

When Was the Nineteenth Century Where? Whither Victorian Studies?

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The title and sub-title of this conference pose two rather different questions, linked by that most useful (and most over-used) punctuation mark of the Anglo-American academic lexicon: the colon. Let me begin by addressing the second half of the posed question – that is, ‘The Future of Victorian Studies?’ Presumably, the terminal question mark is meant to imply that the future of Victorian Studies is in some sense in question, or under threat. This is a reading of the question that could readily be substantiated by skimming through many of the hand-wringing ‘state of the field’ pieces that have appeared in publications such as the *Journal of Victorian Culture* in the past five years or so. In History as a discipline, my suspicion (based entirely upon anecdotal and impressionistic evidence rather than rigorous research) is that there may indeed be some statistical basis for this anxiety. My sense is that the past decade may have seen a decline in the proportion of modern British history PhDs being undertaken on nineteenth- (as opposed to eighteenth- or twentieth-) century topics. But that said, it is worth noting at the outset that I am unconvinced by the common argument that Victorian Studies is experiencing some sort of dangerous or unique crisis, whether existential or statistical. Rather, I would argue that the notion of the ‘Victorian’ is a useful albeit inadequate descriptor which has become caught up in British historians’ broader (and entirely laudable) efforts to engage with concepts of imperial Englishness, on the one hand, and with concepts of modernity, on the other.

This brings me to the initial portion of the conference title: the ‘Long Nineteenth Century’. Does situating Victorian Studies within the long nineteenth century serve to recuperate the Victorian as a meaningful category of analysis – or, failing that, at least to ‘sex up’ the historical significance of the Victorians? ‘If the question implies that the study of the Victorian era is enriched by an embrace of a broader framework that encompasses some portion of the years that came before and/or the years that came after, then one can only agree’. I’ve voted with my feet over the past two decades on this question by writing first a monograph on radical politics in the mid-Victorian era (entitled *After Chartism*¹) and then a study of consumer debt and credit in what I termed ‘the very

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long nineteenth century', a period that I dated from c. 1740-1914. In the latter book, *The Character of Credit*², my choice both to extend the Victorian era and to extend it backward into the eighteenth century was dictated by a desire to grapple with the question of modernity: my evidence suggested (at least to me) that this very long nineteenth century both saw the creation of legal institutions aimed at creating autonomous contractual individuals, and the persistent refusal of historical persons to accept and act according to these new legal instruments of modernity. Confining that project to the Victorian period would have limited my ability to discuss both change and continuity over time. Major changes did, I think, occur in penal policy vis-à-vis debtors in the Victorian era, changes that virtually criminalised imprisonment for debt for male labourers. But we can understand the significance of these changes – and their peculiarity – only by situating the study of the Victorian period within a much longer chronological span that encompasses significant portions of the eighteenth century.

This advocacy of a re-situation of the 'Victorian' within a long nineteenth century framework in no sense denies the possibility and the potential virtues of situating Victorian Studies within a long twentieth century – an option that the title of this conference perhaps prematurely forecloses. Jose Harris's *Private Lives, Public Spirit: A Social History of Britain, 1870-1914* speaks eloquently to this option:

In so far as there have ever been great chasms rather than subterranean murmurings in the deep structures of British social history, it seems to me that they occurred in the 1870s and 1880s, and then again in the 1960s and 1970s, rather than in the apparently more dramatic and cataclysmic happenings of either of the two world wars.³

'In so far as "periods" have "characters", she continues, 'late Victorian and Edwardian Britain resembled the Britain of the 1920s and 1930s, and even of the 1940s and 1950s, at least as much as, and in many ways far more than, the Britain of the early and mid-Victorian years'.⁴ For Harris, the imperative to relocate the later Victorian period in the twentieth century lies again centrally in the issue of modernity: she finds her rationale for this periodisation in the shift to 'modern' demographic structures (including the 'stable, monogamous, highly integrated family') by the 1870s, in the arrival of public utilities and municipal socialism after 1867, in the increase of mass production (including the onset of

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a global revolution in food production) and of mass retailing in the 1870s and 1880s, and in the arrival of mass education, mass culture and mass leisure. This analysis is broadly compatible with Habermas's interpretation of modernity and its discontents, positing the Victorian era as a period that saw both the high point and the turning point in the long history of the liberal public sphere.

Neither situating the Victorian era within a long nineteenth nor locating this period within a long twentieth century, I would argue, poses an especially deep threat to the future of Victorian Studies as a field of research or training. Rather, these two tendencies within historical scholarship on modern Britain pose rather different (and rather more interesting) questions than are accessible from the vantage point provided by the very short nineteenth century that is the Victorian period itself. Locating the Victorians within the long nineteenth century, as Richard Price argued in his 1996 *Journal of British Studies* article on 'Historiography, Narrative, and the Nineteenth Century', raises key questions about the fundamental continuities (and thus the essential conservatism) of English society, culture and politics. By looking backward from the Victorian era, a generation of historians has championed "continuity" as "the central descriptor of nineteenth-century society" thus rejecting an earlier generation's emphasis on change as the defining feature of this period.⁵ Price's interpretation is compatible, in many ways, with Jose Harris's. Both historians depict the 1870s and 1880s as a watershed, an interpretation that could arguably provide champions of Victorian Studies with ammunition for their argument for the centrality of the Victorian era as the historical period that encompassed both the persistence of an old regime and the emergence of a new modernity. Arguing, that is, that the Victorian era was pivotal—rather than arguing that it was seamless or historically coherent—underlines the continued salience of 'Victorian Studies' as a project.

I remain unconvinced, however, that these really are the questions that twenty-first-century historians should be asking of the Victorian period in particular, or about the periodisation of Britain's nineteenth-century more broadly. Rather, I would suggest that we focus instead on three key issues central to the vitality not merely of Victorian Studies but to our broader understanding of Britain in the modern era. These three issues are first, interdisciplinary; second, Britain's place in Europe; and third, the problems of empire.

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It is today perhaps too easy to forget the emancipatory effect of Victorian Studies as a field with regard to interdisciplinary research and teaching, the extent to which it was under the aegis of this rubric that a bold generation of scholars began in the 1960s and 1970s to think outside their conventional historical and literary boxes. A key role in this regard was played by the journal *Victorian Studies*, under the inspired editorial leadership of scholars such as Martha Vicinus who were both willing and able to cross the yawning divide between literary and historical studies. Attention to literature as an historical force encouraged scholars such as Vicinus to take first women and then gender seriously: the role played by Victorian Studies as a field in promoting gender studies more broadly deserves to be underlined, and celebrated. The ability of Victorian Studies to generate scholarship which crosses conventional boundaries merits comment and perhaps scrutiny. Do the rubrics of 'the Georgian' or 'twentieth-century' serve so well to encourage intellectual development across (rather than only within) disciplinary boundaries?

If the Victorian period is, as a tool for interdisciplinary inquiry, perhaps disproportionately good to think with, its utility is much less when one turns to the problem of seeking to situate British histories within the histories of Europe. The imperative for rethinking British history as a part of the wider development of European nations, states and identities derives from more than present-mindedness borne of the European Union. For the gestation and protracted demise of the Victorian period were framed by emphatically European events: the final fall of Napoleon in 1815, and the outbreak of the First World War a century later. The Victorians themselves, moreover, were far more conscious of their European identities than subsequent historians of the Victorian era have been. The enthusiasm with which Victorian men and women supported continental liberal and nationalist leaders such as Garibaldi and Kossuth, the alacrity with which figures such as the Brownings seized upon the opportunity to live expatriate lives and the success with which Thomas Cook exploited untapped wells of tourism all speak eloquently of the need to situate nineteenth-century British history and culture within European contexts. As an analytic category, however, 'the Victorian' does little (if anything) to illuminate the myriad of linkages forged between Victorian Britons and their fellow Europeans. In this context, the category of 'the long nineteenth century', beginning perhaps in the 1780s and ending no earlier than 1914, is not merely useful, but requisite.

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If we are to recapture and assess the historical lives of ‘the Victorians’ in relation to Europe, it will be essential to extend the remit of Victorian Studies at both chronological ends.

If Europe (and Britain’s place in Europe) poses taxing problems for ‘Victorian Studies’, the empire arguably raises insuperable difficulties in this context. For colonies of white settlement, to be sure, the term ‘Victorian’ is often used by historians, and has some salience: references to Victorian Ontario or Victorian Cape Town have a degree of historical purchase. But when we turn to the remainder of the empire, to the vast non-white populations placed under British rule, the ‘Victorian period’ loses much of its cogency. Victoria herself loomed large in the symbolic imagery of empire, at home and abroad. But the significance of distinctively Victorian values for daily life among the subaltern classes under British rule was severely limited. At the risk of being extreme, one might argue that outside the white colonies of settlement, what was most distinctive about the Victorian period for colonised peoples was its absence. Georgian developments such as the rise of evangelical opposition to the slave trade and mounting resentment of the east India Company’s monopoly shaped the tenor of nineteenth-century imperial relations far more forcibly than Victorian liberalism; late-Victorian developments such as the Scramble for Africa and its accompanying forced labour regimes arguably precipitated that continent into a horrific twentieth century without the prior experience of a nineteenth-century transition from early modern to modern society, culture and economics.

If, as historians of empire repeatedly attest, colony and metropole are linked indissolubly at the hip, the limited utility of ‘the Victorian’ as a category of analysis for British imperial history matters to the future of Victorian Studies. Testing whether the ‘Victorian’ rubric is more suitable to Victorians at home than abroad, more suitable to Victorians in Calcutta than Cairo, would provide those anxious for the future of Victorian Studies with an appropriate mechanism for interrogating the viability of the field. First ask ‘when was the Victorian era and where?’, and only then demand ‘whither Victorian Studies?’.

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¹ Margot C Finn, *After Chartism: Class and Nation in English Radical Politics, 1848-1874* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

² Margot C Finn, *The Character of Credit: Personal Debt in English Culture, 1740-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

³ Jose Harris, *Private Lives, Public Spirit: A Social History of Britain 1870-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p.252.

⁴ Harris, *Private Lives*, p.252.

⁵ Richard Price, 'Historiography, Narrative, and the Nineteenth Century', *Journal of British Studies*, 35 (1996), 220-256 (p.230).