VICTORIAN POPULAR FICTION

1860-80

R.C. TERRY

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Preface

We know a great deal about what was provided for the working man to read and what the working man chose to read, what was given to him for his improvement by the missionary-minded, and what the entrepreneur gave him to do himself good.[1] Surprisingly, though, we have bothered less about what the middle-class book-borrowing Brown, Jones and Robinson chose to read – or were persuaded to read – by the powerful new industry, the book trade.

By the late fifties the Browns in their hundreds of thousands were inundated by all kinds of reading-matter – sermons, diaries, memoirs, travellers' tales, and novels of all shapes and sizes. Novels in three volumes mostly, but novels in part issues, novels serialised in periodicals, novels in cheap reprints, novels in lurid covers on railway stands. David Masson observed, in the magical year which is my starting-point, that the novelist had become the truest wizard of modern times.[2]

It is a vast subject, even with the twenty-year limitation I impose and my choice of novelists for detailed study. To begin with my title, the word 'popular' represents what satisfied a middlebrow public seeking entertainment, the 'comicalities' and 'light literature' which beguiled the travelling and leisure of Thomas Arnold's 'Reading Class', and not what a contributor to *Macmillan's Magazine* in 1866 coyly termed 'that literary provender which satisfies the lower classes of our countrymen'.[3]

It is unhelpful to produce a historical guide and it is always dangerous to use novels as social history, yet at the same time the student of so vast and neglected a field must give some sign of the diversity of material and relate the fiction to its cultural milieu. This is the concern of my first chapter. Although popular fiction is short on ideas and enduring literary values (yet it can surprise occasionally on both counts), it should be considered as part of

the scene in which great writers did their noble work, and its role in the commercial and critical sphere is worth exploring. These are the subjects of my second and third chapters. For criticism I rely chiefly on the leading middlebrow magazines, such as the *Athenaeum*, the *Saturday Review* and the *Spectator*, as indicators of the variety of responses, blind spots and bizarre judgements on popular writing. The first part of my book is therefore a broad survey of what the mid-Victorians read, what working-conditions were like for the professional man of letters, and what the mass-circulation periodicals thought of it all.

The larger portion of the book studies such matters in relation to three minor novelists whose work is of sufficiently engaging quality to establish the point that not all kings and queens of the circulating libraries fell into a well-deserved oblivion. The possible choice of authors is enormous and several have been dropped along the way as my own tastes have changed, until three came to seem most representative of cultural moods, fashions and methods. Happily my trio of Mrs Oliphant, Rhoda Broughton and James Payn fit well into three schools of fiction denominated by Alfred Austin in 1870 as 'Simple', 'Fast' and 'Sensational'.[4]

In the course of examining a corner of the vast treasure-house of Victorian fiction I see one constant thread of inquiry, and that concerns the more eclectic nature of Victorian middlebrow reading, and possibly the more flexible criteria we need to do it justice. Of course, it is of little purpose to rescue forgotten novels unless they have something still to say to us, but equally there is a justification in many of the novels under review for insisting that they do possess certain intrinsic values as well as illustrating perspectives on mid-Victorian manners and thought. We might do well to re-examine our attitudes to what after all satisfied a sizeable public. Interesting questions may be posed similar to those raised when we approach modern popular amusements in film and television. Beyond this invitation to compare aspects of culture now and then this study is primarily intended to illustrate the pleasure afforded by some minor Victorian novelists of 1860 to 1880.

I wish to thank the University of Victoria for a period of leave to undertake research for this book and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for assistance. I am grateful to many libraries for information and access to minor

fiction and manuscript materials, notably the Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin, Texas, and the Joseph Regenstein Library of the University of Chicago, Illinois, particularly with regard to James Payn. To the National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, I am indebted for information regarding Mrs Oliphant, and I also wish to acknowledge assistance from the libraries of the Universities of London, Essex and Exeter and the London Library; I am particularly grateful to the staffs of the British Library and the University of Victoria Library. Among many individuals my thanks are especially due to Mr William Payn for talking to me about his grandfather and giving me access to his private collection of novels. In addition I wish to thank many friends in Victoria who have helped in various ways, including Shelley Hunt, Tracy Cameron, Helen Edelmeier, Sarah Baylow and Helen Harris. My final acknowledgement goes to my wife, Judith, for unfailing encouragement and practical help when the byways of mid-Victorian popular fiction seemed unending.

Victoria R.C.T.
British Columbia

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1 Reading Mania

Do not speak slightingly of the three-volume novel, Cicely.
Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Act 2 (1895)

Embarking on the subject of Victorian popular fiction is like that favourite Victorian occupation of mapping the source of the Nile: the dark continent beckons, but the explorer soon begins to feel like Captain Speke without a compass, for ever following tempting channels that wind up in swamps, for ever in danger of being lost in vast, unmapped regions, and not sure what he will find when he gets there. Two large, menacing rocks loom out of the water immediately. Who were the readers? What were they reading? To attempt to negotiate these obstacles will be the business of this chapter, before my exploration plunges deeper into the jungle of commercial publishing, criticism, and three examples of mid-Victorian popularities – Margaret Oliphant, Rhoda Broughton and James Payn.

That the audience for novels was a large one by the 1860s and 1870s is a commonplace; just how large is difficult to say for sure. If it did not reach into the millions, as Wilkie Collins and others had speculated hungrily at mid century, it was at any rate to be numbered in the hundreds of thousands.[1] 'We have become a novel-reading people,' said Anthony Trollope in 1870, 'from the Prime Minister down to the last-appointed scullery-maid.'[2] This is an interesting observation from an author who had his finger on the public pulse and whose practice will be taken from time to time in this book as a yardstick of middlebrow fiction. The novel-reading public was more socially broad, less exclusive than one might perhaps think, and its appetite for fiction gargantuan. People were always sticking labels on this generation, wrote Alfred Austin in 1874 – the age of gold, the scientific age, the age of humbug – but one thing was certain: 'It may be the

age of anything else people like; but assuredly it is the age of Novels.'[3]

Numerically it is unwise to be too dogmatic. There had been phenomenal population growth in England and Wales, from some 6¼ million in 1750 to 18 million by 1850. Add to these statistics the increase in the second half of the century, particularly of the middle class: 357,000 in 1851; 482,000 in 1861; and 647,000 in 1881.[4] Picture this restless, upwardly mobile population, engulfed by change they did not understand, riven by anxieties about social status, prey to deep disturbance about living conditions, perplexed by the break-up of old orthodoxies, excited by the prospect of material progress and already feeling the groundswell of more evolutionary scientific advances. The problems of the individual and mass society begin here, and the paths to diverge between literary culture and popular fiction, both important aspects of this book.

In their higher levels the middle-class readers are Arnold's philistines, rioting on the milk of Tupper and the water of Hain Friswell, terrified of intellectual struggle and abstract ideas and capable of appreciating art only on Mr Podsnap's terms utilitarian and photographic, and devoted to getting up at eight, shaving close at a quarter past, breakfasting at nine, going to the City at ten, and so on. This condescending attitude has largely coloured our own view of Victorian middle-class readers, but they had their defenders. An essay by James Payn called 'The Midway Inn' puts very well the essence of middlebrow taste and the brand of lighter fiction it cultivated. This is a sly, subversive piece of work, in Payn's best manner, written in 1879 for *Nineteenth Century* with a touch of *fin de siècle* cynicism about it as well as nostalgia for a bygone literary era.[5] Payn makes a case for the modern man of letters as entertainer without glossing over his faults, and is spokesman for a level of middle-class taste well above the Podsnap and Veneering level and a range of fiction important to our broader understanding of the Victorians.

Mine host at the Midway Inn is 'the quintessence of the commonplace'; he has no more at the back of him than at the back of a looking-glass, and like the looking-glass he reflects bourgeois taste. This is Payn's narrator, an admirable device for ironical comment. The inn stands halfway between home and school, where the horses were changed in days of yore, and from this midway point Payn voices a Thackerayan melancholy,

tinged with asperity, at the changing world. Midway days are middle age, doubt and depression, discontent with the new, and loss of contact with the old. Religious faith is on the wane; even the clergy 'faintly trust the larger hope', and philosophers voice 'unwelcome doubt respecting the divine government of the world', while the average man shrugs and walks away. Dullness at home has increased public entertainments. 'There is no such thing as high spirits anywhere.' Instead of the lively, boisterous talk of our fathers, 'we have drawing-room dissertations on art, and dandy drivel about blue china', although two pleasures never fail, even among the young – business and making money. At his best in table talk and occasional essays, Payn draws the middle-brow figure as Trollope would: solid, down to earth, practical. New literature has arisen, extolling money-making and thrift; its heroes are all self-made men. Since poetry is all gloom, the public craves fiction. People are glad to find themselves 'anywhere, anywhere, out of the world', and are generally gratified, 'for anything less like real life than what some novelists portray it is difficult to imagine'.

In this, as in other essays he wrote for *Nineteenth Century*, published as *Some Private Views* (1881), James Payn voices an articulate, independent stance that embodies the middlebrow reader for whom Victorian popular fiction provided reasonably intelligent and amusing fare, not without stimulus to thought and reflection. It is too easy, Payn argues consistently in this and other essays, to patronise 'light literature'. As he says in 'The Literary Calling and its Future', in much of it there is a reasonably high standard, a healthy individuality and abundant talent:

> Persons of intelligence do not look for such things perhaps, and certainly not in magazines, while persons of 'culture' are too much occupied with old china and high art; but to humble folks, who take an interest in their fellow-creatures, it is very pleasant to observe what high thoughts, and how poetically expressed, are now to be found about our feet, and, as it were, in the literary gutter.[6]

Payn's persons of intelligence, however, were quite likely not merely to know what was to be found about their feet, but also to enjoy it, even though he does not quite like to say so. Catholicity

of taste can be inferred from contemporary evidence of various kinds. On the undiscriminating and uniform reading-practice of the mid-Victorian middlebrow public Kathleen Tillotson has observed that novels crossed all boundaries. People took in their stride *The Woman in White*, *Great Expectations*, *East Lynne* and *Lady Audley's Secret*. Tennyson said he was steeped in Miss Braddon – 'I am reading every word she ever wrote'[7] – and there were many readers like Edward Fitzgerald who struggled with George Eliot's prose more out of duty than enjoyment. Abandoning *The Mill on the Floss* Fitzgerald lamented, 'I couldn't take to it more than to others I have tried by the Greatest Novelist of the Day; but I will go on a little further.' This was followed by a heartfelt, 'Oh, for some more brave Trollope!' More bluntly, R. D. Blackmore admitted he much preferred Miss Braddon's golden-haired homicidals to Gwendolen Harleth, and dubbed Meredith the 'great unintelligible'. Later in the century one reader turned from *Jude the Obscure* with 'Thank God for Kipling, and Stevenson, Barrie and Mrs Humphry Ward.'[8] It is clearly necessary to resist compartmentalising both audience and reading-material: the audience for *Daniel Deronda* was not always separate from that for *Good-bye Sweetheart!* any more than today's television audience for *Brideshead Revisited* is necessarily separate from that for *All Creatures Great and Small*.

Huge quantities of novels of all kinds were devoured, certainly without the critical sophistication we bring to the subject, but in some cases with far more freedom from exclusive and sometimes inhibiting criteria. Refreshingly, it seems to me, the Victorian bookworm, whether highly educated and leisured or with the minimum of knowledge and of humble status, could move comfortably from classic to bestselling sensation novel, deriving from each kind certain values and ideas, and the inestimable (though usually ignored or discounted) boon of recreation. The Winkworth sisters, Catherine and Emily, were a pair of devoted readers for pleasure who certainly knew the difference between 'literature' and commercial fiction. They had been taught by the Rev William Gaskell in Manchester, were friendly with Charles Dickens, and fortunately left diaries of what they read. Catherine appreciated *Jane Eyre*, but found it infinitely below *Mary Barton* or *Deerbrook*; *Alton Locke* puzzled her. She seems most to have enjoyed books by Mrs Oliphant like *Mrs Margaret Maitland* (1851). Her sister concurred, noting her particular enjoyment of Mrs

Oliphant's *Neighbours on the Green* (1871). Ranking novelists did not occur to them. For Emily the most agreeable aspect of all fiction – the greatest asset a writer could have – was to help the reader see 'the life in life we all long for'. She wanted someone to collect bits of R. H. Hutton, Miss (Anne) Thackeray – above all George Eliot – and make them into one book 'to turn to, like sermons, when one gets pushed and down-hearted'.[9] The yoking of such dissimilar arts and attainments is a striking example of a typical response of readers still able to share spontaneously in the common pursuit and untroubled by the aestheticism of a later generation. What is also noticeable in the Winkworths' response is a commonly shared assumption about the general moral efficacy of novels and the simple artistic criterion which I find the single most important preoccupation of the middlebrow novelist of the sixties and seventies: a good story well told in realistic terms and in a spirit of useful, energising commitment to life and people. James Payn and his contemporaries grasped this essential need of the mid-Victorian public.

Diaries and memoirs add to our understanding of the eclectic reading of the period. Even Mr Gladstone solaced his leisure hour with a popular novel or two, as S. M. Ellis reports:

> I remember a friend, who was a member of the same club as W. E. Gladstone, relating that on one occasion he saw the statesman in the library, deep in the perusal of a book. Gladstone read on for a long time, and when eventually he put the book down and left the room, the engrossing volume proved to be not a work of philosophy or classical history but – *Red as a Rose is She*.[10]

Another indicator of the reading public's unwillingness to categorise is found in the periodical reviewing of fiction, which refuses to discriminate between major and minor writers, and quite cheerfully lumps together some books we now acknowledge as classics with popularities long since forgotten. And this is not entirely a matter of the state of novel-criticism, which, like Joe Gargery's education, was still in its infancy, but stems in part from an acknowledgement of novels for sheer amusement. Similarly, literary surveys which appear in increasing numbers at the end of the century show fascinating preferences and juxtapositions. *Women Novelists of Queen Victoria's Reign* (1897), for

example, pays tribute to George Eliot, Mrs Gaskell and the Brontës, but is not beyond praising Mrs Craik, Mrs Henry Wood, or even lesser lights like Julia Kavanagh.

That Mudie's and other circulating libraries stocked huge quantities of biography, history, travel, philosophy, religion and general science as well as fiction is evidence that readers wanted knowledge, breadth as well as entertainment. In fact the surest guide to the make-up of the mid-Victorian public and what it read is found in the catalogues of Mudie's Select Library of Fiction. Charles Edward Mudie's command of mid-Victorian book-circulation and his consequent role in the fiction industry can hardly be exaggerated. As John Sutherland has remarked, by the late fifties his library controlled a major section of the market in London, in the country and overseas; at the height of his power in the 1860s he earned up to £40,000 a year in subscriptions.[11]

Starting on a small scale in King Street, he rapidly expanded in 1852 to premises in New Oxford Street. These were enlarged in 1860 in what Trollope called Mudie's great flare-up, and thereafter the firm dominated all aspects of the book trade for another thirty-five years. Fiction accounted for 44 per cent of the stock in the boom years. Between 1858 and 1860 Mudie acquired 165,445 novels, and by 1861 the library held 800,000 volumes (according to Guinevere Griest 960,000, nearly half of them fiction, acquired between 1853 and 1862) and by 1900 the library holdings were 7½ million books. A popular novel of 1880 (unremarkable in every way except for this view of Mudie's magnificent emporium) shows how the patrons were under its spell:

> 'To Mudie's'!
>
> The footman touched his hat, put into the carriage a packet of books, a purse, card-basket, and court-guide, the paraphernalia necessary to a lady's afternon in London, and then jumping up beside the coachman, gave the word, and the trim little brougham was soon swallowed up in the gloom of the December fog that hung over the city.

The lady's carriage is followed through Piccadilly, which under the feeble gas lamps seems to the authoress like 'one of the circuses of the Tuscan poet's hell, with its rows of lost souls

wandering disconsolate through the *aura morta*'. Mudie's Library, by contrast, is a literary elysium:

> a large gray building which, with its high windows and swinging glass doors, was evidently the emporium of a brisk business of some sort. The occupant of the little brougham, taking up the books that lay on the seat in front of her, descended. As she entered, her eyes rested with a grateful sense of repose on the rows of richly-bound books that lined the walls, and she inhaled with pleasure the atmosphere of the place, that seemed to be impregnated with the odours of learning and leather.
>
> The counters for distribution were surrounded by rows of eager people, some looking at the catalogues, others opening up books that stood in front of them, whilst the rest waited impatiently until the volumes they had inquired for were brought by the indefatigable attendants, who ascended as occasion required, to the dizzy heights of the iron gallery, running round the top of the room, or descended by the winding stair in the centre to the depths below; but always returned, like the gnomes of the German fairy stories, laden with the golden treasure that is supposed to make glad the heart of man.

Despite this flattery, Mudie did not find a place for the book on his shelves.[12]

In an age of machines Mudie transformed what traditionally had been a fairly leisurely trade into a commercially efficient business with exquisitely calculated profit margins and ruthless exploiting of the market. Mudie was the tycoon – some said the tyrant – of the book trade, and soon had publishers, booksellers and authors eating out of his hand. Perhaps because his prejudices were largely those of his public, his exercise of censorship – sometimes quite inconsistently – was not resented, except among authors like Reade and later George Moore (who bitterly attacked him in the 1880s); but, to give Mudie his due, he did offer a wide range of reading – safe, wholesome and entertaining – at prices the public were willing to pay.[13] That was his masterstroke. For a guinea a year a client would take one volume and change it as often as he pleased. Many of course took out several subscriptions, one factor in Mudie's fight to maintain the three-volume novel.

Mudie's Library, then, is the microcosm – and a pretty large one – of what Brown, Jones and Robinson permitted in the sitting-rooms of Maida Vale, or what her ladyship tolerated in the boudoirs of Belgravia. To reduce this outpouring of print into anything like manageable terms I must pursue (with Mrs Malaprop in mind) my allegory on the banks of the Nile and point to many rivers flowing inexorably into a vast lake of fiction. One major course is the historical novel, from Scott's mountainous heights with tributaries from W. H. Ainsworth and G. P. R. James; alongside it, adventure stories on land and sea from Smollett and his successors down to Captain Marryat. This river acquires a European cast from Dumas and Hugo, is naturalised in R. D. Blackmore and William Black, but grows more international and exotic in Ouida, Marie Corelli, Rider Haggard and Anthony Hope. The religious novel runs straight and slow, high and low, on its course from Charlotte Yonge into shoals and eddies of unbelief; the sensation novel erupts from underground from an eighteenth-century Gothic source amid a landscape clearly Brontë-esque, bursting its banks in the sixties with work of Wilkie Collins, M. E. Braddon and their imitators. Between it and the novels of religious doubt or non-belief runs a powerful flow of the supernatural and unseen and the occult.

Then at last we come to the Nile itself, the domestic novel, or what Vineta Colby calls the 'home and family centred novel', which has been at the heart of English fiction since Fanny Burney, Maria Edgeworth and Jane Austen.[14] Here there is the greatest diversity from the discursive currents of Miss Mitford's *Our Village* (1824–32) to more subtle interaction of character and place in Mrs Gaskell or the robust social comedy of Anthony Trollope. Somewhere into this flood comes a Victorian updating of Mrs Gore's novels of fashionable life in the 'silver-fork' fiction of Bulwer Lytton and Disraeli; the equestrian, military and sporting novels of Charles Lever and George Whyte-Melville; and the tales of school and university life which flourished from the forties and combined with comic material (the legacy of the *Punch* journalists) to provide stories which were really jokes and anecdotes strung on a thin line of plot. But, whatever the variation, love shall be lord of all. There must be love in a novel, declared Trollope, and the mainspring of the English novel has been the study of community, family, boy meets girl, against a familiar landscape.[15] In the days of Boot's 'Book Lovers'

Library', I recall the most often heard request across the counter was for a good family story, which meant a love story among recognisably average people in grandly improbable circumstances, or highly glamorised individuals in credibly ordinary settings. In the days of Mudie's Library it was much the same, and to meet demand a forgotten army – mostly female – drove their pens: Katherine Macquoid, Hesba Stretton, Florence Marryat, Annie Thomas, Lady Wood, Amelia Edwards, Dinah Mulock (Mrs Craik), Holme Lee (Harriet Parr), Anne Manning, Emma Marshall, Lynn Linton, Mrs J. H. Riddell (Charlotte Elizabeth Lawson Cowan), Julia Kavanagh, Matilda Betham Edwards, Sarah Tytler, Helen Mathers, Emma Worboise. Mrs Oliphant's recipe for the novel may stand for the genre: 'a happy circle with subtle flavour of incipient love-making'.[16]

There is as much demand as ever for the 'good family story', but today it is most often satisfied by television. The technique of domestic realism characteristic of *Coronation Street* or *Upstairs, Downstairs*, which has enthralled millions, was essentially that of the Victorian popular novelists. Both with varying degrees of sophistication copy from the life; the novelists, indeed, prided themselves on the veracity of their scene and characters drawn from life. Both hold, as the saying had it, the mirror up to nature; and, of course, no one who looks in a mirror ever sees himself in the glass.

A word on the 'domesticity' of the English novel, from Arnold Bennett in a comment on Rhoda Broughton's *Foes in Law,* published in 1900, shows how the term eventually became a stick to beat the Victorians with.[17] Miss Broughton, he says, is the typical novelist of our domesticity, and continues in what appears to be a tone of genial flattery:

> Endowed with wit, sentiment, and a discerning eye for some aspects of character, she has during thirty and three years given a modest and refined pleasure, not only to the *petites âmes conjugales*, but also to the great intellects philosophic, scientific, and economic, which in hours of slippered ease graciously 'unbend' themselves over a novel.

What Bennett is out to do is first to patronise, then to annihilate this staple ingredient of Victorian fiction: 'The domestic novel is so called because it is written for, not because it is written about,