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## Review of Rereading Victorian Fiction; Rethinking Victorian Culture

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**Alice Jenkins and Juliet John (eds), *Rereading Victorian Fiction***

**(Palgrave, 2000). ISBN 0 333 71445 8.**

**Juliet John and Alice Jenkins (eds), *Rethinking Victorian Culture***

**(Macmillan/St. Martin's Press, 2000). ISBN 0 333 71446 6.**

These two fine volumes have their roots in a Victorian literature conference at the University of Liverpool in 1996, which I had the good fortune to attend. At the time, I remember being struck in particular by the erudition of a number of the papers presented and by the impressive range of material covered in eclectic ways. It is extremely pleasing to see many of the best papers from the conference expanded in these two volumes, pleasing not least because these two collections offer an extremely good snapshot representing the diverse richness and buoyant state of Victorian Studies at the turn of our century.

One of the things that emerges in several essays, explicitly or implicitly, is the generally troubling nature of the word 'Victorian' for scholars today. Unlike, say, a generation or so ago, the umbrella term 'Victorian' no longer seems useful, apart from demarcating the years of the monarch's reign. Any students of the period know that there are more social and political differences between 1837 and 1901 than there are similarities, and the literature across the period is no different. While the titles of these two volumes both employ 'Victorian' descriptively, the essays inside demonstrate over and over again the literary and cultural diversity and complexity across the nineteenth century, rather than the uniformity that 'Victorian' might suggest. As John Lucas puts it:

There is a strong case for arguing that, except in the most rigorously controlled of contexts, "Victorian" and "Victorianism" are terms we could well do without. They are all too frequently employed in ways that are chronologically indefensible, historically dubious, intellectually confusing and ideologically unacceptable – at least, if you're a socialist. "Victorian" in particular is used to imply a cultural and political homogeneity which, the evidence suggests, never existed.

It's this sort of rethinking and rereading, this sort of revisionism, that informs many of the essays in these volumes, and unlike less engaging collections which stem from conference proceedings, by and large the essays here actually *do* live up to the task promised in the titles. We are required to rethink and to reread.

Interestingly (if a little disappointingly), George Eliot does not figure very prominently in these volumes. In fact, there is only one essay devoted to her work – Daniel Karlin's essay 'Having the Whip-Hand in *Middlemarch*', a piece that will be familiar to readers of this journal since it was first published here in 1997 (No. 28, pp. 34-47). Karlin's piece is masterful close-reading of hands in the novel, and if this appears more conventional than revisionist, that's perhaps because it is. But what's refreshing about the article is the way that what we might see as a traditional mode of critical approach pays such rich rewards, and does lead us

to rethink the novel. George Eliot appears elsewhere across the essays, but really only in passing.

One might be inclined to read the absence of George Eliot – one of the ‘Victorian’ heavyweights by anyone’s standard – as an indication that she’s out of critical favour in the academic world. But that would be hasty – there’s hardly a peep on the Brontës, little on Trollope, not much on Wilde. And major Victorians all. In other words, these volumes do not attempt to be comprehensive in ‘covering’ the period, and there’s no reason they should. The essays continually extend our understanding of literature and culture in the period, rather than confirm our preconceptions, and that can only be a good thing. Furthermore, in a number of places when reading through the volumes, I was reminded of George Eliot, and kept thinking of her works. For example, when in *Rethinking Victorian Fiction* the editors address the vexed usage of ‘realism’ as a critical term, referring to seminal readings by J. Hillis Miller and D.A. Miller, George Eliot springs immediately to mind. Indeed, the editors’ thoughtful, succinct introductions provide a number of points worth considering in relation to George Eliot studies – about the status of the novel, about the author’s place in Cultural Studies, about modernity. So while George Eliot may not appear much on the written pages of these essays, she’s there waiting to be placed within the debates raised across these volumes. And if nothing else, you can enjoy the excellent work devoted to other Victorians, in particular essays by Stefan Collini on culture, Kate Flint on dust, Brian Maidment on almanacs, Regenia Gagnier on economics and Gail Marshall on actresses, among many others. Rereading and rethinking George Eliot will only be a richer experience after taking your time with such accomplished essays.

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