THE CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF

VICTORIAN LITERATURE

EDITED BY
KATE FLINT

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THE CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF
VICTORIAN LITERATURE

This collaborative History aims to become the standard work on Victorian literature for the twenty-first century. Well-known scholars introduce readers to their particular fields, discuss influential critical debates, and offer illuminating contextual detail to situate authors and works in their wider cultural and historical contexts. Sections on publishing and readership, and a chronological survey of major literary developments between 1837 and 1901, are followed by essays on topics including sexuality, sensation, cityscapes, melodrama, epic, and economics. Victorian writing is placed in its complex relation to the Empire, Europe, and America, as well as to Britain's component nations. The final chapters consider how Victorian literature, and the period as a whole, influenced twentieth-century writers. Original, lucid, and stimulating, each chapter is an important contribution to Victorian literary studies. Together, the contributors have created an engaging discussion of the ways in which the Victorians saw themselves, and of how their influence has persisted.

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THE NEW CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF
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The New Cambridge History of English Literature is a programme of reference works designed to offer a broad synthesis and contextual survey of the history of English literature through the major periods of its development. The organization of each volume reflects the particular characteristics of the period covered, within a general commitment to providing an accessible narrative history through a linked sequence of essays by internationally renowned scholars. The History is designed to accommodate the range of insights and fresh perspectives brought by new approaches to the subject, without losing sight of the need for essential exposition and information. The volumes include valuable reference features, in the form of a chronology of literary and political events, extensive primary and secondary bibliographies, and a full index.

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Introduction

KATE FLINT

Alone of all the volumes in the *New Cambridge History of English Literature*, this one is named after the reign of a monarch. To identify a literary period in this way is necessarily problematic, and the utility of the label 'Victorian' has long been contested.[1] On the other hand, it has endured – albeit with shifting sets of connotations. Not least among the reasons for this endurance is the apparent precision offered by the bounding dates of the Queen's reign (1837–1901), with the latter of these years more or less coinciding, conveniently, with the end of a century. Yet even before Queen Victoria's demise, her long tenure of the throne had encouraged many commentators to look backwards, thus accentuating the notion of her reign as marking a distinctly defined era. Both her Golden and Diamond Jubilees stimulated evaluative retrospectives – such as Alfred Russel Wallace's *The Wonderful Century. Its Successes and Failures* (1898) – of all that had been achieved (the emphasis was almost invariably teleologically framed) over the preceding decades, whether in politics or industrial invention, the physical sciences or the field of culture.

The sense that Victoria's accession marked a very useful, clearly defined starting point was, of course, in many ways constructed in hindsight, a product of the lengthy reign of a monarch who had attracted a good deal of attention right from her accession, due to the combination of her youth and the fact of her being a woman. This was accentuated as a result of an expanding popular press that exploited these circumstances, then her marriage to Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha in 1840, and then her rapidly growing family.[2] But other, less monarchically centered factors allowed late

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[1] An extensive discussion of these debates, as well as some compelling arguments for the period label 'Victorian' to be retained, is offered by Martin Hewitt, 'Why the Notion of Victorian Britain Does Make Sense', *Victorian Studies* 48:3 (2006), pp. 395–438.

[2] See John Plunkett, *Queen Victoria. First Media Monarch* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). For more on the cultural and literary impact of Queen Victoria, see also Margaret Homans, *Royal Representations: Queen Victoria and British Culture,*

Victorians to look at the decade of her coming to the throne as a starting point, whether they considered the beginnings of the railway system (which was to make a yet greater sociological and economic impact on the country in the 1840s); or the impact of the 1832 Reform Act, and the questions it raised concerning democracy and suffrage; or the ideological and material repercussions of the passing of the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act. In terms of literature itself – to take just three examples – the publication of Tennyson's *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* (1830), signalled the emergence of a writer who, whilst clearly building on the works of the second-generation Romantics who had preceded and pre-deceased him, was perceived over the decades to come as giving voice to many of the period's most pressing private and public concerns. The writings of Thomas Carlyle (*Sartor Resartus* (1833–4); *The French Revolution* (1837–48); *Past and Present* (1843)), similarly, incorporate elements from German Romantic philosophy in his experimental ways of addressing the relationship of the visible and invisible, the material and spiritual worlds, and in reconceptualizing both the interrelations of earlier and contemporary times, and the problems of historical perspective. The appearance of Dickens's *Sketches by Boz* (1836) and *Pickwick Papers* (1837) could, likewise, be seen as indicating not just a new voice in prose writing, but as pointing towards new modes of interaction with a rapidly expanding reading public, whether through prose that simultaneously commemorated and critiqued contemporary society (the transformation of the occasional essay into investigative journalism), or through the creation and commercialization of new habits of reading.

At the other end of Victoria's reign, 1901 provided a strong sense of a break for many commentators of the time, even if the relatively arbitrary cross-over point between 'Victorian' and 'modern' cultural formations has subsequently been repositioned in various ways, with the emphasis increasingly falling – as in this volume – on a whole period of transition, rather than on some neat date. The new generation of writers were keen to emphasize their dramatic rupture with the previous century, and their own attempts to provide a symbolic date for the end of the Victorian era have fed into the periodization of literary history – none more strongly than Virginia Woolf's well-worn formulation concerning the change in 'human character' that allegedly took place at the end of 1910, the year that saw the death of Edward VII, whose brief reign marked what historian G. M. Young called the Victorian period's 'flash Edwardian epilogue'. Yet even when one

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1837–1876 (University of Chicago Press, 1999), and Adrienne Auslander Munich, *Queen Victoria's Secrets* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

considers the social impact of the suffrage movement, the shock to the artistic system offered by the first Post-Impressionist Exhibition at the Grafton Galleries in December 1910, or the importance of the issues behind the constitutional crises that provoked the two General Elections of that year, each of these areas may be seen as a culmination of trends as well as a decisive severance with what had preceded them.[3] And the rupture was by no means absolute: others have preferred to see the social watershed of the First World War as signifying the true end of the period.

Yet the social and stylistic volatility of the late nineteenth century has led some critics and historians to see the transition away from 'Victorianism' as occurring somewhat earlier. One obvious point of comparison and contrast with this *Cambridge History* volume is Philip Davis's impressively thorough and immensely readable *The Victorians*, volume VIII of the new Oxford English Literary History (2002). Davis ends at 1880. But however reasoned this concluding point (whether determined by the author's own arguments concerning religion or literary form, or by the over-arching decision of his series editor), to cut off one's definition of what constitutes the Victorian period at this point is to miss many opportunities, not least to see the later Victorians chafing against the earlier decades of the century in formal, as well as ideological terms.

The 1916 *Cambridge History* – this volume's ancestor – solved the problem of how to construct a period divide by confining its definition of a Victorian writer to include only those who were already dead. Henry James passed away just in time to be included in the bibliographies, if not in the main body of the text, but his literary career, to take but one example, is suggestive of many of the themes and stylistic challenges that were explored in the later years of Victoria's reign: the indeterminacy of language and, indeed, of literary interpretation; concerns with internationalism and national identity; issues of sexual identity, freedom of expression, repression and control; the relationship between the aesthetic and the commercial; the ability of narrative prose to capture the life of the mind, with all its contradictions; the continual interchange between immediate sensory perception, memory, and

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[3] G. M. Young, *Portrait of an Age. Victorian England* (1949; Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 184. For 1910, see Peter Stansky, *On or About December 1910: Early Bloomsbury and its Intimate World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996). Virginia Woolf's comment that 'on or about December 1910 human character changed' can be found in her 1924 essay 'Character in Fiction' (later revised and reprinted as 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown'), in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Andrew McNeillie, vol. III (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988), p. 421.

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