

Sharon Crozier-De Rosa, Madeleine Seys, Maggie Tonkin and Mandy Treagus. *Changing the Victorian Subject*. Adelaide: University of Adelaide Press, 2014. 292 pp.

\$44

ISBN: 978-1-922064-73-8 (Pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-922064-74-5 (Free E-book PDF)

Edited by the University of Adelaide's Madeleine Seys, Maggie Tonkin and Mandy Treagus and the University of Wollongong's Sharon Crozier-De Rosa, *Changing the Victorian Subject* brings together thirteen essays from a number of different disciplines to discuss the idea of the subject in Victorian era novels. There are however, chapters that do not focus on novels, instead examining history and poetics. The text is self-consciously situated as an inter-disciplinary work and the editors argue that to include work from 'art history and criticism, museum studies, the history of costume and textiles, performance and music studies, periodical studies, the history of technology and science, theology and religious history' (3) as well as literary studies and history reflects the historical reality of the Victorian era itself. If the Victorian period was about 'creating new markets, new colonies and new subjects' (2), *Changing the Victorian Subject* aims to create new knowledge, new discourse and new ways of reading the past.

The editors discuss 'the intersection of the Victorian with the colonial, and an interrogation of the varied relationships between the colonial Victorian subject and hegemonic British Victorian mores and values' (2). It makes the post-colonial point that 'Victorian Britain is inseparable from its Empire' which 'necessitates a reconsideration of what can be regarded as Victorian culture or literature . . . Thus British literature should be read in tandem, indeed *in tension with*, colonial literatures' (4). They work against the idea of reading within a national context alone (8). The project—of destabilising nation as a limited category of analysis—is a productive one, which can be used to further interrogate the historical idea of the novel as simply part of the nation building process. This is not to suggest it is an altogether new avenue of academic investigation in Victorian studies and one could cite Sharon Marcus's piece 'Same Difference? Transnationalism, Comparative Literature, and Victorian Studies' from 2003 as merely one prior example. Nor is it to suggest that, for example, a specific novel did not contribute to the creation of a consciousness that enabled 'Australia' to think itself for example, but to point out the two most apparent paradoxes in this. First, that 'Australia' is at once an autonomous discursive product yet simultaneously participates in a worldly system of exchanges that contest its very autonomy; and second, that the novel is a semiotic economy that is at once 'novel' (meaning new) yet is also indebted to its novelistic precursors and that its own language comes from the world as it already exists. The tensions abound then and some questions are: what nation is one's own that thinks itself as one's own and what word is one's own that thinks itself as one's own when nation and word take form in the life of the world? What are Victorian studies or Australian literary studies in that case? These are important questions to consider when re-framing specific texts from a national critical lens to a transnational one and it suggests a wider theoretical debate about the nature of heteronomy and autonomy and era and area studies than that articulated explicitly here.

How though should we consider the frame that places these chapters together? What of the editorial choice that has allowed Guy Boothby to be read alongside J.M. Barrie, Barbara Baynton alongside M.E. Braddon? Taken as a whole, the choice seems judicious—each of the essays stands on its own and contributes to an overall project. However, the authors do point out that there are two parts to *Changing the Victorian Subject*. In their own words, 'the first part of the collection investigates the ways in which the Victorian subject and Victorian

subjectivities were changed by historical forces and challenged in colonial texts from Australia and South Africa' and in the second part 'contributors explore Victorian writers' refashioning of authorial and gendered subjectivities' (12). Although these two parts work well together, upon my initial reading, Amanda Nettelbeck and Dorothy Driver's contributions—'Queen Victoria's Aboriginal subjects: a late colonial Australian case study' and 'Olive Schreiner's *From Man to Man* and "the copy within"' respectively—both stood out, albeit for different reasons. Nettelbeck's was notable because of its disciplinary sensibility—of being a history of one particularly intriguing criminal trial, rather than a study of literary texts connected to these issues. Driver's seemed incongruous because its South African subject matter seemed at odds with what had been an Australian centric project until that point. This is not to comment on the quality of their work, or the style, but rather on the editorial positioning of the texts. Upon reflection though, and in subsequent reading, Nettelbeck sets up a context, albeit obliquely, for following chapters and Driver suits the transnational project. However, transnationalism as a theoretical position needs to be taken deeper into the work rather than simply to be the inclusion of non-Australian material. The *tension* between Britain and Australia is exemplified in two very well written chapters—Margaret Allen's 'A "tigress" in the Paradise of Dissent: *Karoon* critiques the foundational colonial story' and Ailise Bulfin's 'Guy Boothby's *Bid for Fortune*: constructing an Anglo-Australian colonial identity for the fin-de-siècle London literary marketplace.' Both works are important here because they exemplify the project set out in the introduction. Given the restrictions of space, I will limit my further comments to Bulfin's contribution, which explores how Boothby 'made a place for himself in the British literary market by constructing an identity as an Anglo-Australian celebrity author' (15). He was a mediator of all things Australian for a metropolitan readership and his writing reveals 'the tensions and contradictions of belonging to neither the home colony nor the adopted metropolitan abode' (16). This chapter, with its insights about identity and celebrity and its close reading of primary sources, is worthy of praise. Although an undeniably important contribution here, Boothby's resuscitation will continue to be contested, which can be attributed in part to the position of popular fiction in the contemporary academy. Of course, we can challenge the very idea of a canon and I am also reminded of Richard Ohmann's work 'The Shaping of a Canon.' Although written for a different context, Ohmann demonstrated the need for strong sales and critical praise before a work could be elevated to a canon. A more informed historical sense will change taste, but whether this means Boothby is considered in a position appropriate to his contemporaries depends as much on the political vagaries of today's critics as it does on his aesthetic merits. The discussion of Boothby though represents a high point in *Changing the Victorian Subject*.

Accompanying the ideas of Victorianism and transnational tensions is discussion of the frontier and nationalism. As Crozier-De Rosa states in her chapter, 'Identifying with the frontier: New Woman, Nation and Empire,' 'The notion of a colonial frontier has excited much recent debate among not only Australian historians and anthropologists, but also those from other settler colonies, such as North America and South Africa' (39). Arguably then, if we are considering the Victorian world, we must consider the Anglophonic purview at the very least. Studies of the transatlantic world have become common, especially after Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993), and settler society comparisons abound in contemporary scholarship. That Crozier-De Rosa highlights 'recent debate' and the North American and South African parallels is to be commended. However, there are unexplored relationships in her work that seem important and she does not adequately discuss contemporary scholarship, with most of her citations for frontier theories coming from 2001. What of the more recent field in Australian studies at least, of 2010's *Frontier Skirmishes*, for instance? How might developments in the United States, Canada, New Zealand or South Africa influence, at a theoretical level, a discussion of the

transnational Australian frontier and *An Australian Girl* in particular? Having said that, what of Victorian ideas of the frontier? To take one example, what of Frederick Jackson Turner's 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History,' delivered to the American Historical Association in 1893 in Chicago. This address resonated not only in North America but across the pond and down under as well. By 1909, at the very latest, it was mentioned in Australia's daily papers. The omission of significant Victorian theories and the latest scholarship on the frontier is an oversight.

There are eight further essays in addition to the introduction and the four I have mentioned above. To summarise them briefly: Rosemary Moore's chapter, 'The making of Barbara Baynton,' argues that Baynton critiques the prevalent contemporary nationalism which conflated the bush with misogynistic masculinity through a narrative style that used 'hysterical symbolism' and content which dealt with incest and the abuse of women. Megan Brown's examination of Mary Fortune's writing—'A literary fortune'—highlights the years 1865 to 1885. She discusses the paradoxes of colonial attempts to fix and define gender and how Fortune understood and shaped representations of female subjectivities through a negotiation of the male coded spaces of goldfields and city. Seys's contribution locates the importance of the mirror as a reflective tool in M.E. Braddon's *The Doctor's Wife* (1864). As the editors write in the introduction, Seys examines 'the self-conscious construction of literary genre and authorial, feminine and readerly subjectivity through metaphors of dressing, reading and reflecting in Braddon's novel' (16). Mandy Treagus focuses on the female artist as a new figure of late Victorian writing, in which the female subject no longer sacrifices herself but is re-configured as a desiring being, which is a notion that realism does not adequately understand in terms of form. In 'Miss Wade's torment: the perverse construction of same-sex desire in *Little Dorrit*,' Shale Preston turns to Dickens's novel, proposing that Miss Wade is a lesbian or bisexual, a sexual type that was 'frightfully new' (218). Implicit in this chapter is Foucauldian categorisation of sexual types in the Victorian era, but Preston updates and amends this idea of perversity and contamination with subtlety and insight. In the only chapter on poetics, Carolyn Lake explores the politics and poetics of female same sex desire, which eluded representation in this era. Despite this, Lake argues that Levy's work represented desire in such a way that it negotiated and problematised agency and change. Lake's value here, in using the tools of poetics, opens us the possibility of imagining a whole other collection about changing the Victorian subject in poetics. Finally, there is Maggie Tonkin's 'From "Peter Panic" to proto-Modernism: the case of J.M. Barrie,' which uses contemporary and historical sources to explore the public fixation with Barrie as author and situates his work as part of the continuum from Victorianism to Modernism in a stylistic sense. The author is not dead to the population at large and Barrie represents a transitional figure.

It will be evident from this cursory summary that there are many theoretical issues explored in the book that make it useful for scholars not immediately concerned with the Victorian. The collection as a whole skews to the mid to late Victorian—there is nothing on the 1830s or the 1840s and only one essay on the 1850s. Half of the chapters focus on the 1890s or later and Driver's, while drawing on letters from 1884 onwards, examines *From Man to Man*, which was published posthumously in 1926 (Schreiner died in 1920). The question is how should the Victorian era be dated, something the editors discuss very briefly in the introduction (3), but which is worth considering further given the editorial choices they have made. They editors spend more time discussing the 'long nineteenth century' than the 'Victorian' era. They do not suggest that these two terms are commensurate but that in terms of periodisation, cultural moments matter rather than strictly apportioning it to the length of a reign on a throne. When though does the Victorian era end? Is this work changing the late Victorian subject rather than

the early Victorian subject? What would it mean to include a study of say, Mary Vidal's 1845 work *Tales for the Bush*, which ran to at least five editions in London? Would this change our understanding of when the Victorian era was and also what the Victorian subject could be? These are questions that the work produces, even if it does not pose them itself. The other question that comes most immediately to mind is a question about masculinities: what does Victorian masculinity look like and what might this suggest about gender and the female identities explored in *Changing the Victorian Subject*? The collection is less a comparative work than one concerned with female subjectivity, but what happens when these categories are in greater dialogue?

The Victorian subject has been considered in this collection to be a permeable, dynamic, expanding category. This is in distinction to a unitary, static, rational self. However, it is not the Victorian alone that the editors are interested in. *Changing the Victorian Subject* is as much about changing the Victorian subject as it is about changing the Australian subject, the South African subject, the English subject, the colonial subject, the Aboriginal subject, the subject itself. The subject is considered here as something akin to the self as well as to an academic discipline. The editorial juxtaposition of diverse authors strengthens this claim, rather than diminishes it, and read together the essays throw light on each other in ways they might not have if read alone. Although it is not without its problems, *Changing the Victorian Subject* will be of interest to scholars of Australian literature, post-colonialism, English literature and other areas of historical and literary inquiry.

R.D. Wood, University of Western Australia

For readers interested in these issues there is also the special issue of *Neo-Victorian Studies* focusing on 'Neo-Victorianism and Globalisation' edited by Antonija Primorac and Monika Pietrzak-Franger.

My thanks to Sam Dalgarno at Monash University for his feedback on this review.

WORKS CITED

- Gates, Henry Louis. *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars*. York: Oxford UP, 1993.
- Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. London: Verso, 1993.
- Global Dickens*. at Australasian Victorian Studies Association. 15 April 2012.
- Gregory, Cynthia L. 'But I Want a Real Book.' *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 47.3: 266–73.
- Knight, Stephen. 'The Case of the Missing Genre: In Search of Australian Crime Fiction.' *Southerly* 48 (1988): 235–49.
- Marcus, Sharon. 'Same Difference? Transnationalism, Comparative Literature, and Victorian Studies.' in *Victorian Studies* 45(4), 2003: 677–86.
- 'On Literature' in *West Australian*, Perth, Monday 22 February 1909, p 7 and 'London Week By Week' from *Evening News*, Sydney, Saturday 20 February 1909, p 4.
- Robinson, Lillian. 'Treason our Text: Feminist Challenges to the Literary Canon.' *Critical Theory since 1965*. Eds. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle. Tallahassee: Florida State UP, 1986. 571–82
- The Movement of Empire: Dance on the Transnational Stage*. North American Victorian Association Conference. Nov 3-6, 2011.

Jackson Turner, Frederick. *The Frontier in American History*. Huntington, N.Y: R.E. Krieger Pub. Co. 1975.
Vidal, Mary. *Tales for the Bush*, <http://purl.library.usyd.edu.au/setis/id/p00002>, 1845.