

Moran, Maureen. *Victorian Literature and Culture*.

London: Continuum, 2006.

When Maureen Moran speaks of her Grandfather's disillusionment at catching sight of Queen Victoria, a 'woman who could have been anyone's widowed great-grandmother' (1), she not only introduces the oscillations between excitement and disappointment that for her characterise the Victorian period, she personally invites the reader into an era that is often contemporarily viewed as inaccessible. As part of the "Introductions to British Literature and Culture" series published by Continuum, *Victorian Literature and Culture* succeeds in its aim to provide a succinct orientation into the cultural, literary and critical aspects of the Victorian period; it also flags the challenges faced by a series like this, where the need to present a synopsis can conflict with the desire to map complex issues.

Moran's style is lucid and engaging. In the first chapter, she discusses the intermeshing of social, cultural, political and economic details with a rich and diverse range of literature, effectively presenting a literature embedded in a period that was challenged and deeply affected by reading and writing. In the second chapter, "Literature in the Victorian Period", the didactic role of poetry and fiction is highlighted and an important feature of the Victorian period emerges—that poetry and fiction were regularly viewed as conduits of moral and existential truths. Moran offers important insights into the reciprocal relationship between reader and novel when she discusses the fashion for serial publication in the period and overall, a fascinating array of key writers, their styles and concerns, assemble in this chapter.

Possibly as a result of the appeal of those 'loose, baggy monsters' (5)—Henry James' term for Victorian novels—its drama, journalism and non-fictional prose can be somewhat of a mystery to those starting out in the period. As such, the reviews of these areas of Victorian writing are particularly enlightening. In the section on "Domestic Realism and social problem plays", Moran underscores the influence of Henrik Ibsen and the disparate treatment received by those playwrights who established a balance between 'disturbing' and 'wholly disrupting' (102) an audiences beliefs, and those whose shocks were too much to take. Where Arthur Wing Pinero's plays earned him a knighthood, Henry Arthur Jones' plays could be flung out of operation after only ten days (102). The Victorian 'cultural self-consciousness' (104) that emerges in non-fiction writing is shown to both revel in affirmations of its values and to be plagued by doubt. An interesting instance of this dichotomy is given in Moran's sketch of the history writer John Richard Green's valorisation of material progress and its denigration by others like Edward Carpenter, who saw material progress as 'a triumph of selfishness' disabling more balanced links between humanity and the 'living spirit of nature' (105). Moran surveys a substantial range of Victorian newspapers and periodicals—essential background information for those new to the period—adumbrating their various flavours and preoccupations. A similar section, even a very brief one, might have been equally useful on the 'inspirational tracts, collections of hymns and theological articles' (25) given the primacy of Christianity in the period.

The fourth chapter, "Resources for Independent Study" encourages a swift immersion into the period. It includes a compact timeline, a glossary and a list of web resources,

as well as a comprehensive overview of relevant scholarship and reference material which is detailed enough to be serviceable, but not so sprawling as to be overwhelming.

As an introduction, *Victorian Literature and Culture* is necessarily reductive—it sketches the period and its literary trends as opposed to providing an in-depth analysis. Despite this generic requirement, the text offers an excellent analysis of many features of the period and its literature. However, there are places where the need to be reductive has the potential to be misleading. An example of this is visible in the first chapter in a subsection headed, “Sciences of origin and human development”. Here, Moran ascribes the determinism visible in literature after the 1860s to the effect of Darwin’s theories. The determinism which is ascribed to this literature, where ‘characters ceased to be controlling agents, learning from experience and shaping their own destinies’ and become instead ‘tragic victims of both natural and social laws’ (57-58), is arguably visible centuries earlier in writers like Chaucer and Shakespeare. While generalisations about themes and trends must feature in a concise work like *Victorian Literature and Culture*, they tend to be ill at ease with the aims stated in its introduction. These aims revolve around the desire to allow the student to see the Victorian period as one dealing with the ‘possibilities and drawbacks’ of new knowledge, that the student be able to see Victorian culture as a ‘fiercely contested imagined space’ (5) and that they understand the period as fraught with ‘contradictory’ (4) aspects. Those reading this section are left with the impression that Darwin’s theories of human origin led only to secular despair and the perception that humans had no free will, and that these themes are particularly Victorian in nature. Similarly, historical complexity is somewhat elided in the extremely brief subsection on “Empire”. Quite rightly, “Empire” draws attention to the brutality of European imperialism, yet no inkling is given as to the complex and often brutal histories of nations prior to colonisation. As a result, a simplified vision of a pre-colonial cultural idyll, decimated by European intruders emerges. These kinds of simplifications stand out due to the variety of perspectives, which are generally presented with artful brevity, in other sections.

Realistically, such a short work is hard-pressed to even allude to the conflicting views surrounding the cultural, political, literary and economic facets of Victorian life and overall it succeeds fabulously. Books in the “Introductions to British Literature and Culture” series are challenged by the need to boil down complex issues; they also raise the matter of whether introductory guides can be seen as fairly neutral summaries or as critical contributions. Ultimately, *Victorian Literature and Culture* is an inviting study of the period—eloquent and compact, it provides a tantalizing initiation to those entering or returning to the field.

Mandy Swann
University of New South Wales