

REVIEWS

***Victorian Women Poets: A New Annotated Anthology*, by Virginia Blain.
London: Longman, 2001.**

Emerging in the wake of comprehensive anthologies of Victorian women's verse, such as Angela Leighton and Margaret Reynolds' *Victorian Women Poets: An Anthology* (1995) and *Nineteenth-Century Women Poets* (1996), edited by Isobel Armstrong, Joseph Bristow and Cath Sharrock, is Virginia Blain's *Victorian Women Poets: A New Annotated Anthology*. Whereas previous collections have offered a wide range of poems by an extensive number of women poets, Blain's collection aims to offer a representative selection from just thirteen poets. The thirteen that she settles on – Felicia Hemans, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Emily Pfeiffer, Christina Rossetti, Augusta Webster, Adah Isaacs Menken, Mathilde Blind, "Michael Field," Constance Naden, Rosamund Marriot Watson, Mary Elizabeth Kendall and Amy Levy – are themselves a representative "sampling" of women poets of the Victorian period (Blain 2).

The usual questions asked regarding selection for an anthology apply to this one: why does the editor settle on these particular poets, or these specific texts, to represent verse by Victorian women? To some extent, Blain anticipates these questions in her Introduction. "Anthologies, by their very nature, always simultaneously invoke and revoke the idea of a 'full' representation," she writes (1). The limitation *and* appeal of an anthology, Blain argues, is that it will reflect the assumptions and concerns of the context out of which it emerges, even as it tries to convey the preoccupations of the time from which its material is drawn. This dual motivation can be seen to inform Blain's choice of poets *and* selection of texts. The poems range in subject matter from orthodox spirituality to an interest in natural history; from a fascination with other cultures, particularly Eastern cultures, to a domestic focus; from the expression of romantic heterosexual love to the articulation, although sometimes veiled, of same-sex desire, or maternal love.

Related to this is a consideration of the accessibility of the work; poets are included, Blain states, partly on the basis of their appeal to contemporary readers. This might account for the absence of Jean Ingelow's rather effusive or even sentimental verse, which was popular with Victorian readers but may be less palatable today, or Dora Greenwell's poetry, which sometimes seems rather conservative from a contemporary perspective. It also might account, at least in part, for the inclusion of Felicia Hemans in an anthology of Victorian women's poetry, although Blain's collection is not the first to make this choice: Leighton and Reynolds also include Hemans in their anthology.

As the Introduction makes clear, one purpose of the collection is to offer “a teachable range of poems for each poet” (2). The anthology is very well suited to prescription for undergraduate and graduate students taking courses on Victorian poetry or Victorian women writers. What distinguishes Blain’s anthology from other collections, and makes it particularly well suited to this purpose, is its extensive annotations. These are full and detailed in explanation of archaic terms, and offer direction for students interested in pursuing specific references. Where needed, the annotations also provide a brief context for the poem. Felicia Hemans’ “Epitaph on Mr W-” (written 1816), to take one example, identifies the addressee as one C. Pleydell N. Wilton, and points out that in the early nineteenth century “great strides” were made in the study of minerals and rock strata (22). Emily Pfeiffer’s “To Nature” (1876) and “A Chrysalis” (1876) are likewise contextualised, in general terms, in relation to the discourses of science and natural history, as are Constance Naden’s rather humorous “Evolutional Erotics” (1887) and Mathilde Blind’s “Motherhood,” from *The Ascent of Man* (1889).

As these examples indicate, the poems in the anthology participate in, and therefore highlight, what has been regarded more recently as the significant ideological and discursive preoccupations of the nineteenth century. As well as revealing an interest in, and in some cases concern with, the implications of developments in the natural sciences, a number of the poems are noteworthy for their contribution to nineteenth-century colonialist discourse, that system of signifying practices that produce and naturalise the structures of empire, or which reflect the wonder, or sometimes fear, expressed in response to an encounter with an “other” culture. Although neither Felicia Hemans’ “The Chamois Hunter’s Love” (included in Reynolds and Leighton’s anthology) nor the “Indian Woman’s Death-Song” (in Armstrong et al) is present here, Blain does offer, perhaps as an alternative, the lesser known “The Wife of Asdrubal” (1819) to signify Hemans’ fascination with, and participation in, the mythologising of women of other cultures. Mathilde Blind’s “A Fantasy” (1895), in which the speaker assumes the identity of “an Arab” of the desert, is also indicative of the appeal or wonder associated with another culture, partly attributable to the popularity amongst the Victorians of the *Arabian Nights*. It also reflects a tendency in Victorian writers – apparent in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point” (1850), for instance – to deploy tropes of otherness gleaned from textual sources, sometimes inappropriately. As the note to Blind’s “A Fantasy” reminds us, the bananas the speaker describes are unlikely to be found in Arabian deserts.

The works included also draw on a range of different poetic conventions and reflect an interest amongst Victorian women poets in experimenting with form. Blain describes an “anxiety of genre” which leads a number of poets, such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Emily Pfeiffer and Mathilde Blind, to search for “new expressive means in their verse” (8). Augusta Webster’s sonnet sequence addressed to her daughter, “Mother and Daughter” (1895), partly included in the anthology,

offers a unique take on a form traditionally employed in the articulation of heterosexual romantic love. Students could compare this series of sonnets with Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, although none of these are included in Blain's collection, which does seem a rather significant omission.

Whilst there are gaps or omissions such as this, inevitable in any anthology, Blain's selection is sufficient in its scope to make this an anthology well suited to prescription for students. Individual poets are represented by a "teachable" range of texts that offer a variety of concerns and experiments with form; the selection of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's verse, to take one example, ranges from the earlier poems, "A Thought for a Lonely Death-bed" and "Bertha in the Lane" (1844), to Barrett Browning's more polemical and stylistically effective "The Runaway Slave" (1850), "A Curse for a Nation" (1860) and "Mother and Poet" (1862). Poems often included in other recent collections, such as Augusta Webster's "A Castaway" (1870), sit alongside the more obscure texts, like Webster's "The Flood of Is in Brittany" (1893), which is a possible source for a poem by A. S. Byatt's fictional poet Christabel LaMotte in *Possession* (1990).

This selection provides ample opportunity for students to draw useful connections between texts, such as between the poems that draw on the language of evolution, or oriental tropes. Another point of comparison might focus on Victorian women poets' treatment (or even re-evaluation) of the figure, so often represented in Victorian cultural practices, of the "fallen woman." Augusta Webster's "A Castaway," for instance, can be read alongside Mathilde Blind's "The Message" (1891) or Amy Levy's "Magdalen" (1884). Such connections between the different poets' work promotes a contextual reading, which is further encouraged by the annotations, contributing to the anthology's success and demonstrating its suitability for teaching purposes.

Frances Kelly

***George Newnes and the New Journalism in Britain, 1880-1920: Culture and Profit*, by Kate Jackson. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001.**

George Newnes and the New Journalism in Britain, 1880-1910 is a thought-provoking book that makes a significant contribution to our understanding of late Victorian and Edwardian culture. It has many strengths, but perhaps its greatest is the way Kate Jackson employs media studies and political and cultural history to articulate her biographical account of Newnes with an analysis of the institutional and ideological fractures and formations of the period. In doing this, Jackson deepens our understanding of both Newnes and the culture within which he moved.

Newnes (1851-1910) was the son of a Derbyshire Congregational minister. He began his working life in the wholesale business, where he was a successful