*Introduction**

The year 1859 was an extraordinarily creative year, which David Cannadine has described as 'something of an annus mirabilis in British publishing and intellectual life'.[1] It produced some of the most influential, innovative, and enduring books of the Victorian period, and it is because of these texts that the year is best remembered. They include Samuel Smiles's popular *Self-Help*, which exemplified aspirational concepts of individual progress and lent its name to a publishing phenomenon still popular today. The first numbers of *Mrs Beeton's Book of Household Management* were published as a supplement to her husband's paper, *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*; the book has never gone out of print. In later sections of her work, Mrs Beeton would rely heavily on Florence Nightingale's *Notes on Nursing*, which also appeared in 1859. Tennyson published the first four books of his *Idylls of the King*, which sold 10,000 copies in their first year.[2] In February, John Stuart Mill published his passionate and influential defence of the rights of the individual in *On Liberty*, which Stefan Collini has described as 'one of the few indisputably classic texts in the history of political thought'.[3] *Adam Bede*, George Eliot's first full-length novel, also appeared in that month and proclaimed a new form of realism in chapter 17, 'In Which the Story Pauses a Little'. Charles Dickens's serialised novel *A Tale of Two Cities*, perhaps his most-read book worldwide, began to appear in the pages of his new journal, *All the Year Round*, in April, and Wilkie Collins inaugurated a new class of popular sensation fiction with *The Woman in White*, which began serialisation immediately after *A Tale of Two Cities*. And in November 1859, the long-established firm of John Murray published Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species; or, the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for*

* In the notes, the following conventions apply: the year '1859' has been omitted from all references to newspaper and periodical articles; first editions of primary texts from 1859 have been used, and subsequent references to them will be given parenthetically in the text.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 12 Nov 2026 at 22:03:39, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009739030.001

Life, which had sold out its first run before publication. These works represent some of the greatest literary, political, social, and scientific achievements of the Victorian period, and have come to embody a substantial part of what we mean by the term 'Victorian'. In this book, I will read these enduring texts alongside more ephemeral but nonetheless significant publications and newspapers and embed them within a year which was innovatory in many other respects than the literary, but which was deeply conflicted about how to accommodate and acknowledge change within contemporary thought and practice.

The year 1859 also saw a war in Europe between Italy and its Austrian rulers that had a huge impact on Britain, a political reform movement whose aftershocks still shape British politics today, and of course the everyday events that make up the most meaningful part of people's lives, though they rarely figure in subsequent histories. *Britain in 1859: Custom, History, Modernity* looks at how the enduring texts of the year that we still read now were shaped by and read alongside political, military, scientific, and cultural events and seeks to capture something of how that year was experienced by its less well-known inhabitants. Such local impacts are difficult to capture: they are profuse, and they will necessarily exceed, elude, and contradict the dominant narrative or expository thesis produced by retrospection. But an account of a single year can recognise and render some of history's quieter voices alongside texts and names that either were or would subsequently become better-known. The contours of one year convey a form of democracy – particularly fitting in the case of 1859, when concerns around political suffrage were so much in evidence – which can and should disrupt the topography of retrospective history.

As James Shapiro puts it in *A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare: 1599*, the author of a book about a specific year may 'capture some of the unpredictable and contingent nature of daily life' too often ignored in 'historical and biographical works of greater sweep'.[4] Shapiro also talks attractively and wisely about the 'plausibility, not certitude' (p. xviii) that has to be the year book author's only reasonable ambition, and about how a focus on a year can enable a sense of how a work, in his case *Hamlet*, emerges from a writer's 'engagement with his times' (p. xvii). This is a generously open formulation that explicitly recognises serendipity and contingency as factors in aesthetic and creative outputs. And for the author and reader of the year book alike, there is the pure detective joy of discovering 'hitherto hidden connections, patterns, and structures' such as those which shape Rosemary Ashton's *One Hot Summer: Dickens, Darwin, Disraeli, and the Great Stink of 1858*,[5] and Alethea Hayter's pioneering

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 12 Nov 2026 at 22:03:39, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009739030.001

A Sultry Month: Scenes of London Literary Life in 1846, which focuses on June of that year, in a day-by-day approach that tracks and eventually brings together the lives of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle, Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett, and the painter Benjamin Robert Haydon, amongst others. In the preface to his book on 1895, Nick Freeman wisely notes that there are as many renderings of a year as there are people to inhabit it;[6] one can only hope to produce a version of a year that would have been recognisable to some extent to its inhabitants whilst acknowledging that every rendering is an interpretation. The year book can also recognise the pragmatics of reception and the role of the reader in creating art, sustaining shelf-life, and conferring reputation; as James Chandler writes in *England in 1819*, an examination of a year can 'become a study in the cultural history of our cultural-historical literary practices', which inflect the life of the reader as much as that of the author.[7] The year book thus also necessarily brings to light the interpretative process itself.

In trying to encapsulate the variety of a year, and to capture the richness and freshness of the living texture of that year within one book, it is necessary to scaffold it with structures sufficiently permissive to speak to the period's underlying preoccupations whilst revealing how those various preoccupations mesh together to inform a prevailing mood. Three primary threads – custom and the experience of history; the relationship between the individual and the collective; and the life and writings of George Eliot – will bind together chapters on *On Liberty* and *Adam Bede*; 'The English Character'; the Theatre of War; Fraud and Forgery; and Originality, Adaptation, and Custom as the book moves through 1859. I will examine specific manifestations of the widely acknowledged historical self-consciousness of the mid-Victorian period, and changes to the shape and content of 'time' itself in 1859, and will argue that 'custom' as a lived form and an exemplar of precedent permeates not just the major texts of the year but its key events and responses to them. As a collective form, custom impacts upon the possibility of individuality, as do the strikes, debates over voting reform, wars, the status of the professions, and the creation of cultural audiences in that year. The conflict between the individual and the collective is a visceral one in 1859. To demonstrate something of the struggle to realise individuality, as well as to give voice to previously little-known aspects of an individual life – which is one of the most obvious possibilities of the book of a year – I will investigate the changes in the life and examine the writings of George Eliot during this year.

§§§§§

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 12 Nov 2026 at 22:03:39, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009739030.001

In writing about one year, different time-scales coincide. *Britain in 1859* is shaped by and written through these concurrent temporalities and investigates the ways in which they inform each other. A year is twelve months in the life of any individual, a chapter in the narrative of a particular event or events, and one year in all the years that have ever been. In 1859, those years expanded conclusively beyond the span of the Biblical narrative to the untold aeons, the deep history, opened up by geologists' and archaeologists' investigations. Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species by Natural Selection* proffered an explanation of the evolutionary process which necessarily exceeded a Biblical span of time. But earlier that year, tangible material evidence of deep history was literally unearthed as two amateur archaeologists witnessed a French team's digging up a stone axe that dated man's presence on earth to at least the Palaeolithic age. Joseph Prestwich presented his findings to the Royal Society in May, and John Evans to the Society of Antiquaries in June. The Prestwich axe, 'the most dangerous stone in the world',[8] marked what archaeologists have recognised as 'a pivotal moment in the development of the science of prehistory'.[9] The Prestwich axe and Darwin's book, coinciding in 1859, gave rise to descriptions of that year as an annus mirabilis for reasons other than Cannadine's.

It has become a truism that the Victorian period was, as Peter J. Bowler puts it, 'an age dominated by a fascination with the past', and the shape and duration of that past might be said to have changed in 1859, when Prestwich and Evans 'broke the time barrier and established human antiquity'.[10] But the amateur archaeologists' discovery was initially largely overlooked in favour of Darwin's publication, beyond some correspondence in *The Athenaeum* in November and December of that year,[11] and a mention of their work at the meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science in the autumn. Darwin's book was far more widely noticed and reviewed, as we will see, and indeed had been eagerly anticipated since his work was presented to the Linnean Society, alongside that of Alfred Russel Wallace, in the summer of 1858. Since then, of course, Darwin's significance has been fully recognised as helping to make the nineteenth century 'a turning point in history'.[12] But how 1859 was experienced by its own inhabitants is another question, and one which will be investigated in the book that follows, alongside a consideration of how 1859 has contributed to subsequent views of the mid-Victorian period. In the work of the slightly later generation of Whig historians, such as William Stubbs and Edward Freeman, who lived through 1859 themselves

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 12 Nov 2026 at 22:03:39, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009739030.001

and who reflect back on this period from the 1860s and beyond, we see a retro-fitting of progress, wherein 'the past may be revered; it is not regretted for there is nothing to regret. Whig history that earns the name is, by definition, a success story: the story of the triumph of constitutional liberty and representative institutions [. . .in] which the shades of venerated ancestors are honoured guests' (Burrow, *Liberal Descent*, p. 3). As Peter Bowler suggests, 'progress became central to their thinking precisely because it offered the hope that current changes might be part of a meaningful historical pattern' (p. 3). From the vantage point of the early twenty-first century, that assertion of progress may ring hollow, not least because of the consequences of another of 1859's key events: the drilling of the first commercial oil well in the USA, in Titusville, Pennsylvania. Thus, as the year opened out into a new apprehension of antiquity, it also laid the grounds for future catastrophe, and has some claims to being the first year of the Anthropocene.

Clearly, for subsequent readers and historians, a year will be a unit in the many potential narratives of how a historical period, career, topic, or literary genre has been understood. But for those living within a specific year, patterns and meanings will be far from clear, submerged as they are under quotidian pressures and within narratives that necessarily offer only short-term and potentially erroneous interpretations and perspectives. But it is also the case that everyday life, what John Burrow describes as 'the treasure of the accumulated labour of mankind, imperceptible to the age of history because not registered as event' provokes the question: 'How, in the human world, are such activities coordinated, how do they, so to say, become history?' (p. 220) Thomas Carlyle wrote in his 'Thoughts on History' that 'a talent for History may be said to be born with us, as our chief inheritance. In a certain sense, all men are historians.'[13] In a year when its inhabitants did not know themselves to be 'Victorians', we need to ask how they, let alone historians, experienced themselves as historical subjects and if they did, how that awareness was registered and represented.

1859 focused attention on how history might be recorded and experienced through responses to key events that were inflected through a distinctive historical consciousness, through a series of texts that were centrally preoccupied with that question, and with the competing modes of revolutionary and evolutionary change. As we will see, even apart from *A Tale of Two Cities*, the French Revolution was a ubiquitous presence that year, functioning as a gauge against which change that was considered precipitate,

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 12 Nov 2026 at 22:03:39, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009739030.001

ill-considered, or violent might be measured. The movement for electoral reform of 1859, and the war of Italian independence, where Italy's strongest ally was France, were both seen through the prism of the Revolution's aftermath. Darwin's work, on the other hand, built painstakingly over decades on the foundations laid by his own researches and voyages and by Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830–1833), is just one instance of many texts in this year that narrate change as slow, incremental, and barely perceptible, but nonetheless as a kind of progress.

I argue that the predominant, and most readily available, historical form of the year is custom, in which all could and did participate and within which the anonymity of the experiencing subject was irrelevant. Custom is based on precedent, and to observe it, and live within its forms was to be part of a conception of what George Eliot described in 1856 as 'incarnate history'.[14] Custom infiltrates and informs responses to key events, and the subjects, structural forms, and language of the year's best-known, most influential, and most popular texts, particularly *On Liberty*, *Adam Bede*, Mrs Beeton's *Book of Household Management*, *Self-Help*, and *A Tale of Two Cities*. Its application and understanding vary across these works, but custom is a concept central to all of them. Though often associated with popular culture, and less-advanced communities, custom is ubiquitous in 1859.

William Stubbs wrote in 1873 that 'there are no constitutional revolutions, no violent reversals of legislation; custom is for more potent than law and custom is modified infinitesimally every day'.[15] This recognises both custom's power and the difficulty of registering it. But the single-year book is a form that can give it due attention by recording the infinitesimal, and by capturing custom's impact as an agent in people's lives, and as a presence in written texts. *Britain in 1859: Custom, History, Modernity* is an attempt to do that as part of a thick history of the year, an assessment of its key events and texts and how they inter-act in the moment of their first readers. The specific form and remit of the book of a year can mediate between history and lived experience, and in the case of this particular year, can recognise custom as a form that does the same. Custom is ineluctably a part of the concurrent temporalities which I discussed earlier. It can inform individual decisions and actions, and how they are understood, as well as definitively determine British responses to the war being waged in Europe. In the intricate manoeuvring involved in trying (unsuccessfully) to get suffrage reform through parliament, we can also see customary political positions being played out. This is not of course to suggest that no innovations are seen this year, quite the opposite in fact:

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 12 Nov 2026 at 22:03:39, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009739030.001

the year was one of extraordinary innovation in literature, science, and trade, including the (initially unsuccessful) launch of Isambard Kingdom Brunel's enormous ship the Great Eastern and the breaking of ground for the Suez Canal. Yet these and other innovations negotiated with the past as they faced the future, nowhere more notably than in the opening of the National Portrait Gallery early in the year. Custom sits with the year's temporalities not in concentric relations but as one of a set of palimpsests whose connotations underpin the experiences and the writings of the inhabitants of 1859.

On Liberty's central concern is with the necessary maintenance of the rights of the individual in the face of the potential coercion of collective views and actions. Mill writes, 'If all mankind minus one, were of one opinion and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person, than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind'.[16] As a tenaciously pervasive and necessarily collective paradigm, Mill felt that custom, along with 'public opinion', is an important part of the forces marshalled against the possibility of the flourishing of the new forms of identity that were fundamental to the success of the nation. In this respect, *On Liberty* is aligned with other texts and political events that were concerned with the fundamental relationship between the individual and the collective, and indeed 1859 is book-ended by *On Liberty* in February and *Self-Help* in November, both of which concentrated, albeit with very different emphases, on the paradigmatic desirability of individual flourishing. The question is given specific focus by these texts, as well as by the novels in which the plight of the individual is a central theme. George Meredith's Richard Feverel and the young men of Anthony Trollope's *The Bertrams* struggle to prosper as they encounter respectively the edicts of an emotionally traumatised father and the challenges of professional life. But in Mill and Smiles, and indeed in *Adam Bede*, attention is given specifically to the ways in which individuals – usually male – may flourish in the face of the demands and attractions of the broader grouping to which they belong, and to how that individual prosperity may ideally serve the benefit of their community or nation.

The army offered a newly prominent model of collective identity in 1859. The Crimean War of 1854–1856 propelled the British army into its first major war since the defeat of Emperor Napoleon in 1815. This was swiftly followed by efforts to quell the Indian Uprising, which began in 1857 and was still smouldering in 1859. These experiences highlighted the army as a form of collective heroism which sat alongside the individual

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 12 Nov 2026 at 22:03:39, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009739030.001

heroes, and the tendency to hero-worship, which Carlyle had famously analysed. In the theatre, Charles Kean's final Shakespeare production at the Princess's Theatre was *Henry V*, the archetypal soldier-king, whose lines Kean edited to speak to the type of hero needed in 1859. But the year also shows concern for the collective experience of the army as a whole, its discipline and conditions, particularly given the challenges exposed by the Crimean conflict, and what happened to the soldiers who returned to Britain after the fighting was over. Some wrote books about their exploits; others, unable to forge their way as civilians, turned up in the dock of criminal courts. Despite these and other forms of casualty, the army persists as a potent cultural image; this became troubling when fighting erupted in Europe, and Britain was unwilling to join in the hostilities. Instead, a slew of volunteer Rifle Corps sprang up throughout England in response to whispers of a French invasion. The Corps spoke to the desire to re-align Britain and Britons with historic military glories, whilst also offering the attractive possibility of finding a new form of reassuringly exclusive, masculine group identity that for some was lacking in civilian life.

The very visible presence of the army and Rifle Corps informed controversies around, and indeed potentially modelled, forms of communal action and identity that year. Spring and summer saw a slew of strikes that affected a diverse range of trades across the country and that had an impact on everyday life as well as large infrastructure projects such as the building of the new Foreign Office in Whitehall. Trades Unions set themselves up in opposition to owners and managers, who in turn acted collectively to lock out their striking workers and to find alternative sources of labour. For some, the strikes were a material reminder of the power of the working classes to disrupt life and potentially to endanger national prosperity. At a time when voting reform dominated domestic political concerns, the collective power of the unions might seem to a nervous government a reminder of the need to manage working-class sentiments lest they boil over into revolution. Few politicians were as confident in the people as the Radical MP John Bright, who wrote to a correspondent about his ideas for a new reform bill that would not tie any extension of the franchise to educational attainment (as Mill and others had argued) or to temperance: 'If you will trust the people in the bulk, you will get a good constituency, and without difficulty'.[17] The voting reform debates of that year were concerned with modelling a specific form of individual respectability that would coalesce into a body of responsible voters who would act in the best interests of the country, subsuming their own interests within the larger question, or rather perhaps being subsumed within a group the

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 12 Nov 2026 at 22:03:39, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009739030.001

membership of which would enable them successfully to translate their own interests into those of the nation. The creation of the Liberal Party out of factions opposing the Conservative government of Lord Grey, whilst not eschewing the individual voices of MPs, nonetheless is part of a trend this year to build communities out of common interests.

The potential threat to individuality within the collective formation was strengthened later in the year by Darwin's work, which concentrated on species rather than individuals, and indeed ignored man altogether in his research, thereby seeming to fulfil for anxious readers the harrowing lines from Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (1850):

> Are God and Nature then at strife,
> That nature lends such evil dreams:
> So careful of the type she sees,
> O careless of the single life.[18]

Samuel Smiles's *Self-Help* was published by John Murray on the same day as Darwin's book and also considers, though less devastatingly, how to position the 'single life' within a larger organisation, in Smiles's case, that of the nation. He examines how the flourishing of unique individual talent might be enabled in order that it can feed the prosperity of a nation, whilst also recognising that some recompense needs to be given to the individual worker who is not destined to become a great designer or captain of industry. To become a 'true gentleman' is compensation for dutiful effort, and as one of Smiles's epigraphs to the final chapter of the 1866 Popular Edition of the book shows, it is entrenched within concerns for the country and its governance. This quotation is taken from *The Times* and is part of a leader column on the men still fighting in India:

> That which raises a country, that which strengthens a country, and that which dignifies a country, – that which spreads her power, creates her moral influence, and makes her respected and submitted to, bends the hearts of millions, and bows down the pride of nations to her – the instrument of obedience, the fountain of supremacy, the true throne, crown, and sceptre of a nation; – this aristocracy is not an aristocracy of blood, not an aristocracy of fashion, not an aristocracy of talent only; it is an aristocracy of Character. That is the true heraldry of man.[19]

The paragraph in *The Times* ends: 'it is this character, united with intellect, which has won and keeps India', thus making more explicit than Smiles the national interest that is at stake in inculcating the right kind of character within all men, no matter that, as *The Times* puts it, they may not have 'a single drop of Norman blood in their veins'.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 12 Nov 2026 at 22:03:39, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009739030.001

Thus, ambition and talent properly applied may enable an individual to exceed the expectations of the class they were born into without causing the chaos seen in France. Indeed, both Smiles and *The Times* suggest that such aspirational behaviour is crucial to the future prosperity and progress of the state. Smiles writes:

> The crown and glory of life is Character. It is the noblest possession of a man, constituting a rank in itself, and an estate in the general goodwill; dignifying every station, and exalting every position in society. It exercises a greater power than wealth, and secures all the honour without the jealousies of fame. It carries with it an influence which always tells; for it is the result of proved honour, rectitude, and consistency – qualities which, perhaps more than any other, command the general confidence and respect of mankind.[20]

George Eliot's eponymous hero, Adam Bede, seemed to reviewers a particularly admirable type of Englishman, seen first in the workshop where his exemplary industry is accompanied by his hymn-singing. That that industry and his moral behaviour should secure the confidence and respect of his neighbours is the happy expectation of Adam at the start of the novel. As early as 26 February, the *Saturday Review* was advising that, 'persons who only read one novel a year – and it is seldom that more than one really good novel is published in a year – may venture to make their selection, and read *Adam Bede*'.[21] And in the *Edinburgh Review*, Caroline Norton judged that the novelist 'has every reason to feel proud that the universal question in men's mouths in the pause between topics of war and politics, is – "have you read 'Adam Bede'?"'[22] Like the Italian war, the general election, and the call for voting reform, *Adam Bede* took its place as one of the key events of 1859. The person of Adam himself partly enables this identification with the contemporary moment through reviewers' welcoming him as 'no ideal creation, no figment of a writer's brain, one of ourselves ... lighting up some English hearth and home, for truly English is our friend Adam'.[23]

In a move that pre-empted the publication later in the year of Samuel Smiles's *Self-Help*, Adam was welcomed as 'a true model' of 'the noble, simple, self-relying type to be found – as Wordsworth's lines in the epigraph to this remarkable novel express it – among "nature's unambitious underwood/ And flowers that prosper in the shade"' (Norton, 225). As these lines from *The Excursion* (1814) suggest, the recognition of the value of an unambitious, unselfconscious life was not a new phenomenon, but it was to achieve greater political and social purchase in 1859, and *Adam Bede* arguably helped prepare the audience for Smiles's work, which

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 12 Nov 2026 at 22:03:39, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009739030.001

appeared in November. As the *Glasgow Herald* stated, Adam Bede had 'the hands of a carpenter, and the head of a gentleman',[24] a combination that Smiles's work would endorse, though his book and George Eliot's novel differ fundamentally in their ambitions for the exemplary worker.

By the end of the year, *Adam Bede* was confirmed as 1859's best-selling novel, easily outstripping the less ambitious books of which one reviewer, the publisher John Chapman, memorably wrote that, 'swinging on a gate is an intellectual amusement compared with reading most of them'.[25] Eliot's novel inaugurated a class of fiction that was psychologically acute, morally serious, and intellectually ambitious for its readers, and in her hands, the Victorian novel may be said to have come of age. But *Adam Bede*'s success is also significant in what it says about 1859: in a year concerned so profoundly with the past, Eliot shows her characters going through a process that allows them to live in sight of their past but not to be stymied by it. Indeed, Adam's success by the end of the novel is dependent on his observation of his community's customs and traditions and may seem to offer a model for the aspiring businessmen of 1859.

Eliot's own story is one of the organising structures that threads through the information and narratives of *1859*, and in this sense the book is both the life of a year and the story of a year in a life. In January, Marian Evans Lewes was 'in the midst of that exciting anxious business – taking a house'.[26] She was also, under her pen-name of George Eliot, correcting the proofs of her first novel, *Adam Bede*, which was to be published the following month. At the start of the year, only George Henry Lewes and her publishers knew Eliot's true identity: Eliot was famously keen that her fiction be judged on its own merits, and not as the work of one of the 'silly lady novelists' whose work she had reviewed in 1856.[27] Her publishers were equally eager to avoid the scandal of Eliot's home life, as a single woman living with a married man, becoming known. Her highly unusual situation led to a degree of enforced isolation that coloured Eliot's anxious hopes for her novel. John Blackwood had published Eliot's *Scenes of Clerical Life* to critical acclaim but modest sales in 1857, and much rested for both of them on how the novel was received. Initial reviews were extremely laudatory, and the book's reputation did not suffer when Eliot's identity was revealed. By the end of the year, the novel had sold an impressive 16,000 copies, and Eliot had also achieved the unusual tribute of having a racehorse named after her hero, Adam Bede. The horse was sadly less successful than its namesake.

As well as having its own intrinsic interest, Eliot's story shows some of the challenges of an individual's achieving the distinction and exceptionality

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 12 Nov 2026 at 22:03:39, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009739030.001

so prized by Mill in 1859. To examine her life in this year is to gain an insight into how a serious ambition for fiction might be married with a persistent desire for popularity, how cultural reputations are created, and how Eliot managed her unique domestic and creative situation. Eliot's life is also important as a reflection on the near invisibility of women in public at this time. Much of this book draws on the stories appearing in a fraction of the 816 newspapers and a handful of the 549 various kinds of periodicals published in Great Britain and Ireland in 1859. Though some journalism will have been written by women, women's names are absent from the leading newspapers unless they appear in reports from the criminal courts, are members of the royal family, or their artistic work is being reviewed. Snatches of women's stories may be gleaned from advertisements for situations, but they are essentially anonymised. Eliot's creativity, though initially camouflaged by a male pseudonym, demonstrates how fundamental women's cultural work, as writers, artists, actresses, singers, and musicians, is to women's achieving any kind of public presence, and to women's stories and experiences being acknowledged. As a pre-eminent intellectual, influential editor, and reviewer, and arguably the most important novelist of her period, the genesis of George Eliot's story in 1859 is one that not only shapes her contemporary readers' understanding of the history of their moment but intersects too with questions of fraud and identity, and gives an insight into the day-to-day business of a domestic household with its servant problems, and emotional complications. This too is part of the narrative of 1859.

This book would not have been possible without what Zoe Alker and Christopher Donaldson describe as the 'immense and expanding' 'province of digital heritage', which 'continues to transform how researchers access and engage with the cultural heritage of the Victorian era'.[28] This means that we are more able in the twenty-first century, with the availability of rich digital resources about the Victorian period, to understand more than ever before about how the landmark events and texts of any year were first received and understood, how they informed each other, how their influence was made known and disseminated, but also how they might barely register in people's consciousness alongside the micro-narratives of daily life that have previously got lost in history's grand narratives and the privileged status bestowed on its survivors.

Britain in 1859: Custom, History, Modernity draws together a wide range of discourses and texts and, in its methodology, moves between narrative history and literary criticism. Neither is simply 'context' for the other as both are equally important for telling the story of this year. Historical

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 12 Nov 2026 at 22:03:39, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009739030.001

events and published words are each active arenas within which we can witness the playing out of the prevailing concerns of 1859. Their combination is vital where the aim is a full (or, at least, a fuller) appreciation of the transmission and flow of ideas, the accretion of meaning within key terms, and the likely affective heft of events. Raphael Samuel described 'history as an organic form of knowledge, and one whose sources are promiscuous, drawing not only on real-life experience but also memory and myth, fantasy and desire; not only the chronological past of the documentary record but also the timeless one of "tradition"'.[29] This book takes up the implications of Samuel's insight that histories, stories, cannot be told without attention being paid to as many sources as possible, and not only sources of information, but of lived experience and emotions too, where literature, clearly, offers much. A book about 1859 is well-placed to pursue this 'organic form of knowledge' and, in doing so, it will employ the variety of approaches that are needed to register the richness of the experiences that are being revealed.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 12 Nov 2026 at 22:03:39, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009739030.001