

VICTORIAN NETWORK: GUEST EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

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It is a great pleasure for me to introduce the first issue of this exciting new journal, *Victorian Network*. The journal, with generous support from the AHRC, provides a central forum for postgraduate students to publish their work, offering an important insight into the cutting-edge of Victorian Studies at the present time. The title *Victorian Network* represents Victorian culture in terms of interconnectivity rather than discrete ideas, disciplines and institutions. Links in the period between literature, history, painting, religion and science have been well-explored, but what 'Network' highlights, it seems to me, is a more interactive, vibrant, and essentially socialised sense of structures of connection. It also speaks to the value of facilitating *Victorianist* networks. The production of the journal itself brings together an editorial team of postgraduate students, working with a different guest editor for each issue, and will continue to involve new generations of postgraduate students in its development. Its online format opens it up to international consultation and more interactive possibilities, and allows it to be produced with relative speed, ensuring the relevance of the articles. At the same time, the journal retains the rigorous critical screening of a tightly ordered peer-review process: *Victorian Network* draws upon an international pool of postgraduate peer-reviewers.

The theme chosen for this first edition, 'The British Empire and Victorian Literature and Culture', is especially well-suited to the aims of the journal. Postcolonial studies has reached a crucial transition point. A generation into its existence as a discipline, it risks being seen as of diminished relevance to a twenty-first century world supposedly moving beyond concepts of national identity. Yet the spread of globalisation in today's hyper-connected networking world, and the ongoing reminders of the institutional and psychological legacies of colonialism in current-day political events, make awareness of new directions of research into the British Empire and the networks that created, fostered, and ultimately dispersed it all the more urgently necessary. *Victorian Network* offers the perfect forum for this process in its capacity to showcase and energise the present directions of graduate research for an international readership.

One of the journal's distinctive features is its willingness to use its online presence to look beyond academia and consider a wider range of readers, in particular the school students who will be themselves shaping the directions of intellectual thought – in and out of universities – in the years to come. The Humanities are coming under enhanced pressure to foster specifically professionalized functions and demonstrate their relevance (a sometimes narrowly-definable term) to the larger community – pressure which many scholars feel has troubling implications for the discipline. The editorial board's commitment to *Victorian Network* as both an academic forum and a pedagogical tool achieves this relevance without sacrificing intellectual and critical standards and the integral value of research for research's sake. The 'Victorian Wire' section of the website thus contributes to the productive

traffic of ideas between higher education institutions and the general community, as well as training the future generation of academics to present their research in accessible and relevant ways. I can attest to the scrupulous care and academic zeal with which the editorial team and their reviewers have approached the inaugural issue, and the finished product makes an impressive start to this significant project.

This first issue of *Victorian Network* opens in late nineteenth century Africa, with two articles which use imperial adventure novels to expose the deeper ideological underpinnings of colonial power struggles. The £50 prize for the best article is awarded to Jane Ford's 'Spectral Economies at the Anglo-African Margin: Bertram Mitford's Predatory Politics of Consumption'. Ford connects concepts of *fin de siècle* fall and degeneration with economic structures and theories, arguing that Mitford exposes 'the circularity between the rapacious economies at the end point of civilisation and the savage daughter at its genesis'. Her striking analysis of an underrated author links Gothic literary motifs with crucial questions of capitalism and consumption, and makes a persuasive equation between cannibalistic savagery and economic processes at the height of supposedly civilised European society. J. Stephen Addcox, in 'Inoculation and Empire: Cigarette's Healing Power in Ouida's *Under Two Flags*', takes Ouida's classic adventure novel as a means through which to explore the medicalisation of Victorian imperial thought – and the imperial underpinnings of Victorian medical thought. Arguing for the heroine Cigarette's function as an 'inoculation' who heals, cures and immunised the exiled protagonist to return to British aristocratic domesticity, Addcox insists that inoculation has 'a deep historical importance to colonial and post-colonial discourse, especially with respect to women, sexuality, and medicine'. Focusing upon the early Victorian period, Peta Beasley parallels two generically fluid texts, Jane Porter's exploration tale *Sir Edward Seaward's Narrative* (1831) and Georgiana Molloy's letters detailing her new life in 1830s Australia, in 'Georgiana Molloy, Jane Porter and the Significance of Exploration Narratives for New Beginnings in a Strange Land'. Beasley focuses on the emigrant's experience of settler colonialism, but emphasises this experience as a partly literary one: Porter's text offers Molloy a model through which to articulate and realise her new life. The final part of the journal returns to the *fin de siècle*, now considering London in its self-perpetuating role as imperial metropolis.¹ Qi Chen's 'Aristocracy for the Common People: Chinese Commodity in Oscar Wilde's *Aestheticism*' introduces a type of 'Orient' under-explored in postcolonial scholarship: the influence of China and of Chinese arts on British artistic fashion and thought. Imperial trade and zones of influence (often, as in China's case, enforced by British military pressure), together with industrial development, opened up a greatly expanded world of commodities. Wilde's Aesthetic theories, Chen contends, could invoke china as a symbol both of past aristocratic glamour and of present-day bourgeois domestic access. As a conclusion, Theresa Jamieson's examination of

¹ See Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830-1867* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002) and Antoinette Burton, 'Introduction: On the Inadequacy and the Indispensability of the Nation' in *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking With and Through the Nation*, ed. by A. Burton (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

classic *fin de siècle* Gothic fiction, ‘Working for the Empire: Professions of Masculinity in H.G. Wells’s *The Time Machine* and R.L. Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*’ argues for a vital correlation between national identity and the health of the Empire. The admirable anxiety of Victorianist and postcolonial scholars to explore subalternity and otherness has at times led to a critical disregard of supposedly ‘normative’ identities, a disregard that, ironically, risks implicitly conceding their social centrality. Jamieson, by contrast, insistently ‘makes strange’ middle-class masculinity by highlighting it as the crisis point for diagnoses and expulsions of degeneration.

Finally, as part of *Victorian Network*’s interest in the opening-out of classic texts to wider audiences, the £25 prize for the best short outreach article goes to Gillian Nelson’s ‘Vampiric Discourse in Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*’ (available here: <http://www.victoriannetwork.org/index.php/vn/pages/view/wire>). Nelson offers a fresh perspective on a popular cultural trope which has often been taken as a model for colonial power relations. She reads *Wuthering Heights* as offering a distinctive model of symbiotic vampirism through Heathcliff and Cathy’s relationship, a vampirism turned monstrous by social and cultural pressures rather than by its own nature.

The theme of imperial consumption central to Ford’s ‘Spectral Economies’ echoes across this issue of the journal as a whole. ‘As literary studies and art history have turned the gaze of scholarship from makers to audiences’, noted Craig Clunas in 1999, ‘so social, economic, and cultural historians have over the past two decades increasingly focused on the consumer and not the producer’.² *Victorian Network* shows the cross-disciplinary progress of this transition in a powerful fusion between audiences and consumers. These articles go well beyond merely monetary readings of imperial power relations, instead placing consumption as a dynamic psychological experience, and one which cannot be separated from its surrounding networks of financial, cultural, literary, and even emotional economies. While the journal covers the whole ‘Victorian’ period, the prevailing emphasis upon the *fin de siècle* suggests heightened interest in an imperial period of immense economic and cultural expansion but also intensified vulnerability. These articles address questions of what it means to consume – physically and mentally, what price is paid for so doing, what are the networks which sustain consumption and what are the ways in which capitalism and consumption mutually sustain each other. This topic is all too relevant to our immediate concerns as a society in the midst of economic upheaval, but forms part of a more long-standing modern querying of the consumption central to our social functioning, and the often elided institutions of production which support our day-to-day lives.

Ideas of consumption also feed into the volume’s preoccupation with the body and bodies, something in which can also be discerned recent critical interest in the

² Craig Clunas, “Modernity Global and Local: Consumption and the Rise of the West”, *The American Historical Review*, 104.5 (1999)

<<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ahr/104.5/ah001497.html>> [accessed 28 July 2009], para.1 of 17).

materiality, particularly the imperial materiality, of the Victorian world.³ Addcox's 'Inoculation and Empire' uses the infiltrating, infecting, but ultimately inoculating female body as a locus for its exploration of the extent to which the practices and the language of nineteenth century medicine were infused with imperial and patriarchal discourses of knowledge and power. Nelson's discussion of vampirism in *Wuthering Heights* brings together consumption and the body into one chilling package, even while she traces more positive constructions of vampirism as a symbiotic and sustaining, not draining, force. Jamieson's consideration of the imperial body and imperial labour insistently links these to her constructions of masculinity.

A further element of the networks of empire, still at times neglected even with audience-centred scholarship, is the active role played by readers and concepts of reading, and particularly the self-reinforcing representative processes whereby the traveller absorbs models of empire from their reading and then in turn brings those models to bear on their own experience. Beasley's 'Writing a New Life' places a woman reading another woman's supposed life of a male explorer and coloniser as central to the construction of colonial life. Finally, I would also single out the willingness of the contributors to avoid monolithic views of Orientalism and nineteenth century empires and instead to see the British Empire as a *British* Empire, one which partially defined itself against other imperial aspirations (as Addcox notes in relation to France), and one whose aesthetic models could be shaped by even more alien traditions (as Chen notes regarding China), as well as one whose colonial structures took very different directions (as we see with Ford's Africa versus Beasley's Australia). These articles offer a remarkable variety of approaches to the overall theme of the British Empire and Victorian Literature and Culture, but they are brought together, above all, by their authors' capacities to transcend disciplinary and theoretical boundaries and to view the British Empire in terms of networks of economics, physicality, reading, and power.

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³ See esp. Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature*. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003) and Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2006).

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