effort at new ways of seeing.

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PART I

WAYS OF BEING

Identity and Ideology
The Individual and Subjectivity
In *Victorian Subjects* (1991), the literary critic J. Hillis Miller reminded his readers of an etymological fact: that to be a subject is to be ‘thrown under’—to be, as it were, beside oneself. Like literature, with its capacity to tell one story while calling forth another (and another), subjects are beside or something other than—are non-identical to—themselves. No person is at any given moment equal to all that she has ever been. Subjects of investigation or debate (say, academic subjects) are always changing and incomplete. In emphasizing the unfixed and unfinished quality of human subjects—the ways in which ‘the self is always subject to something other than itself, something beneath it or beyond it that may be experienced more as an abyss than a ground’—Miller unsettled any sense of subjects, especially human ones, as stable or fully knowable, even to themselves. At the same time, the phrase ‘Victorian Subjects’ knits together several salient meanings at once by pointing to the subjects studied and popularized by scholars of the Victorian period, as well as those that were important to the Victorians themselves. These include the development of a political ideal emphasizing individual self-governance, as illustrated by the passage of the Reform Acts of 1832, 1867, and 1884–5, which by expanding voting privileges redefined political subjectivity and paved the way for universal suffrage; and England’s imperial mission, dramatically expanding global empire by increasing the number of persons and places subject to Queen Victoria’s rule.

For the purposes of this essay two subjects take precedence. The first is history, a subject important to many nineteenth-century writers in Britain (about which more later). The second is among the more lasting and debated of Victorian inventions: the liberal

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subject, a type of person and a particular understanding of personhood that was central to a number of cultural and political theories affiliated under the banner of political liberalism. Although ‘subject’ is a contested term insofar as it is taken to refer to distinctly modern, Enlightenment ideas of personhood, some scholars argue that Victorian political liberalism produced a distinctive kind of subject by promoting the belief that one’s private psychology and personal store of memories, thoughts, and emotions defined personhood as individual and unique. Rather than conceiving of people in terms of their relationships to a family, community, geographical locality, social class, or belief system, the liberal subject thriving at the Victorian mid-century was, pre-eminently, a self.

Driving this phenomenon was a new sense of the political value of personal opinion or taste. As Elaine Hadley writes, political liberalism involved an understanding of individualism as ‘synonymous with choice, with predilection, with judgment’. Habits of thought and ‘moralized and moralizing qualities of mind’ now designated the self. To be ‘an individual capable of self-government, visible as a citizen in the public sphere, one needed character’, which consisted of ‘certain mental capacities’. Where the Romantic philosopher and legal reformer Jeremy Bentham considered questions of taste and aesthetic judgement inconsequential to legislative or policy matters, the Victorian philosopher John Stuart Mill considered people’s ‘likings and dislikings’ to be ‘full of the most important inferences as to every point of their character’. As he wrote in ‘Bentham’ (1838), a person’s tastes showed him ‘to be wise or a fool, cultivated or ignorant, gentle or rough, sensitive or callous, generous or sordid, benevolent or selfish, conscientious or depraved’.

In stressing how certain ‘mental capacities’ enable political and personal selfhood, Mill sought ways to better develop ‘character’, those qualities of mind, feeling, and judgement cultivated by the best sorts of subjects. For Mill and other Victorians, good character depended on one habit of mind in particular, the ability to generalize, to step outside the self and take on perspectives other than one’s own. To use the terms with which we began, we might say that this understanding of character requires the self actively to subject itself to something (and somebody) else, for the mentality most worth pursuing thinks with other, and different, minds. As Mill puts it, ‘the collective mind does not penetrate below the surface, but it sees all the surface; which profound thinkers, even by reason of their profundity, often fail to do’ (‘Bentham’, 147–8). No ‘whole truth is possible’, he continues, ‘but by combining the points of view of all the fractional truths, nor,

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therefore, until it has been fully seen what each fractional truth can do by itself’ (151).
To comprehend an abstract concept such as ‘national character’, for instance, requires
a level-headed mentality that can ‘rise to that higher generalization’ rather than remain
blinker by a ‘fractional’, too-narrow imagination or personal experience (157). Despite
being one of ‘the two great seminal minds in England of their age’ (Coleridge is the
other), Bentham had in Mill’s view failed so entirely in this endeavour that ‘other ages
and other nations were a blank to him for purposes of instruction’ (132, 149). A ‘half-
thinker’, he was incapable of generalizing about human experience. Having ‘never been
made alive to the unseen influences which were acting on himself, nor consequently on
his fellow creatures’, he ‘deny[ed] or disparage[d] all feelings and mental states of which
[he had] no consciousness’ in himself (149–151).

As much as he prefers ‘complete thinkers’, however, Mill also sees value in thinking by
halves. ‘We have a large tolerance for one-eyed men, provided their one eye is a penetra-
ting one’, he writes; ‘if they saw more, they probably would not see so keenly’. Bentham
had turned this deficit to such advantage that Mill concludes, ‘Almost all of the rich
veins of original and striking speculation have been opened by systematic half-thinkers’
(‘Bentham’, 151). By beginning ‘all his inquiries by supposing nothing to be known on
the subject’, Bentham made his mind a blank, a vantage from which he could better cut
through the errors of habit and customary trains of thought (145–146). Mill’s interest
in the virtues of half-thinking may resonate with readers of Victorian fiction—say, the
novels of George Eliot, which consider both the problems and benefits of mental small-
ness. If better known for her attempts at expanding human sympathy, which often in her
fiction requires overcoming egotism to inhabit perspectives other than one’s own, Eliot
also depicts the darker subjectivities of those who cannot shut others out. Latimer, the
narrator of The Lifted Veil (1859), is a twisted version of the ‘complete thinker’, a miser-
able clairvoyant who cannot help but take in others’ thoughts. Here and elsewhere in
her fiction, as when in Middlemarch (1872) she describes human unconsciousness of the
sound of grass growing, the squirrel’s heartbeat, and numberless other noises buzzing
around us, Eliot expresses gratitude at being ‘well wadded with stupidity’, for such stu-
id obliviousness enables human thriving, and survival. It shelters us against bombard-
ment by all that the sensorium filters out.

At the same time, fin-de-siècle novelists looking back on the period perceived a
related, less advantageous stupidity at the heart of the novelistic enterprise. Henry
James portrayed Charles Dickens and Anthony Trollope as versions of the half-thinking
genius whose novels, despite certain achievements, failed to抽象从 mundane
experience general insights into human mental life. In James’s view, Dickens’s charac-
ters weren’t complete people but were (to use Mill’s term) ‘fractional’ at best (‘Bentham’,
151). All weird gestures and verbal tics, they lacked psychological depth, were mere
forms: animate, but devoid of life. Trollope’s portrayals of contemporary life were accu-
rate and abundantly detailed, but they too ‘vulgarize[d] experience’ by dealing ‘wholly

in small effects. Trollope offered a ‘multitude of real things’ but did not generalize from them, having failed to observe ‘great things’ as well as small (James, ‘Miss Makenzie’, 70–73). Of Trollope’s Miss Makenzie (1865), James writes:

It may be said [...] that the emotions which depend upon such facts as these cannot be too prosaic; that as prison discipline makes men idiots, an approach, however slight, to this kind of influence perceptibly weakens the mind. We are yet compelled to doubt whether men and women of healthy intellect take life, even in its smallest manifestations, as stupidly as Miss Mackenzie and her friends. (‘Miss Makenzie’, 71; original italics)

Trollope dumbs down his readers with trivial details left unexamined, prosaic sentiments un-elevated by reflective thought (‘Miss Makenzie’, 73). Of another Trollope novel, The Belton Estate (1865), James writes, ‘People and things are painted as they stand,’ but in the flesh only: ‘men healthy, hearty, and shrewd, but [...] utterly without a mind.’ Trollope, he concludes, ‘is simply unable to depict a mind in any liberal sense of the word’ (‘Belton Estate’, 127; original italics).

The coming pages consider these broad themes—the cultivation of (good and bad) mental habits, the merits and demerits of stupid, too-trivial, or egotistical understanding—in relation to the narration of historical, specifically wartime, experience in a selection of writings by the essayist and novelist William Makepeace Thackeray (1811–63). Thackeray is today perhaps best known for the biting social satire of novels such as Vanity Fair (1847–8). Adopting a snob persona in such early works as Snob Papers (1846–7), and publishing under satirical pen names such as George Savage Fitz-Boodle, Thackeray had by mid-century crafted himself as tastemaker and social critic. As Hippolyte Taine would write in 1866, Thackeray ‘calls on us with a mocking pleasantry to look at the baseness and stupidity of poor human nature’, which he saw everywhere he looked. Yet everyday English stupidity of the sort lampooned in Vanity Fair is not Thackeray’s principal target in certain of his wartime works. The following pages consider Thackeray’s interest in stupid, ‘fractional’ understanding in relation to the wartime contexts in which these works were written and set. The early years of Thackeray’s literary career saw the publication in England of a substantial number of war memoirs and autobiographical writings, some written by men of rank, but also—for the first time ever—by enlisted men. Despite their historic achievement, however, the first literate army could not be understood as fully intelligent. For although their writings were admired by some, others saw in them a widespread—or widely worried over—representational flaw: the narrowness of view they afforded, which was too partial, local,
or small. That the same complaint can be made of Thackeray’s wartime fictions, which are fashioned as the memoirs of knuckleheaded men, suggests that it is one he took pains to invite. The remainder of this essay asks of Thackeray’s one-eyed soldiers: to what uses are their perceptual limitations put?

### Wartime Subjects

Thackeray was among the first Victorians. Around the mid-1830s, roughly coincident with Queen Victoria’s accession to the throne (in 1837), he began publishing his first journalistic work, having by now gambled away an inheritance and abandoned his studies for a career in law. But born in Calcutta to Anglo-Indian parents in July 1811, then sent to England in 1816 to attend English schools (where he was, by his own account, a mediocre student), Thackeray came of age in the Romantic era. A painful, unsettled period defined by the Napoleonic Wars (1803–15) and their aftermath, these were revolutionary years during which many global contests were fought. Many of Thackeray’s novels qualify as historical fiction and, in keeping with novelistic conventions of the time, are set in these and in earlier, tumultuous decades in British history. The protagonist of *The History of Henry Esmond, Esq.* (1852), for instance, fights in the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–14) and engages in a series of doomed efforts to restore James Francis Edward Stuart, Prince of Wales (the ‘Old Pretender’), to the throne. Finally, Thackeray’s literary career took off around 1848, an unprecedented ‘Year of Revolution’ during which a series of political conflicts occurred across Europe and beyond.

If it is for these reasons unsurprising that soldiers feature so centrally in Thackeray’s early work, less obvious is why they should be so obtuse. A case in point is the moral idiot and protagonist of *The Tremendous Adventures of Major Gahagan* (1838–9), an Irishman serving in the British army and stationed in India, arriving in 1802 ‘at our barracks at Dum Dum’.\(^9\) Gahagan announces early in his narrative that he is ‘a gentleman, and live[s] at least in DECENT society’, but soon reveals that he murdered his own brother in a duel over a ‘very trivial dispute’ involving a gold toothpick-case (4). From there, Gahagan spins increasingly tall tales of callous murder and mass casualty, claiming gruesome responsibility for killing 134 elephants by severing their trunks with a single shot, or for the deadly assault on one Loll Mahommed, felled by 117 Spanish olives fired in the absence of bullets. His cavalier attitude towards the devastation he

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9 Including, to name only a few, the First Anglo-Burmese War (1823–6), the Decembrist Revolt in Russia (1825), the Java War (1825–30), the Russo-Persian War (1826–8), the Liberal Wars (1828–34) which involved Portugal, Spain, France, and the UK, the July Revolution (1830), several American Indian wars, and colonial uprisings such as the Baptist War between white settlers and slaves in Jamaica (1831–2).

wreaks—‘killing these fellows was sheer butchery’ he drily relates of the death of 700 men, all but forty of them ‘bayoneted as they ran’—is amplified to comic effect by his habit of precise calculation, a numerical hyperrealism that comes across as ridiculous (23). He enumerates, for instance, ‘no less than three hundred and eighty-eight tails’, each one attached to an elephant standing ‘twenty-five feet high’ and carrying a ‘two-storied castle on its back’, with ‘sleeping and eating rooms for the twelve men that formed its garrison’ (52). Gahagan’s moral judgement—and narrative—is off balance, overrun by ‘a multitude of real things’, small rather than large (James, ‘Miss Makenzie’, 70). This imbalance is also reflected in his expressions of wounded disbelief towards those who doubt the accuracy of his account (Gahagan, 23). Insisting that he has not ‘willfully perverted history’, Gahagan denies deviating from the facts: ‘No: though my narrative is extraordinary’, he writes, ‘it is nevertheless authentic: and never never would I sacrifice truth for the mere sake of effect’ (19, 22).

Men and women of healthy intellect cannot be expected to take life as stupidly as this. Gahagan’s facts cannot be believed, but then neither can other tropes and events drawn less from life than from literary models: the hero-in-disguise—Gahagan blackens his face and hands with ‘Burgess’s walnut catsup’ to pass as a famous Indian warrior—or the marriage between Gahagan and his Belinda that closes the book (Gahagan, 49). The novel lampoons the falsifying conventions of many genres and modes, including the sentimental novel, as when the fictional ‘editor’ interrupts the narrative to announce having ‘dock[ed] off’ twelve-and-a-half (of thirteen) pages of writing. While accurately capturing Gahagan’s feelings, he explains, these pages nevertheless overdo it: the event described had lasted ‘at the very most not ten seconds’ (68). Grave flaws in Gahagan’s character are revealed not only in his many acts of overt cruelty but also in errors of ‘taste’: his unchecked feeling, but also his lazy reliance on artificial literary conventions. Physical violence and violations of taste are linked.

In bringing war crimes and aesthetic crimes together, Thackeray may also be registering the difficulties of using existing literary models to express wartime experience. ‘Writing the simple TRUTH’ of war seems increasingly impossible with each mode, genre, or convention—mythic, heroic, sentimental, Gothic—Gahagan tries. Where olives and Dutch cheeses become bullets, considerations of taste and of war are literally one and the same, and Gahagan won’t let us forget that his is wartime writing through and through. Describing himself as ‘alone, in the most inaccessible and most bomb-proof tower of our little fortalice’, seated at the ‘desk where I write’, he exclaims: ‘Meet implements for a soldier’s authorship!—it is CARTRIDGE paper over which my pen runs so glibly, and a yawning barrel of gunpowder forms my rough writing-table’ (Gahagan, 48). Personal egotism only partly explains Gahagan’s thick-headedness. For a sense-fracturing wartime also warps his narrative of martial life, insinuating itself so fully into his story that it supplies the very instruments with which he writes.

If Gahagan’s memoir is a product of wartime in an exaggerated sense, the stupid soldier-memoirist and the challenges of representing wartime were themes to which Thackeray would return. His second full-length novel, Barry Lyndon, published serially in Fraser’s Magazine in 1844, features a callous Irish soldier cut directly from the
Gahagan cloth, and subsequent writings offer variations on that theme. Although the sensitive, devoted Esmond of *Henry Esmond* is far less brutal than Gahagan, it isn't hard to see him as another refashioning of the type, for his narrative too betrays remarkable misapprehension of his own experience. While his fidelity to an imbecilic prince can be explained on widespread political and religious grounds—as his narrative (and history) demonstrates, Esmond is hardly alone in supporting that particular lost cause—his memoir details other and more pointed oblivions, as in his long-unrecognized passion for his stepmother, Lady Castlewood, harboured yet overtly repressed throughout his retrospective narration, and hinted at only by proxy as an infatuation with his cousin Beatrix. The love Esmond describes in his memoir's final, hurrying paragraphs as a kind of knowing felt in 'the highest faculty of the soul' seems anything but.\(^\text{11}\) And it isn't the first time Esmond admits to utterly missing out on a momentous experience. At the Battle of Blenheim (of 1704), Esmond manages to behold the ‘two great armies facing each other in a line of battle', and ride 'with orders from one end to the other of the line', only to be ‘knocked on the head [. . .] almost at the very commencement of this famous day’ (238). Details of the ensuing fight are dutifully recorded, but they are not details he remembers, for beyond that moment, 'Mr. Esmond knows nothing; for a shot brought down his horse and our young gentleman on it, who fell crushed and stunned under the animal; and came to his senses he knows not how long after, only to lose them again' (238–239). It is with great irony that Esmond names unconsciousness as the ultimate memento mori. It occurred, he says, ‘as if to make his experience in war complete’ (238).

Thackeray links what might seem merely individual opacities—in this case, the repression of taboo inclinations—with other and more impersonal suppressions of wartime experience. The subjects of history, even mass catastrophe, can remain unremembered or incomplete. Major events can at times go unrecorded, as happens here of a final effort to restore the exiled king. Though Thackeray invents the incident, he suggests that such things might have occurred but left no trace. As ‘the little army disappeared into the darkness out of which it had been called,' Esmond writes, so too does any proof of the men's involvement: ‘there had been no writings, no paper to implicate any man' (*Henry Esmond*, 450). At the same time, using paper to fill in historical gaps presents other problems. Esmond wants his narrative to bear witness to the disappearances of wartime, the ‘thirty thousand [. . .] slain and wounded', the ‘dreadful slaughter' that leaves him and his fellow soldiers mute. ‘We dared not speak to each other, even at table, of Malpaquet, so frightful were the gaps left in our army by the cannon of that bloody action,' he writes (318–19). Poetic conventions, however, produce their own blanks. Of Joseph Addison's *The Campaign* (1705), commemorating the Battle of Blenheim, Esmond complains that the poem's wartime murders are ‘done to military music, like a battle at the Opera', exclaiming: ‘You hew out of your polished verses a stately image of smiling victory; I tell you 'tis an uncouth, distorted, savage idol [. . .] You great poets should show it as it

is—ugly and horrible, not beautiful and serene’ (255). Once again, when war crimes and aesthetic crimes come together, ‘fractional’ understanding results.

In this, the novel recalls Sir Walter Scott’s *The Antiquary* (1816), another historical novel of wartime (1794) and written after Scott’s visit to the recently bloodied field at Waterloo. Addressing a young soldier as ‘my dear Hector’, the obstinately single-minded antiquary, Jonathan Oldbuck, tries bombastically to convince his new friend of the value of old poems in times of war: ‘in the strange contingencies of the present war which agitates every corner of Europe, there is no knowing where you will be called upon to serve’, he states; so ‘what could be more convenient than to have at your fingers’ ends the history and antiquities’ of those many nations in which you may fight? With a one-eyed insistence on seeing only the poetical side of battle, Oldbuck envies the soldier’s chance to visit the ‘mother of modern Europe, the nursery of those heroes’ who ‘smiled in death’, extolling, ‘How animating [. . .] at the conclusion of a weary march to find yourself in the vicinity of a Runic monument, and discover you had pitched your tent beside the tomb of a hero!’ When the soldier replies that he’d rather pitch his tent near a poultry-yard, Oldbuck laments, ‘No wonder the days of Cressy and Agincourt are no more.’

For key reasons, battles over literary representations of history had new relevance in the era of Scott (who, only forty years older than Thackeray, lived until 1832). One had to do with changing conceptions of war and the mentality needed to comprehend it. As Mary Favret has shown, the 1771 *Encyclopedia Britannica* ‘grants thirty-eight pages to moral philosophy and forty to the science of midwifery’, yet it ‘accords a mere sentence to the ancient art of war, and that sentence treats warfare as human failure.’ The entries for ‘military’ and ‘soldier’ each receive half a sentence, that on ‘militia’ only slightly more. But in the third edition, of 1797, the entry ‘War’ runs to eighty-eight pages. War there is declared ‘a great evil’, but it is also now ‘inevitable and often necessary’. Moreover, an entirely new subject appears. Just as war had ‘become itself encyclopedic’, the kind of soldier it required needed to possess encyclopedic understanding—a ‘comprehensive genius’—of that ‘science of sciences’, war. Favret explains that this ‘new evaluation of the man of war and his place in the realm of knowledge is confirmed elsewhere, outside the Anglophone world’, by the German naturalist and philosopher Lorenz Oken, who in *Elements of Physiophilosophy* (1810–11; trans. 1847) describes ‘the art of War [as] the highest, most exalted art; the art of freedom and of right’. As in poetry, he writes, ‘all arts have been blended, so in the art of war have all sciences and all arts.’ ‘We are a far cry from the thought that war brings confusion and perplexity’, Favret concludes; ‘on the contrary, war has become the highest operation of intellect.’


14 Quoted in Favret, *War at a Distance*, 183.

15 Favret, *War at a Distance*, 183.
At around the same time, history’s written record began to include personal histories of persons great and small. The early decades of the nineteenth century saw a surge of interest in biography and autobiography, though these genres were not clearly defined.16 As James Treadwell notes, though the *Quarterly* reported in 1809 on ‘an epidemical rage for autobiography’, and while in *Sartor Resartus* (1833–4) Thomas Carlyle described ‘these Autobiographical times of ours’, the conventions of Life writing in this period were in flux.17 Some readers found memoirs overly intimate, their contents offensively small. For them, even such works as Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Confessions* (1782) revealed what should have remained private, the petty littleness of their human subjects and the vulgarity of personal life.18 While Carlyle cheered John Wilson Croker’s 1831 edition of Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*, saying, ‘this Book of Boswell’s will give us more real insight into the History of England during those days than twenty other Books, falsely entitled “Histories,” which take to themselves that special aim’, even Croker complained that the lives ‘of second- and third-rate people’ were flooding the literary market.19 Many believed that, to be worthwhile, autobiography must serve some public purpose. Autobiographies thus usually made their public aims explicit: ‘documentation of experiences that appear to have some public interest (as in many travel memoirs), exhortations to the reader to learn from a pattern of industry or virtue’ and the like; they had ‘little to do with self-expression’.20 An ‘unfolding of the inner life, whether understood psychologically or rhetorically, accounts for virtually no published texts from the period’, Treadwell explains. Among ‘the most characteristic gestures’ of the era’s Life writing ‘is an outright denial of self-expression’.21

In such a context, the memoirs of common soldiers occupy a complex position with respect to matters of taste and representational value. Unequipped with the ‘comprehensive genius’ required of their commanders, such men would have smaller purviews. Yet because they described wartime, their narratives were not merely personal but offered local insight into globally significant events. Though it has long been noted that Thackeray’s fictional memoirs are modelled on such literary works as Jesse Foot’s *The Lives of Andrew Robinson Bowes, Esq. and the Countess of Strathmore* (1810) and the *Memoirs* of Casanova (appearing in 1822), he was also likely capitalizing on this recent trend.22 Of the Peninsular War of 1808–14, the historian Neil Ramsey writes, ‘None of Britain’s earlier wars had produced anything like this outpouring of soldiers’ writing’.

18 See Treadwell, ‘Reading Romantic Autobiography’, on the confusion of early reviewers of Rousseau’s *Confessions*.
22 Also relevant is the novel’s debt to accounts of real-life criminals, such as Henry Fielding’s *Jonathan Wild* (1743), and to satirical Irish portraiture such as Maria Edgeworth’s *Castle Rackrent* (1800).
diaries and reminiscences ‘on a large scale and in great numbers’, written and published by infantrymen and private soldiers. Many of the most popular were those of common soldiers whose military escapades gave them something worth writing about, and whose ‘plain soldier-like manner’ of writing was seen to authenticate their accounts. ‘Rather than marking the soldier’s incapacity as an author,’ Ramsey writes, ‘lack of polish and simplicity were increasingly viewed as indicative of homely, true, and markedly British sentiments, in which the soldier’s “plain, unvarnished tale” told of an inherently adventurous life.’ Unlike the “dry, confused, and uninteresting” reportage of an official dispatch, the soldier’s memoir held for some the piquancy of the novitiate’s unfined but honest report. In response to the 1826 publication of the Naval Sketch-Book, a reviewer in Blackwood’s wrote: ‘Dang your Spenserian stanza—your octosyllabics—your long and shorts; your heroics and blank-verse, feckless as blank cartridge—but give us Jack himself [. . .] spinning a long yarn.’

Detractors found many things to hate in these amateur works, not least their bad poetry, lack of style, and habit of self-aggrandizement. In a memoir excerpted in Blackwood’s, an officer asks why so many published accounts of recent military events were nonetheless ‘so intolerably dull,’ concluding that it was because their writers were ‘for ever heralding the exploits of [their] own little squad or battalion [. . .] and disgusting us, who care nothing about him, with some story of a rifleman sending a bullet through his thick legs, or a lancer breaking his sabre on his still thicker skull.’ These were writings by what were called, in military slang, a ‘newcome’ or ‘Mr. Newcome,’ an inexperienced or young soldier (the term appears in another of Thackeray’s fictional memoirs, The Newcomes of 1855). More often, the charge against such writings was that they failed at what was representationally most important: generalizing from private experience. They could not possibly add to a more global understanding of war’s causes, mechanisms, or effects. The London Magazine said of Joseph Donaldson’s Recollections of an Eventful Life, chiefly passed in the army (1824), ‘a private soldier is not in a situation to give, from his own experience, a general account of a war. He sees nothing but detached incidents, and if he describes more he must rely upon newspapers and despatches—a task he had better leave to others.’

Exciting as were these tales of travel and adventure, they could depict only the particulars of war, seen in stupid isolation. They could not help anyone understand war as an abstraction—not what caused it, how to win or how to end it. What they could provide, however, was insight into individual

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23 Neil Ramsey, The Military Memoir and Romantic Literary Culture, 1780–1835 (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 1. Military officers too were sometimes viewed as lacking the ‘refinement, education, and virtues’ required of professional authors. Vicesmius Knox argued in 1795 that the military had given rise ‘to many instances of illiterate fine gentlemen’ (quoted in Ramsey, Military Memoir, 60).

24 Ramsey, Military Memoir, 67.

25 Ramsey, Military Memoir, 64.

26 Quoted in Ramsey, Military Memoir, 68.


suffering on the ground. ‘If we had no other reason for recommending these little volumes,’ the *London Magazine* concludes, ‘it would be sufficient that they will instruct unthinking people in the real nature of war and military glory.’

With this in mind, we turn to *Barry Lyndon*, a strange, early novel in which Thackeray takes up such considerations in earnest. Originally *The Luck of Barry Lyndon, Esq.*, the novel was republished as a single volume in 1856 with a telling new name: *The Memoirs of Barry Lyndon, Esq., of the Kingdom of Ireland*. Unlike Scott, who typically relied in his historical novels on third-person omniscience, Thackeray turns once again to ‘limited’ narration, the first-person account of a common soldier. Like those narrow-minded, hidebound subjects against whom Mill’s ideal liberal subject was defined, Barry’s class and familial loyalties prevent him from seeing beyond his own experience or generalizing from it—at least, most of the time. In representing another, altered version of the ‘Dum-Dum’ soldier, Thackeray faces squarely the challenges of historical narration, challenges that had been compounded in the tumultuous recent decades out of which the early Victorian period took shape. In identifying the Seven Years’ War (1756–63)—Barry’s war—with the beginning of a new conception of wartime, Favret characterizes these years in a way that helps to clarify what have seemed to readers of *Barry Lyndon* the novel’s inconsistences and mistakes. With its newly massive geographical scale, she explains, war could no longer be understood by way of discrete events or even distinct temporalities: here and there, then versus now. Wartime is now ‘an affective zone, a sense of time that, caught in the most unsettled sort of present, without knowledge of its outcome, cannot know its own borders.’

The final pages see *Barry Lyndon* as Thackeray’s first major attempt at capturing the ‘real nature’ of this history and this wartime: spatially dispersed and time-scrambled, war not so much intellectually—or individually—comprehended as collectively experienced and felt.

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**Barry Lyndon’s War**

An Irish soldier serving first with the English army, then with the Prussian, during the Seven Years’ War, Barry Lyndon tells a story that moves in and out of wartime, including the Peninsular War, the American Revolutionary War (in which Barry’s stepson, Bullingdon, fights), and the Napoleonic campaigns occurring during the last years of his life. An inveterate scoundrel who, in latter days, from a cell in the Fleet Street prison, recounts a career of treachery and wrongdoing, he fumes throughout that his ancient pedigree failed to guarantee him the prosperity he deserves. Declaring his family ‘so old, noble, and illustrious’ that ‘no gentleman in Europe [. . .] has not heard of the house of Barry of Barryogue, of the kingdom of Ireland,’ Barry exclaims, ‘my family was the

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noblest of the island, and, perhaps, of the universal world. Like Gahagan, Barry is shameless. His hypocrisy knows no bounds. An acknowledged murderer, liar, and thief, he insists to the last on exonerating his wicked behaviour. Defending a phantom honour, he sees his worst actions as justifiably done. Not for him Pip's late, grave realization, 'the inaptitude [. . .] had been in me'. In his final, bitter remarks, Barry regrets only his poverty: 'we manage to eke out a miserable existence', he complains, 'quite unworthy of the famous and fashionable Barry Lyndon' (Barry Lyndon, 307).

Though he seems a cruel moral idiot, a half-thinker committed only to his own pleasures and class, Thackeray's early readers didn't know quite how to take Barry—or Barry—a fact which may explain certain revisions Thackeray made to the text. From the single volume, Thackeray eliminated several editorial asides present in the original, having been put there, according to one of his biographers, Gordon Ray, to 'put obtuse readers on the right track'. Thackeray had resorted to 'the inartistic device' of explanatory footnotes, many of which offer seemingly needless warnings of the implausibility of Barry's claims, because readers reading the novel serially took Barry at his word: 'Thackeray's motives for telling the story were misunderstood and his irony taken literally', says Ray.

James Brander Matthews voices a similar complaint in his 1901 The Historical Novel and Other Essays, where he lambasts Thackeray for speaking 'out of his own mouth' thoughts that could not possibly belong to Barry, such as 'the reflections upon the horrors of war at the end of the fourth chapter'. Though Matthews is unusual in considering Barry Lyndon Thackeray's best book, he criticizes Thackeray for explaining in editorial footnotes what should be obvious: Thackeray 'sinks' to new lows when, for instance, instructing readers that Barry is 'no mere hero of romance, but a callous brute'. According to Matthews, an author 'must heartily despise his audience if he feels called upon to come before the curtain, pointer in hand, and expound the real meaning of his drama. That he thinks his readers very stupid indeed if he believes they could so entirely miss the truth about Barry is a possibility Thackeray appears to admit when he says that he has failed 'to take this great stupid public by the ears'.

33 Thackeray found writing the novel difficult, describing 'B.L.' as 'lying like a nightmare on my mind', and writing from his travels to Malta: 'Wrote Barry but slowly and with great Difficulty'; 'Wrote Barry with no more success than yesterday'; 'Finished Barry after great throes late at night' (Barry Lyndon, 4). In Walter Jerrold, 'Biographical Note', Barry Lyndon, by William Makepeace Thackeray, Penn State Electronic Classics Series, 2008, 3–7, online, http://www2.hn.psu.edu/faculty/jmanis/thackeray/barry-lyndon6x9.pdf [last accessed 4 March 2013].
35 Ray, Thackeray, 346.
36 James Brander Matthews, The Historical Novel and Other Essays (1901; Detroit: Gale Research, 1969), 159.
37 Quoted in Ray, Thackeray, 347.
But Barry’s stupidity—or occasional lack thereof—is most at issue in those passages Matthews singles out for being so frustratingly out of character, passages in which the constitutionally one-eyed Barry engages in rather more complete thinking by generalizing about his wartime experience. The end of chapter 4 is one such moment in which Barry grows keenly conscious of the horrors of battle. ‘Such knaves and ruffians do men in war become!’ he declares; ‘It is well for gentlemen to talk of the age of chivalry; but remember the starving brutes whom they lead—men nursed in poverty, entirely igno-
rant, made to take a pride in deeds of blood’: ‘It is with these shocking instruments that your great warriors and kings have been doing their murderous work in the world’ (Barry Lyndon, 71). Noble sentiments these, yet prior to this Barry brutalizes nearly everyone he meets. His viciousness is well in place before he flees Irish shores—though not even these are sheltered from wartime effects. ‘I did not stop to break his bones, as I would on another occasion’, Barry says of an English dragoon encamped at his Castle Brady, who injures his feelings with a minor verbal insult. Moments later, Barry sees his cousin Nora strolling with a young English captain, Quin, and becomes jealously enraged: ‘I was resolved to pass [my blade] through the body of the delinquents, and spit them like two pigeons’, he says (31). After he is tricked into believing that he has murdered Quin in a duel, Barry finds himself on the run, but without regrets: ‘I did not dream of the death of Quin, as some milksops, perhaps, would have done; indeed I have never had any of that foolish remorse consequent upon any of my affairs of honour’: ‘he is a fool to be ashamed because he wins’ (49). But Barry is broke, and so he joins the English army, which in these times is no more troubled by Barry’s crimes than he is. Approaching a sergeant, Barry admits ‘frankly that […] he had killed an officer […] and was anxious to get out of the country’, but adds: ‘I need not have troubled myself with any explanations; King George was too much in want of men to heed from whence they came’ (62). The wretched military conditions and worse company in which Barry finds himself seem to bother him more than does the sanctioned violence he is soon called upon to commit. Though ‘it calls the blush into [his] old cheeks to think’ of the ‘ploughmen, poachers, [and] pickpockets’ with whom he served under the British crown, it is with far less shame that Barry reports slaying ‘a poor little ensign’ at the Battle of Minden, a boy ‘so young, slender, and small, that a blow from my pig-tail would have dispatched him, I think, in place of the butt of my musket, with which I clubbed him down’ (62, 70).

Barry’s depravity is hard to square with his high-minded condemnations of war. In the main, he draws no parallels between the King’s carnage and his own, instead scourging war’s out-scale horrors without counting himself among the destroyers of the peace. He sneers that while the public admires ‘the “Great Frederick”’ for his ‘military genius’,

I, who have served him, and been, as it were, behind the scenes of which that great spectacle is composed, can only look at it with horror. What a number of items of human crime, misery, slavery, to form that sum-total of glory! I can recollect a certain day, about three weeks after the battle of Minden, and a farm-house in which
... some of us entered; and how the old woman and her daughters served us, trembling, to wine; and how we got drunk over the wine, and the house was in a flame, presently: and woe betide the wretched fellow afterwards who came home to look for his house and his children! (Barry Lyndon, 71)

Yet if life 'behind the scenes of [...] that great spectacle' gives Barry but a 'fractional' insight into war's causes, tactics, or effects, comprehensive knowledge of war, the novel suggests, may also be a delusion. As Gillian Russell writes of the years 1793–1815, 'Part of the politics of making war possible has involved the privileging of the vision of the civilian audience: the viewer at home must "see" more than even the ordinary soldier in the field, assuming the position of a Wellington or a Napoleon.' But public speeches, theatrical spectacles, military parades, and mass print might also leave the public overconfident in its understanding, with an inflated sense of what it knows. Barry Lyndon refuses this, offering instead the highly circumscribed view of one on the ground who understands little. In a scene later reworked as the Battle of Blenheim, of which Esmond 'knows nothing' (Henry Esmond, 238), Barry engages in the Battle of Minden but in a place 'two miles off' from that fight. '[N]one of us soliders of the line knew of what had occurred until we came to talk about the fight over kettles in the evening, and repose over a hard-fought day,' Barry explains; 'It would have been easy for me to have said I was present' (Barry Lyndon, 70; original emphasis). But he does not. Recounting instead how he steals from the little ensign's corpse 'fourteen louis-d'or, and a silver box of sugar-plums,' Barry reasons: if 'people would tell their stories of battles in this simple way, I think the cause of truth would not suffer by it. All I know of this famous fight of Minden (except from books) is told here above' (70–1).

In Barry Lyndon, where 'fisticuff facts' are chronicled on nearly every page, national history is never unbound from Barry's littleness and distortions (17). But wartime also causes his one-eyed obstinacy, and class loyalties, to fray. Barry during wartime allies himself with 'the Fencibles,' members of the volunteer army, saying, 'all my sympathies are in the ranks' (100). Bemoaning the fading away of 'the old times,' Barry's scorn cuts both ways: even as he complains aristocratically that Napoleon was 'conquered in his turn by our shopkeepers and cheesemongers of England,' he also sees that 'Bonaparte brutalized Europe with his swaggering Grenadiers' (134). And where Scott's Waverley (1814) ends in national reconciliation, Barry's memoirs detail the war crimes Scott leaves out. Some readers 'will cry out [...] that I am encouraging insubordination and murder,' Barry remarks after defending an attempt at desertion by thirty men, led by a disaffected Frenchman; but had they

served as privates in the Prussian army from 1760 to 1765, they would not be apt to take objection. This man destroyed two sentinels to get his liberty; how many

hundreds of thousands of his own and the Austrian people did King Frederick kill because he took a fancy to Silesia? How many men, in later days, did Napoleon Bonaparte cause to die by shot or steel, or cold or hunger, because he wished to make himself master of Russia? (100)

Barry refuses to give ‘any romantic narrative of the Seven Years’ War’ because the Prussian army was ‘composed for the most part of men hired or stolen, like myself, from almost every nation in Europe,’ kidnapped and sold by recruiters who ‘market in human flesh’ (101, 80).

An important effect of this inconsistency in Barry’s character is that the rage, pain, and confusion recorded in his memoir are not his alone. Desolation and horror exceed and surround him, as in a stretch of Germany that, five years into the war, is ‘desolate beyond all description,’ a ruthless ‘seller of men’ having so ‘exhausted the males of his principality, that the fields remained untilled, [and] even the children of twelve years old were driven off to the war’ (Barry Lyndon, 80). While in Waverley, a distance of sixty years enables a more measured relation to the national past, the passing of time does little to temper the wartime feelings of Barry and his fellows. ‘For God’s sake, don’t talk of that time,’ cries a French officer whom Barry encounters some decades later; ‘I wake up from my sleep trembling and crying even now’ (Barry Lyndon, 102). As Barry comments, the punishment of soldiers had been so ‘incessant,’ especially for ‘the broken-spirited yokels who had been forced or coaxed into the service’, that it was in peace ‘more cruel than in war’ (102, 95–96).

Not only Barry’s pain but also his obliviousness is widespread. In this wartime, it seems, the two are impossible to entirely unlink. ‘It would require a greater philosopher and historian than I am to explain the causes of the famous Seven Years’ War’, Barry writes, ‘and, indeed, its origin has always appeared to me so complicated, and the books written about it so amazingly hard to understand, that I have seldom been much wiser at the end of a chapter than at the beginning.’ With the arrival of Pitt as prime minister, ‘all of a sudden [….] the rest of the empire applauded the war as much as they had hated it before’, he continues; “the Protestant hero,” as we used to call the godless old Frederick of Prussia, was adored by us as a saint a very short time after we had been about to make war against him [….] Now, somehow, we were on Frederick’s side’ (Barry Lyndon, 67). Not knowing why he is fighting, Barry longs for death—‘a general action and ball to finish me’—adding, ‘I looked to hear my own death march played’ (68–9). Several chapters into his memoir, Barry adds, parenthetically, that the conflict he has been describing was ‘afterwards called the Seven Years’ War’, a reminder of all that is impossible to know from within wartime: how long it lasts, what to call it, when it ends (80).

With this in mind, we can consider another of the novel’s apparent flaws, a series of chronological errors so pronounced that it is hard to know whether the mistakes are Barry’s or are part of Thackeray’s design. As Terence McCarthy points out, it is impossible to say when Barry dies. It may be in 1807–8, after Barry has lived
'nineteen years an inmate of the Fleet Prison' (Barry Lyndon, 307). But Barry cannot have died then, since he is not dead in 1811 when his estate falls into the hands of the Tiptoffs. Barry may have written his memoirs 'about 1800', as Fraser's readers were told. Or, as we learn in chapter 17, he may have written them in 'about the year 1814, in that calm retreat which Fortune had selected for the author at the close of his life' (Thackeray, Barry Lyndon, 10, 247). Or he may have written them in 1833. Through some rather ingenious math, McCarthy even manages to show that Thackeray's dating makes it possible to surmise that the memoirs were compiled by the fictional editor 'in about 1851—seven years after the novel's publication!' Though some readers have been persuaded by the enormity of such errors to conclude that they are intentional—perhaps a by-product of the chronic liar's inability to keep track of his own lies—this would be, in McCarthy's view, wrong. 'Thackeray's own carelessness must ultimately undermine any theory of the intentional inconsistency of Barry's chronology,' he says. While Thackeray would go on to 'commit much graver chronological sins than these,' Barry Lyndon's many mistakes are 'more regrettable than similar inconsistencies in other novels, like Jane Eyre [...] where the drama remains at a personal level.' The problem here is historical as well as aesthetic. While Barry 'insists on the reliability of his assertions, neither he nor Thackeray takes the trouble to make the memoirs historically possible, nor to make any real artistic use of their inaccuracy.'

Yet it is possible to rank this chronic problem among those measures taken by the novel to capture wartime. Perhaps by stunning its readers, stupefying our intelligence, the novel seeks to elicit a structure of feeling in which time, unbound by official timetables or political stops and starts, extends its shocks well past the moment at which war officially ceased. Returning again and again to the subjects of wartime in the uneasy peace that follows and, in his case, precedes war, Thackeray seems committed to making wartime palpable to even those readers who take up the novel in an hour of peace. Not even McCarthy is immune. Although he eventually decides that the novel's chronological errors 'pass entirely unnoticed by average reader', he also describes feeling 'bombarded with dates'. He leaves the impression of having been assaulted by the novel's 'mad chronology' and seems exhausted by the effort undertaken to comprehend this 'monstrously inaccurate' work.

McCarthy may be right that Thackeray, with a 'general disregard for matters of chronology altogether', simply lost the story's temporal thread and that this is why the second edition contains fewer of such errors than the first. But the novel may also frustrate

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39 Terence McCarthy, 'Chronological Inconsistencies in Barry Lyndon', English Language Notes, 21, no. 2 (1983), 29–37, at 37.
40 McCarthy, 'Chronological Inconsistencies in Barry Lyndon', 36.
41 McCarthy, 'Chronological Inconsistencies in Barry Lyndon', 35.
42 McCarthy, 'Chronological Inconsistencies in Barry Lyndon', 37.
43 McCarthy, 'Chronological Inconsistencies in Barry Lyndon', 34.
44 McCarthy, 'Chronological Inconsistencies in Barry Lyndon', 37.
one historicizing imperative by inventing another, refusing to make the memoirs historically possible in matters of dating, or even, thanks to Barry’s lying, to make them true, so as to make them historical in another way, by depicting ‘real’ history. As Ina Ferris argues, ‘both the scientific and sentimental turns’ in Romantic era historiography ‘agreed in valorizing the witness-narrative’, because each ‘understood historiography less as a synthetic mode of explanation and evaluation than as the collection and collation of primary documents through which access to the lived past could be gained’. Thus, in an important way, ‘history’s business was coming to be seen to be the “real” as much as the “true”’:

or, more precisely, the true now had to take the real into account, as had not been the case when new histories were mostly derived from previous ones. Under an emergent historicism that posited historical change as substantial rather than superficial, the reality of the past was understood to inhere in an alterity to which material ‘remains’ provided access. At the same time, the truth of the past continued to be (as it always had been) a matter of present determination, that is, a function of the judgment of the historian.

These ‘two imperatives of history’, the real and the true, implied different kinds of authorship and different formal protocols. Where old ‘literary remains’, such as Romance, could be internalized ‘with only minimal effort’, having occupied ‘a transtemporal aesthetic realm confirming identification across time’, historical remains resisted any easy translation into discourses of permanence and continuity. The ‘real’ might be that which could not be assimilated, not ‘gathered into a structure of some kind’ or made intelligible.

Where Barry Lyndon struggles to make sense of the crumbling world around him, where his guiltless conscience cannot be judged entirely apart from the bloody battlefield of his life, the story he tells immerses its readers in what may be seen as productive confusions. By disordering the familiar conventions of historical novels such as Scott’s, by rewriting recent history for a new era newly resistant to clear-cut historical thresholds and tidy conclusions, perhaps Thackeray hoped to make palpable a ‘fractional’, inassimilable subject, the lived stupefactions and half-understandings of historical—historical—as-subjective—experience. If Barry remains to the end a throwback of an earlier era, unwilling to think like a good liberal subject—too much ego, with a never disinterested stance—Barry Lyndon, understood as a product of wartime, may offer something else: a feeling of embodied personhood that, extending beyond individuals, inheres in a people or shared moment rather than a self.

46 Ferris, ‘Scholarly Revivals’, 274.
Select Bibliography


Writing in 1862 to Isabella Blackwood, sister of her publisher John Blackwood, the recently widowed Margaret Oliphant remarked

I don’t yet know exactly when the book of the season, as you so flatteringly call it, is to be out [. . .] I do believe I have done my best, and the issue will most likely be more critical and important to me and my bairnies than anything I have ever done. For their sake I regard with a little awe and trembling this new step into the world. [. . .] I must say in confidence that I should be much disappointed if this book does not make some little commotion. There never was such a hero—such a princely, magnanimous, simple heart.¹

While the success of today’s misery memoirs and ghostwritten celebrity Lives raises scarcely an eyebrow, we might be nonplussed to find a two-volume biography of Edward Irving, a Scottish millenarian preacher once celebrated, then disgraced, but dead for thirty years, contending with Great Expectations and Lady Audley’s Secret for ‘book of the season’ in 1862.² Granted a little mutual buttering-up between a writer and her publisher’s family, the letter reminds us that Life writing,³ in various forms, was significant to the Victorians both as fashionable talking point and as serious cultural intervention.

Their often uncritical respect for the reputation of the deceased (Life writing was nearly always published after the death of its subject, often by relatives), their unspoken assumption that biographical length correlated to biographical significance, and their generous padding of miscellaneous documentation, have between them stifled the

² Margaret Oliphant, The Life of Edward Irving, Minister of the National Scotch Church, 2 vols. (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1862). References to this edition given hereafter in parentheses.
³ I use the term ‘Life writing’ to include the overlapping genres of memoir, biography, autobiography and edited correspondence, as well as their various subgenres and hybrid forms.
reputation of Victorian Lives. They come down to us not so much shapeless as a particular shape: the coffin. According to the familiar narrative, this realization begins almost at the moment of Victoria’s death, with Gosse’s description of biography as a ‘monstrous catafalque of two volumes’ (1901). It is then confirmed by Lytton Strachey in his influential *Eminent Victorians* (1918): the Victorian Life is ‘two fat volumes [. . .] as familiar as the cortege of the undertaker.’ The nail is retroactively hammered home by William Gladstone’s widely quoted dismissal of John Cross’s *George Eliot’s Life, as Related in her Letters and Journals* (1885), ‘It is not a Life at all. It is a Reticence, in three volumes.’ The provenance of the last epithet is telling: the source for Gladstone’s dinner-party quip is the ‘Three Monumental Figures’ chapter of E. F. Benson’s 1930 memoir *As We Were: A Victorian Peep-Show*, a genealogy that aptly combines the twin modernist urges to solidify the Victorian Life into cliche and to peer behind for its supposed repressions. To this vociferous consensus one might retort that many nineteenth-century commentators, notably Gladstone, and including Oliphant herself, were as aware as their modernist successors of the mortifying effects of indiscriminate prolixity and over-discriminate respectability, and argued forcefully for a more rigorous approach to biographical ethics and aesthetics. One might point out, too, that like the novel, Life writing was subject to the power of the circulating libraries to enforce anodyne propriety and a multi-volume format on any author aspiring to commercial success. Such special pleading, however, does not explain biography’s popularity or the commotion Oliphant anticipated. It is worth pausing to consider why the mid-century might have been an exciting and profitable time to write a Life.

By the time Oliphant came to it, biography was already a hybrid genre, straddling the outer limits of print culture and balancing, with greater or lesser success, rival understandings of the purpose and potential of the published Life. Since the seventeenth century, the various Protestant denominations had fostered and circulated spiritual Lives, especially edited journals and conversion narratives, after their own models of Christian progress and according to their own cultures of exemplarity. Religious memoirs had benefited from and contributed to nineteenth-century evangelicalism in all its forms, promising not just wholesome leisure (the provincial ladies in Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *The Doctor’s Wife* [1864] chat about the newest patterns in crochet and the latest popular memoir of a departed evangelical curate), but guidance and inspiration. ‘People buy, by the million, those well-intentioned publications—it is to be supposed that people also read them,’ wrote Oliphant in 1858, before complaining that

an unaccustomed reader loses himself in those wildernesses of words, and finds nothing but tedium and vexation in books which, if they truly did what they undertake to do, should be safe companions and counsellors for every one, examples of all the manifold and unlimitable diversities of the Christian and the human life.

6 E. F. Benson, *As We Were* (London: Longman, Green, 1930), 111.
7 [Margaret Oliphant], ‘Religious Memoirs’, *Blackwood’s*, 83 (June 1858), 705.
By the mid-century, the hagiographical tradition had competition, with a multitude of subgenres and approaches jostling for attention and legitimacy. The post-Romantic fascination with identity and genius (and especially with the minutiae of authorship) had in part been fuelled by, and certainly contributed to, the cachet of Life writing: a development to which changes in copyright legislation, and the transmission to literary legatees of a longer interest in their benefactor’s sales, lent fiscal urgency. With its emphasis on the truth and moral import of experience, including secular experience, the German Bildungsroman had circulated from Goethe, via Carlyle and Coleridge, to George Henry Lewes and George Eliot, bringing with it a revitalized sense of what was possible in the written life. Meanwhile the anecdotal, table-talkative model of James Boswell’s 1791 *Life of Samuel Johnson*, still revered by many as foundational of ‘English’ Life writing, had undergone a resurgence with the publication in 1831 of John Wilson Croker’s edition. John Forster’s critically acclaimed *Life and Adventures of Oliver Goldsmith* (1848) propelled the ‘Life and Times’ format, with its relish for social context and commentary, into the cultural mainstream even as it prompted controversy about the kinds of property vested in biographical evidence. Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857), also widely respected, was generating its own cottage industry of commentary, rebuttal, and revision. Exemplary Lives of worthy citizens, individually in pamphlets and collected in anthologies, had long been staples of the ‘useful’ knowledge offered to working-class, female, and juvenile readerships, and at this moment were being reconfigured by Samuel Smiles as the motor for aspirational ‘self-help’. Missionary Lives were cross-fertilizing with travel narratives to feed the appetite for entertaining, dramatic, and informative modes of cultural self-congratulation. In 1858–9, ‘biography and history’ together with ‘travel and adventures’ made up around 35 per cent of Mudie’s new stock of volumes for his vast circulating library. Together these constituted a heterogeneous, complex, and vibrant cultural field.8
Oliphant’s appearance as the biographer of Edward Irving was to mark, she hoped, a watershed in her status as author. Though not yet thirty five, Oliphant had been publishing novels—one, sometimes two a year—as well as frequent non-fiction essays for Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine since 1849, and had been supporting her family of three children entirely by her pen since her husband’s illness and death in 1859. She had been signing some of her fiction since the mid-1850s and had recently adopted the emphatically married name Mrs Oliphant, with which she hallmarked what she considered her most valuable work. Although the nature of cultural value, and what it meant to do one’s ‘best’ as a working mother, were and remained vexed questions for Oliphant, authorship itself, even authorship as a woman with ‘bairnies’ to consider, was not the issue here. At stake was a sense that Lives mattered, and mattered differently from the other genres to which she turned her hand. Edward Irving would, she hoped, consolidate her importance not just as a novelist, but in the arena of public debate. It would make her mark as a writer of substance, and enable her to contribute directly and openly to that most Victorian of discussions: who counted as a hero?9

In few of the nineteenth-century manifestations of Life writing had there emerged a decisive distinction between (what we might now recognize as) autobiography and biography. The favoured titles fudged the author–subject relationship, and hence questions of cultural and economic agency as well as perspective: Life of, Memoirs of, and later Reminiscences of. With few exceptions, those who put the Lives of near contemporaries before the public presented themselves less as authors manufacturing a product for the marketplace than as executors, dutifully passing on a legacy from a departed relative, friend or colleague, to posterity. The nature of that bequest was the deceased’s exemplary conduct and evolving outlook, rendered chronologically and in his or her own words. This four-cornered myth of editorial selflessness, narrative completeness, subjective transparency, and public benefaction—what we might call the dominant ideology of nineteenth-century Life writing—was, like all ideologies, unstable and contested.10 From Carlyle’s Sartor Resartus (1833–4) to Henry James’s The Aspern (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 131–50. On the Smilesian tradition of Life writing and its pedagogic uses, see Juliette Atkinson, Victorian Biography Reconsidered: A Study of Nineteenth-Century ‘Hidden’ Lives (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 65–111; on anthologies of Lives, see Alison Booth, How to Make It as a Woman: Collective Biographical History from Victoria to the Present (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004). On missionary Lives, see Atkinson, Victorian Biography Reconsidered, 175–82. The figures for Mudie’s stock come from Guinevere Griest, Mudie’s Circulating Library and the Victorian Novel (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1970), 38.

9 The debate over the conditions and uses of heroism in political, spiritual, and cultural life was galvanized by the work of Thomas Carlyle, notably his lecture series published as On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History (London: Fraser, 1841).

10 Oliphant consistently critiqued the kind of biography that was ‘a series of funeral orations [ . . . ] broken up by bits of narrative of a corresponding kind’ ([Margaret Oliphant], ‘New Books: Biographies’, Blackwood’s, 121, no. 736 [February 1877], 183–4). For a contemporary exploration of some of the model’s horizons, particularly its emphasis on successiveness, see Philip Davis, ‘Why Do We Remember Forwards and Not Backwards?’, in Vincent Newey and Philip Shaw (eds), Mortal Pages, Literary Lives: Studies in Nineteenth-Century Autobiography (Aldershot: Scolar, 1996), 81–102.
Life Writing and the Victorians

Papers (1888) and J. M. Barrie’s Tommy and Grizel (1900), fiction restlessly probed the myth’s vanishing points, its productive incoherencies, and its severely bracketed erotics. More recently, critics such as Holly Furneaux have begun to explore ‘the queer possibilities of the biographical form’ itself, showing how the very terms of the genre, posthumousness, editorial passivity, succession and posterity, enabled the generation of rich and versatile languages of—even non-heteronormative—love and longing.  

One reading of Oliphant’s choice of Irving as a subject is as a way of sidestepping biography’s funereal atmosphere. Writing much later of the ‘ethics of biography’, she would argue that ‘he who has been dead twenty years, has, as it were, emerged from death altogether. He has been, and to our senses is, no longer; but the mystery and awe have departed.’ The span of a generation, in other words, lifted the task from the moral, where personal loyalty and indebtedness should hold sway, to the ethical, where judicious evaluation might be possible. At the time she accounted for the project in divergent ways: ‘great personal attraction towards the man for one thing, and a great desire to do him justice with the world,’ ‘a rather liberal offer from my London publisher’, and the feeling that this work would be a great relief and refreshment to my mind at such time as this when the heavy griefs of my own life disgust me often at those light troubles of fiction which it is my trade to make and to mend—Such a work, just now, would I am sure invigorate and strengthen me.

A professional author already, but one who prided herself on working in ‘the little second drawing-room where all the (feminine) life of the house goes on’ (24), Oliphant construed biography as a new kind of labour: vigorous, outward-looking, productive. In opting for a subject that required active research outside her own archive, she aligned herself with those biographers whose understanding of the task went beyond mere mediation, to encompass matters of evidence and interpretation, as well as questions of moral agency and accountability, and of the relationship between the individual and society. In other words, she aspired to join the ranks of those who, like Thomas Carlyle, practised biography and history as branches of the same endeavour.

David Amigoni has traced the complex role of biography in the discursive and institutional genealogies of ‘literature’ and ‘history’ as disciplines in the nineteenth century. As a largely self-educated woman Oliphant was marginal to such debates, though with

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13 Letter from Margaret Oliphant to Miss Martin (5 March 1860). See Edward Irving Letters, 25–8, Archives of Regent Square United Reform Church, in the care of the United Reformed Church History Society and held in the library of Westminster College, Cambridge. I am grateful to Barbara Waddington of the Lumen Church for introducing these papers to me and to the trustees of these Archives for permission to reproduce quotations.

14 Amigoni, Victorian Biography, passim.
the example of Gaskell’s *Brontë* before her, and an established reputation of her own, she was emboldened, as Gaskell had been, to travel around the country interviewing strangers, collecting documents, and visiting relevant locales. While the offer of a sympathetic ear to a garrulous interviewee could be presented as an extension of her ‘feminine’ sensibilities (‘like the art of driving a hoop, that I give a little touch now and then, and my victim rolls on and on’ [79]), she saw her role as biographer as both requiring and to a degree entitling her to suspend some of the proprieties of her class and gender. Though she began her enquiries with Irving’s kin by marriage, with whom she had a distant cousinship, she soon went further afield, tracing his networks and contacting his acquaintance. She investigated his library records, tracked down correspondence, read satirical pamphlets, presbyterial court records, and newspaper reports. She bemoaned the ‘terrible amount of sermons which I have to read and remember. If Irving had been an ordinary preacher I must have succumbed long ere now’ (173). The bold decision to call upon the renowned Thomas Carlyle for information about his friend Irving—to ‘beard the lion in his den’ rather than writing to him or relying upon an intermediary—she attributed to the ‘courage that comes to one when one is about one’s lawful work, and not seeking acquaintance or social favour’ (75).

The sense of enfranchisement Oliphant experienced from this ‘lawful work’, and from the twenty-plus-year moratorium between herself and Irving’s passing, had limits. In her research, as in Life writing at the time, the boundaries between amateur and professional, between private and public, were unpredictable and porous. With multiple reputations at stake, those boundaries were transected by informal relationships of patronage, dependency, and collaboration: factors still undertheorized in literary histories of the genre. For her respondents, furthermore, Irving occupied living memory—a term that seems to have come into circulation in the law courts in the 1820s—and thus their evidence could be as compromised, or as perverse, as the graveside pieties she had sought to displace. She frequently found herself enmired in the ‘wilderness of words’ she so detested in parochial biography. She recounted later how, holed up in the gloomy guest room of the manse at Rosneath, known in the minister’s family as ‘a field to bury strangers in’, she was confronted by, not the expected cache of Irving letters, but a mass of ‘diabolical handwriting, which was not Irving’s at all [...] but only letters addressed to him’. She feelingly recalled ‘the chill that grew upon me, and the gradual sense of utter stupidity that came upon me’ (74).

The very pleasure of reminiscence sometimes misled her interlocutors into confidences they would not want to see in print. Jane Welsh Carlyle, for instance, followed up the intimate conversation they had on first meeting in the summer of 1860 with a letter on 2 December confessing that she had forgotten ‘you were seeking information

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about Edward Irving to put into a Book, and almost everything I told you about him was “betwixt woman and woman”—under seven seals of secrecy! Oliphant wrote back on 28 December, patiently reiterating her plea for ‘publishable information’. On about 29 April 1861 Jane sent her one of Irving’s letters, accompanied by more prevarications:

If you were here—beside me—I dare say I might give you some of the details you want—your questions would suggest them—or they would suggest themselves in the natural course of conversation. But to write them down—to order—all in a row, with ‘the reciprocity all on one side’—the idea of ‘to be printed’ lowering over me—Oh my Dear!

It is hard to imagine a more devastating critique, or a more effective queering, of the genre’s premises. Oliphant replied on 7 May that such ‘letters and references’ were ‘so many coals of fire’: to be handled with care, if at all. However she acknowledged a mite ruefully that a certain hard-headedness was an occupational hazard: ‘I suspect there must be no creature so entirely devoid of feeling as an unfortunate litterateur in search of materials.’

At the time she joked ‘in the profoundest confidence’ of her intention ‘to disclose the tribulations of a historian in search of information to the sympathetic world’; later she would ‘remember making the discovery already noted—which, of course, I promulgated to all my friends—that every one I saw on this subject displayed the utmost willingness to tell me all about themselves, and quite a secondary interest in Irving’ (184, 76). The code-switching in such anecdotes between confidentiality and broadcast, between formal and informal (so that the ‘historian’s’ relationship to the ‘sympathetic world’ is continually renegotiated) finds Oliphant quietly theorizing her own role in mediating Irving’s affective significance to the public, or perhaps, to adapt Lauren Berlant’s formulation, in forging an ‘intimate public’ receptive to memoir as a genre.

It is worth noting, however, that she places as much emphasis on the ‘historical’ as the ‘sympathetic’ here. The ‘profoundest confidence’ disclosed earlier was addressed to the minister of Rosneath, whose collaboration we have already noted. Her encounter with Revd Robert Herbert Story (1835–1907) is interesting for the collision it illuminates between rival conceptions of Life writing itself: as a practice, as a genre, as an occupation. Most biographers of Oliphant concur in detecting a mutual attraction between the recently widowed Oliphant and the young minister when, in the winter of 1860, he

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16 The Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle (ed.), Ian Campbell, Aileen Christianson, and David Sorenson, xxxvii (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2009), 64 (emphasis in the original). I am grateful to Aileen Christianson and Dale Trela for pointing me towards this episode.

17 The Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle, xxxvii. 37, 156.

18 Mrs Oliphant’s side of the correspondence is given in D. J. Trela, ‘Jane Welsh Carlyle and Margaret Oliphant: An Unsung Friendship’, Carlyle Annual, 11 (Spring 1990), 34–5.

called on her in Edinburgh to offer his help in her research on Irving. Story was born after Irving’s death, but his father, also a minister, also a Robert Story, whose biography he was writing, had been a close friend of Irving’s. The unmarried Robert Herbert invited her to the manse to stay with himself and his mother. After an initial short visit (in the dreaded burial ground for strangers), Oliphant rented a house nearby for the summer and the two families shared expeditions to local beauty spots while the aspirant biographers compared notes about working methods and the value of visiting local sites. There’s a consensus that they flirted at this time, and an impression that at some stage Story proposed to Oliphant and was rejected, perhaps because, despite her grief, despite financial pressure and the trials of lone parenthood, she was rather enjoying being in charge of her life.20

By what must have seemed a remarkable coincidence, the pair were working at the same time on the same period of Scottish ecclesiastical history, on biographies of two figures, both ministers of the Church of Scotland, who were friends, had friends in common, whose stories overlapped in important ways, and whose archives were reciprocally relevant. They could be useful to each other, though of course they were also potential rivals in the marketplace. They helped each other. Story patiently explained the fine questions of doctrine upon which Edward Irving’s alleged heresy, and consequent expulsion from his natal Church, hung, while Oliphant listened to and commented on his manuscript as it progressed.21 Both their subjects, in different ways, were evangelicals. As ministers in the Church of Scotland, Robert Story and Edward Irving came from a distinctive religio-political culture with its own cautious take on evangelicalism, but could not help being influenced by the atmosphere of seriousness and the culture of self-review it brought to early nineteenth-century religious life.22 Christopher Tolley has given the name ‘Domestic Biography’ to the mode of Life writing that emerged from this kind of milieu. This was not primarily biography about the domestic, for though familial ties and culture were implicitly at its heart, it was shaped by reticence about domestic life and marriage. Rather, it was a practice of biography founded within and powered by the culture of early nineteenth-century evangelicalism, and based on the middle-class, educated family as a cherished repository of documents, as a site of pride and source of instruction, and as a privileged channel of values from generation to generation. The impulse could be and was shared among members of the family firm: ministers commemorated their predecessors in the manse or vicarage, and as part of their rite de passage junior statesmen or military officers would write up their departed seniors. Domestic biography in this sense is ‘a family prerogative and involves a sympathetic

21 [Elma Story and Helen Constance Story], *Memoir of Robert Herbert Story* (Glasgow: James Maclehose, 1909), 53.
22 Irving’s phase as a celebrity preacher brought him into contact with many prominent evangelicals such as Zachary Macaulay and William Wilberforce. He was, however, mistrustful of the politically reformist and organizational elements of the movement.
family readership. The evangelical emphasis on spiritual experience and conversion, and on regular self-examination and moral accountability, lent itself to intensive self-documentation and family archive. Tolley enumerates some of the genres generated by this impulse: memoirs, deathbed narratives, autobiographical reminiscences, travel journals, diaries, memoranda of conduct, collections of letters, notes on genealogies, to which one might add documents intended for public consumption such as speeches, sermons, pamphlets, and authorized biographies. Like other biographers of their generation, both Oliphant and Robert Herbert Story had access to considerable archives, spanning not only the spiritual progress of their subjects, but political movements and important waves of revivalism as well as crises in the history of the Church of Scotland. Oliphant’s biography quoted directly and generously from a huge range of sources, and included what was at the time regarded as a coup: a whole chapter devoted to Irving’s private letter-journal addressed to his wife.

In the course of their collaboration, the novice biographers shared friends and acquaintances, and in doing so unknowingly exchanged biographical projects. Story shared with Oliphant his friends the Tullochs, to whom she had recently been introduced by the Blackwoods in St Andrews. The Tullochs were to become, along with the Blackwoods and the Storys, Oliphant’s closest friends in Scotland, especially the theologian John Tulloch, principal of St Mary’s College (University of St Andrews) whose biography she would later write. Story also introduced her to the noted preacher Robert Lee, whose biography Story would write, complete with—notwithstanding her impression of him as ‘a galvanic cast-iron man, quite unworthy of a mile’s walk through the rain’ (174)—a preface by Oliphant. When we add to this that Tulloch would later review Oliphant on Irving and Story on Story; that Story would review Oliphant on Irving, and later Oliphant on Tulloch, and that Oliphant would review Story on Story, the expansive sociability of these months in the west of Scotland begins to look like an inward-looking micro-industry for the production and consumption of ecclesiastical memoirs.

The impression is misleading. ‘There never was such a hero’, Oliphant had boasted. One of the many legacies of the ‘Stracheyan turn’ away from nineteenth-century modes of Life writing has been the repudiation of the narrowly defined, self-congratulatory criteria of ‘eminence’ it supposedly endorsed and circulated. Juliette Atkinson has shown that Victorian categories of importance were surprisingly flexible and capacious: extending,

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23 Tolley, Domestic Biography, 6.
24 Tolley, Domestic Biography, 56–7.
within limits, to working-class as well as middle-class achievement, celebrating quiet distinction as well as public acclaim, and accommodating heroic failure as well as success. For Atkinson, Oliphant’s Edward Irving occupies the heroic-failure category, and certainly the tragic arc Oliphant plots for his career, with its rise to national celebrity and power, and its martyrdom to overwork, misjudgement, and disappointment, suggests this.28

The heroic is, of course, a social and spatial concept as well as a historical and narrative one. As Oliphant noted, Thomas Carlyle, foremost advocate of ‘heroes, hero-worship and the heroic in history’, had regretted in his obituary the ‘Scottish uncelebrated Irving’, and she distinguished throughout the biography between the hysteria of his (mainly) metropolitan followers and the wistful sorrow of the ‘sober Scotch remnant’ (ii. 196) who could sympathize with him but not, in the end, agree with him.29 Recent work on Life writing, as well as identifying marginalized, colonized, and diasporic subjects and voices, has investigated Life texts—including those of the ‘White, male, middle-class’—through the lens of ‘critical geographies’, examining how ‘subjects are embedded in national imaginaries and in transnational and global circuits of exchange and identification’.30 In the case of Oliphant’s account of Edward Irving, we might situate both author and subject within the demographic drift from provincial Scotland to metropolitan England. Further, given Scotland’s education system, with its wider access at school and university level, we might see both as participating in a socially diverse Scottish intelligentsia as it asserts itself over the cultural life of the English capital.31

From the opening lines, in which she juxtaposes the 1792 of the ‘outcries and struggles’ of Revolutionary France with that of ‘the peaceful little Scotch town’ of Irving’s birth, Oliphant highlights locality, but also, to a surprising degree, relatedness. Oliphant proceeds to emphasize Irving’s ‘long-established local kindred’ while acknowledging

29 The phrase is from Thomas Carlyle’s unsigned obituary ‘Death of the Rev. Edward Irving: II’, Fraser’s Magazine, 11, no. 61 (1835), 102.
30 The allusion here is to Catherine Hall, White, Male and Middle-Class: Explorations in Feminism and History (Cambridge: Polity, 1992).
32 Liam Upton points out that Irving’s Scottishness, and hence his version of nationalism, was partial and exclusive: rooted in Lowland folk culture; provincial-cosmopolitan but at odds with the cerebral and secular elements of the Scottish Enlightenment; fiercely Protestant (and hence hospitable to Britishness), anti-Jacobite, and, until the very end of his life, completely identified with the traditions and practices of the Church of Scotland. See ‘ “Our Mother and Our Country”: The Integration of Religious and National Identity in the Thought of Edward Irving (1792–1834)’, in Robert Pope (ed.), Religion and National Identity: Wales and Scotland c. 1700–2000 (Cardiff: University of Wales, 2001), 242–67.