THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

Other Victorian Studies

JOSEPHINE McDONAGH

JOSEPHINE McDONAGH is Randy L. and Melvin R. Berlin Chair of the Development of the Novel in English and Distinguished Service Professor in the Department of English at the University of Chicago and director of the Nicholson Center for British Studies. Her most recent book is *Literature in a Time of Migration: British Fiction and the Movement of People, 1815–1876* (Oxford UP, 2021). With Hadji Bakara and Charlotte Sussman, she is editing the *Oxford Handbook of Literature and Migration* (forthcoming 2027). Her current work thinks about children and migration and the persistence of figures of displaced children in print cultures of the nineteenth century and their twentieth- and twenty-first-century legacies.

The editor of *PMLA* has invited us to consider the prospects of "undisciplining" in Victorian studies and beyond. The two rich essays under discussion respond to ongoing critiques that charge the field with "implicit . . . white universalism and inattention to race," as Emily Steinlight writes, and to rallying cries such as Nasser Mufti's unforgettable admonition that we should "hate Victorian Studies properly." "Undisciplining" means to disrupt or even abandon the field entirely. Jacob Romanow and Steinlight both note that these critiques have ironically placed greater, not lesser, importance on the term *Victorian*. Yet the two essays take different approaches. Romanow opts to revive *Victorian* as a word that has continuing critical utility. Steinlight chooses to historicize it. At the center of their essays are different uses of the term *Victorian*. How significant are these differences? And does history offer alternative versions of Victorian studies that might help us now? Here are some brief thoughts.

The question of to what exactly *Victorian* refers is an old one that has no simple answers. The days when the term meant a mere historical period (the extent of the monarch's reign) in a particular place (the extent of the nation or the empire over which she had sovereignty) are long gone. As Romanow shows, its meanings are complicated in part by the enormous influence that Victorian Britain exerted across the rest of the world; indeed, the migration of things Victorian across national and imperial borders seems to be part of *Victorian*'s DNA. In this rendering, *Victorian* is almost synonymous with expansion. Accordingly, Romanov seeks to detach the category from its temporal and geographic hooks to accentuate both its

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mobility and its staying power. He builds on Priya Joshi's influential 2011 essay, "Globalizing Victorian Studies," which argues that the term's "real use lies in *indexing* a set of preoccupations rather than confining those preoccupations to history and geography" (21). *Victorian* thus indexes a host of things—works, ideas, and attitudes—all of which emanate from the imperial center and, as Joshi demonstrates, continue to exert influence especially in postcolonial environments.

For his part, Romanow finds *Victorian* a useful term for understanding the persistent presence of colonial literary culture as a "contrastive" standard against which nineteenth-century indigenous writers wrote back. His example is the anonymously authored Ghanaian novel *Marita; or, The Folly of Love* (1886–88), recently reissued in an excellent new edition by Stephanie Newell. Romanow's reading highlights the distinctive way in which the novel negotiates a field of literary and cultural references imported from Victorian Britain. For Romanow these associations do not make *Marita* a Victorian novel, because the Victorian is just one of the novel's many overlapping fields of reference. Yet he holds that it is important to retain the term *Victorian* (or "narrow Victorian" in his somewhat confusing terminology) to index the imported "Victorian literary tradition" against which the novel produced its own local meanings.

For Romanow, Victorian is not "a period, form, or method, but . . . a corpus and field of reference, stripped of pretentions to universality . . . a literary tradition." His nomenclature is deliberate, yet the constituents of both the "corpus" and the "field of reference" remain unspecified. What is in this corpus? Which field of reference? And which "literary tradition"? The vagueness is strategic. It allows him to indicate that his *narrow Victorian* (for which read, perhaps, "imperial," or even "the technologies of a colonizing culture" against which indigenous works "pushed back") might come in many forms. *Narrow Victorian* appears to be a placeholder for an imperial frame of mind, a cultural affiliation to colonial modes and manners, and a residue of the colonizing metropole that intrudes on this new environment against which the text responds. Perhaps it is something like what Raymond Williams calls a "structure of feeling"? Although Romanow does not use Williams's vocabulary, several of his conceptions—including the layering of affective responses from different times and places and the continuing efficacy of the "residual"—recall Williams's work. But whatever it is, if we do not call it *Victorian*, Romanow warns, we risk "depicting literary history as far more ideologically and institutionally neutral than it really was." According to Romanow, we abandon *Victorian* at our peril.

But questions remain: Is what Romanow names the "narrow Victorian" anything other than imperial? And might not *Victorian* evoke other meanings or associations—index other corpuses, other fields of reference—besides the imperial? There are many complicating factors muddying the water when it comes to defining what *Victorian* means. Not least among these is the fact that, in the scholarly contexts with which we are concerned, it is always (as Romanow notes) a retrospective formation and conditioned by the context in which it emerges. There are many different Victorians and each of them has its own history. Steinlight's approach is to track the formation of Victorian studies in one particularly dominant iteration: postwar America. She points out that this early phase of the American field accentuated many of the characteristics of the Victorian about which Romanow and the undisciplined have rightly complained, such as the emphasis on elite minds disconnected from political realities and especially from the work of empire. Steinlight cites Michael Wolff, one of the first editors of the journal *Victorian Studies*, and Walter E. Houghton, the author of *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, both of whom specified that by the Victorians, they meant the "literate elite" (Wolff 62) or the "articulate classes" (Houghton xvi), and not the working classes, let alone any subaltern people in colonized nations.

Steinlight's principal source is the archive of *Victorian Studies*, which remains the flagship journal for American Victorian studies; her insightful essay presents a compelling and bracing account of the connections that this field's formation forged between institutions and bodies of knowledge on large and local scales against the background of

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Cold War America. She chronicles how American Victorianist scholars from the 1950s and 1960s identified a version of the intellectual that reflected their own class position as part of a new professional managerial class characteristic of the Cold War era. Victorian studies grew up in America in the context of the expansion of higher education, during which new streams of public and private investment reframed universities as, Steinlight writes, "centers of scientific research and training" capable of producing the technological innovations and "brain power" necessary to make America superior to Soviet Russia.

Steinlight's claim that American Victorian studies had an "outsized footprint" in the formation of this field as it developed internationally is surely correct. She cites a 1957 *Times Literary Supplement* article announcing the launch of the journal *Victorian Studies* in which even the British reviewer appears to cede the entire Victorian Age to American scholars. The use of the term "lend-lease"—which lends the article its title—connects this cultural takeover to the transactions of military power and territory that occurred between America and Britain in World War II and confirms the deep entanglement of academic activities in the tense relations between old and new imperial powers. Steinlight highlights the emphatically celebratory expressions in the article, yet in doing so misses the article's persistent tones of high table irony and not a little condescension. The author comments on the enormous size of the scholarly tomes about British nineteenth-century literary figures coming from America, and remarks that, although Lytton Strachey, the promoter of a more pared down form of biography, had been "prepared, and with the most elegant gestures, to throw away the baby with the bathwater," "transatlantic scholarship in the past decade has solicitously addressed itself to retrieving not just the baby but a large quantity of the bathwater" ("Lend-Lease").

Of course, the American version of Victorian studies that Steinlight analyzes was not the only one to emerge at this time. There were parallel moves in other parts of the world. Some of these followed on American heels, as Steinlight points out. But they had their differences. The 1970s saw, for instance, the inauguration of the Australasian Victorian Studies Association in 1973, which focused, at least in part, on Victorian centers of culture in Australia and New Zealand. In 1974, the establishment of the French journal *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens* offered Edwardians some name recognition that is mainly denied in the usage of Victorian in the United States.

The British case is probably the most interesting. Steinlight gestures to the 2000s as a decade in which Victorian studies took off in the United Kingdom, but she omits mention of a much longer history that began in the 1960s. This history includes work at the University of Leicester, where a group of scholars from history and literature, including the urban historian H. J. Dyos, the railways historian Jack Simmons, and the Charles Dickens scholar Philip Collins, collaborated informally from 1960 and then more formally when they established the Leicester Centre for Victorian Studies in 1966. The center was initially funded by a large grant from the Leverhulme Trust, a philanthropic institution based in the United Kingdom. Instead of a journal, as in the American case, the activities at the Leicester Centre revolved around the formation of an academic program: the interdisciplinary MA in Victorian studies. The idea of a graduate program organized across academic departments was new, and it became a model for many other interdisciplinary initiatives in higher education that flourished in the expanding university sector of the United Kingdom. The MA's curriculum had two main themes: religion and the city. The Leicester Centre also sustained major collaborative research projects; large among them was the celebrated two-volume, multiauthored work on cities, *The Victorian City: Images and Realities* (1973), which incorporated essays on many aspects of city experience—from prostitution, slums, pubs, trains, and transport to churches and places of public workshop, schools, shops, theaters, and so on. Significantly, Dyos's editorial collaborator for this venture was no less than the American *Victorian Studies*'s editor Wolff.

It may be a coincidence that the dynamic urban historian Dyos was a founding figure in the Leicester initiative, but it placed nineteenth-century cities

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at the heart of this new field. And it was fitting that this program should develop in a quintessentially Victorian city like Leicester. A feature of American Victorian studies was the production of new scholarly editions of letters and works by major writers, such as G. S. Haight's magisterial multivolume edition of *George Eliot's Letters*, first published by Yale in 1954 and which changed the course of Eliot scholarship. The publication of such editions was enabled in part by the extensive collections of Victorian books and manuscripts that had been accrued by American connoisseurs who were backed by the accumulated fortunes of industrialists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By midcentury, many of these collections had found their way to American university and public libraries. In the United Kingdom, however, the physical proximity of the remnants of Victorian society presented an alternative set of objects on which to work. Here in the very infrastructure of the cities in which universities were based, where scholars spent their daily lives, were the material vestiges of Victorian life. British Victorian studies, and the particular style of interdisciplinary work that it inculcated, was shaped by the pressing presence of the material past. The British Victorian Society was established in 1958, founded by (among others) the poet and iconoclastic antimodernist John Betjeman and the German Jewish émigré and avid documenter of Britain's provincial architectural history Nikolaus Pevsner. It illuminated the crumbling cities of postwar Britain as material remnants of a Victorian past rapidly disappearing in postwar slum clearance. Dyos would succeed Pevsner as the chairman of this society in 1976, which was, and still is, mainly concerned with architectural conservation. If the Americans had literary manuscripts, Britain had its buildings. The corpus (to borrow Romanow's word) is very different.

Thinking even in this cursory way about the early days of Victorian studies in the United Kingdom highlights some of the particularities of field formation on a different side of the Atlantic. First is that the home of Victorian studies as an academic endeavor in Britain was not in the elite universities, Oxford and Cambridge, but in new centers of higher learning that catered to the expanding student bodies of the postwar era. The University of Leicester was one of several university colleges that, until the 1950s, could not issue their own degrees. The conferring of royal charters to university colleges —Southampton and Exeter, along with Leicester, had been extensions of the University of London, Reading an extension of Christchurch College Oxford, and Newcastle of the University of Durham —allowed them to award degrees and greatly increased the number of degree-awarding institutions in Britain. In addition, in the 1960s, the state invested in a tranche of new universities (the so-called Plateglass universities), including the University of Sussex, where the highly eminent Victorianist historian Asa Briggs, whose *Victorian Cities* (1963) and his edited volume *Chartist Studies* (1967) were defining works of a new Victorian history, served as dean of social sciences and vice chancellor. At Sussex, Briggs introduced a "new map of learning" that enabled students to cross disciplinary boundaries within degree programs of extraordinary vision (Taylor). Victorian studies also flourished at the University of London's Birkbeck College, traditionally a college for working adults that had been founded as a mechanics institute in 1823. At Birkbeck, Pevsner was the chair of the art history department and taught alongside the historian Eric Hobsbawn and the literary critic Barbara Hardy, forming a distinguished trio of Victorianist intellectuals and educators. At Ruskin College, a trade union institution for adult education situated in Oxford, a new style of popular history developed in which the class struggles of the Victorian period were key to understanding the ongoing contradictions and social inequalities that beleaguered modern Britain. This was History Workshop, led by Raphael Samuel, in which "history from below" developed. Ruskin was not part of Oxford University: attendees of the History Workshop seminars and conferences, many of them students and academics at Oxford University, recall just how separate Ruskin was. It was an outpost that fulfilled a distinctive and definitive function.

The 1960s and 1970s were a period of democratization in British higher education, and Victorian

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studies in the United Kingdom was part of this movement. In the United Kingdom, the interdisciplinarity of the field was a cherished element in a more democratic university system. A particularly apposite illustration of this is the creation and early years of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, founded in the University of Birmingham (located in another provincial Victorian city) in 1964. The first director was Richard Hoggart, who had moved from the English Department in the University of Leicester (where else?). His *Uses of Literacy* (1957) was one of the clarion calls for a nonelite understanding of culture and sought new methodologies to comprehend the impact of new media on general culture. Stuart Hall, the Jamaican-born intellectual who had come to study at Oxford on a Rhodes scholarship in 1951, was appointed alongside Hoggart in Birmingham and, in 1969, succeeded Hoggart as the director. Hall expanded the scope of the center to deal with gender, race, and empire and drew cohorts of brilliant graduate students including Hazel Carby and Paul Gilroy, the latter of whom had been an undergraduate in the University of Sussex's interdisciplinary program in American studies, where he had been taught by the groundbreaking scholar of Victorian race and gender Cora Kaplan.

When we scratch at the surface of the early days of Victorian studies in the United Kingdom, we see a quite different formulation from that in America as described by Steinlight; this formulation is no less (or more) interesting and valuable, and it is certainly worth incorporating into any analysis of the field in the anglophone world. The British formation of the field stressed not just interdisciplinarity but also class inequality. Whereas Steinlight highlights the American historian's Gertrude Himmelfarb's signature rejection of class struggle —the "truly momentous events . . . were not crises or riots but books and ideas" (Himmelfarb 9)— British scholars of the Victorian period, including Briggs and Dorothy Thompson, focused on the history of Chartism, working-class radicalism, and popular print culture. And as a field it increasingly spiraled out to deal with gender, race, empire, and multiculturalism.

Of course, the contrast I make across the Atlantic is too stark; there were, and are, many overlaps and transatlantic crossovers. Wolff, for instance, participated in several collaborations with Dyos and other scholars at the University of Leicester, notably with Joanne Shattock to research Victorian periodicals (another lasting contribution of both British and American Victorian studies was the academic study of periodicals and newspapers). Feminist history and Victorian women's writing were especially buoyant transatlantic fields. These are important reminders that no field of study is ever entirely defined by its funding bodies or state ideologies (thank goodness)—as important as these are. There is, no doubt, an alternative radical history of Victorian studies in America that others may have already excavated. My point here is that there are many corpuses that we might call Victorian, and many fields of reference. *Victorian* might legitimately be used to evoke, for example, the shows of a London popular theater, or the autobiographies of working-class orphans, or the speeches of Black radicals like the West Indian Chartist leader William Cuffay, or the diaries of Hannah Cullwick, the servant who gave expression to the racial fantasies of a working-class white woman. And so on and so on. To collapse everything into one imperial box, in the way that Romanow proposes, gives his project a certain critical edge, but it risks missing a set of highly interesting objects of study and a field of cultural production that is as variegated in terms of its class, racial, and gender affiliations as is the Ghanaian novel he studies. It also risks missing a history of scholarship from another time and place, which, if nothing else in these dark days, might give us a smidgeon of hope.

For my own part, I confess that I stand with those who find *Victorian studies* "not a helpful term" (Armstrong 514).[1] It has never helped me when thinking about many of the writers who fall between the Romantic and Victorian periods, like Thomas De Quincey or Thomas Love Peacock, whose relationships to the imperial project are so important. The 1820s and 1830s, crucial decades in the history of settler colonization and history of the press, have been casualties of a periodization which

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makes little sense of a British, colonial, or even global history of literary production. I have rarely used the term—a point noted sternly by Romanow. Perhaps I have thrown out the baby with the bathwater. These searching essays encourage me to reflect on why.

Note

1. I thank Isobel Armstrong for conversations on this topic. Armstrong attended Leicester University, where her PhD on Victorian poetry was supervised by Hoggart. When I first met Armstrong, she was Professor of English at Southampton University. I was a student in the second cohort of Southampton's dynamic new MA in Romanticism and Modernism—an MA focusing on French theory and the Frankfurt School—which Armstrong had set up with Maud Ellmann, Robert Young, and Derek Attridge. The fact that this MA leapfrogged the entire Victorian idea perhaps explains my own aversion to the term; but it also reminds me of a less doctrinaire academic culture, and a healthy fluidity within fields from which we might today have something to learn.

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