

REVIEWS

***Queen Victoria's Secrets*, by Adrienne Munich. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.**

Since Victoria's death in 1901, many people have commented on the centrality of her image to the cultural imagination of the period which took her name. I don't think any commentator, however, has done this in such a lively and extended way as Adrienne Munich in her new book, *Queen Victoria's Secrets*. Members of AVSA were lucky enough to hear a version of the chapter on mourning, "Imperial Tears," as a keynote lecture at the 1994 Hobart conference and will remember how intriguing and entertaining it was, which just about sums up the whole book as we now have it. It is also a useful book, as the best studies of cultural phenomena are, because in it the details of both social and political life serve a developing argument rather than merely give the reader a selection of facts, such as the recent *What Jane Austen Ate and Charles Dickens Knew*, however enlightening those facts might be. Although not a seamless narrative, Munich's book does successfully counter arguments about Victoria's "historical insignificance," arguments which depend to a major extent upon the large number of additional powers which Parliament acquired during her reign. She does this by analysing that imperial conquest of the people's imagination as a process both of democratisation and of domestication.

It is also more than biography, although Munich incisively tackles those basic contradictory aspects of Victoria's character which many biographers have pointed to, by suggesting that such contradictions reflect the contradictions she aroused in the popular imagination. For example, Victoria's moral authority can be seen largely to depend upon her dowdiness; paradoxically, although she actually did little for the poor, her extremely ordinary clothes were an effective disguise which elicited a sense of loyalty precisely because they made her more homely. "In its rotundity, the queen's body resembled a black stove." A homely image indeed! Munich doesn't mention Victoria's undergarments, although one might be tempted, encouraged by the amusing double entendres in some of the chapter titles—and this is not to downplay the scholarliness of the text—to see the book's title as obliquely referring to the modern popular line of underwear called Victoria's Secret, thereby implying a certain raciness in that realm of her wardrobe not usually on view to the public. But I digress.

At first glance there appears to be no particular chronology to which Munich adheres, and there are moments when the ignoring of large gaps of time serves to weaken the argument by implying that there were no significant changes in attitude during a particular period. An early sonnet of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's coinciding with the beginning of Victoria's reign, for instance, stands side by side with Ruskin's "Of Queens' Gardens" over a quarter of a century later, without any indication of the significance of those early years in changing attitudes, although precisely that question becomes central to the argument elsewhere.

But Munich's chronology is a subtle one: she focuses each chapter on a particular aspect of Victoria and her image which accords with a particular period in her

life—Victoria the young monarch and wife, Victoria the young mother, Victoria the widow, Victoria the menopausal woman, Victoria the Empress, and so on. The chapters then move outwards to illustrate the ways in which certain iconic moments ramified their meanings throughout her life. Munich is thus able to look at Gilbert and Sullivan's many depictions of the excessive persona of the aging woman, the figures of Albert, John Brown and her Indian servant Karim as these fed the sexual imaginations of the people (not many people, for instance, seemed to see John Brown as "good, comfortable, indefatigable, resolute" which is Edith Sitwell's version in her very quirky biography of Victoria), what was seen as her endless fecundity, the myth of Scottish virility (was this the reason Albert took to wearing kilts?) and the creation of "Balmorality." Her texts range widely from street ballads to pornography, from popular art to photography, from Rider Haggard to Alice. The "accessible cultural vocabulary" thus generated was mobilised for both social and political ends, with the possibility of alternative readings which would serve different sections of the body politic.

This reading of Victoria really takes off (in the most aerial fashion—and that is a compliment) from Lytton Strachey's idea of the Queen as a mirror. She was a mirror into which all her subjects could look and find something which either fed their imagination or reflected their own lives. But Munich is also a fine historian, and she takes full account of the influence of certain figures on Victoria, such as her mother, Albert of course, Uncle Leopold King of the Belgians, John Brown, Disraeli. She looks particularly at both Leopold and Albert as queenmakers, at Leopold's inspired idea of the monarchy "in trade." There are occasional throwaway references to the present British Royal family, and there are delightful sections on her love of animals, particularly dogs, which dates from her early youth when she and her mother became patrons of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, later to become the RSPCA.

The book is copiously illustrated (many delights there too), and is furnished with a useful chronology and a very full bibliography. There are occasional editing oversights: that wandering apostrophe in Ruskin's title, Rider Haggard becomes a more elegant Ryder Haggard, but these are minimal, and the book is a handsome production. It's an important book, and it's also a thoroughly good read.

Barbara Garlick

***A Magazine of Her Own?: Domesticity and Desire in the Woman's Magazine, 1800-1914*, by Margaret Beetham. London: Routledge, 1996.**

A Magazine of Her Own?: Domesticity and Desire in the Woman's Magazine, 1800-1914 opens with two quotations from readers' correspondence to the contemporary magazines *Woman* and *Bella* which date from 1888 and 1990 respectively. Both are selected for their representation of the type of reader response cited by women's popular magazines during the late twentieth century; both fix the correspondents' relationships with the publications in the domestic realm (one is concerned with sewing, the other with