INTRODUCTION

Representations of the Victorian child commonly portray either an overworked, undernourished, ragged Oliver Twist or, in contrast, a little girl with china-doll features and coiffed curls ensconced in a claustrophobic Victorian interior. Such images are so familiar to us that they function as a kind of shorthand for the concept "Victorian childhood." But the Victorians produced other images of childhood less easy to interpret. Thomas Cooper Gotch's quasi-symbolic painting "The Child Enthroned" transforms the child into a ruling deity reminiscent of a Renaissance icon of the Virgin Mary. The regal pose, glowing halo, and vibrant colours of the original elevate the young figure to a position of awe-inspiring power; yet she is also an adolescent girl poised on the threshold of womanhood. Her mask-like expression suggests the secret interior world of the child. She stares straight at us. What is she thinking? How does she engage with the ideologies of her day? How should we construct her? Gotch's elevation of the child suggests that there is more to childhood and its mythologies than the stereotypes we so often employ.

"The Child Enthroned" was the inspiration for the "The Victorians and Childhood" conference held by AVSA at the University of New South Wales in February 1999. The theme encouraged paper givers to re-examine the myths of Victorian childhood and to question why certain images have been the dominant legacy of the period, while others have been repressed. The essays in this volume are based on a selection of the papers presented at the conference which demonstrated the richness of this area of inquiry in Victorian studies. Topics ranged from the perceptions and sensations of the child—considering "What Maisie Knew" and the child as writer and consumer of dolls and fantasy—to children's education, children's sexuality, and the construction of adult children by novelists such as Trollope. The category of childhood was a problematic one for the Victorians. The child was a subject of concern not only to writers and painters but also to politicians, educationalists, lawyers, and the medical establishment. Thus the conference also examined such concepts as the "wild child," the convict child in Australia, child migration, and infant felons—all aspects of childhood which overstep conventional images of the period.

Our collection begins with the problem of recovering childhood. As Sally Mitchell asks in her account of her search for the childhood that formed the Victorian writer and activist Francis Power Cobbe: "Why is it so hard to find an individual child?" Her interrogation of the material and documentary traces of a family's life for evidence of that childhood yields a sense of distances, silences, and privacy which to a large extent shield the Victorian's childhood from our twentieth-century eyes. Hilary Fraser and Victoria Burrows invite us to gaze upon a certain staging of family life in a photograph album, "a small, soft-covered album" belonging to George Duckworth, rich in images of one of modern literature's most famous Victorian childhoods, that of Virginia Woolf. "I feel that strong emotion must leave its trace" wrote Woolf, but as Fraser and Burrows show, the relations between photography, memory and historical evidence are often open-ended, more suggestive than conclusive. And the elusiveness of the Victorian childhood is not only a function of historical perspective: Catherine Heath's reading of Dickens's journalism and short fiction yields an understanding of the

childhood self as ever-present but strange, to the remembering adult self, the "eidolon of childhood" functioning as a symbol of alienation and loss.

Questions of gender and education occupy the next group of essays in the collection. John Maynard gives us the opportunity to see Emily Andrews Patmore, the original "angel in the house," as a "working and producing individual," the children's author who signed her books "Mrs Motherly." Maynard's reading of these works reveals that "the construction of the parent is of course . . . always implicitly involved in the construction of the child." A similar co-implication of models of motherhood and childhood emerges from Ainslie Robinson's study of Anna Jameson's negotiation of scholarship and maternity. Both articles show how Victorian women using their role as educators to gain social power in spite of, even because of, the gender ideology of separate spheres. Heather Scutter invites us to think of a different set of separate spheres—work and play—manipulated by Kingsley in *The Water Babies* to turn the story of a working-class boy's journey from outcast to social acceptance into a fable of middle-class masculine education. A story of education through "a gendered and embodied discourse of British patriotism" also emerges from Stephanie Green's interpretation of the construction of British boyhood in Meredith's *The Egoist.*

Victorian views on education were often shaped by the opposed ideas of original sin and original innocence. In his study of the Victorian discourse of household management Brian McCuskey finds that the doctrine of original sin underwrote conceptions of children and servants alike, and that often "the working-class servant ends up shouldering the burden of original sin on behalf of the middle-class child who may then be figured as a Romantic innocent." In her account of nineteenth-century Australian models of child-rearing Jan Kociumbas explores the nationalist and gendered investments in the competing notions of childhood sin and innocence. The argument over the "original" nature of children, and the related debate over the values of nature and civilisation which invariably accompanies it, also focuses Joanne MacPherson's exploration of the "wild child" in the Victorian imagination.

Our collection finishes with two very different studies of the construction of Victorian childhood. Carol Bock questions whether childhood as discursive formation, ideology, and social reality is produced primarily through "ideas spontaneously generated in the minds of great thinkers like Rousseau and Locke" or through material culture: "To what extent did the commodities made available to children in the nineteenth century determine their interests, needs, behaviours, ways of thinking, and desires?" Where she explores the ideological work performed by Victorian consumer items such as magazines for children, Roni Natov and Wendy Fairey look to the psychological work accomplished by two texts which have come to define opposing paradigms of Victorian childhood: Dickens's pastoral reverie *David Copperfield* and Carroll's absurdist nightmare *Alice in Wonderland.*

The papers talk to each other in many ways; two dialogues in particular stand out. One is the idea of the empowerment and disempowerment of different social groups through various constructions of childhood. As Brian McCuskey argues, the Victorian's images of childhood functioned as "an expansive and flexible symbolic field" where ideological dilemmas might be resolved and where the interests of one sector of society could be promoted or safeguarded at the expense of another. Several of the essays trace such a process, activated usually, as one would expect, in the service of hegemonic (imperial, middle-class) culture, but also—and perhaps surprisingly often—in favour of

Thomas Cooper Gotch, *The Child Enthroned*

women, and particularly mothers, a group who gained social power through their management of images of childhood. A second recurrent theme is that of loss: from the tale of the upper-class boy lost among the sweeps of London to the images of children lost in the bush which haunted the Australian colonial imagination; from the loss of parents to the loss of innocence; and finally in the loss of childhood itself , both for the adult who seeks to remember and for the historian who seeks to retrieve.

There is a received understanding that Victorian children were seen and not heard. The Juvenilia Press, reviewed at the end of this volume, debunks the latter part of the myth by recovering the exuberant and unrefined voices of youthful authors as various as Jane Austen, Charlotte and Branwell Brontë, Marianne Evans and Louisa May Alcott. The Victorians' visual imagination of childhood was displayed to conference delegates during a visit to a specially convened exhibition on representations of Victorian children at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. With a shock of recognition we found at the exhibition here in Australia another painting by Thomas Cooper Gotch, a variation on his theme of "The Child Enthroned." We are very grateful to the Art Gallery Society for their hospitality and to Richard Beresford for his illustrated lecture. There was an enthusiastic response too from delegates to the reception and exhibition at Elizabeth Bay House on the Victorian childhood of two Australian sisters, Nina and Kathleen Rouse. Here we experienced a personalised display of childrens' games, dolls, dressing-up clothes, juvenilia, art works, music books—all the material culture that embodied emerging notions of childhood as a formative time of innocence, creativity and play. We are indebted to the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales and to Cambridge University Press for sponsoring this occasion.

We are thankful too for the support of our School of English and the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at UNSW without whose assistance we could not have hosted the conference or sponsored our keynote speakers, Professor Juliet MacMaster from the University of Alberta, Canada, and Professor Sally Mitchell from Temple University, USA. The publication of this volume has been underwritten by the Faculty's Humanities Research Program and to them we are grateful for the opportunity to widen our exploration of this topic. We are especially pleased to be able to share with a wider audience the hitherto unpublished photographs of Virginia Woolf's family life presented by Hilary Fraser and Victoria Burrows, and the rediscovered works of Emily Andrews Patmore which are the subject of John Maynard's article.

Our twentieth-century concept of childhood owes much to the Victorians. Following in the footsteps of the Romantics they were possibly the first to see childhood as a distinct phase of life and not merely as a prelude to adulthood. Mid-nineteenth-century writers sentimentalised childhood, later Victorians saw childhood experience as crucial to the development of later character and valued play and other imaginative and artistic expression. It is hardly surprising then that Gotch, a late Victorian, should have sought to enthrone childhood in his paintings. The Australian canvas reinforces the sacred and temporal power of the child in its title, "My Crown and Sceptre."

Christine Alexander and Roslyn Jolly
University of New South Wales