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Introduction

Environments and Their Victorians

In our present time, we generally assume that a healthy economy is one marked by growth, rather than just sustained – let alone reduced – production. "The good life" is still characterized not by a thriving and diverse biosphere, but by individual material prosperity; the successful person (or nation) is, in so many eyes, the one displaying the most signs of wealth through conspicuous consumption and socioeconomic power. Even nature continues to be appreciated primarily for its fulfilment of human interests, such as our economic productivity, aesthetic pleasure, or improved personal health. And yet, despite the climate crises, resource-centered violence, and forced migrations of humans and other species arising from these self-centered, individualist views, we are still asking how we have reached such a dire situation and what it is that has kept us from acting effectively to improve it. With Britain one of the first among the most powerful, assertive, and technologically advanced nations to develop a culture reliant on self-worth defined by bourgeois affluence, the Victorian era marks the crucial historical period that gave rise to this current inability to see beyond our acquisitive drive or to act decisively as a collective in the face of global environmental destruction. But it also began the first local environmentalist groups, enacted the first legislation defending the rights of other-than-human species, and offered innovative literature aimed at shifting collective perspective and contesting environmental degradation. As such, the Victorian era holds not only valuable insights for understanding the limitations of our own environmentalist efforts, but also innovative suggestions for overcoming them.

Scholars to date have predominantly characterized the Victorian period's articulations of environmentalism as driven by models of stewardship and conservation, often rendering the organic world as a passive subject laid out for our appreciation and use. Human stewardship has been seen not simply as an ethical responsibility but also, by some, as an assumed right and privilege either given to us by a supernatural force or justified based on our perceived intellectual acumen. Consider, for example, the eco-sensitive rhetoric

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found in the 1897 *Spectator* essay "'Sixty Years' Change in Landscape," in which the anonymous author's articulation of environmental concern proves to function as a medium for a distinctly different ethical and economic investment than one might expect. Likely written by the journal's co-editor John St Loe Strachey, the piece proposes:

> It would have been a matter of deep regret had the Victorian Era witnessed a change in our rural scenery corresponding to that which has taken place near to the great towns. … [S]ixty years have shown that the evil results even of these destructive agencies are not permanent. The coal is worked out, the scrap-iron foundries, collieries, and bottle-works are deserted, and the ground once more in process of being replanted with trees, and restocked with flowers, birds, and even game.[1]

To hear this author tell it, Britain's extraction industry had ended years earlier – and a good thing, too! The seeming respect for the organic ecology found in "'Sixty Years,'" however, does not reflect an appreciation for nature or for rewilding. Rather, it turns out, it speaks to an interest in the expansionist efficiencies of modern agribusiness. According to the author, the shift from the commons – the parcels of land left public for general use by people and other animals and plants – to enclosures and "the discovery of new crops and scientific farming" has

> fixed the character of our average rural scenery, and made it such as we love and desire to preserve to-day. It replaced much that was wild, and much more that was pastoral and not cultivated, with a tamer but richer outline. It brought its compensation by the increased wealth of colour with the golden corn crops, the rich greens of fields of imported plants like turnips, marigolds, rape, and mustard.

More than this, the profit available to landlords has led them "to plant woods, make lakes, add to parks, and contribute further to enhance the beauty of the country." The idea that landowners' profits from mass agriculture foster the construction of a better, more beautiful landscape is an utterly convoluted turn. What initially appears to be an essay on environmentalism proves to be a celebration of agro-industry where farmed crops are a vital improvement on what is seen as unconsumable vegetation and where landscapes heavily managed by humans are better than those left to ancient organic and community processes.

Shifting Terms and Terrains

In the title to my introduction, the awkward inversion of the seemingly more familiar phrase "Victorians and Their Environments" is intended to remind us that environments influence an individual's sense of themselves

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and their own potential agency. In other words, the world that we can now imagine was shaped in large part by the world that had been imagined and shaped for us. Perspectival and formal conventions create realities and so, if for the moment we can adopt a more biocentric outlook, we may recognize that ecology – the interactions among living organisms and the elements of their environments with and within which they coexist – also gave shape to what has become recognized as Victorian. Many who were neither British nor resident in its colonies contributed to the shaping of the Victorian Age, just as the current scholarly attention to the global anglophone is impacted and shaped in part by the nonglobal – the local and the regional, for example – and by non-English languages and cultures.

We can get a sense of these ecological and cultural interrelations from the first book written by an Indigenous author from the British colony of Upper Canada (Canada became a nation in 1867), the bestselling *Life History and Travels of Ka-ge-ga-gah-bowh, 1847* (1847). Written by Kahgegagahbowh (under the name George Copway), the autobiography demonstrates the complicated tangle behind our perceptions of both the environment and Victorians. The author describes being born

> in nature's wide domain! The trees were all that sheltered my infant limbs – the blue heavens all that covered me. I am one of nature's children … and wherever I see her, emotions of pleasure roll in my breast, and swell and burst like waves on the shores of the ocean, in prayer to Him who has placed me in her hand.[2]

Kahgegagahbowh identified as Ojibwe, part of the Anishinaabe group of Indigenous peoples. At the same time, he readily acknowledged the influence of the English language and the Methodist religion on his values and self-identity. Born and raised near the mouth of the Trent River, he served as a Methodist missionary in the United States before being accepted as a preacher by the Wesleyan Methodist Canadian conference in 1842. He was elected vice president of the Ojibwe General Council but, in 1846, was accused of embezzlement by the Saugeen tribe and eventually defrocked.[3] Kahgegagahbowh then left Upper Canada for the US, where he published his autobiography. In 1850, he traveled to Europe, writing about the ocean crossing, "Fair winds, clear skies, and no rolling sea – calm as the waters of our dear 'Hudson,' that beloved river, which winds along (as Byron said of such scenery), 'In the wild power of mountain majesty.'"[4] Upon his arrival in Liverpool, he noted, "I am now in a strange place. The country, the people, and the places are strange. The sky is strange – indeed the waters before my window roll with strange rapidity."[5] Kahgegagahbowh's first impressions of Britain were mostly positive, as were, he tells us, those the

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Victorians had of him. Notably, while the ocean is a calm mediation in which the Indigenous author turns to a Romantic poet to articulate his sense of a sublimity familiar to him, the colonizer is the alien and foreign, the people of Liverpool conflated with their organic environment in their strangeness.

It is an oversimplification to recognize Kahgegagahbowh as either Victorian or as *not* Victorian; his view of his ecological network reflects not only an Ojibwe worldview but also aesthetic and scientific developments in the nineteenth-century English-speaking world. In his description of his birthplace, in my first quotation from his autobiography above, he presents the natural environment as an all-consuming eco-spiritual force that permeates the human; however, it is simultaneously overridden by Christian authority. But then Kahgegagahbowh goes on to speculate on its transhistorical ineffability: "Nature will be nature still, while palaces shall decay and fall in ruins. Yes, Niagara will be Niagara a thousand years hence!"[6] He thus reconceptualizes the Christian promise of the eternal not as a *human* institution but, drawing on his First Nations cosmology, as a transhistorical organic force symbolized by an element of the precolonial landscape – the name "Niagara" likely deriving from an Iroquoian language and referring to the cataract connecting Lake Erie and Lake Ontario, as well as the falls and the surrounding land. While a global model of environmentalism did not become standard until the mid twentieth century, Kahgegagahbowh's work demonstrates that an all-encompassing or cosmological sense of the environment was active before any dominant national or Western concept took hold.

To effectively act on current formulations of our planet's environmental state requires an awareness of the diverse values, preferences, and limiting perspectives that gave shape to it, as well as those that were put aside. This has been a motivating factor in Victorian eco-studies over the past few decades. As *Life History and Travels of Ka-ge-ga-gah-bowh* suggests, the field benefits from a broad range of perspectives, as well as caution regarding understandings of history and activism that assume a unified field of opportunity. Appropriately, recent work on the subject has been characterized by myriad motivations and approaches. In 2002, John Parham asked, "Was there a Victorian Ecology?" and concluded that, indeed, there had been, albeit one distinct from the more coherent and thus familiar Romantic model. As he insightfully observes, "despite its attempts to re-write the canon, ecocriticism, to some extent, has only succeeded in creating a canon of its own," and one that gives short shrift to Victorian works.[7] Parham argues that, in the Victorian period, scientific writings on the subject were especially rich but contemporary scholars had not yet given this work the attention it warranted.

Since the time of Parham's argument, other scholars have addressed the same query, with the latest responses declaring that the study of Victorian

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literature and the environment has taken off. If there has been an absence of an especially coherent, dominant approach to the subject among academics, this does not signal a gap in Victorians' engagements with the environment or in today's engagements with Victorian eco-interests. Rather, gestures that undermine canonical and disciplinary cohesion reflect authors' and scholars' diverse modes of inquiry and representation, just as they did during Queen Victoria's reign. As the chapters in this collection illuminate, Victorian conceptions of the environment did not arise from a single source or history. Authors, artists, scientists, and others all offered different articulations rooted in their own experiences and sets of knowledge, including in works by – to suggest some of this diversity – Walter Lawry Buller, Charles Darwin, E. Pauline Johnson, Harriet Martineau, Susanna Moodie, John Ruskin, Henry Salt, Herbert Spencer, and Vernon Lee. These figures speak of the environment as, among other things, a planetary network of organic engagements, a source of resources for human use, a way of life and self-identification, the ecology in which one participates, an aesthetic force, and a spiritual responsibility. Scientists, primarily in Europe and the US, studied the environment through spatial and temporal scales ranging from the microscopic to the planetary to the otherworldly, from the transhistorical to the contemporary to the futuristic. Others, such as politicians, adventurers, local activists, farmers, Indigenous thinkers, and urban planners worked from other points of concern, while creative writers and visual artists used their media to imagine new themes, forms, and possibilities, often using the speculative to do so.

According to Ralph Jessop, Thomas Carlyle was the first to use the term "environment" in its current sense, "as a response to a large number of intersecting social, political, economic, and agrarian changes associated with the Industrial Revolution."[8] Carlyle's formulation, he argues, captures the "interrelation of literary, philosophical, and social critique [as] a paradigm-shifting challenge to the authority of mechanism." Victorian environmental studies takes into account the influence of not only the Industrial Revolution and imperialist and colonialist exploitation, but also Darwinian and Spencerian theory; fossil capitalism; new ideas around ecological justice, stewardship, and sustainability; the rise of Chartist, animal rights, and heritage and land preservation movements; and, not least, innovations in literature and other arts that all contributed to our current, complicated understanding of nature, environment, and environmentalism. Moreover, as I have remarked elsewhere, Victorians intentionally challenged dominant, economically driven frameworks and "often turned to a conveniently slippery notion of natural environments and identities in order to obscure normative dichotomies that were deeply invested in economic, political, and

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moral configurations of power and identity."[9] At the same time, as Allen MacDuffie observes, "racial, imperial, and economic ideologies blunted or even subverted the new conceptual possibilities for ecological thinking that the term *environment* both reflected and helped generate."[10] Just as certain especially influential individuals' ideas came to shape the Victorian environment, others that we might find useful today were erased from consideration, shifting into interstitial spaces of conceptual possibility.

Topical Crosscurrents

The twenty-two chapters in the *Cambridge Companion to Victorian Literature and the Environment* are divided into five parts that speak to these issues from interrelated perspectives: The Global Imaginary; Imperialism and Colonialism; Vegetal and Animal Correlations; Environmental Uses and Abuses; and Environmentalism. Written by scholars from around the world, each of the chapters addresses more than one of the five topics. The volume's structure is intended to encourage the decentering of the Western but also of the human in our consideration of the personal, local, global, and cosmological sense of the environment and environmentalism. Kahgegagahbowh's autobiography makes it apparent that many individuals who were technically defined as part of the British Empire and who contributed to the nineteenth-century conceptualization of the environment did not recognize themselves as particularly Victorian. Moreover, the multidirectional influences of imperialism and colonization troubled efforts by people at the time to define, manage, and use the planet. Kahgegagahbowh's *Life History* encourages us to consider who had a voice in the collective description of the environment.

As Part I of this collection suggests, while some Victorians celebrated the natural world on an intimate level, others turned to increasingly popular genres such as travel writing, science fiction, and the Gothic to consider expansive paradigms of ecological networking. In "Part I: The Global Imaginary," contributors consider generic and formal innovations that contributed to modeling a more coherent, less dispersed global environmental movement. Jesse Oak Taylor's chapter approaches literature as a geologic archive; with the "capacity to say more than it ought to properly know," this record unearths the catastrophism that belies the more familiar literary facade of fundamentally progressive order. Roger Luckhurst locates a comparable disturbance in the Gothic's frequent rupturing of scale. The Gothic sensibility, he argues, is tailormade for the eco-apocalyptic, often morphing into the subgenre of the eco-weird in its shift away from a human-centered perception as it allows for alternative framings of ecological crises in general. Benjamin Morgan situates the ecological impact of the Industrial

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Revolution within paradigms of social excess and degeneration found in works of science fiction and decadence, while Cannon Schmitt turns to the study of blue ecology, arguing that, for Victorians, the ocean offered an illusion of infiniteness that fostered the creative conception of a vast realm beyond any notable human impact. In his contribution, Nathan K. Hensley considers notions of global systems of British Empire and economic development as, at bottom, ecological. As Hensley argues, Victorian literature molded imperialist exploitation into aesthetic shape.

This subject is developed further in "Part II: Imperialism and Colonialism," in which contributors speak to the intersectionality of individual and collective identities that impacted lives, practices, and cultures on an international scale. Grace Moore's chapter situates the analysis within the context of colonialist agriculture specifically, looking at the dysfunctional transposition of a British idyll of small-scale self-sufficiency onto the Australian landscape, along with Anthony Trollope's experience of and work on the subject. Meanwhile, Lindsay Wells demonstrates the competing models of colonial relations captured in the aesthetics of botanical illustrations by British and Indian artists. And Sukanya Banerjee explores the adaptation of the georgic in Indian literature as commentary on the agricultural interests of colonial power. Finally, Philip Steer addresses the crosscurrents among settler environments, Indigenous perspectives, and literature by drawing examples from New Zealand, Australia, and Canada.

"Part III: Vegetal and Animal Correlations" expands the inquiry into non-Western contributions to the shaping of what we know as the environment by complicating the very notion of human autonomy through consideration of the influence of other species. Innovations in the literature of the period – like more recent theories of trans-species communication, co-reliance, and cross-influence – problematized the more familiar human economic and capitalist framing. This part explores Victorians' own questioning of environmental (and environmentalist) models that present the human as central to an ecological understanding and yet independent from it. In 1866, German zoologist, marine biologist, and avid Darwinian Ernst Haeckel defined "ecology" as the science of "the *relationship* of the organism to the surrounding exterior world" (my emphasis).[11] Herbert Spencer likewise developed a model of human society as a single biological organism given cohesion and agency through the collective efforts of its micro-organisms. In a similar manner, various other Victorians asked where the human ends and other species begin and what the limits of human agency are or should be.

In her chapter, Catherine Maxwell turns attention to the intimate, personal, and specific through a rich survey of Victorian floral poetics. Maxwell observes the multiple ways in which the ecological saturates not only a

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poetic tradition but the very idea of writing itself. Michael Marder extends this inquiry in his chapter, addressing the English tradition of the poetic herbarium, exploring Emily Dickinson's and other writers' engagements as defined in part by intimacies across species. Meanwhile, in my contribution to this part, I address trans-species intimacies as recognizing a queer animality that is not shaped by assumptions of sexuality and desire but by an intersubjectivity rooted in an appreciation of co-reliance and co-identification. Elizabeth Chang then scales this subject of inquiry to a global level. Turning to the practice of plant miniaturization and invasion, Chang considers the relationship of species taxonomy to narrative form.

It is not surprising that our interest in the environment has always privileged those aspects recognized to have value to humans – whether as an aesthetic experience, something to be extracted, or a renewable resource. Visions of industrial development, imperial expansion, and political and scientific progress were often mutually reinforcing, brought together through a formulation that discredited anything that did not contribute to improving the lives of middle-class, Western people. In her chapter in "Part IV: Environmental Uses and Abuses," Elizabeth Carolyn Miller argues that the development of an extraction-based society often came with the sacrifice of the ecological networks from which coal and other resources were removed. Ella Mershon's chapter conceptualizes global exploitation through the model of the Capitalocene, as captured in Olive Schreiner's representation of the British South African Company in Rhodesia (modern Zimbabwe). In a particularly poignant chapter, Wendy Parkins looks at the way in which individuals concerned about the decimation of bird populations in New Zealand often seemed blind to their own contributions to the devastation. Moreover, as Parkins demonstrates, the displacement theory of natural history also then naturalized colonization and the disempowerment of the Māori population. And as Carolyn Lesjak argues in her chapter on Victorian approaches to land use, the question is "less whether they knew what was happening and more what they chose to do with that knowledge."

The collection's concluding chapters in "Part V: Environmentalism," extend the previous part's arguments into more explicitly environmentalist issues. The contributors explore ways in which literary and artistic renderings of the organic world were in a complicated relationship with concerns regarding the extraction industry, agricultural imperialism, and various other practices that damaged biospheric elements and interrelations. Allen MacDuffie notes in his chapter on pollution that, throughout the nineteenth century, debates continued around the actual nature and form of environmental change as crisis. The subject was explored through not only scientific discourses, but also those of aesthetics, activism, and

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others. In her chapter, Kate Flint asks not simply what it meant to look at environmental damage through an aesthetic eye, but what it would mean to look at nineteenth-century visual art through an ecological eye. As she emphasizes, this is never a question just about the arts but is always imbricated with other discursive fields vying for authority. Adeline Johns-Putra demonstrates in her piece that even the scientific conversion of weather into climate reflects rhetorical contributions to projects of empire. Eco-activism, in this light, occurs on the level of language and aesthetics, rather than that of conscious action. Meanwhile, Barbara Leckie tracks the sense of frustration to be found in fantastic works by Lewis Carroll and William Morris, where literary form and space are distended in transformative gestures as suggestions for real-world shifts in eco-perspective. In her contribution on activism, Caroline Levine speaks of the still persistent progress narrative that was both presented and critiqued within Victorian literature. As she notes, however, this earlier writing does not offer guidance in the form of activist strategies for undermining dominant economic systems. Levine proposes that, for such strategies, we should look to the form of past successful campaigns for action, outlining certain formal elements that contributed to positive environmental change in the Victorian Age and could do so today.

Collectively, these chapters offer examples from around the world that pay attention to complicated rhetorical maneuverings such as those found in "'Sixty Years Change,'" in which eco-friendly discourse serves unfriendly ends. At the same time, they bring forward the erasure of the perspectives of those – the non-Western, the nonhuman, and other disenfranchised lives – who did not have the privilege of being recognized as equal participants in their local and global ecologies. This new knowledge contributes to reformulations of our understanding of the Victorian environment and of the limits of our own capabilities as scholars in ever understanding it wholly. It is my hope, however, that this collection will also foster a dissident engagement with our sense of who the Victorians were, the factors that influenced the idea of environmentalism they developed, and what we might do to enhance environmentalist efficacy for all members of our ecologies today.

Notes

1. "'Sixty Years' Change in Landscape," *The Spectator* 3599 (June 19, 1897), 865–6 at 865, https://shorturl.at/uX133. A distinctly different understanding of the coal industry at the turn of the century can be found in Frances Molena, "Remarkable Weather of 1911: The Effect of the Combustion of Coal on the Climate – What Scientists Predict for the Future," *Popular Mechanics* (March 1912), 339–42.

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2. George Copway, *The Life, History, and Travels of Ka-ge-ga-gah-bowh* (Albany: Weed and Parsons, 1847), 16. Library of Congress, https://shorturl.at/oP2qd.
3. Donald B. Smith, "Kahgegagahbowh," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online* ([1976] 2015), www.biographi.ca/en/bio.php?id_nbr=4517.
4. George Copway, *Running Sketches of Men and Places, in England, France, Germany, Belgium, and Scotland* (New York: J.C. Ricker, 1851), 45.
5. Copway, *Running Sketches*, 44.
6. Copway, *Life*, 18.
7. John Parham, "Was There a Victorian Ecology?," in John Parham, ed., *The Environmental Tradition in English Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 156.
8. Ralph Jessop, "Coinage of the Term Environment: A Word Without Authority and Carlyle's Displacement of the Mechanical Metaphor," *Literature Compass* 9.11 (2012), 708–20 at 708.
9. Dennis Denisoff, "Fluid Margins: Natural Environments in Victorian Culture," *Victorian Review*, 36.2 (Fall 2010), 7–10 at 8.
10. Allen MacDuffie, "Environment," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 46.3/4 (Fall/Winter 2018), 681–4 at 681.
11. Cited in K. Friederichs, "A Definition of Ecology and Some Thoughts about Basic Concepts," *Ecology* 39.1 (January 1958), 154–9 at 154.

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