THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO

VICTORIAN POETRY

Edited by Joseph Bristow

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, United Kingdom
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011–4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

http://www.cambridge.org

First published 2000
Reprinted 2002

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeset in Sabon 10/13 pt. System 3B2 [CE]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloging in publication data
The Cambridge companion to Victorian poetry / edited by Joseph Bristow.
p. cm. – (Cambridge companions to literature)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0 521 64115 2 (hardback) 0 521 64680 4 (paperback)
1. English poetry– 19th century – History and criticism. 2. Bristow, Joseph. II. Series.
PR591.C36 2000
821'.309 – dc21 00–020013 CIP

ISBN 0 521 64115 2 hardback
ISBN 0 521 64680 4 paperback

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PREFACE

The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry presents some of the most exciting critical developments in an area of inquiry that has undergone remarkable changes during the past twenty years. Featuring thirteen chapters that address broad topics that came to public attention during Her Majesty Queen Victoria's long reign (1837–1901), this volume introduces readers to the dynamic – and, on occasion, contentious – roles that poetry played in a period covering some eight decades. Throughout this era poetry addressed issues such as patriotism, religious faith, science, sexuality, and social reform that often aroused polemical debate. At the same time, the poets whom we classify as Victorian frequently devised experiments that expanded the possibilities of the genre, creating innovative forms and types of prosody that enabled new kinds of poetic voices to emerge in print. The period saw the rise of a decidedly innovative kind of poem in the dramatic monologue, together with the emergence of other ambitious forms such as the bildungsroman-in-verse. Beginning with poems written in light of the Great Reform Bill of 1832 and ending with the election of Poet Laureate after Alfred Tennyson's death in 1892, this *Companion* offers detailed studies that deepen our understanding of the many different literary, historical, and political contexts in which Victorian poems were produced and consumed. Some of the chapters concentrate attention on the linguistic, metrical, and stylistic features that came to prominence during this epoch, while others explore the complex ways in which Victorian poets intervened in the controversies of the time. Taken together the chapters of this volume disclose how writers of miscellaneous temperaments – conservatives, liberals, and radicals, among many others – could express their conflicting perspectives on a society in which poetry commanded cultural authority.

Critics, however, have not always viewed the poetry of this era as such a rich resource, partly because of the rather negative connotations traditionally attached to the word Victorian: a term that only came into wide circulation some forty years after the Queen ascended the throne. And

when it was eventually embedded in modern consciousness, the label Victorian more often than not conjured a rather dreary and forbidding vision of the world. At its most extreme, the adjective Victorian characterized those austere values to which Margaret Thatcher (British Prime Minister from 1979 to 1990) attempted to espouse her Tory government. On this view, Victorian invoked an unremitting lower-middle-class morality, one based on values of decency, self-help, and thrift, not to say knowing one's place in a class-stratified society. To pay respect to one's betters, to pull oneself up by the bootstraps, to remain firmly independent of support from the state: all of these actions formed part of a stereotypical – and thus misleading – image of the codes of conduct by which all good citizens from the 1830s to the 1890s were purported to have lived. And even when modern intellectuals expressed profound criticism of these unforgiving Victorian principles, they frequently concurred that the culture that developed during this long period adhered mainly to these strictures and little else. The Modernists – who came to public attention from the time of the Great War (1914–18) onward – adopted this perspective on their Victorian forebears. Some of the most notable Modernist criticisms of Victorian narrow-mindedness emerge in the writings of the Bloomsbury Group, the London-based coterie whose distinguished members included the novelists E.M. Forster and Virginia Woolf. One of its noted intellectuals, Lytton Strachey, wittily mocked various types of imperial zeal, philanthropic patronage, and Christian piety in his four famous studies of eminent Victorians. In an iconoclastic spirit, Strachey refused to elevate a figure such as Florence Nightingale as a "saintly, self-sacrificing woman": he presented her instead as someone who brought order to the military hospitals of the Crimea "by strict method, by stern discipline, by rigid attention to detail, by ceaseless labour, by the fixed determination of an indomitable will" (*Eminent Victorians: Cardinal Manning, Florence Nightingale, Dr. Arnold, General Gordon* [London: Chatto and Windus, 1918], 119, 137). It was from this unappealing inheritance that Modernists such as Strachey sought to emancipate themselves.

Given the Modernists unfavorable outlook on the mid- and late-nineteenth century, one might be led to believe that all things Victorian were morally fierce, socially restrictive, and sexually repressive. Certainly some of the most widely anthologized Victorian poems articulate a defiant self-determination, one that upholds imperial and patriotic ideals. In this respect, W.E. Henley's "Invictus" (1875) remains perhaps the ultimate example of the Victorian spirit that remains valiantly prepared to endure the trials of adversity, whatever the cost. "I am the master of my fate," the speaker memorably declares, "I am the captain of my soul": a sentiment

that may well sound to some ears as quintessentially of its time. But by the mid-twentieth century Jerome H. Buckley began a critical trend that looked more closely at the ways in which the kind of "Victorianism" that we might find in "Invictus" "persisted" as "a shield for the conservative and a target for the modernist" (4). In *The Victorian Temper: A Study in Literary Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1951), Buckley contends that to understand "Victorianism" critics need to distance themselves from this rhetoric of "praise and blame" (7). Better, he thinks, to acknowledge that the "Victorians were quite unable to view their long era as a static entity, a unique whole to be described by a single sweeping formula." In Buckley's view the Victorian temper – even though marked by a definite article – belonged to an era whose "tensions . . . militated against complete spontaneity and singleness of purpose" (12), given the scope and breadth of British culture during this long period of history.

This *Companion* follows Buckley's lead in showing how and why it remains difficult to summarize what it might mean to be characteristically Victorian – either in relation to poetry in particular or to the culture in general. Indeed, the danger in using any broad term like Victorian lies in how it may appear an all-encompassing concept, as if the adjective could reasonably draw together the multiple elements of an amorphous society into a coherent and stable order. None of the chapters in this volume assumes that a unitary set of values accords with the term Victorian. Nor do these studies propose that there is a specific type of poetry that stands for the age. Instead, the word has a different usage. It defines an epoch – an expanse of time so the long that it often remains hard to see clear cultural, political, and indeed poetic continuities from beginning to end. If, then, we admit that scholars employ the term Victorian to designate a period of literary history that has no unchanging core, we may as well ask why we keep using the word at all.

This question is an important one. But it has, of course, an obvious answer. The main reason for currently holding on to the term Victorian relates to matters of scholarly convention and syllabus design. It goes without saying that readers will consult this volume because they wish to know more about a field of study designated as Victorian poetry. Yet, as with all periods of literary history, this field does not have entirely fixed boundaries, especially with regard to the specific poets whom critics have come to value most highly. The value attributed to the many different poetical works that fall within this field has transformed considerably over time. Correspondingly, the kinds of poetry that have been deemed worthy of analysis have changed as well.

It is fair to assert that until the 1980s critical volumes devoted to

Victorian poetry often focused on a triumvirate – Alfred Tennyson, Robert Browning, and Matthew Arnold, with each poet ranked in that descending order. There were good reasons why researchers and teachers concentrated much of their attention on such a small – if undeniably eminent – group of poets. In the early part of the twentieth century when the discipline of English literature sometimes struggled to establish itself as a legitimate area of inquiry, many scholars followed Arnold's influential lead to underline the distinctions between major and minor talents (see Arnold, "Heinrich Heine" [1863]). Much has been written on how the imperative to discriminate between greater and lesser authors fuelled a powerful current in literary studies as a whole. The effort to preserve and study the best poetry resulted in the analysis of a rather constricted – though by no means static – canon of "major" poets (namely Tennyson, Robert Browning, and Arnold), even while modest amounts of research on many semi-canonical or "minor" figures thrived at the same time.

Two imposing studies from Cambridge University Press show this process at work. In *The Cambridge History of English Literature* – a compendious fifteen-volume series published between 1907 and 1927 – the chapters give pride of place to the exalted Victorian triumvirate, somewhat more selective treatment of their less noted contemporaries, and accounts of numerous other writers who receive the briefest mention. The editors assign one chapter each to the Tennyson brothers (much to Alfred, far less to Charles) and another to Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. They combine Arnold's poetic writings with those of his close friend Arthur Hugh Clough and the Republican writer James Thomson ("B.V."). The Pre-Raphaelites – William Morris, Christina Rossetti, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Algernon Charles Swinburne, and Arthur O'Shaughnessey – feature together. The remaining writers, who appear abundant in comparison, populate the longest discussion titled "Lesser Poets of the Middle and Later Nineteenth Century." Equally noteworthy in this respect is *The New Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature* (1969–77) whose five volumes provide an indispensable tool of research for literary scholars. In its comprehensive listings, this bibliography separates major from minor writers. But it would be mistaken to see the persistence of canon-formation in these two books, published some seventy years apart, as a wholly exclusive enterprise. In fact, both of these excellent works of reference offer reliable access to an astonishing range of so-called lesser writings whose value can be understood in terms markedly different from those that elevate Tennyson, Robert Browning, and Arnold into the Pantheon.

In the *Cambridge History* George Saintsbury's long and detailed chapters

on "lesser" poets of the nineteenth century give a fair indication of some of the difficulties facing scholars when it comes to comprehending the comparative merits of the vast quantities of poetry with which they are acquainted. At times, Saintsbury – an immensely knowledgeable critic – views the question of a poet's value as a matter of critical consensus, though it remains obvious from his metaphors that it has not always been easy to agree on who should rise above the others. Discussing "Lesser Poets, 1790–1837" (the period usually categorized as Romantic), he remarks: "[Robert] Southey, indeed, may have been 'knocked out' in the competition on one side, on the general opinion, and [Walter] Scott and [George] Crabbe, on the other, may hold their ground, though with considerably fewer points to their credit than [William] Wordsworth and [Samuel Taylor] Coleridge" (XII, 95). And for those writers who have not even managed to jump into the ring and fight to the last, Saintsbury finds other measures to disclose their weakness. Among the band of late-Romantic poets who came to public attention in the 1820s and 1830s – such as Thomas Lovell Beddoes, Thomas Hood, Winthrop Mackworth Praed, and Henry Taylor – he declares "there is still something about them is indigested and incomplete." Unable to show their physical strength, women poets unsurprisingly fare worse. Although there is one lesser late-Victorian figure, M.E. Coleridge, who impresses Saintsbury, he remarks that the huge popularity of L.E.L. (Letitia Elizabeth Landon) much earlier in the century "set a most unfortunate precedent . . . for women verse-writers" (XII, 126) – because their poetry, we might assume, enfeebled their already frail constitutions.

Saintsbury's commentary too readily lends itself to mockery, and it remains easy for modern critics to poke fun at the seemingly outdated condition of his scholarship. To be sure, in his inexhaustible enumeration of various lesser poets, it is amusing to find Saintsbury wondering why he might be discussing them at all. Turning his attention to Martin Farquar Tupper's *Proverbial Philosophy* (1838–76) – originally sold at a farthing to reach a growing lower middle-class readership – he remarks that "at times, the dullness ferments itself into sheer silliness" (XIII, 150). But he nevertheless finds himself obliged to declare that since Tupper's work was so popular "it can never wholly lose its position" (XIII, 150). Indeed, he produces another – more compelling – reason for reviewing all of the expressly lesser materials drawn from his wide reading. No matter what misgivings he may have about these inferior writers, he remains convinced about the ultimate value that dwells within this eclectic body of minor work:

> There is, beyond all question, in this long period and among the crowd of lesser singers, an amount of diffused poetry which cannot be paralleled in any other age or country except perhaps, perhaps, in our own land and language between 1580 and 1674. At no period, not even then, has the standard of technical craftsmanship been so high; at none has there been anything like such variety of subject and, to a rather lesser extent, of tone. (XIII, 221–22)

For all their minority status, therefore, those poets congregating in the lower ranks of literature have nonetheless produced work that in its attention to form and its diversity of subject matter stands as a tribute to the nation. On these terms, the lesser writers appear sufficiently great that one could (like Saintsbury) almost begin to question why they should have been devalued in the first place.

Based on different ideas of literary value, *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry* does not subscribe to the canon-bolstering assumptions that underpin (albeit uncomfortably) Saintsbury's influential essays in *The Cambridge History of English Literature*. Rather than spend time discriminating between major and minor authors, all but one of the chapters in the present volume look instead at a large topic that preoccupied a range of writers. And the study that takes as its subject the most canonical of all Victorian poets – Alfred Tennyson – does so to contemplate the kinds of value that successive generations of critics have staked upon one of his most celebrated poems, "The Lady of Shalott." Each discussion in turn adopts a range of modern critical approaches – drawn from sources as diverse as gender studies, materialist critique, post-structuralist thought, and cultural historicism – to analyze a much wider span of writers than proponents of the major canon were for decades willing to take seriously. Tennyson, Robert Browning, and Arnold assuredly maintain a prominent position in these pages, not least because their works absorbed an immense amount of critical attention during their lifetimes. But so too do Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Morris, Christina Rossetti, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and Swinburne – writers who made a profound impression on their age but who were often pushed to the sidelines when the modern discipline of English literature became somewhat selective in the objects that it felt were suitable for study.

Women poets in particular occupy a more noticeable place in this *Companion* than they do in the anthologies and works of criticism that circulated in colleges and universities during the mid-twentieth century. Consider, for example, *Poetry of the Victorian Period*, first published in 1930, and subsequently revised and expanded in various editions until 1965. This weighty volume, with its thorough annotations and generous selections from some forty-seven poets, includes in its 1965 imprint only

five women writers. Similar limitations appear in *The Oxford Book of Nineteenth-Century English Verse* (1964), which – in the course of some nine-hundred pages – features no more than eleven women poets. It would take until 1978 when The Women's Press issued Cora Kaplan's impressive edition of Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1856) – a poem of epic proportions that dramatizes one woman's poetic career – before scholars began to reassess how and why the reputation of a writer whom a mid-Victorian readership often held in very high regard should have gone into serious decline toward the close of the nineteenth century. Not long after Barrett Browning's *magnum opus* drew the praise of a new generation of readers, R.W. Crump's magnificent variorum edition of Christina Rossetti's poetry was published, helping to establish this poet's imposing oeuvre on syllabi. Ever since the late 1970s many Victorianists have devoted energies to unearthing, reevaluating, and then reprinting selections from the inspiring works of writers as different as Michael Field (Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper), Amy Levy, and Augusta Webster: all of whom speak powerfully to a new generation of readers who want to know more about women's distinctive contributions to nineteenth-century culture.

Appearing almost a century after the Victorian period officially came to an end, this *Companion* shows that this era comes very much to life when we embrace an inclusive range of poetry by many different poets whose work need no longer be categorized in terms of major or minor talents. In the coming decades, it is more than likely that research into varieties of working-class poetry, poetry for children, dialect poetry, and poems that appeared in a very broad range of print media (such as regional newspapers) will further broaden our knowledge of different aspects of British culture as it unfolded from the 1830s to the 1890s. It seems more than probable that as the twenty-first century runs its course, scholars will reconfigure how we think about the many works brought together under the heading Victorian poetry. In all probability they will suggest alternative frameworks for comprehending the poems that passed into print while the Queen presided over the nation. Such critics will no doubt rise to the challenge of redefining the label Victorian – perhaps to the point of devising terms that will eventually displace it.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry began to take shape when I held a Senior External Research Fellowship at the Stanford Humanities Center in 1995–96. My thanks go to the Director of Center, Keith Michael Baker, and his friendly staff for their hospitality. Two fellow Victorianists, Regenia Gagnier and Yopie Prins, offered helpful advice during the early stages of editing. At the University of California, Los Angeles, Ronald Lear and Thomas Wortham generously shared their editorial wisdom. In the UCLA English Department, Jeanette Gilkison undertook countless tasks that eased communication between California and England. During 1997–99, Matthew Titolo, Laura Franey, and James Walter Caufield in turn provided excellent research assistance. At the other end of the UCLA campus, the surgical skills of Donald Becker and the medical support of Jerome Greenberg enabled me to continue with my life. The staffs of the Young Research Library (UCLA), the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library (UCLA), and the London Library (St James's Square, London) guided me toward resources that I would otherwise have missed. At Cambridge University Press, Josie Dixon's encouragement and patience proved inspiring. Likewise, Linda Bree's painstaking editorial feedback strengthened the volume as a whole. Finally, I must express my gratitude to all of the contributors – without whom, of course, this *Companion* would not have been possible.

"O What a Silence in this Wilderness" appears by permission of Oxford University Press and is taken from Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Poetical Works*, ed. Norman H. MacKenzie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

Joseph Bristow

ABBREVIATIONS

ACS	Algernon Charles Swinburne, *The Poems of Algernon Charles Swinburne*, 6 vols. (London: Chatto and Windus, 1904); volume and page references appear in parentheses
AHC	Arthur Hugh Clough, *Amours de Voyage*, ed. Patrick Scott (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1974); line references appear in parentheses
AL	Amy Levy, *The Complete Novels and Selected Writings of Amy Levy 1861–1889*, ed. Melvyn New (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1993); line references appear in parentheses
AS	Arthur Symons, *Collected Works*, 9 vols. (London: Martin Secker, 1924); volume and page references appear in parentheses
AT	Alfred Tennyson, *The Poems of Tennyson*, Second Edition, ed. Christopher Ricks, 3 vols. (Harlow: Longman, 1987); line references appear in parentheses
CR	Christina Rossetti, *The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti*, ed. R.W. Crump, 3 vols. (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1979–90); line references appear in parentheses
DGR	Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, revised and enlarged edition, ed. William M. Rossetti (London: Ellis, 1911); page references appear in parentheses
EBB	Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *The Complete Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. Charlotte Porter and Helen A. Clarke, 6 vols. (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1900); line references appear in parentheses.
EBBAL	Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, ed. Margaret Reynolds (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1992); line references appear in parentheses
ED	Ernest Dowson, *Poems*, ed. Mark Longaker (Philadelphia, PA, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1962); page references appear in parentheses
FH	Felicia Hemans, *The Works of Mrs. Hemans; with a Memoir of her Life, by Her Sister*, 7 vols. (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1839); volume and page references appear in parentheses

GM	George Meredith, *The Poems of George Meredith*, ed. Phyllis B. Bartlett, 2 vols. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1978); line numbers appear in parentheses.
GMH	Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Poetical Works*, ed. Norman H. MacKenzie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990); line references appear in parentheses
LEL	Letitia Elizabeth Landon [L.E.L.], *Poetical Works*, ed. F. J. Sypher (Delmar, NY: Scholars' Facsimilies and Reprints, 1990); page references appear in parentheses
MA	Matthew Arnold, *The Poems of Matthew Arnold*, second edition, ed. Kenneth Allott and Miriam Allott (London: Longman, 1979); line references appear in parentheses
OW	Oscar Wilde, *Complete Poems*, ed. Isobel Murray, The World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); line references appear in parentheses
RB	Robert Browning, *The Poems*, ed. John Pettigrew and Thomas J. Collins, 2 vols. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books); line references appear in parentheses
RBRB	Robert Browning, *The Ring and the Book*, ed. Richard D. Altick (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969); line references appear in parentheses
RK	Rudyard Kipling, *Verse*, definitive edition (New York: Doran and Doran, 1940); page references appear in parentheses
TH	Thomas Hardy, *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Samuel Hynes, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982–95); line references appear in parentheses
WBY	W.B. Yeats, *The Poems*, revised edition, ed. Richard Finneran (New York: Macmillan, 1989); line references appear in parentheses
WEH	W.E. Henley, *Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1926); page numbers appear in parentheses
WM	*The Collected Works of William Morris*, ed. May Morris, 24 vols. (London: Longmans Green and Company, 1910); volume and page references appear in parentheses

NOTE ON THE TEXTS

For the sake of consistency, all of the contributors to this volume quote from the same editions of poetry. To help minimize the number of endnotes, abbreviations are used sparingly in the main text to indicate the editions from which quotations have been taken. These editions have been selected on the basis of their reliability. In several cases, however, these texts remain unfortunately out of print. Readers will note that it is still the case that scholars must use authoritative editions of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's, Dante Gabriel Rossetti's, and Algernon Charles Swinburne's poetical works that were originally published in 1901, 1911, and 1904 respectively. Given the considerable revival of scholarly interest in each of these poets, one can only hope that publishers will seize on the opportunity to issue new much-needed annotated editions of these authors' works.

Since some readers may be unfamiliar with a number of critical terms relating to such issues as prosody, I have provided a succinct glossary at the end of the volume. For more detailed accounts of each of the terms listed, see M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, seventh edition (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace, 1999) and Alex Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan et al., eds., *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton: N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993). Finally, this *Companion* contains a "Guide to Further Reading" that presents a selection of critical works, dating from the 1960s to the present, that reflect recent developments in the study of Victorian poetry. References to many influential earlier critical works in the field can be located both in the endnotes to each chapter and in Frederick F. Faverty, *The Victorian Poets: A Guide to Research*, second edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968).

In Victorian studies it is the convention to identify wherever possible the names of writers who contributed unsigned articles to the periodicals of the day. These names appear in square parentheses in the endnotes.

JEB