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Focus on the Oxford DNB (part 2)

In 10:2, Alison Booth and David Amigoni reflected on the differences between the new *Oxford DNB*, and its Victorian antecedent. Dr Lawrence Goldman, the historian and present editor of the dictionary, provides his own focus on the continuities and discontinuities between the original and revised dictionaries, and their consequences for a shared understanding of the Victorian.

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A Monument to the Victorian Age? Continuity and Discontinuity in the Dictionaries of National Biography 1882-2004

Lawrence Goldman

I

Lord Rosebery described the *Dictionary of National Biography (DNB)*, published between 1885 and 1900, as ‘the greatest literary monument of the Victorian age’.¹ That the *DNB* is a characteristically ‘Victorian’ production has been generally agreed by critics and historians ever since. Indeed, the fact that its coverage was deliberately extended beyond the last day of 1900 to include a memoir of Queen Victoria herself, who died on 22 January 1901, which therefore ‘furnished a better historical landmark’ for its close, would seem to establish its essential Victorian identity beyond dispute.² Noel Annan, in his biography of its first editor, Leslie Stephen, called it ‘a monument to the Victorian age’.³ Iain McCalman has compared it to a ‘great imperial flagship’ sailing ‘through the second half of the nineteenth century unshakeably confident of its values and virtues’.⁴ A generation ago David Cannadine, referred to it as a ‘great Victorian monument’, ‘one of those grandiosely-conceived and indefatigably-executed works of late nineteenth century self-regard’, ‘an enduring monument to national greatness and national enterprise’ in which, in a very Victorian fashion, ‘moral judgements came thick and fast’.⁵

It might be expected that with the publication in 2004 of the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (*ODNB*), a new and very largely rewritten pantheon of the influential and noteworthy in British history, we could consign the first *DNB* to the ages as an outmoded product of its time, almost a Victorian curiosity. Yet the *DNB* was being used with profit by scholars right up to the publication of the *ODNB*; and as David Amigoni has argued recently in this journal, the *DNB* may still merit attention and consultation.⁶ Other Victorian monuments lost their utility much earlier; the *DNB* continued to be consulted, and crucially, formed the basis of its successor, *ODNB*, a century later. This in itself may raise questions about its status as a distinctively Victorian work. But this essay will go further and will question the assumption that the *DNB* was bound by the supposedly dominant values of the late Victorian generation. It will present the *DNB*, in conception and often in execution, as a remarkably unideological and timeless production, which actually subverts many of our stereotypes of the Victorian age. And it will argue that precisely because of this independence from the time and place of its creation, it has survived and allowed the new Dictionary, *ODNB*, to develop organically from it. There may be discontinuities between the first and second Dictionary, but there are many continuities as well. The continuities link us to the *DNB*, and have been retained in the successor, precisely because the pioneer was, in many respects, 'out of its due time'.

If we go back to Leslie Stephen's initial conception of the *Dictionary of National Biography* the first feature that strikes the reader is the absence of any public statement of aims and intent: famously, the *DNB* had no introduction in which to proclaim its national or celebratory functions, probably because those were not its aims. Stephen's first statement, placed in the *The Athenaeum* and announcing the inception of the new project, was a sober and factual introduction designed to inform, to attract potential contributors, and encourage the suggestion of subjects for the Dictionary. 'It was a manifesto of editorial principles and policies'.⁷ The approach – Stephen's very ethos for the *DNB* – is caught in the sentence, 'We should aim at giving the greatest possible amount of information in a thoroughly business-like form'.⁸ If we examine his surviving correspondence (there being no archive for the *DNB*) the insistent theme is not the celebration of national greatness, nor the recording of individual achievements in a figuration of heroic Victorian values, but that the *DNB* might be useful to scholars and the public. He described the *DNB* to his wife, before the publication of the first of its 63 quarterly supplements as 'really a most useful thing'.⁹ 'If well done, it will be a valuable thing for generations.'¹⁰ He wrote to his

American friend Charles Eliot Norton that 'it will be a good job if done'; 'if it thrives [it] will be a more useful bit of work than any books of mine are likely to be'.¹¹ Much later, at the conclusion of its serial publication, and some years after he had stood down as editor, there was no triumphalism: 'It cost a slice of my life, but has been a good bit of work.'¹² In Stephen's lecture on 'National Biography' he continued the theme, referring directly to 'the utilitarian aspect of a dictionary'. In a statement that is dear to the hearts and purpose of those who worked on *ODNB*, the first Dictionary was a 'contrivance' for making 'accessible' the 'accumulation of material' for scholars. It 'ought to be ... an indispensable guide to persons who would otherwise feel that they were hewing their way through a hopelessly intricate jungle', a 'confidential friend constantly at their elbow'.¹³ The essence of Stephen's intent was caught in the sober early judgment of the *English Historical Review*, first issued in the year after the *DNB* began publication, that 'there is a high average of methodical and scholarly work'.¹⁴

The Dictionary was an extension of Stephen's whole cast of mind. In the central chapter of his biography of his close Cambridge friend, the political economist and Liberal politician Henry Fawcett, Stephen had produced a brilliant sketch of the intellectual life and style of the university in the 1850s and 1860s which had formed them both. The empiricism and dry rationalism of their youth, derived from their reading of John Stuart Mill, endured.¹⁵ As Sidney Lee, his colleague, co-editor and then editor of the *DNB* in his own right, was to put it later, Stephen 'was always impatient of rhetoric, of sentimentality, of floridity in life and literature. His virtues as man and writer were somewhat of the Spartan kind'.¹⁶ Such a man, and such a style, did not conduce to the production of nationalistic or imperial bombast: Stephen's approach was always workmanlike, critical, understated, and realistic. As John Gross has put it, 'in an age of histrionics he kept a cool head'.¹⁷ In the famous words of Alfred Ainger, the tone of the Dictionary was 'No flowers by request'.¹⁸ As Colin Matthew, the founding editor of the *ODNB* observed with his usual acuity, Stephen possessed 'a sharp, practical modernity as well as disillusionment with the higher flights of Victorian optimism'.¹⁹ A radical don who had championed political reform, the abolition of religious tests, the federal cause in the American Civil War, and who resigned his tutorship at his college on admitting his loss of faith, may have changed his politics as the years passed. But Stephen's scepticism, both religious and secular, remained with him and inflected the *DNB*. Not least, it ensured that brevity rather than piety and rhetoric would be the style of the Dictionary. Stephen was impatient with traditional two and three-volume Victorian 'tombstone' biographies – 'It does not

follow that because I want fact, not fiction, I therefore want all the facts, big and small'²⁰ – and was already a master of the biographical essay or memoir, the 'capsule' biography so-called, even before he established that form for the *DNB*. In so doing he substantiated an alternative tradition of biographical writing that has thrived in the twentieth century in the *DNB* article, the short notice in professional or collegiate journals, and in the broadsheet obituary.²¹

Some of the confusion in placing the *DNB* in its age may have originated in the recognition that there were many large-scale national biographical projects in this period. As Keith Thomas has reminded us, the *DNB* was preceded in the nineteenth century by compilations of Swedish, Dutch, Austrian, Belgian, German, Danish and American biography (the latter in the form of *Appleton's Cyclopaedia of American Biography*).²² It has been placed, therefore, in what Colin Matthew, the first editor of *ODNB*, called 'the surge of European national historicism whose supremacy had become evident by the 1860s'.²³ Even before then, its ancestor, the *Biographia Britannica*, published in seven volumes between 1747 and 1766, and the only complete national biographical concordance that the Victorians could use, had sought to advance 'the reputation of our country' and 'the honour of ancestors'. It was 'a British Temple of Honour, sacred to the piety, learning, valour, public spirit, loyalty and every other glorious virtue of our ancestors'.²⁴ But the *DNB* was much more muted, at least under Stephen's initial control, rejecting national triumphalism; it was, as Matthew has observed, 'tinged more with cultural pessimism than cultural superiority'.²⁵ Though it was written 'in the high-noon of tory imperialism, it avoided to a remarkable extent the jingoistic tone and state-worship' of that age.²⁶

As all will appreciate, a *Dictionary of National Biography*, as it was called by Stephen, deliberately left the composition and boundaries of 'the British' unclear and undefined. The title was a brilliant fudge, allowing for a much wider variety of lives to be included than would have been the case had Stephen and Lee been working with a necessarily prescriptive definition of nationality. As is often pointed out, a collection of over 29,000 lives which began with Jacques Abbadie, born near Pau, and which ended with Wilhelm Zuytlestein, born near Utrecht, is difficult to pigeon-hole as specifically, and limitedly British, and is hardly consistent with the idea of the *DNB* as an expression of Victorian national pride.²⁷ The open-ended and flexible approach to nationality and national history has allowed for continuity in a later age when the definition of the nation is much more frequently debated and even less clear. As Colin Matthew wrote in 1997, 'We will retain and develop Stephen's fluid, practical and inclusive view of nationality.'²⁸

More than a tenth of all subjects in the Oxford *DNB* were born outside the British Isles and the new Dictionary has arguably taken inclusivity to the limit, turning many figures – Erasmus, George Washington, Karl Marx – into ‘honorary Britons’ as Keith Thomas has observed.²⁹ Because the *DNB* was projected and financed privately by the Victorian publisher George Smith, it was politically independent and free of the influence of state. No ministry, party, commission, or nationally-directed body advised or directed its choice of subjects or approach, as was also the case with the *ODNB*.³⁰

An intelligence as subtle and unsentimental as Stephen’s could never have fallen victim to national or imperial fervour. Nor could a man whose recent ancestors had been dedicated to the eradication of the slave trade and slavery itself, and who had played such a large part in the abolition campaigns of the early nineteenth century, been blind to the moral failings, individual and collective, to which commerce and empire had led. Thus if the *DNB* had any particular political message it was a reflection – though only a rather indistinct one – of Stephen’s Liberal Unionism. While some Liberal Unionists were enthusiastic imperialists, there was no necessary and inevitable relation between the two. Stephen was one of those members of the Victorian intelligentsia who, in the mid-1880s, looked on Irish Home Rule as a betrayal of Liberal principles and a failure of Gladstone’s leadership of the nation.³¹ Paul Langford reported soon after the inception of the *ODNB* that the first Dictionary had over-represented Irish subjects of the late-eighteenth century, particularly the Irish rebels of 1798, and Colin Matthew interpreted this as an attempt by Stephen, as a Liberal Unionist, to demonstrate the place of the Irish in British or ‘national’ history.³²

Matthew also suggested that the political confusion and absence of a defined affiliation that Stephen experienced after the Liberal party split in 1886 ‘beneficially aided the political scepticism’ of the *DNB*.³³ It was an insight that may have owed something to Matthew’s own political persona. A loyal supporter of the Labour Party, as a lowland Scot who had grown up in Edinburgh but had been educated and employed all his adult life in Oxford, he was also a unionist – indeed he spoke at the very end of his life of beginning a project on the history of the Union.³⁴ Matthew had a very strong sense that his Dictionary was being planned and executed at a similarly significant moment in national history to the era of Home Rule as the national identity and constitutional independence of Britain was dissolved into the European Union.³⁵ Though he had opposed British entry to the EEC in 1973, so far as one could tell from his conversation he was not overtly hostile to the process of

national assimilation in the 1980s and 1990s. He recognized, however, that his might be the last major, national historical project to be undertaken while Britain retained her separate identity. As Ross McKibbin has put it, 'he had a very strong sense of the uniqueness of British institutions, and the unique value of these institutions'.³⁶ He thus described the *ODNB* as 'a suitable epitaph – some might say a lament – for the 1,500 years of the formation of the autochthonous United Kingdom'.³⁷

Beyond the *DNB*'s resemblance to other and more nationalistic biographical projects, two further factors may explain its mistaken assimilation into the era of British imperialism: its reception, and the rather different views of its second editor, Sidney Lee, from those of its first. If the *DNB* was clear of nationalistic intent, it was the subject of a nationalistic reception. An early and significant review of the Dictionary by Richard Copley Christie, Professor of Modern History at Owen's College, Manchester, concluded, for example, that it 'will not only be immeasurably superior to any work of the kind which has been produced in Great Britain, but will far surpass the German and Belgian biographical dictionaries now in progress, as these two important undertakings are in advance of the two great French collections, which until lately reigned supreme in the department of Biography'.³⁸ *The Athenaeum* claimed that, in starting after the Germans began their biographical dictionary, and finishing before them, the British had administered 'a handsome beating to their most formidable competitor'.³⁹ Remarkably, something of this spirit has endured into 'our age', as Noel Annan has called it.⁴⁰ But it was never of Stephen's making. No trace of chauvinism infects the sources he left behind from which we must piece together the early history of the *DNB*.

The fault, if that it is, lies with Lee, who surpassed Stephen in the methodical requirements of an editor, but was never his equal in judgement and intellect.⁴¹ Lee's 'Statistical Account' of the *DNB*, the preface to its last volume in 1900, boasted that 'the number of memoirs in this Dictionary is far in excess of the number of memoirs to be found in national biographies of other countries'.⁴² It is hard to believe that Stephen would have written thus had he still filled the editorial chair at the close of the project. And Lee referred at the very end of this essay to the 'national and beneficial purpose' of helping present and future generations appreciate 'the character of their ancestors' collective achievement'.⁴³ His approach to the selection of subjects placed greater weight on the criterion of 'distinction' as the 'claim to the national biographer's attention', whereas Stephen's choices had been more eclectic, giving prominence to lesser figures interesting in their own right, whether they influenced British History for good or ill, or for what

they told of their age.⁴⁴ In reply to an early letter in *The Athenaeum* from H.S. Ashbee enquiring about the principles for inclusion in the Dictionary, Stephen committed the DNB to breadth: 'I hope to have as many thousands of obscure names as possible'.⁴⁵ The difference may be explained in the origins and temperament of the two men: Stephen, a product of the intellectual aristocracy of the nineteenth century, was the social and intellectual equal of any, and was formed in mid-Victorian Cambridge a generation before the advent of high-imperial self-congratulation. Sidney Lee, born the son of a Jewish merchant in London as Solomon Lazarus, was the more conscious and proud of his acceptance in the higher reaches of British society, and had been educated in Jowett's Balliol where a powerful ethic of imperial service and achievement marked many in this era.⁴⁶

Ironically perhaps, the supplements to the *DNB*, approximately covering each decade of the twentieth century down to 1990, continued Lee's narrow approach to historical distinction and influence even while new approaches to national history were broadening the sense and meaning of historical significance. This may have reflected the establishment ethos of successive editors of the *DNB*. It was also the unintended product of publishing constraints: supplements were limited in size to a single decennial volume; the overall number of entries was therefore inelastic; the memoirs were often curtailed and focused only on a subject's public career and achievements. In these circumstances, the great and the good predominated. It was the stated purpose of the *ODNB* to reverse the trend and 'return to the integrationist approach of the original edition, in which many minor figures were included'.⁴⁷ Colin Matthew wanted to reinstate 'utility and interest' and downplay 'worthiness' at the heart of the new Dictionary.⁴⁸ Once again the Victorians would appear to be rather un-Victorian in their approach. Looking forwards to our own valuations of historical interest, Matthew made frequent reference to the thematic breadth of the first Dictionary which had included many categories of person not yet of interest to the historians of that age, 'particularly sports people, murderers, journalists, actors and actresses, deviant clergymen, transvestites, fat men, old women'.⁴⁹ Looking backwards, Keith Thomas has reminded us that the inclusion of 'pirates, gamblers and highwaymen' was part of a long pre-Victorian biographical tradition which Stephen continued and endorsed in the *DNB*.⁵⁰ Whether acknowledging the picaresque traditions of eighteenth century literature, or casting forwards towards the thinking of the late-twentieth century, the Dictionary was evidently more than just a reflection of the common thought of its own age.

Moreover, Stephen not only approached the choice of Dictionary subjects in a liberal and humane spirit; he chose his authors in the same way, trying to secure, in the words of his friend and biographer, Frederick Maitland, 'not only competence but broad-minded tolerance and sympathy, especially in religious matters'.⁵¹ As Lee recognized, this approach 'admirably fitted him for the direction of an enterprise in which many conflicting points of view are entitled to find expression'.⁵² That very entitlement further distanced the *DNB* from any prescribed style or position of its age. And it answers the claim advanced previously by Amigoni that the *DNB* 'projected itself as a monument of official discourse, which resisted forms of fugitive or subversive discourse believed to carry the potential to undermine established institutions' and was, therefore, 'a sophisticated bid for cultural power'.⁵³ It was never so uniform or so orthodox. Maitland's comment that the breadth and eclecticism of the first Dictionary reflected 'the confusion of the national mind' is much closer to the truth.⁵⁴ And if that was said of a Dictionary written by just over six hundred authors what may be said of the second Dictionary, with its ten thousand contributors? Simply, that its only ideological commitment (if that it may be) is to the historical significance of its subjects, widely understood in the light of current criteria, and the inclusiveness of its choices. As with Stephen's Dictionary, 'there is no implication that it will make us morally better or more patriotic. The theme of nationality is very muted'.⁵⁵ In a work that was never afraid to venture criticism of its subjects, which was often disrespectful and sometimes plain rude, moral uplift was only rarely in evidence in the *DNB*. This reflected Stephen's approach to life; it was also by design. As Lee was to put it somewhat later when reflecting on the *DNB*, 'The aim of biography is not the moral edification which may flow from the survey of either vice or virtue; it is the truthful transmission of personality'.⁵⁶

II

It is precisely because the *DNB* was not a characteristic work of its age but something much more eclectic, broad, independent and ultimately unclassifiable that it has been possible to build upon it and make the *ODNB* an organic development from it. A truly 'Victorian' dictionary, reflecting only its time and place of composition, would have necessitated a more radical attitude to past historiography and a more pronounced break from it. Keith Thomas has reminded us of a long tradition of biographical writing and publishing, much of it unsuccessful and unfinished, that the Victorians were heirs to and conscious of

before the inception of the *DNB*.⁵⁷ In the same way, Matthew's first statement of his aims proclaimed on page one that the new Dictionary was to be 'a development from the present *DNB*, not a *de novo* replacement of it'. He sought to provide 'an edition which maintains the best of the *DNB*, and develops and expands it to meet the needs of the foreseeable future'.⁵⁸ He justified this in terms of his own 'organic view of scholarship' and his respect for the judgement of past scholars.⁵⁹ As Ross McKibbin has written, 'The new edition of the dictionary is, therefore, a collective account of the attitudes of two centuries: the nineteenth as well as the twentieth, the one developing organically from the other.'⁶⁰ Boyd Hilton has called it 'evolution by accretion'.⁶¹ To Matthew, a student of Victorian politics who also wrote on the electoral history of the twentieth century Labour Party and who possessed a very strong 'sense of the continuity between past and present', we stand on the shoulders of giants.⁶² It was also the preferred solution of 'almost everyone' who replied to the fifteen thousand questionnaires that Matthew issued at the start of the project to elicit opinions.⁶³ There was another view, of course, that the cleanest of breaks should be made with the *DNB* so that the new Dictionary would represent this generation's view of national history unalloyed and uncluttered by the judgments of the past. In this view there would have been an entirely fresh choice of the lives to be included based on the criteria we now apply to designate 'noteworthiness'; the ejection of many whose claim to national attention had faded over the intervening century; and there would have been no revision of existing articles but a new text for each life even if we know little more now than the Victorian author had known.⁶⁴

Matthew's decision to reject this approach has been explained in terms of a characteristic English national 'peculiarity', the 'Burkean adherence to empirical, constitutionalist and cautious reformist approaches to political and historical change'.⁶⁵ Undoubtedly, Matthew's cultural conservatism (as opposed to his political socialism) predisposed him to respect and conserve Victorian historiography and the architecture of the first Dictionary as a whole. More specifically, he was wary that a new *DNB* written specifically to illustrate contemporary opinions would be subject to changing academic fashions and date rapidly: 'he was trying to endow the new edition of the dictionary with a certain timelessness'.⁶⁶ But we should also recognize the singular historical experience of the British which makes 'organic development' from the *DNB* to the *ODNB* not only practical but entirely appropriate. The Germans undertook a new national biographical dictionary in the 1950s in recognition that their history necessitated re-writing in a newly democratic era, and in light of where the strident nationalism, so promi-

ment in their first Dictionary, had led them.⁶⁷ But British history is distinctive and exceptional in its continuity and stability in the modern era, and the British experience of the twentieth century holds fewer terrors for those who would recall it.⁶⁸ Matthew, indeed, remarked frequently in postgraduate seminars on the qualified success of Britain's retreat from empire and management of national decline since 1945. Organic development in historiography is a luxury few nations can enjoy, the product of a history without radical discontinuities. For this reason the development of the *ODNB* from the *DNB*, adopting its fundamental structures, all of its subjects, and many of its conventions, was not only prudent: it demonstrated that continuity, relative to the experience of so many other nations, was at the heart of Britain's recent historical experience.

Continuity between the two Dictionaries manifests itself in many ways, some of which we have already encountered: in their political independence, their reliance on the voluntary efforts of far-sighted publishers acting *pro bono*; in the consequent losses incurred (Smith lost £70,000 on the *DNB*, equivalent to £5 million today, and Oxford University Press has no prospect of making a commercial return on the funds it has spent on the project).⁶⁹ In the words of the *ODNB*'s second editor and its project director, 'it was decided at the outset that the new dictionary should, as before, be made up from signed individual memoirs'.⁷⁰ The *Oxford DNB* may include far more information about the personal lives of its subjects, and integrates such things, as well as details of marriage and family, into the text proper, rather than leaving it for sparse comment at the very end of a memoir. But it has rejected the approach of 'psychobiography': neither Dictionary delves into, or speculates about, the inner life of its subjects.⁷¹ In Stephen's case, 'the deeper riddles or contradictions of a personality were liable to strike him as merely irritating and perverse'.⁷² As he wrote in his announcement of the *DNB* in 1883, 'elaborate analysis of character or exposition of critical theories is irrelevant'.⁷³

In respect of the practicalities involved in producing scholarship on such a scale and to time, the two founding editors shared a very similar attitude. Stephen's approach had been workmanlike, sober and practical; in Matthew's words, 'I favoured getting the job done'.⁷⁴ Matthew described his impatience, while editing Gladstone's diaries in fourteen volumes, with 'the pursuit of perfection' and 'the definitive philosophies' of some editors and their editions.⁷⁵ He noted in 1995 that the *Italian Dictionary of National Biography*, published serially, had taken thirty-two years to reach the letter D and had already issued three volumes of supplements.⁷⁶ When Oxford University Press offered him

twenty years to produce a new Dictionary published serially, Matthew chose to do it in twelve and to produce it in one go as a completed edition of the whole work in order that it should represent the coherent view of a single generation of scholars working at the end of the twentieth century. He spoke often of his concern that by the time a lengthy project was finished many of those who had written memoirs would themselves have died and be subjects in the Dictionary. By a sad irony this was to be his fate.⁷⁷ He reminded his staff that ‘the best was the enemy of the good’ – that ‘perfectionism defeats itself’.⁷⁸ He was echoing George Smith who had written to Stephen that ‘We can only do the best; we can, and must be content with this, even if it stops short of perfection’.⁷⁹ Matthew often quoted Leslie Stephen’s dictum, from the conclusion of his essay on ‘National Biography’, that ‘great as is the difference between a good and a bad work of the kind, even a very defective performance is immensely superior to none at all’.⁸⁰ Those who would pick over the inevitable and acknowledged mistakes in the *Oxford DNB* might think on this before they complain. They might also recall that within four years of the final publication of the *DNB* a volume of errata, running to 300 pages and approximately 12,000 corrections, had been issued.⁸¹

III

This is not to argue that there are no differences between the two Dictionaries, or that those which exist are insignificant and may be ignored. Rather it is to acknowledge that though the *DNB* was outdated by the 1990s, its structure, approach and ethos were worthy of conservation and provided a basis for the new Dictionary. In the way that the *Oxford DNB* was compiled, in its declared intent to update and remedy Victorian deficiencies, and in its attention to the historical context of its subjects, the *ODNB* is different, but nevertheless comparable.

The new Dictionary was written according to a different plan and structure. It was the result of a series of linked research projects, starting at different points during the twelve years of commissioning and composition, each covering a different period (medieval, sixteenth century, seventeenth century etc.) or theme (literature from the renaissance to romanticism 1500-1780, literature since 1780, art, business and labour, and so forth) and under the oversight of a consultant editor. Each major division was subdivided into discrete topics and sub-periods, administered by one of 362 associate editors and known as ‘blocks’ which might each contain as many as two or three hundred lives. As compared with a Dictionary issued according to an alphabetical

arrangement and strict timetable, this gave greater scope for research expertise and encouraged reflection on the way the *ODNB* was covering different subjects and issues during its composition. Because publication was at one time rather than serially, articles could be compared more easily and inconsistencies resolved. In the 1880s and 1890s, in a Dictionary being issued alphabetically and quarterly, later authors had to accept the views of earlier ones, or counter them at their peril.

Early in the project, the consultant editors were encouraged to review the coverage of their areas in the *DNB* and they set out their ideas on amendment in a series of insightful reports which, as intended, pinpointed the deficiencies of the original dictionary. Given its origins in the late nineteenth-century, the lacunae in the *DNB*, and also the areas of over-representation are as we might expect. As Jane Garnett, the consultant editor for women across the whole Dictionary observed, the *DNB* had not only underrepresented women but had been insensitive to matters of gender in general. The complex relationship between public and private lives had been ignored. Thus the *DNB* had also underestimated women's contributions within the context of marriage and the family. There was a need for 'a considerable shift of balance in many male entries, where a wife (or mother, sister or daughter) was a collaborator in a common enterprise, or whose work complemented that of a man'.⁸² The number of women subjects increased from 1,759 in the *DNB* and its supplements to 5,627, as published in *ODNB* in 2004. Absent also were non-Europeans: though hundreds of white colonists in the dominions were included in the *DNB*, very few non-Europeans were judged to have made an impact on British history. Sir Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy (1783-1859), merchant and philanthropist, was the only Indian to be included, for example, no doubt because of his support for the British during the 1857 mutiny.⁸³ While Stephen excluded national triumphalism from the Dictionary in its early years, many contributors to the *DNB* shared the assumption of the age nevertheless that white settlers were part of a 'Britannic' world which did not encompass 'lesser' races.

For the medieval entries as a whole, Barbara Harvey noted that 'kingship, government, and politics are well-represented' whereas 'poetry and other forms of literature tend to be neglected, and the same is true of science, mathematics and astronomy, trade and industry'. Authors focused on the creation of a centralized nation-state; 'local and regional contexts were of little or no interest'. A *DNB* article on a fifteenth century merchant was 'more likely to tell the reader whether he supported Lancaster or York than how he made his money'.⁸⁴ Sixteenth century articles showed an expected religious bias: as Felicity Heal

observed, 'Catholic bishops, controversialists or missionaries are rarely omitted completely, but the old text frequently gives them short shrift'.⁸⁵ According to John Morrill, in the *DNB*'s coverage of the seventeenth century 'the intense interest taken by the Victorians in the English Revolution had been reflected in exceptionally full coverage of all "public" areas especially for the middle part of the century'. The balance could be redressed by devoting space to lives opened up by recent social and women's history.⁸⁶ In the case of the eighteenth century, Paul Langford observed that it was less a question of interest and more the very proximity of the age to the late nineteenth century which explained its 'relatively generous treatment'. In addition, the availability of sources influenced coverage of this particular period: 'the huge expansion of printed materials from the 1690s ensured that many eighteenth-century authors featured in the British Museum (now Library) collections that the first editors drew so heavily on'. In addition, Stephen himself 'took a keen interest in the intellectual and literary life of the period, as did a number of his colleagues on *DNB*'.⁸⁷

As social and economic historians like Neil McKendrick⁸⁸ and Martin Wiener⁸⁹ reminded us in the 1970s and 1980s, Stephen's Dictionary had neglected business and enterprise. Nowhere was the *DNB*'s coverage found more wanting than in relation to economic life and labour. The lives included represented the view of British economic history then current, at the very moment when the term 'Industrial Revolution' entered the language in 1884, and the emphasis was therefore on steam, factories, heavy engineering, textiles and railways.⁹⁰ According to Martin Daunton, the 'great names in the domestic system of manufacture, significant figures in turnpikes or coastal shipping, and so on' were neglected. Meanwhile the twentieth century supplements erred in another way by covering business figures who had held important positions for that reason alone rather than searching for subjects of historic significance. Representatives of the labour movement were treated in an analogous manner: the leaders of large national unions predominated at the expense of more interesting and less institutionalized figures from outside the organized labour movement and the major industries. The distaste for trade manifested itself in the focus of the articles: 'In many cases, the reason for the inclusion of business and labour subjects in the old *DNB* arose from their secondary interests, how they spent their money rather than made it, or their later political career rather than their role in trade unions'.⁹¹ In its efforts to include more manufacturers (as opposed to metropolitan bankers, who were relatively well-served), retailers, failed as well as successful entrepreneurs, and even 'women in trade' in medieval London and York, the

Oxford DNB has tried to make amends.⁹²

Coverage of scientists in the *DNB* reflected an older cultural tradition which valued the gentleman-amateur above the professional; the geologist above the mining prospector; the collector of fossils and specimens above the engineer; the clergyman-naturalist above the artisan collector; the moment of genius above the steady accumulation of evidence. Social status and membership of elite scientific societies were almost stronger claims to inclusion than intellectual distinction. But these were not distinctively late-Victorian themes: natural science had always been associated with the leisure of gentlemen *savants*, and its popularization in the early Victorian period had established these 'types' – carriers of the natural scientific tradition – long before the *DNB* was written.⁹³ The distinctive stamp of late-Victorian professionalization, however, ensured that a particular conception of natural science – rigorous, empirical and socially respectable – predominated. Thus alchemy, astrology and the occult were excluded from the first Dictionary. Their inclusion in *ODNB* makes it possible 'to appreciate the social, intellectual and indeed political role played by astrologers active in Parliamentary and Restoration England' and 'the spread and scientific relevance of alchemical practices up to the second half of the eighteenth century'.⁹⁴

Yet there were other areas of the *DNB* which, in various ways, stood up well to modern scrutiny. The treatment of medicine was once such. Largely written by a small group of authors who comprised the first generation of British medical historians, including Joseph Payne, D'Arcy Power, and Norman Moore, the 'coverage was surprisingly comprehensive, the style was literate and usually precise, and there was an interest in the whole person and not just the medical vocation'. Their 'impressive descriptive vocabulary' outshone the style of late twentieth century medical writers, whose language sometimes lacked the same accuracy. While there tended to be a bias in favour of metropolitan practitioners and physicians in general, as opposed to provincial doctors and surgeons, they were not star-struck: 'establishment hagiography' was more a feature of articles on the medical profession written for the twentieth century supplements than by the Victorian pioneers.⁹⁵

Sidney Lee developed the dogma, with which few modern scholars could agree, that biography, the study of individual personality, and history, the study of 'the aggregate movement of men' should not mix. The very clichés by which he expressed himself in making this case – 'The historian looks at mankind through a field-glass. The biographer puts individual men under a magnifying glass' or 'It is the art of the biographer sternly to subordinate his scenery to his actors' – betray

the flimsiness and arbitrariness of the argument.⁹⁶ Leslie Stephen, in contrast, was no narrow biographer. In the light of books such as *English Literature and Society in the Eighteenth Century* John Gross has seen him as a pioneer of the sociological study of literature.⁹⁷ Nevertheless, the *DNB* generally refrained from placing the life in the times, or at least to a degree sufficient to meet more recent scholarly demands and developments.

Tocqueville observed in the second volume of *Democracy in America* in 1840 that historians writing in aristocratic ages were inclined to ‘refer all occurrences to the particular will and character of certain individuals’, whereas those living in democratic ages discounted the influence of individuals but assigned ‘great general causes to all petty incidents’.⁹⁸ Biography has never been out of fashion in Britain, but over the past two scholarly generations – since perhaps the late 1950s – academic history has tended to focus on general causes, whether marxist, structuralist, or some other. Contributors to the *ODNB* could not escape their formation in this historical culture, and Matthew did not wish them to: as he wrote at the start of the project, ‘much of the interest of biography springs from the tension between individual characteristics and development and the family, social and class background to which such characteristics relate ... the significance of men and women is almost always as part of a group or some form of association, whether familial or public’.⁹⁹

In conformity with these views, which, it must be admitted, are so widely held as to be almost universally accepted, many of the lives in the *Oxford DNB* have been written with the intent of placing the subject in relation to relevant political structures, economic forces, or intellectual contexts. In this way Tocqueville’s two distinct approaches to history may be said to have been fused in the new Dictionary. Indeed, in the presentation of many of the most historically significant lives, a final section on reputation and assessment has allowed authors to ‘place’ their subjects in luminous concluding remarks which set out relevant historiography and rival interpretations. Stephen’s Dictionary never attempted this, not least because the scholarship on which it depends has largely been the product of the twentieth century. We must admit that we know more than our ancestors, which is not to say that we know better. But it does make the *ODNB* larger, different, and more useful.

The *DNB* was compiled during the late-Victorian ‘fragmentation of the common context’ as Robert Young has characterized British intellectual life after 1870, during a period when a unitary cultural and academic heritage previously shared by an elite readership broke

down.¹⁰⁰ Young may have exaggerated the degree and speed of the process of dissociation, but Stefan Collini is surely correct to note that British intellectual life, in common with the organization of knowledge, and of work in general, underwent a process of specialization from the late-Victorian era which has continued to the present.¹⁰¹ The British were relatively slow to professionalize academic life (and it is a pleasing aspect of the *Oxford DNB* that although over two-thirds of its contributors are or have been professional academics, a significant remaining proportion of its articles have been written by independent scholars without institutional affiliation). Nevertheless the *DNB* was compiled as the map of late-Victorian and Edwardian knowledge became more complex and differentiated. Stephen and Lee's Dictionary was largely written by gentlemen-scholars, 'journeyman "men of letters"' as Matthew referred to them, drawn from the London clubs, the Athenaeum most notably.¹⁰² The quality of their work was variable, and frequently required extensive revision.¹⁰³ Contributors, readers, and interested parties were kept informed of progress through *The Athenaeum* magazine, 'the most respected critical journal of the period', which carried announcements and notices about the *DNB*, and also reviews.¹⁰⁴ Though there were 653 contributors in total, the core of the Dictionary – over half its bulk – was written by thirty-four, and Lee picked out 'one hundred regular and voluminous contributors' who 'have written nearly three-fourths of the whole'.¹⁰⁵ Among the inner circle were figures like R.L. Poole, S.R. Gardiner, Mandell Creighton, A.F. Pollard, T.F. Tout, Charles Firth and A.W. Ward who went on to take their places in the first generation of specialized, university-based career scholars. But the sheer number of articles they wrote – Pollard was responsible for 425 articles, Firth for 222, and Tout for 237, for example – is evidence that the age of the gifted generalist had not yet given way to that of the expert.¹⁰⁶

The *DNB* was produced on the cusp of changes to the organization of knowledge and the structures of academic life, therefore, which have altered considerably the location, the self-identity, and the procedures of modern scholars. As Maitland could see in 1906, 'it was an unorganized world to which Stephen issued his first circulars' in which the universities 'were but beginning to take seriously the claims of modern history'.¹⁰⁷ But the fact that he could contrast the higher professionalism a generation later with the disorganization and amateurism of 1882 owed something to the *DNB* itself: it had provided a brilliant training for a cohort of professional scholars of the future, and developed a model of one way of pursuing historical studies. It deserves its own place in the history of academic professionalization, therefore. A century

later, the numbers producing and consuming scholarship in educational institutions around the world have expanded exponentially. The specialized nature of much of today's scholarship is accepted universally. The sheer amount that we know, including what we know about the British past, has grown in consequence. Because the new Dictionary is international in its range, seeking to assess British lives that have been lived across the globe in all periods, it has used the expertise of three thousand authors from abroad, in addition to the seven thousand domiciled in the British Isles. It could not have been otherwise if the *Oxford DNB* was not to be charged with parochialism and also amateurism, but the statistics, when compared to those of the *DNB*, tell us that the two Dictionaries are products of different academic cultures. As Ian Donaldson has summarized, the first *DNB* was metropolitan in focus, privately funded, and drew on independent authors. The *Oxford DNB* has been publicly subsidised (though to the tune of only about fifteen per cent of its total cost), is located in a university, and is published by a university press.¹⁰⁸

Its publication prompts reflection on the nature and course of British history; on individual agency in history in general; on the advantages and disadvantages of biography as a type of historical writing; on modern British historiography; and on the sociology of knowledge – the way that scholarship is organized and produced. But such reflections, which are to be encouraged, must start from an understanding of why and how the *Oxford DNB* was produced, and must appreciate the complex relationships, both continuous and discontinuous, with the first *Dictionary of National Biography*. The argument advanced here is that the *DNB*, while inevitably marked by some of the attitudes of its age in some of its articles, was surprisingly free from many supposedly quintessential late-Victorian opinions. If further reflection should confirm this, and if we should start to question our presuppositions about things Victorian in general, that, too, is to be encouraged.

(St Peter's College, Oxford)

Endnotes

1. Alan Bell, 'Leslie Stephen and the DNB', *Times Literary Supplement*, 16 Dec. 1977, 1478.
2. C.H. Firth, 'Memoir of Sir Sidney Lee', *DNB, Supplement 1912-21*, H.W.C. Davis and J.R.H. Weaver (eds) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1927), xxi.
3. Noel Annan, *Leslie Stephen. The Godless Victorian* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1984), 87.
4. Ian McCalman, 'Introduction', in Ian McCalman (ed.), *National Biographies and National Identity. A Critical Approach to Theory and Editorial Practice* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1996), iv.
5. David Cannadine, 'British Worthies', *London Review of Books*, iii, 3-16 December

- 1981, 3-6. But Cannadine is much closer to the argument of this essay when he also recognizes that the *DNB* was 'an abidingly useful and incomparably wide-ranging work of reference'.
6. D. Amigoni, 'Distinctively Queer Little Morsels: Imagining Distinction, Groups and Difference in the *DNB* and *ODNB*', *Journal of Victorian Culture* 10:2 (Spring 2005), 87.
 7. Gillian Fenwick, 'The Athenaeum and the Dictionary of National Biography, 1885-1901', *Victorian Periodicals Review* 23:4 (Winter 1990), 182.
 8. Leslie Stephen, 'A New "Biographia Britannica"', *The Athenaeum*, 2878 (23 Dec. 1882), 850.
 9. L. Stephen to Julia Prinsep Stephen, 31 March 1884, in L. Stephen, *Selected Letters of Leslie Stephen*, John W. Bicknell (ed.), 2 vols (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1996), II, 307-8.
 10. Quoted in Bell, 'Leslie Stephen and the DNB', 1478.
 11. L. Stephen to Charles Eliot Norton, 13 April and 16 Oct. 1884, in L. Stephen, *Selected Letters*, 310, 317.
 12. L. Stephen to Mary L. Fisher, 27 May 1900, in L. Stephen, *Selected Letters*, 507.
 13. L. Stephen, 'National Biography', in L. Stephen, *Studies of a Biographer* (London: Duckworth, 1898), 11, 20.
 14. *English Historical Review* v (1890), 787.
 15. L. Stephen, *Henry Fawcett* (London: Smith Elder, 1885), ch. 3, 'Cambridge', 73-133.
 16. Lee, *Principles of Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911), 5.
 17. John Gross, *The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters. Aspects of English Literary Life Since 1800*, 1969 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 96.
 18. Annan, *Leslie Stephen*, 84.
 19. Matthew, *Leslie Stephen and the New Dictionary of National Biography*, Leslie Stephen Lecture, 1995 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 36.
 20. Annan, *Leslie Stephen*, 302-3.
 21. Brian Harrison, 'A Slice of Their Lives. Editing the DNB, 1882-1999', *English Historical Review* cxix (Nov. 2004), 1191-2.
 22. Keith Thomas, *Changing Conceptions of National Biography. The Oxford DNB in Historical Perspective*, The Leslie Stephen Special Lecture, 2004, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 15.
 23. Matthew, 'Dictionaries of National Biography', in McCalman (ed.), *National Biographies and National Identity*, 2-3.
 24. *The Biographia Britannica, or the Lives of the most Eminent Persons who have flourished in Great Britain and Ireland from the Earliest Ages down to the Present Times*, 7 vols (London, 1747-1766), i, viii, xv, quoted in Thomas, *Changing Conceptions of National Biography*, 12-13.
 25. Matthew, *Leslie Stephen and the New Dictionary of National Biography*, 36.
 26. *Ibid.*, 12.
 27. Matthew, 'Dictionaries of National Biography', 17.
 28. Matthew, *Leslie Stephen and the New Dictionary of National Biography*, 37.
 29. Harrison, 'A Slice of Their Lives', 6; Thomas, 'Changing Conceptions of National Biography', 38.
 30. Though the Oxford DNB received £3 million from the British government, via the British Academy, towards the costs of research for the new Dictionary, its total cost was some £25 million, and the balance was entirely made up by Oxford University Press, a department of the University of Oxford. The editor was responsible to a Supervisory Committee which included representatives from the British Academy,

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- Royal Society and other learned bodies. But no member of the committee represented a state or political organization.
31. Christopher Harvie, *The Lights of Liberalism. University Liberals and the Challenge of Democracy* (London: Allen Lane, 1976), ch. 9, '1886 and After', 218-42. See esp. 223.
 32. Colin Matthew, 'Editor's Report [to the Delegates of Oxford University Press], April 1993', 5; Matthew, 'Dictionaries of National Biography', in McCalmán (ed.), *National Biographies and National Identity*, 8.
 33. Matthew, *Leslie Stephen and the New Dictionary of National Biography*, 26.
 34. Matthew suggested that he write an essay on the history of the Union at a seminar in Oxford on 1 October 1999 in St Catherine's College where the collection that became *Civil Society in British History: Ideas, Identities, Institutions*, Jose Harris (ed.) (Oxford, 2003), was projected. He died at the end of that month. The last essay he wrote to be published in his lifetime was on Scotland and the future of the Union in the *London Review of Books*, 'The British Way', 5 March 1998, 27, 30-1.
 35. Peter Ghosh, 'Colin Matthew', *The Guardian*, 2 Nov. 1999, 20.
 36. Ross McKibbin, 'Colin Matthew: A Memoir', in Peter Ghosh and Lawrence Goldman (eds), *Politics and Culture in Victorian Britain. Essays in Memory of Colin Matthew* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 30.
 37. Matthew, *Leslie Stephen and the New Dictionary of National Biography*, 36-7.
 38. *Quarterly Review* 164 (April 1887), 350-81.
 39. Robert Faber and Brian Harrison, 'The Dictionary of National Biography: A Publishing History', in R. Myers, M. Harris and G. Mandelbrote (eds), *Lives in Print: Biography and the Book Trade from the Middle Ages to the 21st Century* (London: British Library, 2002), 172.
 40. Annan, *Leslie Stephen*, 86: 'Giving its continental competitors a start of as much as twenty-five years in some cases, the British Dictionary outran them all.'
 41. Firth, 'Memoir of Sir Sidney Lee', *DNB Supplement 1912-21*, xvi.
 42. Lee, 'Statistical Account', xi.
 43. *Ibid.*, xxii.
 44. Thomas, *Changing Conceptions of National Biography*, 30-1.
 45. H.S. Ashbee, 'A New "Biographia Britannica"', *Athenaeum* 2880 (6 Jan. 1883), 17; Leslie Stephen, 'The New Biographical Dictionary', *Athenaeum* 2881 (13 Jan. 1883), 54.
 46. Alan Bell and Katherine Duncan-Jones, 'Sidney Lee', *ODNB*, 33, 113-20.
 47. Matthew, 'Editor's Report', 17.
 48. *Ibid.*, 2.
 49. Matthew, *Leslie Stephen and the New Dictionary of National Biography*, 13.
 50. Thomas, *Changing Conceptions of National Biography*, 22-3.
 51. F.W. Maitland, *The Life and Letters of Leslie Stephen* 1906, 2nd edn (London: Duckworth, 1907), 368.
 52. Sidney Lee, 'Leslie Stephen', *DNB, Supplement 1901-1911*, vol. III, 402.
 53. David Amigoni, 'Life histories and the cultural politics of historical knowing: the *Dictionary of National Biography* and the late nineteenth-century political field' in Shirley Dex (ed.), *Life and Work History Analyses: Qualitative and Quantitative Developments* (London: Routledge, 1991), 146, 163. See also David Amigoni, *Victorian Biography: Intellectuals and the Ordering of Discourse* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester-Wheatsheaf 1993), 180, n.27 where the *DNB* is described as 'a sophisticated bid for, and consolidation of, cultural power, recording the careers of the compilers along with the lives of those whom the compilers celebrated'. The problems with Amigoni's approach are exemplified in the comparison made in his 1991

article between the *DNB* and Frederic Harrison's *New Calendar of Great Men* (1892). It is admitted that Harrison's biographical choices and approach embody the ideals and values of the English Positivist movement, the politico-religious grouping of the followers of Auguste Comte that emerged from Oxford in the 1850s. It is contended that the *DNB* was also engaged in a 'subtle struggle aimed at securing cultural power' (163) though it was written by hundreds of different contributors across the space of a generation and subject to intense and continuous public scrutiny and review. If the argument is that all works of history and biography reflect unspoken ideological assumptions it cannot be said that anything very new or surprising is being advanced. The argument of this essay is that the *DNB* was simply too diverse in the number and range of its subjects as well as its writers to represent any single outlook.

54. Maitland, *Life and Letters of Leslie Stephen*, 368.
55. Thomas, *Changing Conceptions of National Biography*, 37.
56. Lee, *Principles of Biography*, 25-6.
57. Thomas, *Changing Conceptions of National Biography*, 25. Gilliam Fenwick, *The Contributors' Index to the DNB 1885-1901* (Winchester: Oak Knoll, St Paul's Bibliographies, 1989), x.
58. Matthew, 'Editor's Report', 1, 10.
59. On Matthew's instinctive support for continuity, see Peter Ghosh and Lawrence Goldman, 'A Brief Word on "Politics" and "Culture"', in idem (eds), *Politics and Culture in Victorian Britain*, 2.
60. Ross McKibbin, 'Colin Matthew', *ODNB*, 37, 340.
61. Boyd Hilton, 'Colin Matthew (1941-1999)', in Ghosh and Goldman (eds), *Politics and Culture in Victorian Britain*, 25.
62. H.C.G. Matthew, Ross McKibbin and John Kay, 'The Franchise Factor in the Rise of the Labour Party', *English Historical Review* 91 (1976), 723-52; Hilton, 'Colin Matthew (1941-1999)', 24.
63. Faber and Harrison, 'The Dictionary of National Biography', 182.
64. This view was advanced by the current editor of the *Oxford DNB* at a seminar in St John's College, Oxford on the new Dictionary given by Colin Matthew to the modern British historians in the Faculty of Modern History in Oxford in October 1993.
65. McCalman, 'Introduction', v.
66. McKibbin, 'Colin Matthew', 340.
67. See the *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie* (Leipzig, 1875-1912) and *Neue Deutsche Biographie* (Berlin, 1953-). The latest volume, 22, has reached the letter S.
68. E.P. Thompson, 'The Peculiarities of the English' (1965) in idem, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (London, 1978), 35-91.
69. Lee, 'Statistical Account', vii.
70. Faber and Harrison, 'The Dictionary of National Biography', 186.
71. Thomas, *Changing Conceptions of National Biography*, 51.
72. Gross, *The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters*, 97.
73. Stephen, 'A New "Biographia Britannica"', 850.
74. Matthew, *Leslie Stephen and the New Dictionary of National Biography*, 12.
75. *Ibid.*
76. Matthew, 'Dictionaries of National Biography', 7. *Dizionario Biografico Degli Italiani* (Rome, 1960-). The latest volume, 63, published in 2004, has reached the letter L.
77. Ross McKibbin, 'Colin Matthew', *ODNB*, 37, 337-41.
78. Matthew, *Leslie Stephen and the New Dictionary of National Biography*, 12.

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79. George Smith, Ms. Autobiography, National Library of Scotland, f. 231, quoted in Harrison, 'A Slice of Their Lives', 1189.
80. Stephen, 'National Biography', 36.
81. [Sidney Lee, ed.] *Dictionary of National Biography. Errata* (London: Smith Elder, 1904).
82. Jane Garnett, 'Women in the New Dictionary of National Biography: A Preliminary Report', November 1993, f. 1.
83. I am grateful to Dr Alex May of the *ODNB* research staff for this reference, and for stimulating discussion of the coverage of empire and commonwealth in the two Dictionaries.
84. Barbara Harvey, 'Report of the Consultant Editor for the Pre-1500 Area', 29 June 1994, ff. 3-4.
85. Felicity Heal, 'Report of the Consultant Editor for the Sixteenth-Century Area', 10 September 1998, ff. 3-4.
86. John Morrill, 'Interim Report A by John Morrill, Consultant Editor for the Seventeenth Century', 9 Aug. 1998, f. 4.
87. Paul Langford, 'Report on 'HAN' – Hanoverian' (n.d.), f. 1.
88. Neil McKendrick, 'General Introduction', in R.J. Overy, *William Morris, Viscount Nuffield* (London: Europa Publications, 1976), vii.
89. Martin J. Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit 1850-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 130.
90. Arnold Toynbee, *Lectures on the Industrial Revolution in England* (London: Longman and Green, 1884).
91. Martin Daunton, 'Report on "Business and the World of Labour"', May 1994, ff. 1-2.
92. Caroline M. Barron 'Women traders and artisans in London (act. c.1200-c.1500)', *ODNB*, 60, 54-8; P.J.P. Goldberg, 'Women in trade and industry in York (act. c.1300-c.1500)', *ODNB*, 60, 52-3.
93. Jack Morrell and Arnold Thackray, *Gentlemen of Science: Early Years of the British Association for the Advancement of Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).
94. Pietro Corsi, 'Science 1500-2000' (n.d.), ff. 1-2.
95. Margaret Pelling, 'Consultant Editor's Report For Medicine', 13 Jan. 1997, ff. 1-3.
96. Lee, *Principles of Biography*, 26-30.
97. Gross, *The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters*, 98-99. Annan, *The Godless Victorian*, 113.
98. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (2 vols, 1835-40) (New York, 1945 edn.), ii, 90.
99. Matthew, 'Editor's Report', 9-10, 27. The second quotation referred specifically to planned prosopographical articles, which Matthew called 'navigational articles', designed to show how individuals in the Dictionary were part of wider historical networks, be they political, economic, artistic or sporting. The *ODNB* is now commissioning these essays which will be added to the Dictionary and published as a separate companion volume in due course. For further insights into Matthew's thinking on the relations of history and biography, see McKibbin, 'Colin Matthew', 340.
100. Robert Young, 'Natural Theology, Victorian Periodicals and the Fragmentation of a Common Context' in idem, *Darwin's Metaphor. Nature's Place in Victorian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 126-63.
101. Stefan Collini, 'Their Title to Be Heard: Professionalization and its Discontents', in idem, *Public Moralists. Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain 1850-1930* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 199-250.

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102. Matthew, *Leslie Stephen and the New Dictionary of National Biography*, 20. Gillian Fenwick, *Women and the Dictionary of National Biography* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1994), 3.
103. Harrison, 'A Slice of Their Lives', 1188; Fenwick, 'The Athenaeum and the Dictionary of National Biography', 185.
104. Fenwick, 'The Athenaeum and the Dictionary of National Biography', 180.
105. Lee, 'Statistical Account', xv, xvii.
106. Fenwick, *The Contributors' Index to the Dictionary of National Biography*, passim. These figures exclude articles contributed to the 1901 supplements.
107. Maitland, *Life and Letters of Leslie Stephen*, 366.
108. Ian Donaldson, 'Biographical Uncertainty', *Essays in Criticism* liv: 4 (Oct. 2004), 307.

PERSPECTIVE

Victorian Culture and the Museum: Before and After the White Cube

Tim Barringer

Among the great art museums of the Anglo-Saxon world, a majority are creations of the Victorian era. The British Museum alone provides a glimpse of pre-industrial, pre-Victorian museology, a blend of Enlightenment taxonomies, royal and private collections and cabinets of curiosities – traditions which still both distinguish and hinder the institution beneath the spectacular computer-designed roof of its Millennium Court. At the other end of the spectrum, Tate Modern might wish to be an authentically (post-?) modern phenomenon, but it ultimately owes its existence to a benefaction of Victorian subject paintings. The major London art museums – the National Gallery (which, though founded in 1824, opened in the present building in Trafalgar Square on 9 April 1838), the Victoria and Albert Museum (known as the South Kensington Museum from 1857 to 1899) and the Tate Gallery on Millbank (founded 1897) – are emblematic, respectively, of early-, mid- and late-Victorian manifestations of the museological project for the fine and decorative arts. Housed within splendid Victorian buildings, they stand in complex and sometimes tormented relation to the Victorian epistemologies which produced them. These museums, so omnipresent as to have become naturalized into our cultural landscape, have framed the ways in which we view the world through its material remains and the way we narrate histories for art. As Donald Preziosi noted in 1996,

We live today in a profoundly museological world – a world that in no small measure is itself a product and effect of some two centuries of museological meditations. Museums are one of the central sites at which modernity has been generated, (en)gendered, and sustained over that time. They are so natural, ubiquitous and indispensable to us today that it takes considerable effort to think ourselves back to a world without them, and to think through the shadows cast by the massive and dazzling familiarity of this uncanny social technology.¹

The museums of Victorian Britain can be seen in Preziosi's terms as paradigmatic sites of the production of modernity – a paradox which locates the modern precisely in the act of preserving and presenting the material culture of the past. Of course, to the Victorian imagination such there was no paradox in looking to the past and future in a single move: the Pre-Raphaelites, after all, created an art of radical modernity from a historicist, revivalist project.

If the museum is an essentially Victorian phenomenon, it has, in turn, provided a dominant, and often tendentious, framework through which Victorian art is displayed, and Victorian culture is viewed and assessed today. The strategies of self-promotion, display and exhibition adopted by these institutions often cling to a now threadbare Modernist aesthetic and ideology which moves them to deny their links to the Victorian past. In doing so, they continue to cast the Victorian era as modernity's other – whether through hostility to the opulence and eclecticism of Victorian art, or through a nostalgic, reactionary view of the Victorian era which likewise positions it as non-modern. The contested status of Victorian art both within the canon of (modern) British art and, more generally, in the history of Western art, has, especially since the Second World War and the rising influence of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, fostered in many of these institutions an ambivalent and even hostile relationship to the art of the era which created them and towards the buildings in which they are housed. In the 1930s, MoMA positioned its hallmark display techniques – sparse hanging of often unframed paintings against brilliant white walls – in explicit opposition to the eclecticism and visual overkill of 'cluttered' Victorian display techniques. This induced a mood of anti-Victorian self-hatred among British institutions such as the V&A, which in 1949 obscured the magnificent decorations of the South Court, including frescoes by Frederic Leighton, filling in Francis Fowke's elegant arcades with a shoddy asbestos-ridden white cube. Once a ghastly restaurant, this still provides the museum's unhappy venue for temporary exhibitions.

This essay broaches two separate but related questions: firstly, what was distinctive about Victorian museum culture, and secondly, how do museums represent the Victorians, and in particular Victorian art, to us today? I will suggest that, just as some of the most original Victorian contributions to the development of the museum took place in peripheral settings, so, today, metropolitan institutions engaged in narrating broader histories of art and culture have struggled to produce adequate representations of the Victorian period, lagging behind regional museums. Despite contemporary unease with both the material and

visual culture of Victorian Britain, and with the era's highly visible museological legacy, I will argue that the Victorian museum project has much to teach today's curators and museum directors. This essay, then, argues for a reversal of widely held assumptions about centre and periphery, and about the effortless superiority of Modernist museum practice.

Power and the Imagination: Two Museums Founded in 1876

It is the limit-cases, strange effects at the margins, which most clearly define what Victorian culture wanted of the museum, and best epitomize its salient features. Two examples from well beyond the familiar turf of the metropolitan museum-goer seem to me emblematic of the strength of the Victorian museum, the first in northern India, and the second in the outskirts of a Yorkshire city. Despite fundamental differences, they share a defining referent: each responded directly to the precedent of the South Kensington Museum. The subject of a large historiography, this most strikingly original museological manifestation of the Victorian era, was created by Henry Cole and Richard Redgrave from a pot-pourri of influences redolent of modernity – international exhibitions, the department store, liberal economics, technical design education and utilitarian reform ideology – yet it was also informed also by the more traditional curatorial and aesthetic motivations of John Charles Robinson and his successors.²

The influence of South Kensington could be felt in all over the world. In 1876, the Prince of Wales, touring Rajasthan, laid the foundation stone for the Albert Hall in Jaipur, an institution which would contain ceremonial spaces, a school for the industrial arts and a museum. Paid for by the Maharajah of Jaipur, the museum opened in temporary rooms in 1881 and was finally inaugurated in 1887. The museum was intended as a miniature version of the institutions at South Kensington, with a spectacular, didactic collection of Industrial Arts dominating the main floor, and Educational and Natural History collections in the upper galleries. It was believed that the display of a profusion of objects of high quality (mainly Indian in origin) would promote the regeneration of local crafts and industries, leading to higher productivity. More broadly it was assumed (though not explicitly stated) that the museum – a place of beauty and repose, but one carefully regulated – would inculcate in visitors a willing conformity to participation in the great design of empire. A handbook, written in 1895 by its curator Thomas Holbein Hendley describes the Jaipur Museum's content and installation with exemplary clarity. The 'uncanny social technology' of the

museum, in this formulation, was an active agent of social change and economic development, as well as a demonstration of the beneficence of the ruling establishment, local and imperial.

The erection of a striking and aesthetically powerful building was just as important in 1876 as it has remained. Just as hardly a single significant art museum in the USA today is without a major expansion programme, in the hands of a celebrity architect, so the British Raj excelled itself in the production of magnificent official buildings. Like Frank Lloyd Wright's and Frank Gehry's Guggenheim buildings, the Albert Hall at Jaipur, a masterpiece of the indo-saracenic style designed by Swinton Jacob, formed a powerful visual statement, an assimilation of diverse indigenous elements into a hybrid western style. In Jaipur, as at the South Kensington Museum, but unlike modernist and post-modernist museum structures, the museum building was also an exemplary and didactic text, charged with meaning, inscribed with significant iconography and exemplifying applied art techniques whose revival the authorities wished to promote.³ In the museum's ante-room were (and still are) large frescoes, constituting a series of portraits of the Rulers of Rajasthan since 1503 – culminating with Sir Sawai Madho Singh, the thirty-fifth and present maharaja, patron of the museum. Also prominent is a large copy in fresco, made by Rajasthani court artists, of a work by Giotto, based on an Arundel Society chromolithograph, a striking example of colonial hybridity.

The museum was carefully installed using the latest techniques to maximize its didactic and pedagogical effectiveness. After passing through a turnstile, the visitor entered 'The Metal Room'. The objects 'which require most minute examination' were displayed in the central cases, while others 'whose interest consists chiefly in their form or place in the classification, or in which the details of arrangement are not very remarkable' were banished to shelves at the side of the room. 'Small hands (coloured red) have also been placed on the cases and frames to point out the order in which the objects should be inspected, and the labels give all information regarding the articles which is not found in the handbook, and which is really necessary to understanding them.'⁴ The hierarchy of objects was also clearly indicated: 'Anything of special value is distinguished by a red star.'

While this museum, whose mission was one of social and economic activism, certainly presented objects according to a didactic framework based on colonial ideology and epistemology, it also offered a space for the enjoyment of works of art and design to a broad audience, much of which would have had no such experience before. The subjective response of visitors is, as ever, largely undocumented, but the museum

must have been a source of wonder: a site for the free play of the imagination, for aesthetic pleasure and for individual response; and thus for possible resistance to dominant ideologies.

A more explicitly defiant form of museology is apparent in my second example. While the Prince of Wales was away on his Indian tour, John Ruskin opened a tiny museum for Sheffield artisans, installed in a small farmhouse in Walkley, on the outskirts of the city. In *Fors Clavigera*, Ruskin professed himself to be

ready to arrange such a museum for their artizans as they have not yet dreamed of; – not dazzling nor overwhelming, but comfortable, useful, and – in such sort as smoke-cumbered skies may admit – beautiful; though not, on the outside, otherwise decorated than with plain and easily-worked slabs of Derbyshire marble, with which I shall face the walls, making the interior a working man’s Bodleian Library ...⁵

The museum at Walkley formed a diametrical opposite to the South Kensington Museum’s gospel of promoting industrial development through the improvement of design, a mission in which Ruskin could see only ‘abortion and falsehood’.⁶ Instead, Ruskin wished to de-industrialize his wished-for visitors, the Sheffield ironworkers – to return them, through aesthetic contemplation, to what he considered a Gothic condition of direct response to nature and art. He provided the museum with exquisite objects from his personal collections – illuminated manuscripts and natural history samples, minerals, precious stones and watercolours by Turner and by Ruskin himself. The collection, unified by Ruskin’s own taste and consonant with the arguments of his published works, lacked the taxonomic and totalizing ambitions of its official counterparts, the universal survey museums of the Victorian state, and offered scattered epiphanies rather than the sustained exposition of a historical narrative or an ideological position. The aim was to teach – to teach aesthetics, ethics, even politics – through the study and enjoyment of beautiful objects, both man-made and natural. But where South Kensington was large, impersonal, bureaucratic, systematic and liberal in its economic and political instincts, and drew attention to itself using all the techniques of the modern media, Ruskin’s museum was small, intensely personal, radical-Tory in its politics, and happy to remain obscure, and provincial. South Kensington claimed to be a world in miniature, offering complete series, grand taxonomies, spectacular vistas. Ruskin’s museum offered individual people small insights that revealed aesthetic, ethical and spiritual truths. It is perhaps to be regretted that today’s highly commercialized museums share more with Henry Cole’s vision than with Ruskin’s.

As with its counterpart in Jaipur, Ruskin's target audience was marked out by its alterity from the organizers – two groups separated by a gulf of caste and race in Rajasthan, and one of class in Yorkshire. It would be easy – it is, indeed, irresistible – to see these two museums as both relating to a project of social control. In Jaipur the museum participates in a regime of colonial assimilation of key subaltern social groups. In Sheffield the artisan is seduced into the acceptance of social inequality by the baubles of high culture, retreating from the true path of radical or revolutionary action; in India, the colonized craftsman backs away from nationalism after accepting state education and patronage. Yet such a reading perhaps both overestimates the repressive power and underestimates the radical potential of the museum, missing the possibility that visitors can, and do, read, and look, against the grain.

One of the staples of the current literature on museum studies is Tony Bennett's article 'The Exhibitionary Complex', which applies Michel Foucault's arguments about the operation of institutions of state dedicated to the modification and control of behaviour – the prison, the lunatic asylum – to the museum. Bennett's work is the most cogent formulation of what one might call a museology of paranoia – the notion that every aspect of the museum's operation represents a sinister and calculated manifestation of the state's power to discipline and punish the individual. The connections between the museum and the architecture of state repression cannot be denied; Rafael Denis has, for example, revealed the dense web of connections between the military and the South Kensington Museum.⁷ But surely museums, so allusive and mediated in their effects, were never an effective method of social control, or even of ideological dissemination. Other, more direct forms of physical and ideological repression, through the legal and penal systems to military interventions; manipulation of food supply and housing; education in the classroom; and the mass spectacles of empire – durbars and parades – all exercised state power more effectively.

Through the presentation of historical and contemporary material culture, museums operated more subtly by conferring value on particular forms of fabricated object, by shaping the material traces of culture and history into coherent patterns. Perhaps the best riposte to Bennett's museology of paranoia is the note that anecdotal evidence, and a good deal of research from the new academic discipline of visitor studies, reveals that the responses of museum visitors to displays and exhibitions often radically differs from the stated aims of the curators. The museum, in other words, can be seen as a space of widely varied individual response – even a site of intellectual anarchy where the careful regulation of the visitor's body and behaviour fails to result in the

transmission of coherent ideological positions from curator to viewer. Above all, the museum is a space for the play of the imagination, richly stimulated (in the Victorian case) by a panoply of objects, textures, colours and ideas. It may be that the purportedly radical and liberating Modernist museum, with its strict and repressive concentration on formal matters, its aggressively reductive architecture and garishly blank interior surfaces, delimits the emotional and aesthetic response of the viewer: the puritanical search for stylistic purity might be contrasted with the riotous visual and hermeneutic excesses of the supposedly puritanical Victorians.

Viewing Victorian Art Today

I want to shift focus now to the display of Victorian art today, which still takes place mainly in institutions created in the Victorian period. Indeed, to inscribe the geographical distribution of Victorian art in public collections on a map of Great Britain would be to chart, quite accurately, the distribution of capital and entrepreneurial activity in Britain during the late nineteenth century. London's collections – at Tate Britain, the Victoria and Albert Museum, Royal Holloway, and the Guildhall Art Gallery – directly reflect the sources of Victorian metropolitan wealth. These museums have received significant academic treatment, and their histories are now familiar.⁸ The capital underlying the capital's collections derived from diverse regions of the world: horse jobbing for the Napoleonic wars (the Vernon collection at the Tate), Caribbean sugar plantations (Tate), wool exports from Leeds and global shipping (the Sheepshanks and Ionides collections at the V&A), patent medicines (Royal Holloway), and the financial sector based on world-wide investments (the Guildhall). But collectively greater riches in this field can be found in the industrial and commercial centres of northern Britain and the Midlands: Manchester, Liverpool and Birmingham; Leeds, Newcastle and Glasgow. Even the smaller industrial cities – Bristol, Bury, Bradford, Oldham – can count their collections of Victorian art as being of national significance.

Liverpool, Manchester and Birmingham certainly provide the most effective permanent displays of Victorian art in Britain today, with representative works of high quality intelligently displayed. In a highly original study, Amy Woodson-Boulton has chronicled the local decision-making processes which resulted in the museums of the Victorian industrial cities focusing on the acquisition contemporary British, rather than old master or contemporary foreign paintings. A range of reasons – from the existence of a critical literature, to the ease of

demonstrating authenticity, and the popularity of works with new audiences for art – contributed to this development.⁹

Its legacy can be seen, to take one example, in the recently re-opened Manchester Art Gallery.¹⁰ The main floor of the restored original Art Gallery building now presents a survey of mainly British art from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries, in which the Pre-Raphaelites and major Victorian artists such as Leighton, Watts and Alfred Moore provide a climax. A single, densely hung gallery, with rich, though notably modern rather than historicizing, wall colours, gathers together many of the greatest Pre-Raphaelite paintings: Madox Brown's *Work*; Holman Hunt's *Hireling Shepherd* and *The Shadow of Death* and Millais's *Autumn Leaves* and *Winter Fuel*. A broad and elegant bridge leads from this room, across a lobby space, to the newly converted Athenaeum building, where the museum's holdings of twentieth century art are placed, nicely (if perhaps inadvertently) providing an architectural analogy for recent revisionist accounts of Pre-Raphaelitism as a proto-modern, even modernist, movement.¹¹

At Manchester, the decorative and fine arts are woven into a seamless display, though the gallery has stepped back from Timothy Clifford's earlier installation which theatrically restaged a 'heritage' Victorian hang complete with pot plants and hangings.¹² While the progression of the galleries is broadly chronological, each room also adopts a thematic approach featuring, for example, a particularly fine grouping of Victorian landscape paintings. Although the aesthetic impact of the gallery, and the historical narrative it presents, are impressive (with the exception of the inexplicably dreadful positioning of Millais's *Autumn Leaves* in a dark corner), the textual material fails to meet the same standard. Unfortunately, the Gallery's education-driven labeling is patchy, ranging from clear and informative to the needlessly matey and dumbed-down. Worst of all, the Gallery has employed a bizarre teleprompter-style typographical formula which produces each sentence as a paragraph in soundbite fashion, ironically rendering the labels more difficult to comprehend than their Victorian predecessors in Jaipur or Sheffield.

If the residue of Manchester's textile wealth can be seen on the walls of its galleries, Liverpool's industrial and trading histories are richly present in the Walker Art Gallery and, especially, the Lady Lever Art Gallery at Port Sunlight, an exercise in 1920s nostalgia for the Victorian and earlier periods situated at the heart of an ideal garden city created for the workers at the Lever Brothers' Sunlight Soap factory, whose distant bulk can be seen over the top of the picturesque dwellings. Recent refurbishments here, too, have seen the spectacular re-instal-

lation of Victorian collections, with labeling which reflects the fundamental cataloguing work undertaken by the staff of what is now known as 'National Museums Liverpool.' It is little short of a triumph over circumstances that, throughout an era of sustained Government philistinism under Thatcher, Major and Blair, that major catalogues of the highest quality such as Edward Morris's *Victorian and Edwardian Paintings* have been produced.¹³ The labeling and interpretation in these galleries is more sedate and scholarly than in Manchester, but the language is clear and precise and accessible to most museum visitors.

If the regional museums present their publics with balanced, judicious and well-presented displays of Victorian art, the museum visitor in London is less well served. Visitors to Britain's National Gallery might well believe that Turner's *Rain, Steam and Speed* (1844), essentially a Romantic masterpiece, was the last work of British art to be painted in the nineteenth century, apart, perhaps from the odd Sargent. For although the collection of French art stretches to Bonnard and Vuillard, and even Picasso is represented in the collection, there is not a single work of Victorian art, as the term is generally understood, in the main picture-viewing spaces of the National Gallery. Although the Pre-Raphaelites, Whistler and Watts are strictly excluded from the collection (in contrast to the likes of Hogarth, Wright of Derby, Gainsborough and Reynolds, seen at their finest), there is one Victorian painting to be seen in the building, but only at risk of personal injury. High above the main staircase, on loan from the Royal Collection, can be seen Frederic Leighton's *Cimabue's Celebrated Madonna* of 1855. This superb processional painting which marks the meeting of British and German traditions, and which established Leighton as a history painter of major promise, is reduced in the National Gallery's hang to the status of decoration – beyond the hushed, air-conditioned sanctum of the galleries, it hangs in a public space filled with noisy, milling tourists. Decorative, illustrative, kitsch (so this placing tells us) – it is presented as 'not-art'.

Sir James Linton, President of the Royal Institution, argued in 1887 that the National Gallery should collect modern British art: 'How much more valuable and instructive would be the National Gallery if it were in every sense national; not alone 'national' because it is the property of the nation, but 'national' in its most useful sense? Amongst the gathered works within its walls we ought to be able to see all that is best of our own school, as well as of its great predecessors'.¹⁴ It was not a new idea; the Sheepshanks collection at South Kensington had been donated with exactly this intention, and that abortive National Gallery of British Art is commemorated today in a tiny, but potent display in the

British Galleries of the V&A. There is still a compelling case for a better representation of British painting from after the death of Turner in the Trafalgar Square galleries where much of it was first exhibited.

It was, of course, Sir Henry Tate's donation of paintings in 1897, after a long series of negotiations, which finally brought a National Gallery of British Art to light, though its mission was soon fudged by the addition of 'Modern Foreign' art. The Tate has been the central repository of British – including Victorian – art, and has mounted many significant exhibitions in the field, from *Pre-Raphaelites* (1984) and *Ruskin, Turner and the Pre-Raphaelites* (2000) to *Exposed: The Victorian Nude* (2001), with a Millais retrospective promised for 2007. Despite the institution's Victorian origins, and the fact that Tate's collection was entirely of contemporary (Victorian) art, the display of Victorian art in the permanent collections at Millbank has never been anything other than half-hearted. There were, however, two fine wood-panelled galleries in which large Victorian canvases such as Burne-Jones's *King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid*, and J.W. Waterhouse's *The Lady of Shalott* found a permanent and a visually appropriate home. These galleries were demolished during the Centenary Development campaign during construction of the Linbury Galleries which opened in 2001.

With the founding of Tate Modern came the opportunity for a re-display of the British collection at Millbank, fulfilling Henry Tate's original ambition. This took the form of a temporary thematic re-display, *Re-Presenting Britain*, a new departure in the display of British art and one that was shameful for its visual illiteracy, shoddy execution and its intellectual laziness.¹⁵ Paying lipservice to a Blairite agenda of accessibility, the display simply allowed an elite already familiar with the history of British art to enjoy a passing frisson by seeing familiar works jumbled up and rehung according to simplistic themes (William Powell Frith's *Derby Day*, for example, rubbed shoulders with Wyndham Lewis's Voriticism *The Crowd*, on the grounds that both contained many small figures). To widespread relief *Re-Presenting Britain* was replaced by *Collections 2002-1500*, a broadly chronological re-hang which included distinguished new displays of eighteenth-century, Romantic and twentieth-century British art. The Victorian period, however, was ill-served by displays which retained the anti-visual, thematic approach of *Re-Presenting Britain*, with portmanteau themes like 'Art and Society'. Paintings of radically differing genre, style and size were thrown together in a poorly-lit and badly configured simulacrum of an 'academy hang'. (*Art on the Line*, an exhibition curated by David Solkin at the Courtauld Institute demonstrated how effective this archaeological and recreative experiment can be if done seriously).¹⁶ The fact

that *only* the Victorian galleries received such dense hanging, and that the rest of the collection was installed according to the spare modernist aesthetic characteristic of the Tate under Nicholas Serota's directorship, made plain the alterity of Victorian art to the hierarchy of aesthetic values canonized by the Tate.¹⁷ At the time of writing, a new gallery installation curated by Alison Smith, drawing together an enterprising selection of Pre-Raphaelite paintings, well-lit and interestingly juxtaposed, provides an indication that Victorian art at Millbank is slowly emerging from the gloom.

A fact with serious repercussions for the historiography, and market value, of Victorian art, is its absence from the major American collections. Despite the presence of small groups of Victorian paintings in Delaware, at the Yale Center for British Art and the Fogg Art Museum of Harvard University, the fact remains that while the robber barons of the early twentieth century revered the aristocratic panache of Reynolds and Gainsborough, their tastes for near-contemporary painting were almost exclusively French. Nineteenth-century art – and therefore modernity itself – is held, in the American curatorial imagination as well as in the duller backwaters of the American academy, to be a wholly French phenomenon. This orthodoxy is so ingrained that, even when an institution does own major Victorian works, they rarely appear on public display – The Metropolitan Museum of Art, in New York, for example, holds Leighton's *Lacrymae* (1896) and Burne-Jones's *Chant d'Amour* (1868-77), neither of which has regularly appeared in the nineteenth-century galleries.

The status of Victorian decorative arts is subtly different. Pugin, de Morgan and Morris always hold court in the Metropolitan's decorative arts displays (an unconscious tribute, perhaps, to the South Kensington Museum's dominant influence in the Met's early years). Likewise, the Victoria and Albert Museum's British Galleries present a superbly sustained and brilliantly installed history of the decorative arts, material culture and patronage in the Victorian era, including a self-reflexive analysis of the museum's own role and history.

When the Museum of Modern Art reopened, to much fanfare, in 2004, the oldest object on view to a New York public eager for Picasso and Pollock was a Sussex chair, designed for Morris and Co. probably by Ford Madox Brown in the 1860s. This modest wooden object, simple in its geometry, appears in MoMA's Architecture and Design galleries as an unassuming starting point for the history of modern design, a prelude to the high achievements of Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier. Austere, linear and functional, it emerges as an emblem of a bold, precocious modernity, deriving from the world's first industrial

nation in the years immediately after the Great Exhibition. Yet the unyielding glare of MoMA's white walls seems uncongenial to the Morris chair, whose cultural resonances are deeply troubling to an orthodox history of modernism. The chair insists that there is as much – perhaps more – to admire in the past as in the future, in the country as the city, in craft skill as in machine manufacture – and that a modern art can, simultaneously, be eclectic and historically resonant; an art, in short, which draws on and parallels the function of the museum. It demands a richly textured, eclectic, visual context to release its full range of resonance, a chromatic rather than the ultimately banal relentlessness of a monochrome installation.

The fact that contemporary artists have become fascinated with the idea of the museum indicates a return, at some level, of a Victorian sensibility.¹⁸ While the white cube, as it should, persists at MoMA, other institutions are re-examining their Victorian architectural and aesthetic heritage, as the uncovering of Victorian decorative schemes at the British Museum and the National Gallery indicates. The Victoria and Albert Museum has announced an intention to restore the South Court to its former glory by dismantling the 1949 conversion, literally removing the white cube, an incubus which has obscured what is perhaps the finest of all Victorian museum interiors. But the challenge is not merely an archaeological one. Victorian museums provided vibrant social and cultural relevance, a strong didactic impulse, but also a sense of profusion and spectacle, of layering, mixing and juxtaposing images and meanings, which allowed the visitor's imagination free play. The Crystal Palace's cornucopia of objects makes modernists shudder, just as its building thrills them; but perhaps we should revise, even reverse, this assessment. As revisionist art history offers new perspectives on Victorian art, there are hints (more in regional than metropolitan centres) that newly creative, and not merely replicated, techniques of installation and interpretation are being applied to Victorian collections. It is only appropriate that our obsessively museological culture should embrace and celebrate that Victorian phenomenon which is the modern museum, and to recognize the ways that modernity itself is a museological project.

(Yale University)

Endnotes

1. Donald Preziosi, 'Brain of the Earth's Body: Museums and the Framing of Modernity', from Paul Druro (ed.), *The Rhetoric of the Frame: Essays on the Boundary of the Artwork* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 97.
2. On the South Kensington Museum, see *inter alia* Brenda Richardson and Malcolm Baker (eds), *A Grand Design* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1997).

3. For a discussion of the South Kensington Museum building see Tim Barringer, 'Re-Presenting the Imperial Archive: South Kensington and its Museums', *Journal of Victorian Culture* 3:2 (Autumn 1998), 357-73.
4. Thomas Holbein Hendley, *Handbook to the Jeyapore Museum* (Calcutta: Government of India, 1895), 7.
5. Fors Clavigera, E.T. Cook and A. Wedderburn (eds), *The Works of John Ruskin* (London: George Allen, 1903-1912), 39: 397.
6. *The Works of John Ruskin*, 29: 154.
7. Tony Bennett, 'The Exhibitionary Complex', *New Formations*, 4: 7-102, revised and reprinted in Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 59-88. Rafael Cardoso Denis, 'The Brompton Barracks: War, Peace and the Rise of Victorian Art and Design Education', *Journal of Design History* 8:1 (1995), 11-25.
8. See, for example, Brandon Taylor, *Art for the Nation: Exhibitions and the London Public, 1747-2001* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999).
9. Amy Woodson-Boulton, 'Temples of Art in Cities of Industry: Municipal Art Museums in Birmingham, Liverpool and Manchester, c.1870-1914', PhD dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 2003. I am grateful to the author for sharing her work with me and for illuminating discussions on the subject.
10. For an introduction, see Michael Howard, *Upclose: A Guide to Manchester Art Gallery* (London: Scala, 2002). An earlier history of the collection can be found in *A Century of Collecting, 1882-1982: A Guide to Manchester City Art Galleries* (Manchester: Manchester City Art Galleries, 1983).
11. See Elizabeth Prettejohn, *The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Tate, 2000).
12. See Timothy Clifford, 'The Historical Approach to the Display of Paintings', *International Journal of Museum Management and Curatorship*, 1 (1982), 93-106.
13. Edward Morris, *Victorian and Edwardian Paintings in the Walker Art Gallery and at Sudeley House: British Artists born after 1810 but before 1861* (London: HMSO, 1996).
14. Sir James Linton, 'The National Art and the National Gallery', in *The Magazine of Art*, (1887), 150-3, quotation from 152, quoted Amy Woodson-Boulton, 'The Art of Compromise: The Founding of the National Gallery of British Art, 1890-1892', *Museum and Society* 1:3 (2002), 147-69, 147.
15. For an illuminating critique see David Sylvester 'Mayhem at Millbank', *London Review of Books*, 22 no 10, (18 May 2000). The accompanying publication – Martin Myrone. *Re-Presenting Britain, 1500-2000* (Tate, 2000) makes no allusion at all to the actual displays but presents an album of favourite works with three very broad themes – 'Private and Public', 'Literature and Fantasy' and 'Home and Abroad', which loosely resemble three of the rooms in the display.
16. David Solkin (ed.), *Art on the Line: The Royal Academy Exhibitions at Somerset House, 1780-1836* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001).
17. See for example, Nicholas Serota, *Experience or Interpretation: The Dilemma of Museums of Modern Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996).
18. See Kinaston McShine (ed.), *The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1999).