

Introduction: Neo-Victorianism and the Discourses of Education

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The essays in this Special Issue of *Neo-Victorian Studies* see the Victorian period as marked by crises, contradictions and complexities that, together with the motives and drivers for the radical changes that took place, can seem uncannily familiar to us in the twenty-first century. This introduction is embedded in the work of contemporary educational historians and philosophers, who revisit nineteenth-century ideas about the role of education to interrogate our relationship to the present and future – an engagement that may at once involve revivifying and mourning ‘old’ ideas (particularly in light of recent political and institutional changes including the massification and corporatisation of tertiary education), and recognition of the inadequacies and inequities of the past.

In their *Rethinking the Education Improvement Agenda* (2012), educational philosophers Nick Peim and Kevin Flint describe a contemporary *double-sided* engagement with the Western educational traditions we have inherited that read “educational improvement as a form of technology [capable] of revealing the world” (Peim and Flint 2012: 1). As Dinah Birch demonstrates in her tellingly titled *Our Victorian Education* (2008), in the Victorian period as in our own, concerns and anxieties about the achievements and failings of education were widespread, and the discourse on education was neither monolithic nor uncontested. Rather, educational discourses divided public opinion and provoked continuous political and societal debate in ways we recognise in our own period, as we struggle with similar questions. For example, have our ideas about higher education continued to be shaped by nineteenth-century “arguments between those supporting policies defining higher education as a private good for very restricted publics” or, conversely, as “a national good for much wider audiences” (Thody 2012: 17)? As Frances Kelly asks in this

Neo-Victorian Studies

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pp. 1-14



issue, can the nineteenth-century *idea* of the research university – together with the significance for democracy of the invention of the discipline of literature – hope to survive the transition to the audited and marketised corporate institution operating within and obedient to a competitive global knowledge economy? The essays collected here explore texts that contribute to these on-going debates by recognising the origins of contemporary philosophies of education in a complex Victorian system, the legacy of which is at once top down and largely state-driven *and* part of a groundswell of working people and the knowledge diffusers and philanthropists who supported them. The drive toward universal education may have been on the one hand vocational, instrumentalist, and designed to produce docile bodies, but on the other hand, educational historians trace a strong movement among the working classes that saw education as a means of producing not disciplined subjects (and therefore greater profits) but “happier and wiser men” (Thody 2012: 25). As in any attempt to reflect on moments of origin, what is inevitably found, as Michel Foucault taught us, is a profusion of things, forces and ideas, some of them self-contradictory.

1. An Age of Education

The Victorian period is notable for the dominance of industrial capitalism, but it was also, as David Thiele points out in his essay in this issue, an “Age of Education” (Thiele 2017: 15). Thiele argues that education was a force for democratisation as *culturally* powerful as the three Reform Acts were *politically* powerful. Certainly, elementary education was imposed from above, producing the surveilled “pedagogized society” that Peim and Flint convincingly argue persists in the twenty-first century (Peim and Flint 2011: 14). Angela Thody, however, quotes Albert Mansbridge’s comment in his 1920 history of the Worker’s Educational Association that “there [had] never been such a general movement on the part of the people towards education” (Mansbridge qtd. in Thody 2012: 25). Birch reminds us that no matter how “driven by divided and sometimes incompatible aspirations” the transformation of education may have been, and no matter “[w]hatever else might define the values of the Victorians, their commitment to systematic learning was unshakeable” (Birch 2008: 2). She goes so far as to suggest that by 1900 something of a “revolution” had occurred, so great was the impact of changes and reforms in education on the broader population – at all levels and across a range of institutions from state-funded elementary

schools to mechanics' institutes, to reading rooms and libraries, and to institutions of higher education (Birch 2008: 2-3). However, while such reforms were often 'benign' and designed to ameliorate the worst ills of industrialisation, the schooled population was only partly shaped by philanthropic attitudes to social aspirations, child labour, or the democratisation of knowledge. The aim was discipline, not social mobility: "[r]elations between owners and workers were not to be disturbed" (Peim and Flint 2012: 16). Instead, the "emphasis was on training dispositions and ultimately producing a self-managing, basically literate and numerate populace, in tune with dominant national values" (Peim and Flint, 2012: 18). This is perhaps not so unlike today's results-orientated and league table dominated education system, advocating equal opportunities and inclusivity but still complicit in maintaining economic differentials – the recent UK debate about state funding for the expansion of grammar schools and increased selection (via performance-based entry exams) being a case in point.¹

In the 1870s, mass state-funded non-religious education for children between the ages of five and twelve was introduced through a series of reforms that eclipsed existing piecemeal provisions, though of course the scattering of privileged public and grammar schools remained (see Peim and Flint 2012: 21). At the same time as elementary education was being universalised, the old universities, including Cambridge and Oxford, were tentatively broadening their reach – in terms of gender if not class. In the 1890s, as Jonathan Memel reminds us in his essay in this issue, Christminster/Oxford would continue to refuse entry to working-class autodidacts like Hardy's Jude, while at Cambridge, Girton was founded in 1869 and Newnham in 1872, closely followed at Oxford by Lady Margaret Hall and Somerville in 1879, although actual degrees would not be conferred on their female students until 1948 and 1920 respectively. Additionally, as Frances Kelly notes in her essay, new civic tertiary institutions were founded in wealthier urban centres across Britain and its settler colonies: Durham was founded in 1832; by the early 1880s the new Great Towns of the Midlands were served by Victoria University, with colleges in Manchester, Liverpool, and Leeds; and from the mid-century onwards, universities were established in Australia, in Sydney (1850) and Melbourne (1853) and, in New Zealand, in Otago (1869) and Canterbury (1873). These seats of learning furthered the paternalistic and ideological

reach of empire as they broadened access to knowledge. The valorisation of education, the sense of promise that it held for individuals *and* for nation-building, imperial expansion *and* liberal democracies, was ardent. As the Governor of New Zealand Sir William Jervois stated at the opening ceremony of the University College in Auckland 1883:

The work on which we are engaged – placing the advantages of a university education within the reach of every man and woman of Auckland – is one the importance of which it is almost impossible to over-estimate. It is a work that will, I trust, influence not merely the immediate neighbourhood and the present generation, but also indirectly the whole colony, and that for all time. (Jervois qtd. in Sinclair 1983: 24)

From the first decades of the nineteenth century, parallel movements in adult education that promised an imminent and more radical democratisation of knowledge, particularly (but not only) in science and technology for vocational purposes, were set in motion across multiple geographical sites by a range of philanthropic organisations. The first mechanics' institutes, which reached out to working men by offering evening classes and libraries, were established in Scotland in the 1820s and immediately spread across Britain and its colonies. In 1854, the Working Men's College was set up in London by Christian Socialists, "a movement whose politics often took precedence over theology" (Birch 2008: 62; see also Thiele's essay). In 1891 the Goldsmith's guild founded the more gender-inclusive Goldsmiths' Technical and Recreative Institute, "dedicated to 'the promotion of technical skill, knowledge, health and general well-being among men and women of the industrial, working and artisan classes'" (Bailey, Clarke and Walton 2011: 189). Four years later the Fabian Society founded the London School of Economics, whose focus then as now was the social sciences. It proclaimed its broad-ranging if somewhat vague mission to be "the betterment of society" (McKernan 2013: 418). In London in 1903 Albert and Frances Mansbridge founded the volunteer Workers' Educational Association (WEA), which went on to produce branches in the settler colonies including Australia, in 1913, and New Zealand, in 1915.

2. Reading and “the Conquests of Science Over Time and Space”

Increasing literacy was unquestionably an effect of both state-led, top-down initiatives and charitable and less formal educational endeavours, but the rise of a reading public was made possible primarily by the synthesis of education and steam technology. The steam printing press enabled the rapid production of cheaper reading materials, but steam of course revolutionised transport, too. As Judith Johnston explains, “the astonishing transformation of the publishing industry was one of the more interesting direct outcomes the advent of the railway produced”, and its effect on recreational reading, including the reading of fiction, was profound (Johnston 2013: 7). From the 1840s, W. H. Smith & Son set up bookstalls at railway stations across the country. These specialised in periodicals and cheap editions of novels – usually those out of print to keep costs down – as well as travel accounts and biographies. In 1851 the *Spectator* reported the Longman’s ‘Travelling Library’ offered “high quality” novels “for a new class of readers, whom the conquests of science over time and space had called into being” (Johnston 2013: 7). The technology of the book, which allowed Victorian travellers to seal themselves off imaginatively and, of course, socially from fellow travellers, is familiar to us in the twenty-first century as, tethered to electronic technology, we signal our absence from the physical spaces we occupy. We are, as Sherry Turkle terms it, “alone together” in airports and railway stations, on planes and on trains (Turkle 2011: 155).

Cheaper printing and the rise of serial and part-publication made reading an affordable past-time across the classes, but books were also enthusiastically borrowed and shared. The drive to educate and the rise of mass literacy saw the passing of the 1850 Public Libraries Act, and libraries mushroomed in regional areas as well as in the larger cities. While novels became increasingly popular, they continued to be prohibitively expensive for most despite the economies afforded by the steam printing press, but the growth of private circulating libraries like Mudie’s made the latest triple-decker accessible to the middle, if not to the working classes. The availability of affordable print matter meant texts and ideas circulated beyond Britain to the colonies, their mobility facilitating the creation, transformation and critique of an “imperial commons”, a term that refers to a nineteenth-century international environment in which permissions were often ignored, and one that, as Antoinette Burton and Isabel Hofmeyr note,

“has recently gained new life in relation to digital communications” and its implied shared use rights (Burton and Hofmeyr 2014: 3).

Staying with continuities of the discourse between the Victorian period and our own time outlined by Thiele, the revolution that made print materials widely accessible in the nineteenth century is reflected in a digital revolution that not only assumes universal screen access, but often devalues print culture. For example, since 2010, the institution of the public library that facilitated the social and geographical spread of knowledge in the Victorian period is under growing pressure. In most Anglophone countries, libraries are being closed or re-purposed,² and research institutions, including universities, are literally dumping print materials in favour of digitised texts. Digitised resources that provide access to manuscripts or out-of-print texts of course facilitate international research, but the quality of scanned materials like the plates from nineteenth-century journals can be to say the least variable and consequently less than ideal for research purposes (see Barnett 2016).

As education cuts continue, schools and universities are increasingly corporatised, and educators and students are redefined as service providers and consumers. It is possible these changes, set in motion by the neoliberal reforms of the late-twentieth century, have spurred us to reflect on our educational origins via a steady production of neo-Victorian novels set in educational contexts both formal and informal, as may be seen in the essays in this issue by Kelly, Lea Heiberg Madsen, and Marlena Tronicke, who address Rachael King’s *Magpie Hall* (2009), Audrey Niffenegger’s *Her Fearful Symmetry* (2009), Clare Dudman’s *98 Reasons for Being* (2004), Jane Harris’s *Gillespie and I* (2011), and David Lodge’s *Nice Work* (1988).³ Settings range from schools, universities, libraries, art colleges and anatomy schools, to private tutors’ rooms and the domains of governesses, to ragged schools, and more. Changes and challenges in our own era spark a revisiting of the past. As articles in *Neo-Victorian Studies* have explored for a decade, contemporary discourse self-consciously engages with ideas inherited from canonical works by Victorian writers. Heiberg Madsen cites contemporary theorists and critics of neo-Victorianism in order to remind us the twentieth- and twenty-first-century texts they explore are inherently uncanny in their disruptive mimicry of their Victorian precursors. The purposes and ethos of education we have inherited are, as we suggest, haunted by Victorian voices, ideals, and contentious debates. Contemporary fictions revive and

reconsider nineteenth-century concepts of education, including character building, *Bildung* and the formation of civic identity; connections between personal and societal development; access to education; and the inculcation of moral values and national ideologies – education as social control over “docile bodies, to be known, defined, and rendered optimally viable within social, cultural and political systems” (Peim and Flint 2012: 2) – and the perception that education systems serve as engines of the nation’s economy.

3. Neo-Victorian Responses to the Victorian Governess/Companion

Despite the noticeable presence of educators and students, educational contexts and ideas in neo-Victorian cultural practice, particularly in literary texts, there have been few *critical* engagements to date with this aspect of the genre. With the publication of books like Birch’s *Our Victorian Education*, or Stefan Collini’s *Common Reading* (2008) and *What Are Universities For?* (2012), we might have assumed that critical examinations of the contemporary engagement with Victorian education *in fiction* would follow, and that this dimension of neo-Victorian studies might at last have its day. Yet surprisingly scant attention has been paid to current engagements with our educational inheritance, with novelists’ and film-makers’ revisitings of nineteenth-century educational ideals or institutions, or ideas about teachers and students that continue to influence and perplex. Although reasons for the current fascination with the Victorians are much debated in this journal and elsewhere, the ways in which neo-Victorianism engages with ideas about *education*, its importance to the Victorians and to us, scarcely feature. This is a marked contrast to, for example, interest in matters of childhood, gender, sexuality or empire – and yet education is inextricably linked to all of these.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the figure of the governess. In our initial call for papers we perhaps envisaged a flurry of articles on the governess, given this figure’s significance in canonical works, from Anne and Charlotte Brontë’s High Victorian novels to Henry James’s 1898 novella *The Turn of the Screw*, as well as in contemporary neo-Victorian reworkings in literature, film and television. Contemporary reworkings – influenced by social history and feminist theory – are sympathetic to the restrictive economies for women in the period; after all, what roles other than the governess or companion could well-educated, unmarried women occupy with respectability within a patriarchal household in Britain or in the

Antipodes? The hopes, ambitions and struggles of women in nineteenth-century colonial settlements form a strong cultural imaginary that is replayed and reconfigured in neo-Victorian texts, from Jane Campion's Oscar-winning *The Piano* (1993) to Eleanor Catton's Man Booker prize-winning *The Luminaries* (2013).

The governess has also come to be understood as a vital cog in the engine of imperial ideology. What ideas about morality, Britishness, or gentility did governesses foster amongst their charges? What books did they teach them to read? It is perhaps not surprising that *Jane Eyre* features in Burton and Hofmeyr's *Ten Books that Shaped the British Empire* (2014). According to Charlotte MacDonald's essay in that book, Charlotte Brontë's novel was read in 1848 – the year after its publication – by Mary Taylor of Port Nicholson (later Wellington), in New Zealand. Taylor received the novel in the post and immediately wrote to her friend Charlotte Brontë to give her opinion of the work, after which she lent her copy out amongst her friends in the new settlement. The circulation of the novel intimates it spoke to the women of Port Nicholson, many of whom had moved to the colony in the hope of expanding their pecuniary options, through governessing or other means, including marriage, as MacDonald points out. Letters written by women like Mary Taylor who settled in the colony in the 1840s reveal that *education* was a keen issue, particularly in the early years of colonial settlement, before the newly centralised New Zealand state took over its provision in 1877. For some, offering ragged schools or deportment classes was necessary for survival in the colony, while for others education was closer to an ideological mission or calling.

In contemporary retellings of nineteenth-century stories, governesses range from mostly sympathetic figures, whose mistreatment and dependency underscore women's lack of financial independence and agency, to threatening figures whose charges are made to suffer the ire of a malevolence arising from thwarted intelligence and twisted power. Both characteristics are sometimes present in one and the same person. Sallie, the twenty-first-century protagonist of A. N. Wilson's 2005 novel *A Jealous Ghost*, is a PhD student turned governess-figure. Her love of and absorption in Henry James's fiction (the subject of her thesis) contribute to her inability to distinguish fiction from reality, and this leads to the murder of a child. Such texts implicitly raise the question as to what degree governessing was understood to be education, and to what degree care. Wilson's novel plays

with the entrenching of Victorian ideologies that constructed women as ‘natural’ carers, gentle and self-sacrificing, and picks up from *The Turn of the Screw* in order to develop the debate in a contemporary context. Wilson’s novel also plays with the motif and narrative technique of doubling that is central to Heiberg Madsen’s reading of both *98 Reasons for Being* and *Gillespie and I* in this issue, but doubling can also be seen at work in other rewritings of James’s novella, including John Harding’s *Florence and Giles* (2010). Indeed, Wilson’s Sallie bears some resemblance to Harriet Baxter, the protagonist of *Gillespie and I*. Although Harriet is not a governess, each woman occupies a similarly marginal position to the family she attaches herself to, and both are dissemblers and unreliable narrators seeking to ‘better’ themselves. What these novels and the essays in this issue underscore is that neo-Victorianism can reveal *and* subvert (or explode) our assumptions about governesses and companions, like Harriet and Sallie, who are derived from nineteenth-century fiction and in whom tenacious essentialist constructions of gender adhere.

4. The influence of the Victorian democratisation of education

More broadly, as we asked in our initial call, what nineteenth-century educational aspirations and ideals are depicted in neo-Victorian texts or other contemporary cultural practices as unfulfilled and unrealised? Certainly universal schooling means children are students for far longer than they were in the nineteenth century, and the proportion of young adults who are accepted into universities is demonstrably higher—for example, despite exponential increases in fees, the British Universities and Colleges Admissions Services reported in December 2016 that it had placed 535,200 school leavers in higher education that year (UCAS: 2016). But it goes without saying that issues of elitism, access and social justice continue to undermine the democratisation of the educational sector. Jonathan Godshaw Memel notes, for example, that the spectre of Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure* (1895) remains “an uncomfortable reminder of the foundations of our current education challenges” (Memel 2017: 65). He cites data produced by the Sutton Trust in 2010 that shows “the proportion of non-privileged students at the UK’s most academically selective universities [to still be] depressingly low” (Sutton Trust, qtd. in Memel 2017: 42) The democratisation of education since the Victorians, then, has delivered

neither the anticipated equal opportunities nor full equal access to what are considered to be the best institutions the country has to offer.

David Thiele's essay asks how the Victorian "knowledge democracy" could enable us in the twenty-first century to engage differently with – and thereby negotiate – our own difficulties, as Birch encourages us to do. It is worth reflecting on the idea of a liberal education, espoused in mid-century speeches by such luminaries as Charles Dickens, John Ruskin and Cardinal Newman, *because* it is one of the core principles on which the public education system, as well as the 'new' red-brick higher education institutions, were founded – although we are encouraged not to use such language as 'liberal education' or 'liberal arts' in universities these days, in case our customers should not value or recognise these terms as correlating with their own aspirations and ideologies. Readers may think that Dickens and Newman spoke to quite different audiences but, as Thiele argues, Dickens was a popular speaker for educational institutions across British towns and cities and, like Ruskin, he played a significant role in supporting them. Yet in their writings, both Dickens and Ruskin also espoused ideas that ran counter to the democratic ethos and rhetoric of their speeches. Although heroes both of 'equal outcomes social democracy' and 'equal-opportunity liberal democracy', both are clearly committed to democratic principles, the writings of both men evince a 'slipperiness', even a contrariness, particularly around ideas of character.

5. Education and the Social-Problem Novel

The High Victorian social-problem novel focuses on class difference and its symptoms, including rural and urban poverty, suffrage, and the Woman Question. Elizabeth Gaskell's High Victorian triple-deckers, *Mary Barton* (1848), *Ruth* (1853), and *North and South* (1855), are each exemplary of the genre. In her essay in this Special Issue, Marlena Tronicke explores David Lodge's *Nice Work* (1988), a response to *North and South* set in Thatcherite England. As Tronicke explains, Lodge collapses the genre of the campus novel he has made his own into that of the Victorian industrial, or social problem, novel. While the class struggle remains evident, it is complicated by the foregrounded schism not between the rapidly industrialising North and the established, land-owning South but between industry and the university, between manufacturing and what might be termed the 'knowledge manufactory'. The persistence of the class struggle exposed in

North and South is revealed particularly in the renewed class struggle exacerbated by Thatcher's defeat of the miners' strike as well as her cuts to education.

Reading and books are integral elements of Victorian educational practices with which, as Thiele suggests, we may be losing touch, despite the rhetoric in support of *literacy*. If the reading of books is on the wane – if more of us are choosing aliteracy – that is to say choosing not to read long-form texts including novels – this has implications for English departments, for the PhD thesis (itself a big book), and even for ideas about research (and what qualifies as such), as Frances Kelly points out. In a sense, the history of education *is* a history of reading since, as we have outlined in this introduction, a reading public that engaged a particular set of interior, private, silent, book-based reading practices only came into existence with the conjunction of universal literacy and the affordability and accessibility of reading materials. Given that this kind of reading was not a widespread practice before the Victorian period, is it elitist to insist it matters if reading per se is at risk of redundancy in a digital age? Essayist and literary critic Sven Birkerts argued as early as 1994 that deep reading is crucial to complex thought, to the capacity to imagine, and to the contemplation enabled by “the slow and meditative possession of a book” (Birkerts 2006: 146). In parallel, the work of the neuroscientist and literacy researcher Maryanne Wolf, while recognising the benefits of scanning and clicking, makes an eloquent plea for maintaining the learned skill that is deep reading when she explains that reading, unlike speech, is not genetically programmed. Each of us must learn the skill, and if we are to maintain it, we must practice:

The development of a “brain that reads” represents one of the more astonishing manifestations of the brain's plastic ability to form new circuits from older, genetically programmed circuits that underlie vision and language, cognition and emotion. (Wolf 2016: 4)

The research is far from complete, but it seems evident much will be lost if the emergence of a “digital reading brain” (Wolf 2016: 4), for all its advantages, were to overwhelm rather than function alongside the deep

reading brain, with its capacity for hospitable, meditative, contemplative engagement with the wisdom that is contained in our textual heritage.

This Special Issue engages with ideas of a liberal education, promoted by Cardinal John Henry Newman and others in the mid-nineteenth century, for its capacity to foster such modern-day audit culture desirables as critical thinking, complex reasoning and writing skills. On the one hand, the idea of a liberal education finds itself pitted against concerns about an outmoded, monocultural or elitist idea of education, while, on the other hand, it serves as a bulwark against understandable fears that current alternatives result in fragmentary or shallow forms of (inadequate) education and learning. It is tempting to read recent political events as a failure of contemporary education to foster the critical and the complex (not to mention historical understanding and a healthy fear of demagogues). Massive Open Online Courses (or MOOCs) may make aspects of higher education more accessible for some, but it remains questionable whether this form of university education *actually* offers comparable rewards to those once only accessed by the economically privileged. We might well ask: does education and the individual, social and economic benefits it carries *really* become democratised through such means? Similar questions can be asked of the educational movements by and for working-class adults in the nineteenth-century higher-education context, and as Thody argues, opinions varied as to whether these even “constituted higher education” and “whether they forwarded or repressed the working classes” (Thody 2012: 25). If the Victorian social novel fosters reflection on these and other elements of education in the past, contemporary neo-Victorian reworkings engage us with the question of education in our own era – and the eras to come – as well as the shaping of future society through the education systems we choose to endorse and perpetuate.

Notes

1. Not least, selection unfairly advantages children of wealthier families, who can afford private tutoring to help their offspring attain the necessary entry qualifications.
2. In November 2016, Alice Ross reported in the *Guardian* on research by the House of Commons library service and the BBC that revealed “[a]round one

in eight council-run libraries has closed or been transferred out of the public sector in the past six years”, while “spending has been cut by a fifth between 2010 and 2015, according to the Department for Communities and Local Government” (5 Nov. 2016: n.p.).

3. There are of course other titles that engage with the discourses of education that are not explored in the essays in this volume, from A. S. Byatt’s canonical *Possession: A Romance* (1990) to Francis Hardinge’s *The Lie Tree* (2015).

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