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VICTORIANS LIVE

Introduction

By Herbert Sussman

For this issue, *Victorians Live* examines contemporary responses, counter-formations really, to the great transformations associated with the Victorians – empire, secular modernity, evolutionary theory. Shearer West discusses *Black Victorians: Black People in British Art 1800–1900* as revealing the complexity of Victorian attitudes toward race as manifested in these visual representations. The essay also notes the contemporary interest in this revisiting of Victorian black history as shown by the crowds that came to see the show at Birmingham and at Manchester, museums situated in the now multi-cultural British Midlands. If conventional wisdom sees in Victorian Britain the rise of a secular society, the gradual replacement of religion by science, *The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult* – both exhibition and catalogue – demonstrate a complex dialectic between empiricism and spiritualism in the nineteenth century that is continuous with the widespread challenge to rationality in our own time. And as George Levine demonstrates, the popularity of the celebration of Charles Darwin at the American Museum of Natural History shows Darwin to be the most famous and the most influential of Victorians, but again the initiative for the exhibition and its popularity draws upon the contemporary debates on teaching evolution, which in recapitulating the Huxleyan battles of the mid-nineteenth century participate in a global move to repudiate science itself.

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