

Victorian Literature and Culture. Maureen Moran. London: Continuum, 2006. 184pp. ISBN 0-8264-8884-6.

Maureen Moran's study is part of Continuum's 'Introductions to British Literature and Culture Series' providing, according to the publishers, 'an initial map of the knowledge needed to study the literature and culture of a specific period'. There are many such general guides to the Victorian Age, a range of which are on my shelves, and for the most part they are excellent in content and approach. This production is of that same quality, but different in being single-authored, so that there is a consistency of style throughout the work that distinguishes it from its forerunners. The volume also provides an apparatus that includes a timeline of the key historical and cultural events; a glossary of the key terms and concepts; and a list of further reading and resources. These are all provided in section 4, 'Resources for Independent Study'. On page 1 it states that terms in bold will be found in the Glossary, but I could not locate any highlighting of that kind. Nevertheless this kind of apparatus is invaluable for students in offering short but pithy explications of such terms as 'Aestheticism', 'Dandyism', 'Romanticism' among others. The list of terms is not extensive but they all are pointedly relevant to the Victorian Age.

Designed as a background text for (I assume) tertiary students, I found the focus on the idea of an independent student useful as a means of assessing the content and contemplating the degree to which this work would inform someone who had no other recourse. The Introduction begins anecdotally, recalling the author's grandfather being taken to see Queen Victoria in Dublin in 1900. This is such an evocative personal connection and it successfully eases the reader into Moran's book making it companionate indeed. The Introduction itself offers a comprehensive and informed snapshot of the era in precise, clear terms. I found this clarity right across the work, where categories are put with straightforward expression but offering explanations and descriptions which are not simplistic. In this regard the book is a *tour de force*. Part I explores the 'Historical, Cultural and Intellectual Context' offering four key areas: Arts and Culture; Philosophy and Religion; Politics and Economics; Science and Technology. Most passages of explanation provide citations from well-known Victorian writers (Thackeray, Dickens, Carlyle, both Brownings, Eliot) by way of illustration, and what struck me particularly was that most citations or examples from literature were precisely the right ones, the very ones you would expect. Thus Miss Clack from Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*, caricatures an 'Evangelical enthusiast' (p.27), as Moran puts it, in her discussion of Evangelicalism; Ruskin's 'Of Queens' Gardens' inevitably appears in the explication of 'The Woman Question'; Dickens's *Great Expectations* helps to illustrate the issues around class and the idea of what constitutes a gentleman.

Moran's citations often provide contrasting opinions such as: 'Arnold mourned the intellectual and moral bankruptcy of his age, while the novelist Anthony Trollope (1815-82) felt his world "less cruel, less violent, less selfish, less brutal" [1883] (p.9)'. This balancing of opinion helps to provide the reader with the understanding that the Victorian Age was not marked by homogeneity in ideology and beliefs, and so resists the common, popular but mistaken perception of the period as one in which every man was a misogynist, every woman a passive victim, and in which racism and classism were rife. As Moran remarks: 'Whether enforcing or challenging artistic and social conventions, the arts and culture of Victorian Britain show us a society both confident and self-critical' (23). The much-discussed Victorian morality, Moran points out, was dealt with by authors of the time employing 'coded, indirect terms to express unorthodox attitudes' (17), particularly when addressing certain issues: sexuality, class and religion are probably the three most important ones.

Important points are made such as that legislative change was often a matter of compromise rather than an urge for pro-active reform, and the absolutely appropriate example here is the Repeal of the Corn Laws (1846). More significantly is Moran's strong sense of the problems facing both the population at home and those who were the Empire's colonisers in the government's failure to permit the populace as a whole to participate in 'political and economic processes' (54). Literature's role in establishing a sense of British superiority, of "Englishness", is comprehensively dealt with. In the section on 'History, Sage Writing and Public Commentary' Moran cites noted Victorian historians Macaulay, Froude and Green, all of whom celebrate the English nation but then also refers to Edward Carpenter's 1889 book, *Civilisation, its Cause and Cure*, which takes issue with their more optimistic views. The counter narratives are important in the balance which this study achieves.

In discussing popular fiction there were categories I did dispute, for instance that Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* might be classified as 'psychological ghost fiction' when it is clearly urban gothic, and more might have been made of the Gothic—Sensation—Detection trajectory which is the clear pathway to today's detective fiction, both literary and in film/ television. Stevenson's *Jekyll and Hyde* provides a telling example of just how that trajectory works. Nevertheless overall Moran's work contains informed, nuanced discussions that flow neatly into each other, that offer connections which are informed and tightly, cogently expressed, with sufficient detail to lead the reader to more information and to pique the reader's interest in the various authors and titles sampled. I could discover very few gaps, everything one would expect was there, whether it was recognition of Comte's as the dominating creed in moral philosophy, or the era's engagement with medievalism. Moran shows us a society 'in continuous dialogue' with itself (126) and in so doing provides those of us who teach Victorian and/or Nineteenth-Century studies a very real service.

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