

BOOK REVIEWS

A Companion to Victorian Poetry

Edited by R. Cronin, A. Chapman, and A. Harrison. Blackwell, first published 2002, paperback 2007. 602 pp.
ISBN 978-1-4051-7612-5

The hardback copy of this Blackwell *Companion to Victorian Poetry* was released in 2002, with a paperback copy issued in 2007, so this review aims not to compete with already published (and overwhelmingly positive) reviews, but rather to evaluate at least in part the longevity of the volume's contribution, to assess its continuing usefulness to its intended audiences, and to consider how well it has achieved its stated aim, "to lay out an agenda for the study of Victorian poetry in coming years" (ix).

The volume has received deserved praise for its high editorial standards and the calibre of contributors, a veritable roll-call of leading international scholars. From the vantage point of 2010, certain contributors' essays function as cogent summaries of substantive projects that have subsequently reached publication, as is the case of Herbert Tucker's opening essay on "Epic," which presents in an erudite but often humorous précis of the magisterial and weighty *Epic: Britain's Heroic Muse 1790-1910* (OUP, 2008). Tucker's essay argues persuasively that Victorian epic poems were "episodes in the history of a coherent and durable idea about poetry's relation to culture" (25), and despite the essay's relative brevity the sweep of Tucker's discussion includes many more epics than the best-known by Tennyson, Browning, and Barrett Browning. Similarly, Warwick Slinn's most recent book, *Victorian Poetry as Cultural Critique* (University of Virginia Press, 2003), appeared after the hardcopy edition of this volume, and the theoretical arguments that inform Slinn's longer work clearly provide a foundation for this tightly constructed and provocative essay. The volume as a whole thus gestures beyond itself, while avoiding any suggestion of obsolescence. The great majority of the essays stimulate further investigation by suggesting the underlying richness and relevance – not to mention the interconnectedness – of the topics. The essays contained herein, themselves of rich merit, *lead somewhere*.

The freshness of the insights and approaches demonstrated in the *Companion* have been lauded elsewhere, and it is a pleasure to find essays treating subjects such as Lorraine Janzen Kooistra's "Poetry and Illustration" and J.-A. George's "Poetry in Translation," neither topic regularly covered in broad treatments of Victorian poetry. While primarily a straightforward review chapter, in suggesting that "verse translations became one of the most important means by which English poets challenged the orthodoxies of their own culture" (277), George's essay offers tantalising suggestions concerning women poets' use of translations. In another well-chosen inclusion, Joanne Shattock's "Reviewing" assesses both the practice and the impact of poetry criticism in the nineteenth century. The essay adroitly balances an impressive breadth of scope with an enlightening close focus, demonstrating "much of the serious debate which constituted Victorian poetics took place in the reviews of individual poets and volumes of poetry" (382). Shattock also negotiates the changes

that characterised poetry reviewing as the century progressed, assessing the contribution of criticism to poetry's dynamic cultural role.

The editors of the *Companion* have explicitly avowed a 'new approach' which eschews an author-by-author or text-by-text approach in favour of a more richly culturally and textually contextualised approach. When the editors suggest that the volume's design aims to "demonstrate the ways in which a given poet or poem can be seen to emerge from a number of cultural matrices and participate in a variety of cultural discourses" (ix), the book's structural principles proudly achieve this.

Part I of the volume systematically addresses the primary 'varieties' of Victorian poetry; the term is used advisedly. While lyric, dramatic monologue, elegy, and (in another delightful and well-judged inclusion) nonsense verse may reasonably straightforwardly be considered in terms of generic affiliation, the generic characteristics of "The Pre-Raphaelite School" are more debatable, as are those of the body of working-class poetry, despite Florence Boos' deliberately polemical opening definition: "This genre's forms and venues included songs, chants, ballads, broadsides, newspaper-poems and religious and political hymns, verse in dialects or regional languages... as well as books" (204). Boos' discussion of this tremendously various populist and reformist body of work is both skilful and provocative. Given the volume's emphasis on charting new directions, an essay on periodical poetry might be particularly pertinent: Linda Hughes has recently argued the importance of the poetry printed in periodicals,¹ and in 2009 Sally Mitchell predicted that "the scholarly use of Victorian journals may be reaching a point of transition," with the "number, variety, breadth, and depth of recent studies" bespeaking a surge in critical interest (311).² As technology and archival accessibility of periodicals advance hand in hand, the wealth of periodical resources from the Victorian period is being systematically uncovered: the significance of poetry within this treasure trove, and the suggestive interplay of verse, periodical, and consumer culture, are ripe for scholarly investigation. Such an essay might most logically find a place alongside Shattock's essay in Part II of this volume, "Production, Distribution, and Reception," presently the most slender of the sections with a mere four essays.

The eight essays in Part III most explicitly examine the interplay of Victorian poetry and Victorian culture, although this interface is, as promised, analysed in all the essays in the volume. The religious context of Victorian poetry receives thorough analysis, both in specific essays ("Poetry and Religion," "Tractarian Poetry," and "Hymn" – a particularly pleasing recognition of an enduring cultural and literary touchstone even for those later Victorians whose faith was severely rocked), and within the discussion in many other essays. Substantial recent works by Cynthia Scheinberg, Kirstie Blair, and F. Elizabeth Gray, among others, indicate that the rich body of religious literature, often neglected by twentieth-century scholars, provides compelling and illuminating future directions for Victorian poetry studies.

The editors are to be congratulated for a finely achieved balance between scholarly weight and undergraduate accessibility. The richness promised in the preface is certainly evident, but the apology for a "chaotically cluttered" text is unwarranted. The volume may be easily negotiated via table of contents and a thorough and helpful index, while each essay concludes with references and suggestions for further reading (this is one area in which the volume does already betray its age, as mentioned

above.) The volume will certainly continue to provide an invaluable resource for libraries and students. The traditional opening chronology is a pleasingly familiar feature that this reader was delighted to see retained, as it proves particularly useful for students in giving a sense of the coherence of the period. The well organised chronology offers a good metaphor, perhaps, for the anthology as a whole, which succeeds comprehensively in avoiding the random snapshot approach of many anthologies, instead producing a cumulatively richer and more complete portrait of a complex, multifarious, and energetic age.

F. Elizabeth Gray

Notes

¹ Hughes, Linda K. "What the Wellesley Index Left Out: Why Poetry Matters to Periodical Studies." *Victorian Periodicals Review* 40 (2), 2007, 91-125.

² Mitchell, Sally. "Victorian Journalism in Plenty." *Victorian Literature and Culture* 37, 2009, 311-321.