***Defining the Victorian Nation: Class, Race, Gender and the British Reform Act of 1867*, by Catherine Hall, Keith McClelland and Jane Rendall. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.**

When I began to read this book, it was against a background of the post-Olympics warm glow, the growing discussion about next year's Federation celebrations coupled with the lingering unease about the Republican fiasco, the looming twenty-fifth anniversary of the Dismissal—Australia's most important political crisis—and linked inevitably with this the memory of the carnage of the First World War. The eleventh of November for Australians does not just mean a red poppy in the buttonhole. It also means a speech on the steps of Old Parliament House which spelled the end of our particular brief period of Camelot. So what does make a national turning point, a moment which defines what that nation is? Sometimes a single event can come to stand for that pivotal moment out of all proportion to its actual importance at the time. Sometimes the change in a nation's affairs is the result of many smaller moments, so that when the change is instituted these are all subsumed in the final result, whether it be merely a new government or a dramatic change in the basic political structure. Federation—the great political change which came peacefully after a simple nationwide vote (the referendum merely asked "Are you in favour of the Proposed Federal Constitution Bill?) rather than after a revolutionary crisis (all the newspapers made much of the peacefulness of the transition)—could well not have been possible, however, without the widening of the suffrage in the 1867 Reform Bill, and the very gradual movement over the following thirty years both in Britain and the colonies towards the application of democratic principles to all, not just to the propertied classes. By the time of Federation this included at least some women in Australia (and, of course, all women in New Zealand), unlike in the imperial centre: women in South Australia had the vote, but women in Western Australia just missed out by a year.

The body of *Defining the Victorian Nation* consists of a long chapter from each of the three eminent historians, McClelland on class, Rendall on women, and Hall on race and empire. An equally long jointly written introduction traces the background to the political climate which led to the Reform Bill, and which is discussed within a context of changing modern attitudes to historiography and different developments in historical studies—a move away from the emphasis on social histories which marked the 1960s to the early 1980s period towards an approach which has been influenced by developments in political sociology and studies of electoral behaviour. Interestingly enough this latter approach may be considered to be less rather than more politically inflected than the former, which is clearly seen in the cogent and extremely helpful section on Marx and different versions of the class-based historiography which dominated that post-war period up to the 1980s which follows; here there is particular emphasis on the work of historians like E.P. Thompson and E.J. Hobsbawm with his concept of a labour aristocracy as an explanation of the nature of popular and working-class politics in the 1850s-70s. In the section on "New approaches to political history" the authors consider the shift from the early 1980s towards a focus on the language, ideas and discourses of politics, reflecting the response of historians to postmodernism

and the post-structuralist theories of, particularly, Foucault and Derrida, and which was marked by the publication in 1982 of Gareth Stedman Jones's groundbreaking essay on the language of Chartism.

It is probably in the area of women and politics that this "new" historiography is most useful as a way of exploring the complexities of individual political subjectivities, the making and remaking of identity through diverse discourses of belonging and exclusion. Increasingly this is also being applied to questions of racial identity and imperial power structures. This section of the introduction concludes: "The new confidence in the British 'nation' expressed throughout the reform agitation was based on political identities shaped partly through the making of those relationships [between Britain and different parts of the Empire including, most importantly, Ireland], partly through the power of new languages, of unity and of differentiation, of nation, race and civilisation" (29).

Separate sections in the introduction then develop the contextualising of women and gender and of nations and national identity within modern historiography. This section on national identity is particularly topical with the recent publication of the Macpherson report on the death of Stephen Lawrence and its claim of institutionalised racism, the Runnymede Trust report into Englishness and racism largely written by Stuart Hall, and the Rowntree Foundation survey into racism. Tony Blair's indication that national identity (Englishness or Britishness, what is it to be?) is to be a part of forthcoming election debates further highlights the topicality of McClelland, Rendall and Hall's approach. The next section on citizenship allows the writers to focus on Mill, his ideas on liberty and his construction of the principles of citizenship which conclude the introduction. Because it roams so widely over recent and current trends in historiography, this long introduction is extremely useful in a general sense quite apart from the way it lays the groundwork for the critical approaches in the separate chapters. It is also made clear that the chapters which follow "focus more upon those forces in British politics that were favourable to reform, and especially upon the many varieties of liberalism, radical-liberalism and the politics of labour, in urban rather than rural contexts" (70).

The first of the central chapters, Keith McClelland on 'England's greatness, the working man,' looks first at the debate surrounding who should be included in the rather nebulous figure of the "respectable working man" and the events and arguments of the preceding years, including the period of Chartism and the various reform associations which flourished in those years. McClelland's analysis of what constituted this masculine political identity and the lengths the debates went to exclude the poor and the "rough" working class is an important one, because it confronts the complexities of class and the way in which radical politics (and the rise of trade unionism in the 1860s is an important issue here) was able to come to some accommodation with liberalism. He admits that there is a paucity of evidence both about just who was given the vote and about the economic figures which might truly reflect the degrees of poverty, unemployment, part-time employment, the earnings of women and children, and so on. In one sense this chapter does not do anything new in terms of historical analysis, particularly when taken in conjunction with the promises of the introduction, but, by

focusing on events leading up to the granting of full citizenship to a limited number of working men, it does bring together a number of important mid-Victorian movements and suggest the relation between these and issues such as the temperance movement, the prostitution problem, sanitary reform, all unfortunately rather hastily canvassed at the end of the chapter.

Jane Rendall's chapter on the citizenship of women predictably begins in familiar historical territory with a brief mention of Wollstonecraft's early indication in the *Vindication* that women should play some part in the political process and then early-nineteenth-century activism through to the involvement of political women with Mill and his campaign for women's suffrage. A useful and thorough analysis of later nineteenth-century developments in gaining women the vote is followed by the most interesting part of this chapter which is on defining women as citizens. Liberal-minded women who were involved in the suffrage movement hesitated to claim the suffrage out of self-interest, and instead couched their arguments in altruistic terms: "Rights were conceived in relationship to a duty or a responsibility to others" (163). Rendall's linking of citizenship with the language of individuality and self-cultivation—of which education is a prime component—which she locates in Mill is a fundamental part of her ongoing project which is to rewrite the history of the early women's suffrage movement. As she says, the only detailed history of the movement of those early years is that of Helen Blackburn, a participant, which while detailed and painstaking is nevertheless part of "a very lengthy tradition of Anglo-Saxonism" (177) and Aryan racial pride.

Catherine Hall's argument in "The nation within and without" is simply stated: "I suggest that a full understanding of the meaning of the nation as constituted in 1867 depends on a grasp of the imagined nation in both its political and its cultural forms ... The boundaries that concern me here are those constructed through racial and ethnic categories ... The essay aims to question existing historiographical paradigms and open up a way of thinking about the British nation and British domestic politics that focuses on the interconnections between Britain, Jamaica and Ireland and the impact such relations had on how national politics and national identities were constituted" (179). She goes on to explore and question the political and cultural—and always gendered—identities of the Englishman, "the negro," and the Irishman against the historical background leading up to the mid-century. It is a powerful argument, particularly the section on Jamaica which she sees as "a crucial testing ground for ideas about race and nation from the late eighteenth century" (192). Her conclusion that the parliamentary debates which led to the Reform Act were "framed by reference to questions of race and empire from the beginning" (221) justifies fully the emphasis on a new historiography which the introduction to the book argues for.

All three chapters are illustrated by familiar black-and-white illustrations from the usual sources, mainly *Punch* and the *Illustrated London News*, and there are six appendices giving various statistics and factual details pertinent to the Reform Act (including the 1832 Reform Act and the 1829 Catholic Emancipation Act) and covering Ireland, Scotland and Wales as well as England. A seventh appendix gives a cast of characters; this is an unexpectedly theatrical addition, and it highlights the fact that the

drive towards reform never took on a life of its own, but was always propelled forward by strong-minded individuals, many of whom disagreed with each other's policies or went over old ground, and who engaged in the rhetoric with a very familiar Victorian moral fervour. Chief amongst these, of course, was John Stuart Mill

Defining the Nation then is an important work in its demonstration of the way in which focusing on a defining national event, be it political as in this case, or more widely cultural, can allow the historian access to that wider arena of ideas about citizenship and what it is to be part of a nation. I found it particularly useful in its opening-up of possible new avenues in literary studies: enabling a move away, for instance, from the familiar view of the mid-nineteenth century which most of the literature reflects in some way; that is, the effect of the industrial revolution, the hegemony of the urban, commercial and industrial middle class, and so on. Could it, for instance, shed some light on other aspects of the Victorian novel, particularly its means of production. Is it too much to suggest that the marked increase in publishing output in this period has some connection with a partial liberalisation of society generally? While the book does not mention the 1870 Education Act which perhaps might have been more delayed had it not been for the widening of the franchise in the Reform Act, wider access to education is perhaps one of the most striking evidences of this liberalisation in the immediate post-Reform Act era.

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***Women and Playwriting in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, edited by Tracy C. Davis and Ellen Donkin. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.**

So, *were* there any women playwrights? Yes, indeed, as one might expect, countless named and anonymous women wrote for English theatre in the nineteenth century. But Davis and Donkin want to render my initial query irrelevant (as well as impertinent) by interrogating the terms of the question itself. By so doing they shift the debate away from name-counting or recuperative exercises which, though worthwhile and necessary, risk achieving little beyond making more women visible in discursive and industrial fields already thoroughly colonised by gendered assumptions. They thus ask us to consider questions not about "play writers" but about the functions of the "playwright," and to look more closely at the masculinist assumptions about authority and professionalism which were formative of the rising category of the nineteenth-century dramatic author. As the editors write in their introduction: "This book is organized as a series of questions which intentionally undermine assumptions about where to look for evidence, what authorship means, why locale matters, and how genre functions" (5). The twelve contributors to the volume show a keen awareness of these historiographic drives demonstrating a fertile conversation where the individual scholars are aware of each others' projects as well as the volume's overall thrust of enquiry.

Tracy Davis develops Jeff Weintraub's concept of "sociability" as a political act defined as "discussion, debate, deliberation, collective decision-making, and action in