

Review: *Dark Victorians* by Vanessa D. Dickerson

Fiona Wilkes

Dark Victorians

Vanessa D. Dickerson

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Dark Victorians is a slim, well-presented and readable volume which aims to trace the complex and changing relationship between white British Victorians and their black American counterparts.

Dickerson, in the opening chapters, traces the transatlantic connections between black Americans and white Britons. In two further chapters, she examines this relationship in a detailed analysis of the writings of two seminal authors, Thomas Carlyle and W. E. B. Du Bois.

In 'On Coming to America: The British Subject and the African American Slave', Dickerson argues that despite the historical relationship between the United States and Britain, their respective attitudes to the institution of slavery and to the black American highlight a plethora of anxieties: the physical and philosophical implications of enslavement, actual and industrial; Britain's concern with the incipient issues of race and empire; and, the tensions existing between a monarchical and hierarchical society and, a flaunted but flawed democratic one. Dickerson shows that the obligatory observations of the British antebellum traveller to America on the subjugation of the black slave, prevalent in literature until the middle of the century, reflect these anxieties. Authors as diverse as Fanny Trollope, Frederick Marryat, George Combe, Harriet Martineau, Fanny Kemble, and Charles Dickens, along with numerous, miscellaneous travelogues and essays, are compelled to keep the slave steadily before the reader. Their fascination with the institution of slavery and the figure of the slave are treated with admixtures of curiosity, repugnance and sentimentality. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Dickerson notes, authors such William Makepeace Thackeray, Anthony Trollope and Rudyard Kipling mark the increasingly strident and racist tide of race relations induced by the changing socio-political climate in both Britain and America. Actual physical crossings of the Atlantic are, Dickerson says, supplemented by imaginative and metaphoric ones:

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, Elizabeth Gaskell's 'An Accursed Race', Robert Browning's 'Caliban Upon Setbos' and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point'. Dickerson concludes that these literary productions inject the lives of black African Americans into the minds of white British Victorians. The most significant outcome for African Americans was a body of writing that provided a critical view of their nascent nation. British writing did much to raise consciousness of black Africans in America but it did not necessarily ameliorate their status.

Conversely, in her second chapter 'Hail Britannia: African Americans Abroad in Victorian England', Dickerson alerts the reader to the different socio-cultural imperatives that precipitated the black American's relationship with white Britons. Whilst the white Briton travelled confidently with a mission to propagate cultural imperialism and the white American with an assumption of their 'manifest destiny', black American travellers were compelled to reflect on their identity in leaving a country that abused and disowned them. For the majority of black Americans who came not as visitors, voyeurs or agents but as property, servants and slaves, travel gave little sense of empowerment and offered no opportunity of personal agency to comment and interpret. There is a paucity of travel writing by blacks. However, many nineteenth-century African Americans of prominence did travel to Britain. Dickerson argues that there is a strong correlation between black emancipatory activities and European travel. The commodification of the slave testimony is indicative of blacks' need for fiscal survival and is accompanied by gruelling physical lecture tours and benevolent philanthropy. Although some became literally Black Victorians, those such as William and Ellen Craft, John Brown, Francis Frederic, Josephine and Clarissa Brown and Ira F. Aldridge, among others, ultimately returned, renewed, invigorated and determined to press for human rights and democratic freedoms, for example, Frederick Douglas and Harriet Jacobs. Britain for black Americans was important in overcoming and circumventing impediments to black freedom and self-realisation in the United States and significant in giving blacks greater influence, self-confidence and visibility as leaders and the opportunity to take measure of their own identity.

In chapter three, Dickerson examines Thomas Carlyle's *An Occasional*

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Discourse on the Nigger Question (1853) which not only articulates the imperialism and racialism of the time but also the shift away from anti-slavery towards a more overt racism which was deeply unsympathetic to the African American. After examining the *Discourse* in detail, Dickerson shows how black Americans actively engaged with this text. This theme is taken up and examined with some success in Dickerson's exposition of the writings of W. E. B. Du Bois, in particular, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903).

The conclusion explores intriguingly the legacy of the Victorian in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Dickerson argues that the re-inscription of conservative Victorian values into American life remains essential and constitutive, yet it is contested and is a cause of conflict in American black communities. This bifurcation of white and black lives seems to negate the premise of the book that there was, or is, a real and palpable relationship between white British Victorians and their black counterparts.

The book is inconclusive in firmly establishing a mutual relationship between white British Victorians and their black American counterparts. The relationship which emerges from the author's exposition is essentially a one-sided one of the black espousal of Victorian values as a legitimising force and site of contested ground. Although the 'dark Victorians' are considered in literal and metaphorical interpretations, the general reader is sometimes left in doubt as to what constitutes a 'dark' Victorian – W.E.B. Du Bois certainly, but Thomas Carlyle?

There is little evidence that the author has returned to original archival material, if indeed this exists. Instead, she uses published volumes, collected editions and theoretical readers. Despite this, quotations are vivid, appropriate and illustrative. Although Dickerson doesn't engage directly with post-colonial discourse, the bibliography shows that she has located her argument within current scholarship and major works in this field.

This book can be welcomed as an exploration of the wider cultural influence of 'Victorianism' in the examination of the relationship between the British and black inhabitants of antebellum America to the present day. However, readers looking for a wider exposition of Victorian attitudes to race will need to look elsewhere.

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