

Victoriana Histories, Fictions, Criticism

Cora Kaplan

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS NEW YORK



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Introduction

In Brian Moore's comic novel *The Great Victorian Collection* (1975), a young Canadian, Anthony Maloney, an assistant professor of British history whose subject is Victorian things, falls asleep in the Sea Winds motel in Carmel-by-the-Sea, California, and dreams that he is walking through an exhibit of Victorian objects, rivalling and sometimes reproducing those on display in Britain's Great Exhibition of 1851.¹ In a typical aberration of dream life, the collection, which takes up a modern city block, is located not in some virtual London, but, to Anthony's amazement, in the Sea Winds parking lot. He wakes to find himself the custodian of just such an exhibition outside his motel room, whose contents not only perfectly replicate actually existing historical objects – from a glass fountain to a toy engine, to erotic playthings he has only read about – but has created others, many of which were not known to have survived the inevitable triage of history, or even to have ever existed in more than descriptive or imaginary form. Media attention to the collection brings Anthony, as its realiser and reluctant curator, a brief celebrity, but its mysterious origin in his psyche, and its curious dependence for its integrity on his presence at the site of its appearance, ultimately prove fatal to the dreamer and his dream; the story ends with Anthony's macabre death, while the collection – subtly degraded, no longer newsworthy, but not destroyed – survives him.

A meditation on the modern obsession with things Victorian, *The Great Victorian Collection* explores the late twentieth-century desire to know and to 'own' the Victorian past through its remains: the physical and written forms that are its material history. Maloney's academic interest in Victorian 'collectibles' – Victoriana in its earliest definition as material culture – provides the occasion for a surrealist exposure of the grotesque and even dangerous side of the historical imagination – the incommensurability of the Victorian past and its late capitalist legacy. California, in Moore's evocation of the 1970s, represents the horizon of

Britain's influence as America's Pacific rim: postmodernity's monstrous elaboration of a consumer society derived in part from Victorian ingenuity, invention, high ideals and greed, the effect of the nineteenth century's insatiable desire for commodities, as well as its perverse sexual imagination. Carmel, at first glance, is the antithesis of Victorian Britain. A second look tells us that it is the logical evolution of the 1851 Exhibition's utopian and imperial impulses. Reworked fantastically in his unconscious, Maloney's projected archive, the cultural capital drawn from his historical research, materialises in the land of the dream factory, and is no more or less surreal than Hollywood or Disneyland.

The tone and texture of Moore's California novel are variously indebted to the state's dystopic chroniclers, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Nathaniel West and Raymond Chandler. Asocial, unstable, *The Great Victorian Collection's* characters are radically unsecured in their own history, and they move helplessly towards disaster in a landscape whose distinctive character is its anomie. It is in this California-like space, in which the past itself is a waning concept, that Moore implies we must now know it. *How* we know the Victorian past, Moore seems to suggest, is irrevocably altered not just by a leap in time and in context, but by the elaborate theorisation of the self and the work of art in the twentieth century. Nowhere credited, the novel's conceits about material culture and the mind adapt elements of Walter Benjamin's argument about 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' and is indebted to Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*. There are parallels too to Jean Baudrillard's 'Simulacra and Simulations', published in English in the same year as Moore's novel.² A *jeu d'esprit* that probes and satirises the late twentieth-century interest in Victoriana, *The Great Victorian Collection* is also a wonderfully complex example of it.

Brian Moore, like his doomed protagonist Anthony Maloney, was Canadian, and Moore's take on Maloney's lethal curatorial passion for the objects gathered for or made in the metropolitan centre of the British Empire at its triumphal moment, is suffused with postcolonial irony. But Britain's own revived appetite for its past has far outstripped that of its former possessions. Sanderson's William Morris range of fabric and wall-paper, Peter Ackroyd's monumental *Dickens* (1990), the historical pastiche of A. S. Byatt's *Possession* (1991), Sarah Waters's *Tipping the Velvet*, *Affinity* and *Fingersmith* (1999–2003), a spate of successful television and film adaptations, including Dickens's *Bleak House* (2005) and Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (2004) – the fascination with things Victorian has been a British postwar vogue which shows no signs of exhaustion.³ At the beginning of the fad in the 1960s, 'Victoriana' might have narrowly meant the collectible remnants of material culture in the corner antique

shop, but by the late 1970s its reference had widened to embrace a complementary miscellany of evocations and recyclings of the nineteenth century, a constellation of images which became markers for particular moments of contemporary style and culture. I can see my younger self – just – watching television costume dramas like the longrunning Victorian series, *Upstairs, Downstairs* (1971–75): an American expatriate living in an English seaside town, curled up on a re-upholstered Victorian chesterfield in a Laura Ashley dress. Today ‘Victoriana’ might usefully embrace the whole phenomenon, the astonishing range of representations and reproductions for which the Victorian – whether as the origin of late twentieth century modernity, its antithesis, or both at once – is the common referent.

Describing the making and circulation of such objects, histories, stories, adaptations, pastiches and parodies is easier than pinpointing their collective significance. But we might start by asking whether the proliferation of Victoriana is more than nostalgia – a longing for a past that never was – and more too than a symptom of the now familiar, if much debated, view that the passage from modernity to postmodernity has been marked by the profound loss of a sense of history. This loss, some theorists of the postmodern argue, has meant that what was once a depth model of historical time has been compressed into a single surface, so that the past has become a one-dimensional figure in the carpet, a thematic element in the syncretic pattern of a perpetual present.⁴ Individual instances of Victoriana – a film, a pastiche fiction, a retro style, even a biography – may superficially fit this latter description. Yet in the wider definition that I am proposing, one that includes the self-conscious rewriting of historical narratives to highlight the suppressed histories of gender and sexuality, race and empire, as well as challenges to the conventional understandings of the historical itself, the transformation of the Victorian past cannot be so neatly characterised. The variety and appeal of Victoriana over the years might better be seen as one sign of a sense of the historical imagination on the move, an indication that what we thought we knew as ‘history’ has become, a hundred years and more after the death of Britain’s longest-reigning monarch, a kind of conceptual nomad, not so much lost as permanently restless and unsettled.⁵

I would like to offer the five essays and the Afterword that follow – on Victorian literature and culture as read through its modern interpreters, on biographical treatments of Victorian writers and on late twentieth-century Victoriana in fiction and film – as at once an example of Victoriana in its most inclusive definition, and as an extended commentary on the phenomenon as a whole. For while the essays are freestanding and come

at their subjects from different angles, together they extend and elaborate the analysis of Victoriana in some of the many genres it has colonised or invented from the late 1960s forward, considering it as a discourse through which both the conservative and progressive elements of Anglophone cultures reshaped their ideas of the past, present and future.

My own interest in writing about the Victorian period, in particular the stormy middle decades of the nineteenth century, began in the mid 1970s, overtly as an offshoot of research on feminism and women's poetry, but subliminally inspired, I now think, by the many ways in which the reinvented Victorian was incorporated in my everyday life. My modest 1870s terraced house in Brighton, like those of my professional neighbours, was full of Sanderson and Laura Ashley reproduction wallpaper and fabrics, a confusion of the plebeian and the bourgeois in its furnishings of stripped pine and reupholstered button-backed chairs, but my politics and my other cultural tastes were not in any sense retro; both left-wing and feminist, they were emphatically of the moment. The productive incongruity of these influences found its form in my initial project to republish Elizabeth Barrett Browning's narrative poem, *Aurora Leigh* (1855), an almost forgotten proto-feminist Victorian text, and to reinterpret its moment of writing in the light of late twentieth-century political concerns. In the process of working on the edition, published by The Women's Press in 1978, I began to think of myself for the first time as a 'Victorianist', albeit one working from a Marxist and feminist perspective, and open to the kinds of contemporary theoretical influences – German critical theory, psychoanalysis, semiotics, poststructuralism, deconstruction – which seemed (and still seem) to have an odd affinity with an interest in the Victorian period and its literature. I knew that the theory-friendly feminist Victorianist was not an invention of my own but an identity shared with other Anglophone academics, ubiquitous enough to be affectionately parodied at a later moment in David Lodge's *Nice Work* (1988) with its red-haired protagonist Robyn Penrose, a specialist in the Industrial Novel, and in A. S. Byatt's *Possession* (1991), whose cool, blonde, English lecturer Maud Bailey writes about the life and work of her fictional forebear, the composite Victorian woman poet Christabel LaMotte.

Over time my interest in women's writing, and in social hierarchy, led me to read and teach Victorian women's prose and poetry, setting Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*, Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*, *Jane Eyre* and *Shirley* alongside *The Diaries of Hannah Cullwick*, a Victorian maid-of-all-work.⁶ For many left-wing Victorianists in the 1960s and 1970s it was class hierarchies, class injustice and class antagonism that were the worst of the nineteenth century's legacy to

modern Britain, a judgement made stronger, the remnants of the system more despised, just because those structures of deference that class imposed were definitively weakening in the postwar years, and Labour policies were promising, if not delivering, a more equitable, supposedly 'classless' society. In the fourteen years that I lived among Brighton's Regency and Victorian streets and waterfront I grew deeper into that scholarly identity. Increasingly I began to think of myself as British as much as American. My relationship to things Victorian – from the built environment, to fashion, to books and domestic furniture – redefined my sense of national identity, influenced my politics and changed my academic signature. As a writer, teacher, scholar, reader – as a woman and a British resident – I am myself written through, like a stick of Brighton Rock, with the contradictions inscribed in that complicated encounter with Victorian culture. My pleasure in the period's literary language, which went back to my adolescence in Massachusetts when I first read Brontë and Dickens, became crossed with my outraged fascination, translated into respectable critical analysis, at Victorian social conventions and prejudices which surface unexpectedly in much-loved texts – for example in the vicious and grotesque representations of the poor in Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, a poem I still teach and read, and, as I came to see by the mid-1980s, in the imperial and racial discourse that is a leading trope in my favourite *Jane Eyre*.

These abiding concerns about class, gender, empire and race run through these essays and are joined by another preoccupation: the high degree of affect involved in reading and writing about the Victorian past, an indication that more is at stake in the ongoing popularity of Victoriana than can be registered in the categories of historical investigation, aesthetic appreciation or entertainment. As I have suggested, I am as implicated in the contradictory sets of feelings that the Victorian provokes as any other writer and reader, and my intention in analysing such emotions is not to rationalise or depoliticise them, or to suggest that I or anyone else can finally stand outside them. The Victorian as at once ghostly and tangible, an origin and an anachronism, had a strong affective presence in modern Britain in the supposedly libertarian 1960s and 1970s, when the nation was thought to be on its way to becoming a classless and multicultural society. Its idiomatic function was enhanced in the 1980s and 1990s when Victorian Values – thrift, family, enterprise – were brought back as the positive ethic of Conservative government. It was then that I began seriously to consider the curious appropriation of the Victorian for disparate political and cultural agendas in the present, to see Victoriana's peculiar role, not simply as that always selective and unreliable thing, historical memory, so easily cloyed with nostalgia or

soured into persecution of the dead, but as what we might call history out of place, something atemporal and almost spooky in its effects, yet busily at work constituting this time – yours and mine – of late Capitalist modernity.

In exploring some of the cultural and political ramifications of Victoriana, these essays try to account for the pleasures and dangers evoked by imitation or reference to the narrative forms, individual histories and systems of belief of nineteenth-century Britain. For while the high literary modernism and the popular culture in the first half of the twentieth century defined itself through an explicit or tacit rejection of the cultural preferences and social mores of the Victorian world, distance from the period has not only produced detailed – and controversial – historical analyses of its customs, practices and influence, but has gradually lent it over time the charm of antiquity and the exotic, so that increasingly, in the new millennium, even its worst abuses seem to fascinate rather than appal. Genealogically speaking, the Victorian is no longer seen as a disapproving parent of the louche modernity of the opening of the last century – indeed, the modernist period may have increasingly replaced the Victorian as a still coercive but more wayward antecedent. Certainly the postwar left's characterisation of the Victorian as the bullying bourgeois patriarch responsible for the twin cruelties of capitalism and empire, has less purchase on the general historical imagination today than it did some twenty years ago, and has become the subject of vigorous debate in the humanities.

An aggressive and politically focused putsch by academic and popular historians has set itself the task of demolishing the critique of the Victorian. The present moment has gone much further than Margaret Thatcher ever did in extolling the virtues of the Victorian – it was in her interests to keep that association positive but vague. Now TV programmes such as the BBC's 'What the Victorians Did for Us' endlessly praise its invention and enterprise.⁷ Matthew Sweet, in an acute and engaging study, *Inventing the Victorians*, suggests that most of our assumptions about them are wrong – the Victorians are neither our skeleton in the closet nor our moral saviours, but are more like us in their differences than is commonly supposed. Sweet rejects the 'sentimentality' and opportunism which made Margaret Thatcher praise Samuel Smiles, and Tony Blair in 1996 describe himself as a 'Christian Socialist, in order to create a continuity between New Labour and a progressive political tradition that predated the formation of his own party' – and, we might add, to explicitly distinguish his 'socialism' from the socialism of 'Old Labour' and the Bennite left.⁸ The tradition of Christian Socialism itself is a little more of an ethical minefield than Blair knows or at least implies: one of

its founders and most prominent members was the Reverend Charles Kingsley, author of the Victorian classic *The Water Babies* and an outspoken racist.⁹ British Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, follows the line of recent revisionist historiography – David Cannadine's *Ornamentalism* (2001) and Niall Ferguson's *Empire* (2002) have been particularly influential – when he told Anglophone Africa on a 2005 visit that the Empire had been on balance a progressive and modernising force, and Britain has 'nothing to apologize for'.¹⁰ This anti-apologetic stance is, even so, couched in defensive terms, and can take a range of contradictory positions, so that we might now see the Victorian in the Blair years as a key term in the struggle to define the 'conservative modernity' of New Labour, as well as a period once again wide open not only to the endless revision of historical interpretation, as it should be, but also especially porous to highly politicised forms of representation.¹¹

The first essay, 'Heroines, Hysteria and History: *Jane Eyre* and her Critics', discusses the revision of women's writing of the 1840s by twentieth-century criticism. It traces the critical fortunes of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, a novel whose enduring popularity, rewriting and translation to small and large screen make it a leading example of narrative Victoriana. *Jane Eyre* remains a classic, I suggest, because its themes and rhetoric have summoned up for generations of readers the powerful politics of affect at the heart of gender and modernity. Working forward from Virginia Woolf's condescending treatment of Charlotte Brontë as a writer, to more recent feminist rethinking of her best-known fiction by Elaine Showalter, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Nancy Armstrong, Sally Shuttleworth and Heather Glen, it ends with a consideration of artist Paula Rego's stunning series of drawings on *Jane Eyre*, which comprise a strikingly original commentary on accompanying passages from Brontë's text. I explore *Jane Eyre* as a popular icon which acts as what Freud called a 'mnemic symbol', a memorial or narrative that embodies and elicits a buried psychic conflict which cannot be resolved in the present. The essay asks what *Jane Eyre* is to her twentieth-century readers that they should still weep for her, but it also questions whether the disentangling of the novel's critical genealogy and political history dispels, or only renews in new ways, the strong affective responses it has evoked over time.

'Biographilia' considers the high – and still rising – profile of Victorian literary biography in the last two decades. Less a craving on the part of readers for a full-frontal exposure of the private lives of Victorian writers, the ongoing enthusiasm for biography satisfies a more bookish desire, perhaps equally subversive in its way, to revisit the nineteenth century's realist forms through a modern genre that borrows from them.

Conservatively viewed, this urge can be seen as a wish to recapture the cultural and social optimism of the period, that time of high humanism in which the ‘man of letters’ could be a hero, and individuals could be seen as having both cultural and ethical agency. Yet I argue that the vogue for nineteenth-century literary biography today is more culturally complicated than this perspective has allowed. Ideas about authorship, and about agency more generally have been deeply affected by the theoretical moment of the late 1960s and 1970s in which Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault jubilantly, but prematurely, announced ‘the death of the author’.¹² The author whose comeback from the culture wars of the 1970s and 1980s is being celebrated is not quite the confident figure who left. Survivors of an uncertain philosophical and political détente, authors past and present emerge as a new sort of hero for these less than heroic times. ‘Biographilia’ explores our undiminished *fin de siècle* appetite for life histories, commenting on the invention, ambition and appeal of Victorian literary biography through three celebrated examples: Peter Ackroyd’s potboiling, late-romantic *Dickens* and two biofictional treatments of Henry James, Colm Tóibín’s melancholy *The Master* and David Lodge’s briskly comic *Author, Author*. Throughout, the essay raises some broader questions about Victorian literary biography as an occasion for elegy in its capacity both to retrieve and to bury the past, and as an ambivalent site of identification for biographers and readers.

‘Historical Fictions: Pastiche, Politics and Pleasure’ looks at a constellation of historical novels which thematise the Victorian and whose styles and narrative procedures are influenced by postmodern fiction and theory. The original of this sub-genre was John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969), but by the early 1990s a flood of such narratives had appeared, flowing across the different categories of the novel. Detective fiction, for example, has developed a lucrative little line of mass-market Victorian pastiche, much of it written by Americans whose acquaintance with England, much less the Victorian period, seems both slight and second-hand. Successful novels with more literary aspirations include David Lodge’s *Nice Work* (1988), A. S. Byatt’s *Possession* (1991) and Michael Faber’s *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002). Sarah Waters’s trio of novels, thematising lesbianism in the Victorian, have been so successful that they have nicknamed a new subgenre: the slyly metrosexual ‘Vic Lit’. All these novels engage the Victorian through a mix of narrative strategies. *Possession* cross cuts between the nineteenth century and the present, tracking a lost manuscript by an imaginary woman poet who is a synthesis of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti and Emily Dickinson, comparing sexuality and literary cultures

then and now; *Nice Work* cleverly updates Mrs Gaskell's *North and South* for post-industrial Britain under Thatcher. The historical side of their ambition has less to do with the faithful reproduction of Victorian language, landscapes and mores – *Possession* is full of these, but in *Nice Work* they are a lightly referenced backstory – than with constructing a virtual relationship between past and present, one which experiments with the kaleidoscopic configurations of two key moments of modernity. Intimately dependent on, and in critical dialogue with, the last quarter century of radical revisions of Victorian social and political history, the pedagogic dimension of these novels is matched, from Fowles forward, by their experiments with form and their speculative aesthetics. At once philosophical, political and generic, the new historical fiction positions itself as both a complement and rival to academic writing on the period.

The last long essay in the collection, 'Retuning *The Piano*', traces the network of Victorian sources and intertexts at play in Jane Campion's 'dark' postcolonial romance which opened in 1993. Set in nineteenth-century New Zealand, Campion's film about the mute but musical Ada McGrath and her illegitimate daughter Flora contains a web of references to Anglophone fictions from the nineteenth century, many of them American texts. Fragments – both figure and story borrowed from Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*, Herman Melville's *White-Jacket*, Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*, Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* – are recomposed to emphasise both the film's origins in nineteenth-century narrative, and its emphatically 'modern' take on colonialism and sexuality. In the same way *The Piano* keeps before us the competing terms of nineteenth- and twentieth-century science and philosophy. The film invites us to interpret Ada's supposedly self-willed disability through romantic psychologies of the self and/or psychoanalysis; its tongue-in-cheek evocation of Claude Lévi-Strauss's structural anthropology in its central narrative conceit about the exchange of women and pianos, runs alongside its emphasis on the common-sense racial assumptions of nineteenth-century settler societies. These various ingredients blend almost magically at the level of the film's narrative diegesis, but separate out as discrete, even radically incompatible, elements if one tries to follow their social and political logic. The feminist, or some might say post-feminist, motifs in *The Piano* undermine its somewhat truncated critique of British colonial and imperial practices. 'Retuning *The Piano*' explores the peculiar dissonances between the film's twin political imperatives.

Campion's film nevertheless maps out fresh and interesting terrain. While narrative Victoriana in books, film and television has always sold well on the international market, trading on a sentimental attachment to

English or British cultural heritage, *The Piano* daringly abandons this limited focus, representing the Victorian more comprehensively as the *modus vivendi* of empire, as travelling cultural capital that included the methods of conquest as well as the social, psychic and material baggage that British colonisers carried with them. This ideological dissemination is examined and criticised within the film text, but it is ironically reproduced in the mode in which the film functions as a commodity. A successful example of postcolonial cultural enterprise, *The Piano*'s crafting of a new kind of 'global' Victoriana with its exotic antipodean setting, its English-speaking cast drawn both from the metropolitan homeland and its now fully-detached empire, its erotically charged, sexually explicit romance coupled with 'artistic' cinematography, is cleverly fashioned to appeal to multiple audiences worldwide. Although the film can itself be seen as a period piece which has taken on classic status, Jane Campion's compelling staging of the Victorian has not been surpassed in its disturbing complexity. In a short Afterword to the book I reflect further on some of the questions raised throughout the book about the thematising of Empire in Victoriana from Jean Rhys through Julian Barnes.

Once a month for the past eight years, on my way to my London hairdresser, tucked away in a converted warehouse off the Gray's Inn Road, I walk past the Charles Dickens Museum at 48 Doughty Street, where one may presumably (I have never looked in) see the writing environment in which Dickens lived and worked from 1837–39, together with paintings, rare editions, manuscripts, original furniture and personal items. While I have dutifully, and with some profit and pleasure, visited Hardy country and Kipling's house, and am a regular at V & A exhibits, I have been resistant to this particular tourist attraction, which in any case never seems mobbed by visitors. Perhaps Dickens's twenty-first century fans, finding him alive and kicking in his novels, their adaptations, popular biography and in his vivid evocation in Peter Ackroyd and Simon Callow's camp, tragicomic one-man show, *The Mystery of Charles Dickens*, are put off, as I am, by four floors of material culture offering Dickens as fixed and frozen in cultural memory through a reconstruction of one of the houses in which he briefly lived, however historically meticulous that reconstruction may be. The Museum is there, however, if you like that sort of thing. You can even preview your visit by taking a 'virtual tour' of the house on the web, as if it were a hotel you might book in some far-flung resort. Dickens certainly exists today 'out there' in his texts, adaptations and in his always-changing reception by academic and common readers, as well as in his appropriation by the heritage industry (of which this museum is a part). Personally too he exists 'inside' for me