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Review of Victorians Undone: Tales of the flesh in the age of decorum

Kathryn Hughes

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**Kathryn Hughes, *Victorians Undone: Tales of the flesh in the age of decorum*
(4th Estate: London, 2017), pp. 414, 22 illustrations. ISBN 978 0 00 754836 1. £20.**

This is a superb book, written with deep scholarship by one of our leading biographers, which breaks new ground in its attention to the physicality of its subjects. In her introduction Kathryn Hughes says that she has felt ‘chronically short-changed by the lack of physical detail in biography’. This book, she says, is ‘an experiment to see what new stories emerge when you use biography ... to put mouths, bellies and beards back into the nineteenth century’ by introducing ‘a certain lumpiness to canonical life narratives that have previously

been rendered as smooth, symmetrical, and as strangely unconvincing as a death mask. For it is in lop-sidedness and open-endedness, in bulges, dips, hollows, oozes and itches, that we come closest to a sense of what it feels like to live in the solitude of a single body, both then and now.'

The five subjects in the book are well known but have not been documented in the ways indicated above that Hughes uses to breathe life into them. In her words, she fills in the holes in the biographical text 'where arms, legs, breasts and bellies should have been'. To achieve that she has delved for more than a decade into archives hitherto undiscovered or overlooked and sat 'in silence with boxes of unsorted paper'. But how worthwhile was the search and how valuable the discoveries? With new material shown in new ways by Kathryn Hughes we must add her extraordinary writing skills, compassion and understanding for her subjects and her delightful humour in describing them to present us with a fascinating and interesting book which is undoubtedly worthwhile and valuable.

The five subjects are as diverse as could be. Lady Flora Hastings is not a stranger to any who watched the recent TV series 'Victoria' with its talk of phantom pregnancies and social disgrace. Victoria emerges from this tale as a vindictive and unfeeling young woman, as involved in the swirling court intrigues, plots, betrayals and deceptions as any of the courtiers who were prepared to see the innocent Flora Hastings subjected to a deeply humiliating internal examination lasting 45 minutes and involving three people, one of whom, though a doctor, was clearly incompetent and clumsy to boot. The descriptions are jaw-dropping in their detail, and – a surprise to me – the press was as intrusive and offensive then as now. If the Murdochs of now had a sense of history one might suspect them of having honed their skills for vindictiveness on newspapers from the late 1830s. The truth of course is that we have always liked a gory story; that truth is ignored to suit the story, which is now accompanied by pictures. The event shook the monarchy and the court, revealing many deep channels of hypocrisy, all at the expense of an innocent woman actually dying a painful and premature death, one of whose symptoms was a distended stomach.

The second section is called 'Charles Darwin's Beard' and is introduced amusingly by the unwilling attendance in April 1866 of the Prince of Wales at a Royal Society event at Burlington House, attended by the great and the good of the World of Science, including the painfully shy but much altered Charles Darwin. Even fellow scientists had failed to recognize the gaunt figure, largely reclusive in recent years, but now encumbered and disguised by a long white beard, discoloured around the mouth by snuff. The Prince of Wales was unaware of who he was and escaped the event as soon as possible. But more to the point many of the other guests were unaware of the presence of the greatest scientist of the century. Kathryn Hughes goes on to write a beguiling account of the changes in gentlemen's fashion that turned most close-shaven men of the 1840s into bearded weirdos by the 1860s. It is a fascinating account, full of new stories and delightful accounts across a wide range of Victorian men, from Dickens to Carlyle to Tennyson, from Ruskin to Lear, Trollope to John Chapman – known to us for his amatory incursions on Marian Evans, but it turns out that later he became a doctor. One should be wary of his bedside manner.

However, Darwin suffered badly from facial eczema and it was wife Emma's suggestion that he should grow a beard. He had grown up believing he was ugly. He was self-conscious about his weight and his feet as a young man. In his *Beagle* days he grew many beards, as did other sailors and he made observations about them in his thinking about

nature and culture, about 'savage' and 'civilized' and gets into something of a twist when relating hairiness to evolution, sex and gender. It turns out that Darwin was a martyr to wind, leaving dinner early to find relief, unwilling to stay elsewhere. At home there was a screen in the study behind which he retched and heaved, ruined his teeth from acidic bile, and in distress called his wife Emma 'Mammy'. Yet this man of genius contrived to change the way mankind thinks of itself. It is a scintillating section of the book.

The fourth subject is Fanny Cornforth's mouth and the uses to which she puts it with some of the less inhibited members(!) of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. There is an intriguing analysis of Rossetti's *Bocca Baciata* but the great interest lies in how Hughes shows that Fanny Cornforth has been written out of most contemporary accounts of the artists and their period. She rescues Fanny from oblivion through her careful research and places her among the important figures of the movement and details her later life with its highs and lows until her death in poverty in a mental asylum in 1909, twenty-seven years after Rossetti. Hughes is meticulous in her sequencing of events and reveals many new approaches to the period.

The fifth subject is Fanny Adams, an eight-year old little girl murdered and dismembered by a very odd young man, Frederick Baker, in 1867. Kathryn Hughes has researched contemporary documents and court reports to draw out the details of this macabre and distressing tale from Alton. She shows clearly how working-class over-crowded families subsisted, how small-town prejudices worked and how communities had eyes everywhere, which, despite being suspicious of Baker and his ways, hadn't enabled them to halt his activities or apprehend him in time to prevent the tragedy.

After these four subjects and the physical peculiarities that accompany them, Lady Flora's abuse by doctors, Darwin's debilitating flatulence, Fanny Cornforth's roving mouth and poor Fanny Adams's body dismembered among the hop plants and now remembered only in the crude phrase 'Sweet Fanny Adams', it comes as a relief that, when Kathryn Hughes turns to George Eliot, she concerns herself only with the size of her right hand.

But what a story she tells, and what a joy to read it. There is a section of admirable clarity showing the sequence of how the first biographies of Eliot were written, and one is at their shoulder as Mathilde Blind, Edith Simcox (who withdrew early out of loyalty) and John Cross scurry around North Warwickshire and beyond in search of scraps of information from those still alive who might have known the young Mary Ann. Key to this is the scrap of information the now elderly Cara Bray revealed to the engaging and attractive Blind which she had not given to Cross or Simcox, which was that in her Coventry days Marian Evans had spoken of her right hand being broader than her left on account of all the dairy work and cheesemaking she had done at Griff. To us this might seem an insignificant and amusing detail but to Isaac Evans and his eldest son Frederic (by now rector of Bedworth and a man of influence – in Bedworth), now guardians of the flame, it was information they wished to suppress. Their reasons are superbly described by Kathryn Hughes as she details the changes in social standing of the family, especially their self-regard, and the associations between dairy maids and raw, earthy copulation which these socially climbing but unimaginative men preferred not to see, especially in their womenfolk, and especially not in their famous sister and aunt. The way Hughes links all these threads to produce a thoroughly convincing argument is wonderful. She also brings into the story the fussy, sycophantic distant relative from Derbyshire, the Congregationalist and Temperance pioneer Revd William Mottram, in

whose face Isaac slammed the door in 1890, and son Fred tried to avoid thereafter.

Hughes is also fascinating when she shows the different attitudes across the generations, the way farming and farmers were changing, and when she shows how Fred Evans glosses over that most awkward of things, his aunt's living arrangements with Lewes, which he never faced up to. In 1907 he suggests that the 25 year gap in communication between brother and sister was just one of those unfortunate things where family members go their own ways. Oh, and there was 'possibly some misunderstanding' along the way. In the 1919 centenary events he blamed the schism on his aunt (of course) for 'a misunderstanding on her part about a purely business matter'. How could he!?

But he was keen to hide the swollen hand, and when American biographer Charles Olcott visited Fred Evans, recorded in her diary by Fred's daughter Alison in 1907, he was dissuaded from mentioning the hand in his 1910 biography. It was Alison who, twenty-five years later glossed over the truth to Blanche Colton Williams, who in return dedicated her book to Alison. Stranger still, suggests Hughes, even Haight was less punctilious than you would expect in his referencing this story.

The section ends with 2015 and the arrival through the post of a right hand glove belonging to Eliot that had been passed down from Cara Bray. When I emailed Kathryn Hughes to tell her about it she made immediate plans to visit Nuneaton to see it and soon afterwards I took her to the snug at Griff. We sat near Robert Evans's office to gaze at the glove and other Griff artefacts the Fellowship has acquired. It was a special moment, certainly for me, and I think for Kathryn Hughes. And this is a very special book.

John Burton