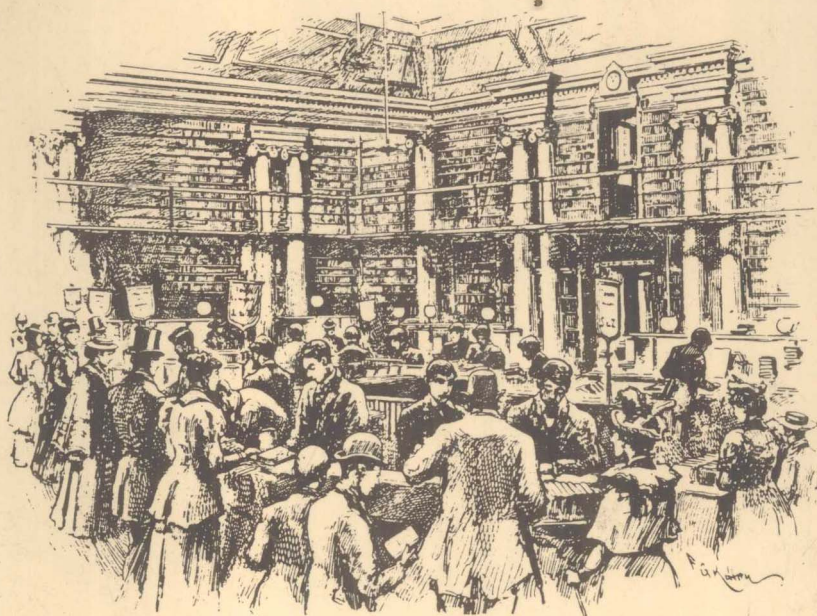


THE VICTORIAN NOVEL BEFORE VICTORIA

ELLIOT ENGEL
AND MARGARET F. KING



MACMILLAN STUDIES IN
VICTORIAN LITERATURE



THE VICTORIAN NOVEL BEFORE VICTORIA

British Fiction during the Reign of William IV,
1830–37

Elliot Engel and Margaret F. King

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THE VICTORIAN NOVEL BEFORE VICTORIA

Shelagh Hunter

VICTORIAN IDYLLIC FICTION

Further titles in preparation

For Laurie and for Bruce

Preface

Our book examines the British novel during the seven-year 'inter-regnum', as it has been called, between the death of George IV and the accession of Victoria. Histories of the British novel have traditionally paid scant and often disparaging attention to the fiction of this brief era. Richard Altick's assessment is representative when he calls this period 'the fallow interval following the exhaustion of the Romantic Age's energies and awaiting the fresh invigoration that would soon come as new, identifiably Victorian voices were heard' (*Victorian People and Ideas*, p. 2). We hope to demonstrate on the contrary that William's reign was not a fallow interval at all but rather the seedbed for the great flowering of Victorian fiction that began with the publication of Dickens's *Pickwick Papers* in 1837.

The plan of the book reflects our interest in the relationship between the novels of 1830 to 1837 and their cultural milieu – a milieu which we see as much more identifiably Victorian than post-Romantic. After all, it was in 1830 that the Whigs, with William's help, gained control of Parliament, inaugurating the Age of Reform which saw its greatest victory in the First Reform Bill of 1832. To provide the historical context in which to study the novels, our introductory chapter examines the social, political and literary trends of William's reign.

The rest of the book focuses on the novelists and their works. Chapters 1, 2 and 3 deal, respectively, with the three authors during William's reign whom Ernest Baker in *The History of the English Novel* and Walter Allen in *The English Novel* deem most important: Frederick Marryat, Edward Bulwer-Lytton and Benjamin Disraeli. These neglected authors are only beginning to draw critical attention. Bulwer and Disraeli have finally reached a status worthy of individual chapters in *Victorian Fiction: A Second Guide to Research*. And Marryat deserves special consideration in our book since his contribution to British sea fiction owes as much to the reforming spirit and Scott's influence in the

1830s as it does to Smollett's or Marryat's own naval careers. To maintain our focus, we examine in detail only those novels which Marryat, Bulwer and Disraeli wrote from 1830 to 1837 but include allusions to earlier or later works when necessary.

Chapter 4 combines a study of six minor novelists of the period with a study of the subspecies of novels to which these writers most notably contributed: the Silver-Fork Novel (Mrs Gore and Lady Blessington), the Historical Novel (W. H. Ainsworth and G. P. R. James), and the Comic Novel (Theodore Hook and Robert Smith Surtees). A generic approach to the minor novelists should not only help establish the literary climate of these years but should also throw additional light on the three more major novelists of the period and on later novelists like Thackeray and Dickens who adapted those subgenres to their own genius. These complementary approaches help delineate the development of the British novel during the reign of William IV – its embodiment of the *Zeitgeist*, its advances beyond previous British fiction, and its anticipation of later Victorian fiction.

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Introduction: Political, Cultural and Literary Trends (1830–7)

This study was partly inspired by a comment of Kathleen Tillotson's in *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties*: 'The time has surely come to break up "the Victorian novel" into manageable segments; not by novelists, or categories, or phases, but simply by concentrating upon a decade or so at a time.'¹ Ironically, Tillotson's book was so dazzling in its illumination of fiction written in the 1840s that it eclipsed most interest in the first decade of Victorian fiction, the 1830s. In contrast to the attention given to the prose of Carlyle and Mill and even to the very early poetry of Tennyson and Browning that was published in the 1830s, the novels of that decade have been stigmatized by critics like Walter Allen as being written during 'a poor time for fiction', one cluttered by novelists whose names 'survive in literary history with only the wannest kind of historical interest'.²

Of course Tillotson and other critics interested in the historical development of British fiction did not by themselves draw attention away from the 1830s. Much of the credit – or blame – must be ascribed to Charles Dickens. Because Dickens conveniently published his first novel, *Pickwick Papers*, in the year that Victoria came to the throne, scholars have often felt justified in looking back no further than 1837 to discover the Victorian novel's inception. The years from 1830 to 1837, the reign of Victoria's uncle, William IV, are therefore dismissed as the void between Scott and Dickens.

It can be argued, however, that the neglected fiction of William's reign not only deserves study but that it deserves study as Victorian, rather than 'interregnum', fiction. As Lionel Stevenson says of fiction in *The English Novel: A Panorama*: 'A decade of expansion and experiment ended in 1830; by that date

the less effective varieties of fiction were fading out, leaving certain recognizable types of method and subject matter to serve as models.³ The novels that followed during the years of William's reign contain techniques, themes and generic forms which were then bequeathed to their more famous successors. Authors like Dickens and Thackeray may have transformed this literary inheritance, but they could not disown it. Moreover, the climate of reform, King William's own personality, and the status of the book-publishing trade also mark 1830 as the beginning of a new era, as Victorian in certain ways as the remaining six decades of the nineteenth century.

If the emergence of a new era can be gauged politically, then 1830, more than the traditional 1832 or 1837, inaugurated the first phase of Victorianism known as the Age of Reform. Actually, agitation for political reform had begun by at least 1780, when both liberals and radicals in the House of Commons clamoured for a more representative electoral system. But the French Revolution and England's subsequent war with France postponed consideration of reform measures; and after Napoleon's death not only were conservatives in control of Parliament, but fear of revolutions like those on the Continent cemented their obstructionist resolve. If anything, the political climate was reactionary: in 1817 the Habeas Corpus Act was suspended, and in 1819, following the 'Peterloo massacre' of members of a Manchester crowd gathered to hear a radical orator, the repressive Six Acts were passed to prevent large public meetings and to restrict the radical press. In the five years preceding 1830, reactionary conservatism finally began to erode, as signalled by the repeal of the Test Acts in 1828 and the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829. But only in 1830 did the flood of liberal and radical sentiment sweep the conservatives from power.

A convergence of events and forces during the latter half of 1830 ensured the triumph of the reform movement. The death of George IV on 26 July sparked the hope and fuelled the demand for parliamentary reform – among the Whigs, who wanted greater representation for manufacturing and commercial interests; among the Radicals, who wanted universal suffrage; and among the English people in general, who felt that any change would be for the better. Adding to the pressure for reform were the uprisings of farm workers in response to a bad harvest and the

riots of factory workers in protest against unemployment and high food prices. In the midst of such domestic turmoil, England's ruling class feared that if Parliament kept clinging to the *status quo*, the moral of the recent July Revolution in Paris (which ousted Charles x) could apply to a tale of more than one city. When Parliament convened in October, it was under the leadership of the Tory Duke of Wellington, but when the Tories were forced to resign a month later, William turned to Lord Grey and the Whigs to form a new government. Grey agreed, but only with the proviso that he be allowed to formulate a bill for electoral reform. Thus, with Tory rule finally ended, the Reform Bill could be forged. As Louis Cazamian noted in *The Social Novel in England*: 'Victoria's reign began in 1837, but in all respects that of William iv (1830-1837) was inseparable from it. After 1830 the progress of liberal ideas and the aftermath of the July Revolution made the Reform Act inevitable.'⁴

The years of William's reign mirrored in miniature the socio-political movement of the early and middle phases of the Victorian age as a whole. Both the dangerously explosive early period (1837-48) and the more peaceful, prosperous middle years (1848-70) were foreshadowed in remarkably accurate proportion during William's rule. In his first two years social upheaval and pressure for reform intensified, moving England close to revolution. The Duke of Newcastle's palace was burned; the Derby jail was stormed; and mobs in Bristol set fire to jails, town halls and the bishop's palace. But once the Reform Bill became law in 1832, a peculiarly 'High Victorian' atmosphere ensued from 1833 through 1836. Actually, the Bill did very little for English democracy but a great deal for public morale. As David Thomson points out: 'It offered a taste of reform and whetted the appetite for more; it left abuses enough to provoke sustained agitation for another generation; but it set a precedent for changing the most antiquated and traditionalist of institutions by legislative action.'⁵ The feeling which prevailed for the remainder of William's reign, then, was one of sheer relief, relief that the electoral process had been changed with scarcely any bloodshed and no damage to Britain's revered national institutions. Moreover, during these four and a half years England entered a period of relative prosperity which lasted until 1837, when Victoria's rule - and the most harrowing ten years of social unrest in the nineteenth century - began.⁶

The 'Victorianism' before Victoria is due not only to the climate of reform but also to the temper of William's reign, a reign characterized by the diminution of royal power and a shift towards a figurehead sovereign. William's acquiescence to the constriction of his powers makes him, in the opinion of Roger Fulford, the 'saviour' of the British monarchy. Fulford may exaggerate William's significance here; he later sums up more moderately William's contribution to the evolution of the British monarchy: 'William was the link joining our modern sovereigns with the more politically powerful Georges. The powers of the Crown were diminished when he was on the throne as a result of many struggles, but he will be remembered by posterity as one who made his contribution to the modern monarchy and in his bluff, natural way enhanced its popularity.'

William's moderate popularity derived in part from his responsiveness to his subjects' wishes, to which he was a good deal more sensitive than his brother and predecessor, George IV. Unlike his brother, who obstinately resisted reform, William played an active, albeit a reluctant, role in the passage of the Reform Bill. When Lord Grey demanded that William create fifty Whig Peers to overcome Tory opposition to the Reform Bill in the House of Lords, William at first refused, consenting to create only twenty. But when the Tories failed to form a government and revolution threatened if the Bill's passage was delayed further, William agreed to meet Grey's demands. Under the threat that fifty new Peers would be created, the Tories withdrew their opposition to the Bill, and it passed the third reading to become law on 4 June 1832. Although hardly revered or adored to the extent that Victoria was, William became, like Victoria, a monarch congenial to the newly powerful middle class.

The respectability of William's court also earned the approval of the middle class. It reflected the new seriousness of mood which began to pervade England after George's death in 1830. It was a mood set by such shaping forces of Victorianism as Evangelicalism and the middle-class ethic of success by thrift and hard work. As Phillip Ziegler comments in *King William IV*, 'The court of William and Queen Adelaide was a dull and dowdy place. In this it largely reflected the personality of the Queen. Adelaide was a Victorian before her time; indeed, in many ways the court which Victoria inherited in 1837 was more "Victorian"

than was to be the case for another twenty years.⁸ And although William had openly enjoyed the attentions of mistresses before he became King, after acceding to the throne, he was a model of discretion and, by most accounts, even fidelity. His subjects welcomed and respected the royal shift from Regency gaiety and profligacy to Victorian soberness and decorum.

Despite the Victorianism of William's reign, it would be untrue to say that he exerted much direct influence on literature of the period, although for that matter Victoria was hardly like Elizabeth in shaping the literature that bears her name. William's reading was limited largely to naval history and manuals on lighthouse construction. His one recorded comment on writers – 'I know of no person so perfectly disagreeable and even dangerous as an author'⁹ – hardly qualifies him as a patron of the literary arts. Forces outside the court in 1830, however, were radically reforming the dissemination of fiction so that it began to reach the same class which the Reform Bill enfranchised. Until the late 1820s novel-reading had been limited largely to the wealthy. Published in two and three expensively bound volumes, novels were beyond the means of most but the rich. Even the circulating libraries, which were more responsible than retail sales for the distribution of fiction, necessarily catered to the well-to-do because of the high subscription rates. Until around 1830 the cheap market was left entirely to small publishers who lacked the resources for mass distribution. But in June of 1829, when Tom Cadell issued the Author's Edition of the Waverley novels in five-shilling volumes, he inaugurated the vogue of inexpensive recent fiction reprints. Two years later in 1831 Colburn and Bentley's began their long-lived series of Standard Novels at six shillings each. Finally readers could buy a complete novel in one volume (rather than several) and at one-fifth of what a fashionable novel cost in its original edition. Thus, around 1830 began a trend of sharply falling book prices and, therefore, of broader readership which continued unabated until 1850.

However, the availability of fiction to the less affluent classes should not be exaggerated. The cheap book movement, like the Reform Bill, primarily benefited the upper middle class. The lower class, and even the lower middle class, benefited very little from the change. As Richard Altick points out,

Five shillings – the price of a reprinted novel – would buy five

pounds of butter or ten pounds of meat. And seven shillings would provide a family of five with good table beer for a month; hence the middle-class book lover of moderate means, though able to patronize a book shop occasionally, could not afford to buy many volumes even at the reduced rates of the early thirties. Books remained a minor luxury.¹⁰

The novels purchased by the expanded readership of the 1830s fell into two roughly equal categories. Capitalizing on the popularity of Sir Walter Scott (who died in 1832), historical novels comprised about half of the fiction written during William IV's reign. The other half consisted of novels of contemporary life. What linked together these novels of past and present are the twin strains of realism and romance. The romantic and realistic impulses may vary in their manifestations, degree of dominance, and positive or negative influence, but few novels of the period are not hybrids created from the coalescence of both strains. Indeed, by far the most important factor in the evolution of British fiction during William's reign is the gradual triumph not only of the contemporary novel but also of the realistic impulse within it. By the time Victoria came to the throne, the contemporary-realistic mode was becoming the norm which would be modified and later immortalized by the novelists of the next three decades.

It is remarkable that contemporary realism could possibly emerge as the normative fictional mode between 1830 and 1837 considering its insignificant role in British literature of the previous decade. The literature of the 1820s was Regency and Romantic, terms which by definition exclude the moral seriousness, middle-class perspective, and deflation of the heroic and ideal associated with Victorian realism.¹¹ Though politically the Regency ended when the Prince Regent became King George IV in 1820, culturally it most certainly did not. The king continued to be as profligate, idle and indifferent to the desires of the middle and lower classes as he had been before his coronation, and his court followed suit, setting the standards of taste for the nation. Excepting brilliance, the literature which embodies the Regency spirit has much in common with Restoration literature: it glorifies the aristocracy, disparages the middle class, and treats both moral and social concerns with a high degree of detachment. The paradigmatic subgenre of Regency fiction was

the silver-fork novel first popularized by Robert Plumer Ward's *Tremaine* in 1825. The silver-fork novel has as its hero the dandy, who asserted his superiority to the rest of mankind by his dazzling wit and equally dazzling waistcoats. Middle-class characters, when portrayed at all in Regency fiction, tended to be the subjects of comic novels like Pierce Egan's Tom-and-Jerry series, where the bourgeoisie are burlesqued from the perspective of an upper-class sneer. Tied as it was to a particular monarch and to an aristocracy whose power would soon be eroding irrevocably, the Regency spirit was doomed to obsolescence. Its hold on the British imagination was at best weak and faddish.

The same could not be said of the Romantic spirit. Romantic poetry continued to exert a powerful literary influence during the 1820s on the fiction as well as the poetry, even after the deaths of Keats in 1821, Shelley in 1822 and Byron in 1824. In fact, the only notable anti-romantic novelist of the decade was Thomas Love Peacock, whose *Maid Marian* (1822) and *Misfortunes of Elphin* (1828) look backward for their inspiration to eighteenth-century rationalism. But this minor anti-romantic chord was virtually drowned out by the popular acclaim which greeted the continuing historical romances of Sir Walter Scott published in the early 1820s: *Ivanhoe* (1820), *Kenilworth* (1821), *Quentin Durward* (1822) and *Redgauntlet* (1824). *Ivanhoe* signalled a major shift in Scott's subject matter – from the Scottish lore of the Waverley novels written before 1820 which the author had absorbed since childhood almost by osmosis, to English and continental history, which required of him more formal research. The evidence of this research, the footnotes and appendices that accompany these novels, would mislead some of Scott's disciples of the 1830s into substituting the most dry pedantry for Scott's vivid evocation of the past. But for the British reading public of the 1820s, what made Scott's English novels so appealing, like the Scottish novels before them, was their romanticism: their picturesque and remote settings, their colourful accounts of ancient customs and superstitions, their stirring adventures, and their celebration of chivalry. From 1820 to 1829, Romanticism ruled British literature as surely as George IV ruled the British people – and with far less opposition.

One cannot, then, look to British literature of the 1820s for an explanation or foreshadowing of the gradual triumph of contemporary realism in British fiction from 1830 to 1837. Nor can one

look to the influence of French literature during the same decade. Though French Romanticism can be traced back as far as Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, written in the middle of the eighteenth century (1761), the Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars delayed its full flowering until after 1815. Literary historians usually date the height of the French Romantic movement from 1820, when Lamartine published his *Méditations*, to the revolution of 1848. In contrast to the English Romantic movement, where poetry was pre-eminent, the French Romantic movement owed its brilliance partly to poetry but to drama and prose fiction as well. Many French Romantics, among them Hugo, Vigny and Gautier, contributed to all three genres. In the 1830s, when romanticism was slowly beginning to give way to realism in the British novel, French fiction remained overwhelmingly romantic, but interestingly, the single greatest influence on the French novel of that decade, as on the English novel, was still Sir Walter Scott. On 6 January 1830, a reviewer in *Le Globe* observed, 'Even in 1830, we notice that by many people, the Waverley novels were regarded as a precious mine newly discovered – a mine to be worked without delay.' And two years later, in the year that Scott died, he had, according to Stendhal, at least 200 imitators in France.¹² The vogue of the French historical romance had actually begun in the 1820s, inaugurated by the publication of Martin de Vigny's *Cinq-Mars* in 1826, a novel set in the reign of Louis XIII and clearly indebted to Scott. Also saturated with Scott's romanticism was Balzac's *Les Chouans* (1829), a novel of the French Revolution and the first of Balzac's *Comédie Humaine* series. The 1830s proper saw the publication of Victor Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris*, perhaps the most brilliant French historical romance of the era. Known to English audiences as *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, it is set in Paris of the fifteenth century, the same era as Scott's *Quentin Durward* and contains, like Scott's novel, a brilliant portrait of the Machiavellian King Louis XI of France. The most prolific historical novelist of the French Romantic movement was, of course, Alexander Dumas *père*. Totally lacking Scott's genius, Dumas nevertheless had a great gift of imitation and a knack for knowing a money-maker when he saw one. Reducing Scott's romances to a formula of swashbuckling adventure, he and a staff of ghost writers used it to clone dozens of historical novels – some 300 volumes in all. Dumas's best-known works were published in