

Victorians Beyond the Academy
Curating the Victorians: Introduction

Jane Hamlett

Jane Hamlett jane.hamlett@rhul.ac.uk

The History Department, Royal Holloway, University of London, Egham, Surrey, TW20
0EX

Keywords: curating, Victorians, museums, public history, impact, beyond the academy

In recent years, museums and scholars of Victorian Studies have been working more closely together, producing a range of exciting new work, both scholarly and public. At the British Association of Victorian Studies annual conference in summer 2015, a panel of museum specialists and academics assembled to reflect on this. The panel examined changing cultural understandings of what it means to curate the Victorian period, and how the Victorians have been represented in museums and collaborative exhibitions. This was followed up by a study day, led by Professor Gail Marshall, at the University of Leicester, that brought together a wider range of academics involved with museums in different ways and museum curators. This collection of short essays, presented as part of the *Journal of Victorian Culture*'s Victorians Beyond the Academy feature, draws on reflections inspired by the panel and the study day, offering a commentary on a significant change in the way we approach the Victorians, as well as some suggestions for how we might move forward with this. To a certain extent, co-operation between museums and academics in the UK has been driven by structural and pragmatic factors. These include changes in the way research council money is allocated to PhD studentships, the 'Impact' agenda imposed through the Research Excellence Framework (REF), which means that the research funding universities receive is now partly based on the way that they demonstrate their impact on the wider world, and the funding cuts that many museums have faced under austerity. While the imperatives for collaboration might sometimes be pragmatic, this round table will show that working together has consequences for the way in which researchers operate and think about their research. Across Victorian Studies this shift in ways of working has borne considerable fruit and we are only just beginning to see the intellectual effects of this – not only in the many rich research projects that have grown out of it (e.g. Collaborative Doctoral Awards) and the enhancement of museum holdings and displays, but also in a wider sea change, in how we think about our role as academics, our relationship with museums, and how this can shape how we represent the Victorian past.

The essays here reflect on curating and the Victorians in a general sense, and on museum representations of the Victorians, before taking a more focused look at recent roles and projects. The selection opens with a commentary from Professor Gail Marshall on the changing ways in which curating itself has been understood and how this intersects with interpretations of the Victorians. Marshall's piece asks – what do we mean when we speak of 'curating' the Victorians? What does the term 'curator' mean, and what has it come to mean?

Marshall reflects on the public dialogue between the Victorian age and contemporary culture, and a shift within Victorian Studies towards museums in terms of their history and the construction of heritage today. Marshall also demonstrates that the Victorian past itself fundamentally shaped many museums in their founding era, and this legacy remains crucial today. The theme of the representation of Victorians in museums is then taken up in more detail by Jack Gann and Lauren Padgett, PhD students based in the Centre for Victorian Studies at Leeds Trinity, engaged in the study of Victorian street scenes and women in museums. As they show, there is no simple relationship between academic research and the representation of these subjects. While museums are often engaged with current trends but, the need to reach out to popular audiences remains crucial to what museums choose to display. Often there is a focus on prominent individuals, such as Dickens and Victoria. Yet this tendency is also a product of the Victorian age itself as famous Victorians often created their own legacies.

We then move to more practical reflections from three scholars who have recently been involved in curating the Victorians – thinking about how working with museums changes how we research and how we think about our research. Dr. Oliver Betts, a current postdoctoral fellow at the National Railway Museum, considers the benefits for the researcher of working in a museum environment, and the importance of knowledge-sharing between curators and academics. The depths of museum collections are often only fully revealed through curatorial expertise. Betts' discussion reveals how surviving objects can provoke new research questions. He also usefully reflects on the challenges of being a Victorianist in a museum that deals with a range of periods – and how this can generate new thinking about periodisation. The next piece is from Dr. Rachel Bates, who worked on a Collaborative Doctoral Award at the University of Leicester and the National Army Museum exploring the cultural afterlife of the Crimean War. This environment shaped the nature and breadth of her research project, and led to a strong engagement with the museum's collections. Bates also discusses how her research evolved alongside new approaches to the curation of histories of war and soldiers' experience. Working as an academic allowed her to venture beyond the museum's usual agenda – and to think deeply about the more difficult aspects of the representation of soldiers and their capacity to kill or wound. These ideas went on to inform the curation of the newly renovated National Army Museum and a new gallery on soldiers' experience. The final contribution to the round table is made by an academic (myself) and a museum curator, Hannah Fleming, from the Geffrye Museum of the Home. We discuss our work on the Geffrye exhibition 'Homes of the Homeless: Seeking Shelter in

Victorian London,’ which ran in 2015. We explore the process of translating research into an exhibition and the interaction between academics, curators and designers. The final design was very much determined by the specific challenges inherent in curating the lives of the Victorian poor, the paucity of material evidence for them, and the need to build an exhibition on a basis of 2-D sources. Finally, we look at how visitors responded to the exhibition – engaging with interactive exhibits but also subverting them in ways we did not expect. All three practice-based pieces stress the importance of building good relationships between academics and museum curators, and just how fundamental these are to the success of collaborative projects. While the process of ‘translating’ research to wider audiences can be complex and it can be challenging for professionals with different institutional imperatives to work together, these case studies demonstrate that these problems can be overcome and how these interactions can be very productive.

As the essays here are predominantly based on case studies from the UK in the early and mid 2010s, the discussion is inevitably shaped by the British political and education system, their concerns with impact, and the UK funding landscape – for both museums and universities. The source material under discussion is also specific to the UK. Curating the Victorians in other places across the world, using material relating to different nineteenth-century peoples, would probably throw up other kinds of challenge and discussion, especially in relation to how different kinds of minority groups are portrayed. While this collection is UK focused, the questions raised here could equally be applied elsewhere and it is hoped that the discussion will spark similar debate and reflection further afield. Overall the collection offers both conceptual and practical insights into the issues involved in ‘curating the Victorians’, allowing JVC readers to reflect on the benefits and challenges of this approach, and hopefully inspiring them to step outside of their usual institutional boundaries and to collaborate in new and productive ways.

Jane Hamlett
Royal Holloway,
University of
London
Jane.hamlett@rhul.ac.uk