



Introduction. “Victorians Like US”: The Victorian Age Revisited

ELISABETE MENDES SILVA 

MARIA GRANIC

**Author affiliations can be found in the back matter of this article*

SPECIAL
COLLECTION:
VICTORIANS LIKE US

EDITORIAL

]u[ubiquity press

ABSTRACT

“Victorians Like Us” was a project carried out by the English Culture Research Group of The University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies. The four conferences organised between 2012 and 2018 and held at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities in Lisbon gave visibility to the project. They all promoted discussion on a wide variety of topics pertaining to ideological, social, and cultural settings and encompassing all facets of the Victorian era. The topics fostered a critical and creative dialogue on Victorianism and our current age. This introduction first sets the context for the present issue of *Anglo-Saxonica*, which comprises expanded versions of papers delivered at the Victorians Like Us III conference, and then briefly describes their main topics and goals.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Elisabete Mendes Silva

Polytechnic Institute of
Bragança & University of
Lisbon Centre for English
Studies, Portugal

esilva@ipb.pt

KEYWORDS:

Victorianism, progress,
dialogue, ideological setting,
social setting, cultural setting

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Silva, Elisabete Mendes, and
Maria Granic. “Introduction.
“Victorians Like US”: The
Victorian Age Revisited”. *Anglo
Saxonica*, No. 19, issue 1, art. 7,
2021, pp. 1–6. DOI: [https://doi.
org/10.5334/as.67](https://doi.org/10.5334/as.67)

The idea that to understand our present we need to scrutinise our past is commonly asserted.¹ In fact, philosophical movements, political theories, moral values, scientific and technological breakthroughs that gathered momentum sometime in the past have had serious implications in the way we live nowadays. Take, for instance, the legacy of the Renaissance period, of the Enlightenment movement, of liberalism, of socialism, of social Darwinism, of imperialism, or the implications of the scientific revolution of the 15th century and technological advances of the 19th century. These have engendered paradigmatic changes on the outlook of not only Western society, but also of the Eastern Hemisphere, in all areas of life.

Nonetheless, when revisiting the past, one has to bear in mind the particularities of the context in which ideas and facts emerged and developed. Despite a common human nature, which allows us to establish analogies with past and present cultures, the questions we ask about the past, and the way in which we conceive it, are different in every age and in each generation. Isaiah Berlin's concept of cultural pluralism (Berlin, *The Power of ideas*), stemming from the Herderian theory of cultural nationalism (Herder, *Ideas for a Philosophy of the History of Mankind*) and Giambattista Vico's idea of culture, highlight the existence of a plurality of ideas, of cultures and of temperaments (Berlin, "My Intellectual Path" 11). These are analysed in light of each culture's outlook and reference points. As Berlin stated:

True knowledge is knowledge of why things are as they are, not merely what they are; and the more we delve into this, the more we realise that the questions asked by the Homeric Greeks are different from the questions asked by the Romans, that the questions asked by the Romans differ from those asked in the Christian Middle Ages or in the seventeenth-century scientific culture or Vico's own eighteenth-century days. The questions differ, the answers differ, the aspirations differ; the use of language, of symbols, differs (...). ("My Intellectual Path" 7–8)

Our immersion in the Victorian era represents an attempt to examine it through the critical lens of our cultural perceptions, to ask questions in the search for more than mere facts. Our purpose is to go beyond a mere empiricist and rationalist approach, and delve into the reasons why such events or facts took place so as to understand people's feelings, reactions and ambitions, in addition to various aspects of daily life to which we can easily relate.

With the benefit of hindsight, and with the fresh look of cultural studies and postcolonial studies, we perceive the Victorian Age as a complex period, one of antithetical tendencies, where different, old and new, ideas contended, where paradoxical approaches to life cohabited. One tendency is to define the Victorian era as modern, urbanised and liberal. Another tendency is to see Victorian elements that mar this perfect and progressive picture of society. Poverty, illiteracy, the lack of sanitary conditions in the countless slums in the industrial towns, crime, prostitution, child labour, only to name a few, represent (negative) visible elements of a society that tried to adapt to an industrialised world. In addition, debates about faith, where agnosticism contended with the desire to believe, quarrels about politics with the rise of the working-class politics, the defence of marriage and family as highly praised institutions and the need to uphold moral guidance in the so-called rotten souls, permeated Victorian society. Moreover, a highly paternalistic, puritan, and orthodox society dictated the Victorian status quo. The Victorians highly praised institutions and hierarchies, as all these gave them a sense of individual and national identity. The concepts of class, gender and race² (Hall, McClelland & Rendall) were thus gradually but substantially promoted during this period. The Victorians also claimed the defence of crucial values as part of their national character: "morality, self-restraint, public spirit, manliness, conscience" (Parry 86) and self-discipline. These values became the frame within which Victorian attitudes to both education and political reforms developed.

Several reference works about the Victorian Age define it as a period of great economic expansion and prosperity, a period of transition from a static feudal system to a dynamic industrial society, marking the birth of modern Britain³. Others highlight the nineteenth century

¹ Sagan stated precisely that "you have to know the past to understand the present" (In <https://nacada.ksu.edu/Resources/Journal/Current-Past-Book-Reviews/Coming-of-Age-in-a-Globalized-World-The-NextGeneration>).

² See, for example, Hall, McClelland and Rendall, *Defining the Victorian Nation. Class, Race, Gender and the Reform Act of 1867*.

³ See Simon Heffer, *High Minds: The Victorians and the Birth of Modern Britain*, Kenneth Morgan, *The Birth of Industrial Britain*, and Jeremy Black, *A History of the British Isles*.

as “the British century” “being in large measure due to the global economic system it forged through the doctrine of free trade” (Vernon 187). The advocates of free trade, one of the main principles of liberalism, believed it would bring progress and civility not only to Britain, but also to overseas colonies where Britain had imposed its presence. For James Vernon, free trade “forged a global economy upon a deeply uneven division of labour” (Vernon 187–188), giving way to “the imperialism of free trade”, where Britain gained the upper hand. In point of fact, one cannot neglect the idea that Britain held sway over a vast empire, an inextricable element of the history of the nation, in general, and of Victorian England, in particular. It was during this period that Britain displayed its imperial greatness and industrial power. The 1851 Great Exhibition, the India Exhibition (1886), and the Greater Britain Exhibition (1899), all held in London intended to display industrial and imperial power aiming to “instill imperial patriotism into the masses” (Searle 38). The construction of “symbolic statuary”, had a definite purpose: “The construction of Admiralty Arch, and the building of the Victoria Memorial outside the Buckingham Palace were intended to create a theatrical setting suitable for monarchical pageantry and imperial celebrations” (Searle 39). Furthermore, the media, museums, displaying exotic and imperial artifacts, and music halls also played an important role as far as the promotion of such propagandistic imperial discourse was concerned.

Nonetheless, the dissemination of this discourse to the masses was not successful. On the one hand, working-class people were indifferent to the empire or, according to Bernard Porter’s work, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society, and Culture in Britain*, they were preoccupied with their quotidian activities. Their supposed indifference towards the idea of empire was intimately associated with the turbulent times Victorian people were living. They did not care about the Empire and its influence either at home or overseas, as they simply focused on their daily lives and on their struggle to survive. In Porter’s words: “They had too much on their plates. When you are caught in the maelstrom – starving, striking, getting rich, struggling with new working conditions, agitating for reform (...) you do not have the time or need to look to the margins, unless they relate specifically to your concerns at home” (21). On the other, the middle and upper classes, who became mesmerised at the prospect of knowing or getting in touch with such exotic people, places and customs, had a rather naïve approach to the Empire as they gained knowledge of it out of context and under the spell of the discourse of Orientalism, as set forth by Edward Said in his groundbreaking work *Orientalism. Western Conceptions of the Orient*.

This brief account of the Victorian era provides the setting for the works we proffer in the present issue of *Anglo-Saxonica*. It was within the scope of Victorianism that Research Group 2 (English Culture Studies) of the University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies organised a series of conferences. The infinite possibilities for dialogue on this specific period and our present inspired the need to bring to the fore current debates around the Victorian age, which emphasised important aspects of such a riveting and life-changing period, in Britain in particular and in the world in general. Furthermore, Victorian and Neo-Victorian studies, stemming, in part, from the development of Cultural Studies and Postcolonial Studies, focus on new approaches to a time usually circumscribed to the nineteenth century, reestablishing thus the continuity, in contemporary society, of some of the themes that shaped the Victorian world. In addition, these studies put forth analyses of that century from new perspectives.

The title *Victorians Like Us* was hence chosen for the project, as it encompassed the idea of bridging the Victorian past and our present time. This project was made visible at the four conferences organised between 2012 and 2018. For this reason, the first conference, held at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, in Lisbon, focused on the subject *Victorians Like Us. Dialogues, Memories, Trends*. The key words that compose the subtitle were meant to be overarching ideas to promote critical and creative dialogue on Victorianism.

Victorians Like Us II, with the subtitle *The Victorian Household. Power, Policies, Practices*, held in 2014, drew attention to a unique platform for the assertion of the British middle classes and one of their values, the home.

The third conference, *Victorians Like Us III: Progress. A Blessing or a Curse?*, was held in 2016 in Lisbon. It underscored the contrasts of the Victorian era where progress could mean either a blessing or a curse, depending on which side of society people were on. The paupers were a neglected and stigmatised class in a society where hypocrisy ruled, where the middle class created its ethos in the search for an identity that matched their economic condition, very much resembling the upper-class in society.

In the form of an International Seminar, *Victorians Like Us IV. 1837–1901. A Walkthrough* was held on three distinct moments: March 24; April 18; May 23, 2018 at the same venue, the Faculty of Arts and Humanities of Lisbon. This last edition, with such an overarching subtitle, aimed to leave open the ground for the discussion of a myriad of issues, covering all areas of Victorian life and thought.

With the purpose of revisiting the Victorian Age, this series of conferences prompted a varied, insightful and passionate debate by several Victorianist and neo-Victorianist scholars.

The essays that we present in this special issue are developments of papers delivered at the *Victorians Like Us III* conference. They cover research investigating different topics on the Victorian Age, adding new and insightful critical approaches to the extant literature.

Cláudia Martins alludes to the Victorian ebb and flow move in her essay “Was Culture a Commodity ‘All’ Victorians Could Afford? – Notes on the First British Public Museums.” Here, she uses the idea of culture as commodity, as discussed by previous authors, to claim that the need to cultivate taste and enable the masses to improve was a ubiquitous aspect of the Victorian times. To prove her point, Martins draws from Karl Marx and Pierre Bourdieu, particularly on the concepts of cultural and symbolic capital. She establishes that, as Chu, Kelly and Bourdieu show, to understand cultural venues such as museums, one needs knowledge. First, she offers a historical overview of museums from *Mouseion* of Alexandria to the Chambers of Treasures at the end of the Roman Empire, the Renaissance exhibition created by the Médicis family (known as the Galleria degli Uffizi in Florence), and the Curiosity Cabinets, in particular John Tradescant’s The Ark. Following, as a result of the Enlightenment’s belief in art as a means to educate and entertain the masses, the author mentions that private collections continue up to mid-18th century to open to the public. However, using the work of Chu and Zola, she brings into question the idea of the Louvre as a museum open to everyone. Naming the second half of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century the period when the modern museum appears, Martins concurs with Simpson’s idea that the increasing number of museums signals the European powers’ means to boast with past deeds. Further, Martins considers events such as the Great Exhibition of 1851 and the second world fair in 1862 to have inspired the opening of several Victorian museums. These represent spaces for the Empire to express its nationalism through a display of trophies and education of its masses, which led to the opening of public museums. Martins closes with a history of the public museums and their accessibility based on the available information, to conclude that already a commodity in 19th-century, culture also was a way to distinguish between classes on the basis of attending cultural venues, particularly museums.

Education, an essential part of the Victorians’ progress, interests John Stuart Mill, the topic of Elisabete Mendes Silva’s essay “John Stuart Mill on Education and Progress.” Silva examines Mill’s beliefs in and contribution to education and progress in his society. She acknowledges the difficulties that the foundation of national state education had in England and the transition from *laissez-faire* and individualism into collectivism. In her portrayal of Mill, Silva describes him as a supporter of state and secular education nationwide in his work as a political thinker, economist, moralist and mental philosopher. Silva argues that Mill viewed education to factor in the development of the individual and the progress of mankind. To illustrate Mill’s support for reform in education, Silva refers to the newspapers and periodicals of the 1860s and 1870s, where she finds reports on Mill’s speeches on state education and the need for reform. According to Silva, the Victorian age is one in which popular education fought ignorance. Therefore, The Second Reform Act of 1867 and the Elementary Education Act of 1870 represent signs of a growing awareness in the need to educate the masses, to improve the conditions of popular education, and to extend the suffrage. Silva shows that Mill’s own utilitarian education results in his endorsement of the state interference in education to improve and regulate it and in the colonized Indian state when its actions have the individual progress in view even. He also supports the self-regarding sphere of the individual as the master of his own decisions and the women’s right to vote. As Silva pinpoints, Mill does not adhere only to Bentham’s quantity principle of “the greatest happiness of the greatest number’ but also to a qualitative hedonism and to the classical liberalism and *laissez-faire* theory. A defender of liberal education, Mill agreed with the state education intervention as long as it did not monopolize education but assisted those in need of educational endowments. Concluding that Mill was a man ahead of his time, Silva highlights his liberal conception of education that entails a continual enforcement of intellectual knowledge together with his belief in the state provision for elementary education.

Another promoter of education, this time for women, Sarah Grand, figures in Maria Granic's essay "Sarah Grand and the Woman Question: Dialectical Progress and Hope." Granic examines the progress of the Woman Question, despite its moments of regress, by analyzing Sarah Grand's *succès de scandale* novel *The Heavenly Twins* (1893) as well as three of her articles, "The New Aspect of the Woman Question," "The Man of the Moment," and "The Modern Girl," published a year later. In these texts, Grand brings together the New Woman and the New Man to challenge the Victorian separate spheres and show the progress which the women's suffrage movement had made. Quoting from the work of Herbert Spencer, Matthew Arnold and Charles Darwin, Grand proves that education is indispensable for women to progress. Moreover, she suggests that the high mental capacity of women can be a hereditary transmission. However, in order for women to redefine themselves, they need the help and support of the New Man. Granic argues that in the aforementioned novel Grand reassesses the gender spheres in the Victorian society and shows the importance of the New Man, a benign companion for the New Woman, who in *The Heavenly Twins* is not yet a political ally, as he is in later novels. Using Grand's articles, Granic demonstrates that several characters in the novel display characteristics that make the New Man a worthy companion of the New Woman: Dr. Galbraith and Dr. Shadwell, the politician Mr. Kilroy, and the American Minister Mr. Price. Although not perfect examples of progressive masculinity, these men stand out among other characters by acting sympathetically with women and believing in them as the catalysts for a better society. As Granic shows, these men have gained the admiration of women and men involved in the suffrage movement based on characteristics which Grand discusses in her journalistic work. Neither Evadne nor Angelica join Ideala and the suffrage movement, the former withdrawing in motherhood to heal and the latter using her husband to parrot her ideas. Nonetheless, they are in relationships with New Men who support them and meet their needs, which entails progress and brings forth hope.

Sharon Worley's essay "Victor/Victorian: Gender and Aesthetic Idealism during the Italian Risorgimento" examines the feminist movement in the second half of the nineteenth century associating it with the Italian Risorgimento. Worley describes what she depicts as an enduring theme of an Anglo-Italian style: transforming the male concept of ideal beauty into a new feminist ideal of independence. Her work proposes a genealogy of English and American literary interest in Italy and the Italian Risorgimento, from Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Margaret Fuller to Henry James and Vernon Lee. The author attempts to link art and aestheticism with history and gender roles against a backdrop of the rise of the women's rights' movement and the critique of the institution of marriage. To establish such connections Worley illustrates how Italian history impacts art and literature, referring to several primary texts. Worley focuses primarily on as Henry James' "Last of the Valerii" (1874), "The Altar of the Dead" (1895), *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), and *The Golden Bowl* (1904) to portray the women's movement from a male perspective through the protagonist's exchange of marital duties for new aesthetic rituals. In Worley's view, James makes Italian aristocrats the main characters of his Anglo-Italian novels to acknowledge the restoration of the Italian aristocracy and the preservation of the Italian aristocracy by the Risorgimento. Moreover, Worley states that by using impecunious Italian noblemen in need of affluent American women, James's novels indicate a crisis in modern marriage: men affirm their independence from the limitations which marriage, and therefore women, place on them. The Italian nobleman in "The Last of the Valerii" rejects his wife for an art object, a marble statue of Juno (Hera), the goddess of marriage and a trope for Italy in James's work. Worley finds the subplot of men choosing art over marriage recurrent in James's novels. Subsequently, Worley examines Vernon Lee's *Miss Brown*, inspired by James's "Last of the Valerii," and refers to other literary texts such as Staël's *Corinne*, Florence Nightingale's book *Cassandra*, and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Marble Faun* to show the authors' awareness of the contemporary ideological and literary movement, which they associate with the feminist movement.

These essays underscore the relevancy of the period in study and its enduring connection with our present. Irrevocably, they represent a testimony of this debate and a complex set of discourses on ideas, landmark events, experiences, and mindsets that defined the Victorian Age, and have far-reaching implications in the way we think and act today.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Elisabete Mendes Silva  orcid.org/0000-0002-1782-2567

Polytechnic Institute of Bragança & University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies, Portugal

Maria Granic

Benedictine University Mesa, United States of America

Silva and Granic
Anglo Saxonica
DOI: 10.5334/as.67

6

REFERENCES

- Berlin, Isaiah. "My Intellectual Path". *The Power of Ideas*. Henry Hardy (Ed.). Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002, pp. 1–23.
- Black, Jeremy. *A History of the British Isles*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.
- Hall, Catherine, Keith McClelland and Jane Rendall, eds. *Defining the Victorian Nation. Class, Race, Gender and the Reform Act of 1867*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Heffer, Simon. *High Minds: The Victorians and the Birth of Modern Britain*. London: Windmill Books, 2013.
- Herder, J. V. "Ideas for a Philosophy of the History of Mankind". F. M. Barnard (Ed). *Herder on Social and Political Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 255–326.
- Morgan, Kenneth. *The Birth of Industrial Britain. 1750–1850*. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2011.
- Porter, Bernard. *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society, and Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Sagan, C. E. (author and presenter). Episode 2: One Voice in the Cosmic Fugue [Television series episode]. In Adrian Malone (Producer), *Cosmos: A Personal Voyage*. Arlington, VA: Public Broadcasting Service. 1980. In [https://nacada.ksu.edu/Resources/Journal/Current-Past-Book-Reviews/Coming-of-Age-in-a-Globalized-World-The-Next-Generation.aspx#:~:text=Carl%20Sagan%20\(1980\)%20stated%2C,and%20the%20world%20of%20tomorrow](https://nacada.ksu.edu/Resources/Journal/Current-Past-Book-Reviews/Coming-of-Age-in-a-Globalized-World-The-Next-Generation.aspx#:~:text=Carl%20Sagan%20(1980)%20stated%2C,and%20the%20world%20of%20tomorrow).
- Said, Edward W. *Orientalism. Western Conceptions of the Orient*. London: Penguin, 1991.
- Searle, G. R. *A New England? Peace and War 1886–1918*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005.
- Vernon, James. *Cambridge History of Britain. Modern Britain. 1750 to the Present*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Silva, Elisabete Mendes, and Maria Granic. "Introduction. "Victorians Like US": The Victorian Age Revisited". *Anglo Saxonica*, No. 19, issue 1, art. 7, 2021, pp. 1–6. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/as.67>

Submitted: 15 June 2021

Accepted: 15 June 2021

Published: 26 August 2021

COPYRIGHT:

© 2021 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Anglo Saxonica is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Ubiquity Press.