

Pite, Ralph, editor. *Lives of Victorian Literary Figures I : Eliot, Dickens, and Tennyson by Their Contemporaries*. 3 Vols. Vol 1. *George Eliot*, edited by Gail Marshall; Vol. 2. *Charles Dickens*, edited by Corinna Russell; Vol. 3 *Alfred, Lord Tennyson*, edited by Matthew Bevis. London: Pickering & Chatto, 2003. v + 444; v + 526; v + 504. ISBN 1-85196-759-1. £275/\$440.

Vast as are the primary sources for the lives of the canonical Victorian writers, many remain scattered and difficult to access. The astounding industry of the great postwar generation of Victorianists and its successors has brought together many of their letters in fine scholarly editions, yet to begin to see these figures as their contemporaries saw and remembered them one must look elsewhere, to the early biographical memoir, the obscure reminiscence, the fugitive review, the newspaper column, the critical summing-up. The long-running "Interviews and Recollections" series has sought to address these needs with short, annotated selections from many such sources, volumes that are especially rich in quick glimpses and vivid anecdotes. Not quite so lively, Pickering and Chatto's handsome and ambitious new series on the lives of literary Victorians also aims to make excerpts from many far-flung texts newly accessible, but its larger purpose is to stimulate thought and discussion about the nature of biographical writing and the vagaries of literary reputation.

Like the publisher's successful series on the lives of Romantic figures, these first three volumes on Eliot, Dickens, and Tennyson are attractively put together and fitted out with full-scale scholarly apparatus. Each offers a thoughtful introduction by the volume's editor, followed by a bibliography, a timeline of the author's life, and selections, presented in facsimile, from a wide range of sources. Each of these facsimile texts features an introduction of its own setting the source in context, while endnotes helpfully explain allusions and proper names. Whatever the other advantages of facsimiles, their use in this series does serve to introduce readers to the vagaries of nineteenth-century typography, including some very small type, indeed. To make things a bit easier on modern eyes, the publisher has tidied up the reproductions electronically to make them not only more readable than the originals, but noticeably more so than the smudgy photocopies that are the usual harvest of biographical researchers. A chart at the beginning of each volume shows which page numbers in the original text correspond to the volume's own pagination, simplifying the process of locating the selected passages in their original form. Indeed, it is to be hoped that these exemplary anthologies will draw students and scholars back to take a closer look at these often neglected texts. A subject and name index to all three volumes appears at the end of the last volume, making it possible for readers to range across them in search of common themes and figures.

Well-made and potentially useful as these volumes are, they may be said to lack a certain clarity of purpose. Neither the series editor nor any of the volume editors feel called upon to explain why these particular texts have been selected,

rather than others equally worthy. Nor is it always clear how some of the selections illuminate the life of the figure in question. Many of Gail Marshall's choices in the George Eliot volume, for example, consist of critical responses to the novels, like a passage from Beatrice Webb's diary in which she muses about *Daniel Deronda* or long stretches of substantial excerpts from evaluations by Mrs. Oliphant and Eliza Lynn Linton. Readers in search of vivid glimpses of George Eliot herself will find these very thinly scattered among these discussions of her novels and characteristic views of life. Yet Marshall's insistent focus on the shaping of Eliot's posthumous critical reputation does convincingly illustrate how impossible it was for her late Victorian readers to separate their views of her unconventional life from their experience of her fiction. Similarly, Corinna Russell's long excerpt from William Hughes's *A Week's Tramp in Dickens-land* (1891), to name but one instance, characteristically mingles incidents from Dickens's life and fiction in what she describes as "a rich hybrid of topographical biography, literary companion, and rambler's guide" (159). The ways in which hero-worshiping readers' experience of Tennyson's poetry was inflected by their meeting with the poet himself comes through forcefully, and often amusingly, in the reactions of such memoirists as Henry James, who was startled to find that "Tennyson was not Tennysonian" (230).

The reliance on facsimiles makes excerpting relevant passages from longer works more difficult, and one wonders if some of these selections would have been shorter or more to the point if the texts had been more readily manageable. In some cases, this reliance actually obscures the meanings of the texts themselves; Matthew Bevis's inclusion of undated passages from various editions of the Carlyles's letters seems merely confusing and unnecessary when more reliable versions are readily available in the Duke-Edinburgh edition. Similar small lapses are noticeable here and there. Marshall has a rather dogmatic tendency, in her introductions to each selection, to grade each author according to the correctness of his or her approach to Eliot. Pace Russell, the *Times* publication of Dickens's "Personal Statement" did not precede its appearance in *Household Words* by "several days," but only by two (the magazine came out on Wednesday, though dated the following Saturday), nor is there any convincing evidence that Dickens was "horrified" by the appearance in print of the "Violated Letter," which he clearly expected to be widely circulated. Bevis's unpersuasively harsh criticism of the late Robert Bernard Martin's insightful 1980 biography of Tennyson seems out of place in a short survey.

Such criticisms fade to insignificance, however, in the face of what the editors have accomplished. These volumes, with their carefully nuanced, thought-provoking introductory essays and wide-ranging selections, deepen our understanding of the impact of these writers on their contemporaries' imaginations, while also charting the multifarious origins of our own often contested and ambivalent experience of their lives and works. Each volume is eminently, engrossingly browsable, and offers a useful way to introduce graduate students to the excitements and pitfalls of research among the primary sources for Victorian

literary biography, few of which are as easily accessible in even the best research libraries. The second three-volume set to appear in this series will cover the Brownings, the Brontës, and the Rossettis; the third will feature the Carlyles, Ruskin, and Gaskell. If this first set is any indication, we have much to look forward to.

Patrick Leary