

Afterword:
Living in the Library: On My (Neo-)Victorian Education

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But, you may say, we asked you to write about your neo-Victorian education, what has that got to do with living in the library?¹ I shall explain. When I was initially asked to provide this Afterword, I thought about the start of my neo-Victorian education. I considered the question through three different lenses, metaphorically speaking: from the perspective of a researcher (as a Professor of English and a researcher in Victorian and neo-Victorian studies), of a civil servant and policy-maker (formerly the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council's Director of Research), and of a member of the public (which I think I still am, occasionally). And each of those perspectives, re-considered while reading the various articles included in this special issue, makes me, to quote Alice, 'curiouser and curiouser' concerning the question of what a (neo-)Victorian education looks like.

This is deliberately an Afterword of connections; it might even have been subtitled 'only connect'. It is approaching twelve years now since I took up residence inside a Victorian library. I do not mean I had an office there, although I did have a desk. I mean that on 1st February 2006, I literally moved into a library. Although as a then AHRC-funded postdoctoral researcher,² I was on little more than Woolf's indicative £500 a year, my particular version of 'a room of one's own' coincidentally did cost me £500 a month. This covered the accommodation, meals (breakfast and dinner; lunch was extra), and a shared bathroom (which is certainly one way of encountering, if not engaging, the public). I am going to begin with the story of what I found in my new residence, the impact it had on my thinking, and why I deem it relevant to the notion of a neo-Victorian education. (It will also reveal the connections between me, the Yorkshire-born playwright and national treasure Alan Bennett, and a bath tub – but all in due time.) My thoughts here serve another purpose, at a time in which, as the guest editors of this special issue rightly point out, education – by which

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we largely though not exclusively mean higher education – is undergoing a process of accelerated challenge and change. In both the UK and elsewhere, the challenge arises in relation to the fundamental purpose of higher education, including values and ethics, motivation and return, and in respect to the individual and society at large. As the articles in this special issue demonstrate, those concerns are hardly new, but they do have a sharper focus in a world in which technological change (not always the same as technological advancement), and the very interconnectedness of global systems, incorporating the space and place of learning and knowledge generation, dissemination and accessibility, shifts human relationships and the organisational spheres in which they occur. The idea(l) of the university – not in strictly Newmanite terms but more capaciously defined – is shifting.

Writing about this contemporary moment in *Speaking of Universities* (2017), the intellectual historian and more recently policy critic and provocateur, Stefan Collini, marks the shift as one that is pointedly drawing upon but also pushing back against, undermining, and overturning, a consensus that has been one of the most enduring legacies of the long nineteenth century. In ways that engage directly and pertinently with several of the factors raised in the essays by David Thiele, Marlena Tronicke, and Jonathan Godshaw Memel in this issue, Collini notes the ‘Humboldtian’ principles that have endured for more than a century and a half in most Western countries as far as higher educational models are concerned:

From the early nineteenth century onwards, it was the Humboldtian ideal that did most to shape universities over the next 150 years. This emphasised the pursuit and transmission of knowledge and its elaboration into *Wissenschaft*: the professional autonomy of the scholar was essential to this model, and teaching was often conceived as a form of apprenticeship [...]. [T]he civic ideal prioritized the making of citizens, the inculcation of a shared ethic, whether elite or republican or democratic, that involved developing talents and forms of expertise that were to help define and strengthen the identity of the polity. (Collini 2017: 16-17)

It is the “civic ideal” that interests me here, because implicitly Collini’s statement hinges on the idea of an architecture of knowledge. This

architecture not only concerns the structures of learning, classification, or the birth of distinct disciplinary areas of study, but also the infrastructures: the fabric of the institutions engaged in promoting the “ideal”, the facades and foundations, the solid brickwork of knowledge organisations. While much of this is located overtly within the physical presence and endurance of the university itself, there are also those other public, civic spaces of education that impacted on the transformation identified by Dinah Birch in *Our Victorian Education* (2008), as outlined in the editors’ Introduction to this issue. As Collini goes on to suggest, all these institutional frames – the “places” of the university and its wider knowledge campus – together form the contractual sphere between learning and life, public body and the body public:

at the heart of the implicit contract between university and society in all these places was an acceptance that the distinctive value of the higher learning lay in its cultivation of those forms of scholarship, science and culture whose relation to the instrumental and mundane concerns of the practical life was indirect and long term, even at times downright antagonistic. (Collini 2017: 17)

Although several of the essays in this issue have touched on elements of that antagonism and its continued reverberations in policy debates about education today, the question posed by the editors remains: Why should education be so noticeably absent as a specific theme for investigation within neo-Victorian studies? For me, a partial answer resides in the fabric and connection points I have already raised and will touch on again during the course of what follows: simply put, the ethical and implicit idea(l)s of Victorian education have, until recently, been so infused in the 150-years-plus tradition Collini cites that we have not needed to make the topic such an explicit field of work. Unlike other areas of revision or adaptation (race, gender, class, for example), the mutability and yet survival of consistent modes of understanding in terms of education has, in some regards, been quite successful. The uncontested nature of this particular nineteenth-century legacy is striking compared with other social, cultural and political changes. But now the work has been brought into prominence, and with an urgency that grows with each new policy pronouncement or politically

expedient decree. In 2017 in the UK alone, the debate about student fees, rising Vice Chancellors' salaries, the scoring and assessment of teaching excellence, and the perpetual motion machinery of research evaluation and impact have all brought forward headlines involving higher education. These debates are not in and of themselves involved *in* higher education; they are seemingly 'about' the issues while in reality they frequently focus 'on' the margins rather than the substance. These are not debates on education – its values, purposes, modes – that could measure up under any VEF (Victorian Equivalence Framework), partly because they still veer away at key moments from wider discussions of the knowledge organisations that are as much a part of what education *means* as the universities that often sit in the centre of our perspectives. Fundamentally, this matter also concerns the publics within and beyond the full range of such institutions.

I want to turn now to one such institution, founded in the late-nineteenth century, by a Victorian politician. It is not a university, but a place in which my neo-Victorian education found a distinctive, original home, where 'it all began' and where this Afterword finds its roots: in Gladstone's Library.

1. From the 'Tin Tabernacle' to 'a health spa for the mind'

Who that cares much to know the history of knowledge, public engagement and the library, and how that varying mix of issues has been handled since the nineteenth century, has not dwelt, at least briefly, on William Gladstone? Not many, one suspects. Towards the end of his life, though, the Victorian Chancellor and Prime Minister founded a library in north Wales in the village of Hawarden just outside Chester. It was the village of his wife's family, and he lived there from their marriage to his death, interfering in the running of the estate and taking over the family seat of Hawarden Castle. In the late 1880s and 1890s, Gladstone's thoughts turned to legacy and posterity. His significant collection of books and pamphlets was something he pondered in particular, and he settled on the idea that rather than donate his collection to an Oxbridge college or an institution in his home city of Liverpool, he would build his own library in Hawarden. Gladstone's theory of knowledge was not quite a key to all mythologies, but he did believe in the concept of 'oneness' or 'monad' and had faith that in bringing people together in residence in the library and sharing his collection (plus the books

that would go on being bought for it after his death) one could bring thoughts into a space of debate to reach a higher truth. An educational value system was therefore built into the physical fabric of the library as an institution, in some senses more tangible than the specific legacy of Gladstone's one-time ownership of the materials held therein. There was also a public element – Gladstone's daughter Mary said that her father had wanted to “bring together books who had no readers with readers who had no books” (qtd. in Membroy 2014).

Gladstone himself was a library theorist and his article ‘On Books and the Housing of Them’ (1890) was concerned with how shelving and stacking of books could work given the expanding world of nineteenth-century print. Alongside shelf designs, Gladstone expressed his view of the world of books: “In a room well filled with them,” he wrote, “no one has ever felt or can feel solitary” (Gladstone 1890: 10). But Gladstone also went further in asserting a connection between knowledge and the individual's sense of self, education and connection with the past:

We ought to recollect, with more of a realised conception than we commonly attain to, that a book, ay, that every book, consists, like man from whom it draws its lineage, of a body and a soul [...] books are the voices of the dead. (Gladstone 1890: 4-5)

The library itself was established via a Foundation Document in 1895, and opened in its earliest building – the so-called Tin Tabernacle – the same year. Legend has it that Gladstone himself wheelbarrowed his collection from the Castle to the new location (he was 87 at the time); some versions say that he was helped by his valet. The myth probably comes from Gladstone's article where he wrote: “But what man who really loves his books delegates to any other human being, as long as there is breath in his body, the office of inducting them into their homes?” (Gladstone 1890: 36). The Castle housed Gladstone's original collection in his study which he named The Temple of Peace. When he died in 1898 there was renewed interest in creating a more fitting monument than what was effectively a shed in a field, and St Deiniol's – as it was called until 2010 when it was renamed Gladstone's Library – was built. First the library wing, financed by public subscription, opened in 1902 as the National Memorial to William

Ewart Gladstone, and then the residential wing in 1906, paid for by the family, who still live in Hawarden Castle today.³

I was not living or working at the library on my own. There was the Warden, the Librarian (who had come as a trainee and then stayed for over twenty years), the kitchen staff, a gardener, a handyman-technology-expert-general-do-what-was-required, and various booking and reception staff. All the work was overseen by the Trustees, governed by the foundation document signed off by Gladstone himself, and with several family members still represented on the board. The library itself was run by the Librarian and a trainee library assistant who changed every year. I was fortunate that when I arrived the assistant in residence (who lived in the room next to mine) was a former tutee from my PhD teaching days at Swansea, hence a familiar face. Rounding off the ‘staff’ was a scholar who earned her living (and her residence) doing various bits of cover on reception and indexing and proofreading work for various theological publishers while she researched the life of Richard III. And then there was Father John, resident member of the Anglican religious order of the Oratory of the Good Shepherd. His obsessions included Mrs Bridges from the LWT TV series *Upstairs, Downstairs* (1971-75). When anything odd or discomfiting occurred, we could always readily reassure him with what I now recognise was coined as a perfect neo-Victorian catchphrase: ‘I don’t know, Father, what would Mrs Bridges say?’. If these arrangements all sound rather Trollopian, with wardens, librarians and clergymen, it is because they were indeed Barchester-esque.

In addition to this rather fixed group of people, there were the guests. As you can probably imagine by this point, St Deiniol’s as a residential-library-cum-Anglican-budget-B&B attracted an interesting crowd, many of whom were interested in the cheap bed and breakfast rather than either the library in general or the specifics of the collection. There were other scholars (often of film and theology, which was an interest of the Warden himself, and although Gladstone personally did not have an extensive collection of books in this area we certainly did). These included those working on Gladstone, of course, but they were fewer in number than one would might expect – apart from during the yearly Gladstone event, GladFest, which coincided with the annual Founder’s Day lecture, dinner, and afternoon tea. These were days when the library was still finding its place in the new century: now it is truly thriving as a hub not only of the

local community but also serving as a “health spa for the mind” for international and national visitors, literary festivals, and other major cultural events in the area (see Membery 2014).

Part of the absence of Gladstone scholars during my sojourn may be attributed to the nature of my project: to identify which books, in a collection that I believe at that point amounted to about 250,000 items, had belonged to the Grand Old Man himself. The original Gladstone bequest was now interspersed across the library building – donations from Gladstone’s friends and colleagues had come in quite swiftly after the library was established, there had been later offerings from the family and others, and the library also had an annual purchasing budget arising from bequests and investments. The Accession Registers unhelpfully started at a number in the mid-28,000s, and I never found a book in the library that had a lower accession number than that first volume of the register. So the only way of identifying the Gladstone core collection was to individually assess every item in the collection published before his death and determine its provenance based on a series of clues: did it have a Gladstone bookplate? Had he included a signature or initials in the first pages? Did it have a handwritten note, card or dedication to Gladstone? Had he written a summary of his views on an early page? Was there a record in the Gladstone diaries of his having read the book, and could we therefore reasonably assume that if it met some of the other criteria it was his own copy? And the most revealing test of all: did it carry Gladstone’s annotations, which of course meant at least flicking through the pages but sometimes also attempting to interpret whether a ‘v’ was in Gladstone’s hand or not. Since Gladstone publicised his method of annotation among his friends, many items in the collection carried such signs but in a different hand (for details of the methods and approach, see Bradley 2009). My PhD research, which had included the study of seventeenth-century manuscripts, certainly provided transferable and much needed skills in this environment. Ultimately, though, the challenge was often a case of ‘Does it matter?’. Apparently, Gladstone had been determined that the fact these were his books should – and did not – matter, although in ‘On Books and the Housing of Them’, he had thought around this subject, asking:

But underneath all particular criticism of this or that method
of classification will be found to lie a subtler question –

whether the arrangement of a library ought not in some degree to correspond with and represent the mind of the man who forms it. (Gladstone 1890: 24-25)

Despite his claims that it did not matter which books in the collection had belonged to him, it was striking to see that those books with Gladstone's bookplates in them were less likely to carry any other identifiable marks of his ownership.

But these were the questions largely of the (few) researchers in the building. As a hub of the community in Hawarden, the library also provided a café/tea room, and an occupation for various retired individuals (I seem to recall an agglomeration of former school teachers), who would offer tours of the library to local history groups or those just visiting the area, whether they were staying at the library or not. My most vivid recollection is of sitting in the office just by the door into the library and hearing the loudest of these volunteer tour guides talking to a group of hushed visitors. The silence of the library itself (which was always somewhat of an anathema to this particular guide) could be sensed right next to the large wood-panelled doors that offered entry into the Theology Room. And here, in the real world just outside, came a loud proclamation: "For those of you who don't know much about William Ewart Gladstone, throughout his life he was obsessed by books. Books alone were his focus. What did he do all day? He read, and he read, and he read." Once, hearing this, I made a point of coming out of the office, walking to the door just before she did and cynically muttered in a murmur loud enough to be heard, "he did fit in being Chancellor and Prime Minister four times as well". Looking back on this now, I have a deep regret at the cheap, academic-professional-I-know-better-than-you attitude I displayed. It exhibited a contempt for the public and for public engagement that I did not feel then and certainly do not feel now.

Fundamentally, the experience at Gladstone's Library taught me that it is the engagement with the Victorians and the routes into their experience that are most important; that the public discourse is different, and it is one that academics and researchers need to re-learn when engaging with a public just as keen to be educated *by* the Victorians as *about* them. In this sense, the neo-Victorian educational experience is distinctly one of the lifelong-learning variety. My comments about the "myth" of Gladstone and the

wheelbarrow, for example, do not really matter. The image is key to the myth: it is the way into the discussion and provides an accessible image that becomes the route to start thinking about the issues involved. The veracity of the myth is less important than whether it inspires the ones who hear it to delve a little deeper, whether it piques the curiosity, whether it makes them wish to learn more.

Both the Librarian and I had a bit of an obsession with felines (we could probably have started a blog called ‘Librarians with Cats’), and this meant that the Gladstone Catalogue, of course, had to be shorthanded as ‘GladCat’, the name it still carries as a separate catalogue to the MainCat at the library today. Aside from the research project itself, my role included some responsibilities within the library-cum-guest-house. I occasionally served breakfast, acted as head of table at dinner a couple of times, and in the rare absence of Father John, one night even had to say grace, but my more regular duty was lock-up nights on Tuesdays. This meant being the responsible officer once a night each week, whose responsibilities consisted in checking the entire building (windows, fire doors, locks) and closing the library itself (huge fire doors) at 10 p.m. Shutting off the lights zone by zone, only to see a series of spectral Gladstone faces peering out of the darkness as the moon’s beams came through the huge windows, was tinged with a Gothic atmosphere, but you got used to it. When the library closed for a three-month period for refurbishment, repair, and some redevelopment work to the residential wing (a new kitchen, servery, chapel and conference suite), we shut down completely. The AHRC project had to continue, however, so for that period, with the public excluded completely for their own safety, I found myself the sole resident, inhabiting a kind of limbo. I got plenty of work done, but the library during that time was undoubtedly a different place. It was probably the first time I had ever really contemplated the fact that buildings used in different ways have very different atmospheres associated with those uses, even though the physical structures and architecture remain the same. It helped me realise that the spirit of a place derives as much from its inhabitants and the interactions of its communities within the fabric of the space.

My time at St Deiniol’s had a profound effect on me, which I did not quite realise at the time, and have only really come to understand over the last few years. It exposed me – and I make no apologies for using so raw a word – to the *public* place of research; to the functions of organisations

outside the academy, not only in disseminating research but also in providing a context and an engaged, participative community for research as a process; and to the need to consider the interests, angles, perspectives and desire to know of ‘the public’ alongside, even above our academic standpoints, which can prove a stimulating and challenging learning experience in itself.

2. Educating Policy and Public

The Gladstone’s Books project began in early 2006, before research councils like the AHRC had introduced ‘Pathways to Impact’ (2007 onwards) to grant applications and well before the REF (Research Excellence Framework) or its predecessor, the RAE (Research Assessment Exercise), had considered ‘counting’ impact as part of the overall research endeavour that those devices seek to assess, evaluate and ultimately audit. The UK’s National Centre for Coordinating Public Engagement (<https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/>) was not founded until 2008, and so while areas like engagement and impact were spheres in which people knew that work was being done, they also recognised that probably more could be done and done ‘better’, and that support was needed for the development and improvement of such work. Yet such support was still very developmental in terms of funding and policy. By the time I took up my chair at the University of Strathclyde (institutional motto: “the place of useful learning”) in 2011 – following several happy years at the redbrick, Victorian University of Liverpool where I had the pleasure of working with the colleague who *literally* wrote the book *On Our Victorian Education*, Dinah Birch – these issues had moved to the forefront of educational debates. It was in 2010/11 that as an applicant to a funding call I first engaged with the AHRC-led Connected Communities Programme with a project that sought to rethink my experience at St Deiniol’s and my time at Liverpool, where I had worked with cultural organisations in the city, to consider the question of ‘Historicizing Contemporary Civic Connection’.⁴ The topic was timely in that it coincided with debates about society – was it big, small or did it even exist? – and the role of communities, organisations and individuals in the collective creation, generation, and understanding of knowledge. The notion of the ‘civic’ was being resurrected politically, although possibly for the wrong reasons (see Llewellyn and Heilmann 2013: 31-33). Over my time at the AHRC as Director of Research (January 2012

to April 2017), one of my privileges was to see the Connected Communities Programme (<https://connected-communities.org/>) challenge assumptions about research, participation, the nature of who ‘owns’ or should best initiate research projects and activities, what partnerships in research mean, and how to stress-test the funding and university system with the challenges of delivery around such diverse kinds of activity. Readers of this special issue will find plenty of interest in Keri Facer and Bryony Enright’s report *Creating Living Knowledge* (2016), which looks at projects across the programme to reconsider the role of the university and knowledge communities and organisations more generally, including the challenges and rewards of democratising the educational and research processes.

The tension between the practical and applied, on the one hand, and the conceptual and character-developing model, on the other, is not distinctive to the contemporary period. In their Introduction to this issue, Frances Kelly and Judith Seaboyer outline issues related to recent changes in policy or approach, and several of the article contributions necessarily reflect on the present-day pressures experienced as Victorian ideals clash with twentieth- and twenty-first century realities. Jonathan Godshaw Memel’s piece on the rhetorical uses and abuses of Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure* (1895) or Marelana Tronicke’s example of David Lodge’s Thatcherite-inflected *Nice Work* (1988) indicate both a *timelessness* and a *timeliness* to the resurrection not only of the long-dead Victorians’ thoughts on these matters but also the more recent refraction of them during the last forty years. As a child of the 1980s (I was born in 1979, a month after Margaret Thatcher entered Downing Street for the first term, quoting St Francis of Assisi on harmony and peace), it is somewhat humbling to find oneself engaged in research on the roots of contemporary neo-Victorian discourses within one’s own lifetime that are now read as political history. One can only wonder at the equivalent experience for the Victorians themselves and the radical shifts in culture, politics, and educational policy experienced in the period leading up to the passing of the 1870 Elementary Education Act and the remaining three decades of Victoria’s reign.

One reason why I focus on the public here is because of the kind of implicit contract between universities and society that Collini mentions in the quotation I provided earlier. It seems to me that when addressing the question of education as researchers on the Victorian or the neo-Victorian, we inevitably risk indulging in a kind of narcissism about our own

perspectives. (And yes, I do recognise the irony of what might be viewed uncharitably as a solipsistic piece of writing highlighting the dangers of individual perspective.) We are writing from within the very institutions we are writing about, critiquing the very policies that are imposed on us as professionals and within which we operate. Higher education is both a 'thing' and an intangible process. It might be benchmarked and can even win Olympic-style Gold, Silver and Bronze medals now for Teaching Excellence, while the performance of its 'service deliverers' may be managed or assessed. But in most respects, education still remains a unique-to-the-individual experience in terms of how it *matters*. Education is not just structural or institutional. Once we start adding the 'public' into the equation, then it becomes clear that their perspective alters the very essence of what we mean by 'Victorian education' and of its continuing relevance. This takes us into thinking about the Victorians' own approach to the question of education and engagement through precisely those kinds of civic connections, infrastructures, and communities which rendered notions of the amateur and the professional more fluid, and allowed different 'classes' to mix in debates that were engaging in and of themselves.

The debate extends into the fictional too, and into the means by which nineteenth-century fiction seeks to address the challenge between public and private, community and individual, common purpose and individualism, shared endeavour and atomisation. George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-72) is not a novel about universities, but it is undoubtedly a novel about education, and partly in the terms raised by Collini. I would not like to put a fixed badge on the novel as the first novel about public engagement, but I would suggest that it sets up a certain kind of debate between scholarship and knowledge, on the one hand, and practical application and purpose, on the other. That is a crude generalisation, of course, but just think of that moment when Dorothea – at this point already married to Mr Casaubon – and the narrator contemplate different kinds of reading, the spaces in which it takes place, and the spheres it excludes:

They usually spent apart the hours between luncheon and dinner on a Sunday; Mr Casaubon in the library dozing chiefly, and Dorothea in her boudoir, where she was wont to occupy herself with some of her favourite books. There was a

little heap of them on the table in the bow-window – of various sorts, from Herodotus, which she was learning to read with Mr Casaubon, to her old companion Pascal, and Keble’s *Christian Year*. But to-day she opened one after another, and could read none of them. Everything seemed dreary: the portents before the birth of Cyrus – Jewish antiquities – oh dear! – devout epigrams – the sacred chime of favourite hymns – all alike were as flat as tunes beaten on wood [...]. It was another or rather fuller sort of companionship that poor Dorothea was hungering for [...] [S]he longed for objects who could be dear to her, and to whom she could be dear. She longed for work that would be directly beneficent like the sunshine and the rain, and now it appeared that she was to live more and more in a virtual tomb, where there was the apparatus of a ghastly labour producing what would never see the light [...].

Books were of no use. Thinking was of no use. (Eliot 1994: 474-475)

Dorothea’s desire, hunger, longing, is for “work that would be directly beneficent” to the wider world. The language is centred around engagement and disengagement, community inclusion and exclusion, the extremes of life and death, light and darkness, the life of knowledge and the power of action. If any Victorian literary character was ever in need of the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement, it is Dorothea Casaubon.

3. Duncker on Doctorates

While Dorothea has her personal frustrated ambitions about the use of knowledge and the application of learning to practical ends, as well as the contrast between a life spent indoors with books to one engaged in building new spaces and places of engagement, today’s expectations around research, innovation and impact afford those entering the academic profession no such luxury as sufficient time to even consider the contrast. Not long after taking up my AHRC post in 2012, I was struck by a series of jobs at all career stages being advertised in a leading Russell Group university: applicants for professorial appointments were asked to provide ample evidence of world-leading quality publications for the future REF, while

starting lecturers were expected to demonstrate the ‘essential’ criterion of public engagement and impact from their research. This seemed to me then (and continues to appear to me now) to raise the challenge: do we expect early career researchers to be better at public engagement because they have been explicitly trained in it, or because in academic career terms they are still viewed as closer to the ‘public’ than the profession? Then again, I probably think too deeply about what job adverts tell us about the state of the academic world.

It did, though, bring me back to my own experience as a PhD student, spanning the period 2002-2005. It is always risky to take the individual experience as representative, but given that this Afterword has been grounded in an autobio-critical route from the outset, I might as well continue to the end. I decided I would like to do a PhD when I was sixteen and read a novel about a PhD student, whose sanity becomes questionable through over-reading and falling in love with the subject of his thesis. Not, I suspect, uncoincidentally, that novel was authored by an academic creative writer now well-known as a neo-Victorianist, Patricia Duncker. Following *James Miranda Barry* (1999) and the more recent *Sophie and the Sibyl* (2015), Duncker’s reputation as part of the canonical creative-critical neo-Victorianist writers’ circle is assured, but *Hallucinating Foucault* (1996), which made me first think about doing a PhD, was her first novel, written almost as a distraction piece while she was working on the Barry historical fiction (Duncker 2012: 24). While Duncker’s book stems from the mid-1990s and I completed my PhD in 2005, the fictional and actual experiences were not entirely different, especially as regards the sense of scholarly isolation. In the narrator’s words:

You see, when I decided to go on with my studies and to do a doctorate I was making a real commitment, not just to my writing, but to his. Writing a thesis is a lonely obsessive activity. You live inside your head, nowhere else. University libraries are like madhouses, full of people pursuing wraiths, hunches, obsessions. The person with whom you spend most of your time is the person you’re writing about. (Duncker 1996: 4-5)

I do not doubt that university libraries and their virtual equivalents are still “like madhouses” and, while students might ‘live’ on Facebook and Twitter, PhD research is still about the hunches and obsessions that drive the intellectual chase. But thinking about Duncker again really brought home to me the different and evolving nature of the experience of the Arts and Humanities PhD now as compared to my own studies. Not least, this contrast is evident in the sense of a community of early career scholars much more prepared to share, debate, and engage as a cohort, not only in terms of presenting their research (at in-house symposia and national and international conferences), but through a different kind of supportive culture and environment, a different sense of researcher identity, which is frequently online and virtual in nature.

Movements like neo-Victorianism – which should be innovative, creative, and, one hopes by definition, open to the ‘new’ – might be more prominent in the assertion of values attached to new ways of researching, thinking and publishing the outcomes of that work. Indeed, as Frances Kelly reminds us elsewhere in this issue, there is even a distinctive genre within neo-Victorianism of the doctoral novel. Moreover, with major neo-Victorian novelists like Duncker and others, including A. S. Byatt, Sarah Waters, Michéle Roberts, and Charles Palliser, being former academics turned critical and creative practitioners, the connectiveness between research and reinterpretation, between critical practice and creative revision, might be more celebrated as part of the ‘neo-Victorian education’ dynamic. The nature of the training provided in activities such as public engagement – which might now involve working rather than living in the library (or the museum or the gallery or the government office) – has improved alongside the opportunities to put that training into action.

The public is not (nor should it be) passive in this process; it may assume the role of a consuming audience for the (neo-)Victorian experience, but it is also a participatory and interactive one. The Victorians are everywhere; they engage, they attract, and they are curious to us in ways that only the simultaneously familiar and strange can claim to be. As researchers in a field founded in such a rich and deep level of public interest, perhaps our future focus on Victorian education should be about those places and publics outside the academy as well as within. Hence my use of the St Deiniol’s example: to users of the library space, Gladstone’s Library meant a whole series of things, depending on whether they were on

a weekend visit to north Wales in need of cost effective B&B, a scholar working on nineteenth-century debates about the Athanasian creed, or a villager popping in for some homemade cake and a cup of tea. These competing and very different sets of priorities can be discussed, they might even be prioritised, but they should never be overridden. The public are not there to serve academic needs for impact because it suits us; neither are they under any obligation to care what we do and why we want them (need them?) to be involved in our work or to know about it. This is why the engagement has to be reciprocal. Both sides need to find common words, shared places, and neutral spaces to discuss how that engagement might be taken forward. The power dynamics are significant, and they cannot be ignored; indeed, discussion of difference may in some cases prove more interesting, challenging and important than the acts of engagement in/with/through research themselves. Fundamentally, thinking about ‘our’ or ‘my’ neo-Victorian education has to be hospitable to alternative perspectives. We need to be open to making the connections but not imposing them, facilitating them but not forcing them, and recognising the validity of seeing things through a different lens.

To illustrate this by way of a conclusion, I shall offer a second-hand anecdote that returns us to the library in which I began. When I started doing some of the thinking I outlined in the opening pages of this piece, I read Alan Bennett’s latest book, which includes the last decade of his diaries. In another ‘only connect’ moment, he wrote this entry on 28 December 2015, which no doubt struck me since my birthday falls on the same day. Bennett talks about why he likes lying in the bath looking at the stars through the window, and this prompts a thought of the past. Bennett writes of a time when he was a student doing a traineeship at St Deiniol’s, explicitly bringing together education, the place of learning, and the memory of a library:

As an undergraduate I spent two of the vacations in my final year working at St Deiniol’s, a residential library attached to Gladstone’s home at Hawarden in North Wales. It was an Anglican institution, though staying there didn’t oblige one to attend services in the local parish church, some of which were conducted by the warden of the library who was himself an Anglican clergyman. He and his wife were

leaving for Evensong one Sunday when hearing a bath being run but seeing no lights on they postponed their religious observances and came belting up the stairs to bang on the bathroom door and enquire what was going on. I found it difficult to explain (I think I said I was saving the electricity and they took it, I'm sure, that I was engaged in some unmentionable immoral activity). Though the library, bathroom included, was always too cold for anything like that. (Bennett 2016: 374)

While Bennett's ostensible lie is in the parentheses, there is a level of untruth in the description of St. Deiniol's. But that untruth – much like the omissions of “he read and he read and he read” in the words of the tour guide – is partly balanced by perspective and purpose. For the library is not “attached to Gladstone's home” in a spatial sense; it is across the road and about half a mile away. I have no doubt that the bathroom is in the same place as Bennett left it. The attachment is in the form of a connection, however; the library – St Deiniol's then in Bennett's and my time, now re-named Gladstone's Library in honour of its founder – remains connected to the family, to the community and to the wider associations of memory, cultural legacy and, ultimately, the shared purposes of neo-Victorian and Victorian education.

Bennett's book is entitled *Keeping On, Keeping On*, and in a Bennett-esque way that is what I want to suggest our interest in the Victorian – and in neo-Victorian and Victorian education – requires. We should keep reading, thinking and writing back to the nineteenth century, but also use that education constructively to think forward to the challenges of the twenty-first century.

Notes

1. Versions of this Afterword were originally delivered as keynote addresses at the conferences ‘Nineteenth Century Matters’ (British Association for Victorian Studies, British Association of Romantic Studies, Chawton House Library; January 2017) and ‘(Neo-)Victorian Hospitality: International Seminar on (Neo-)Victorian Studies in Spain: VINS Network’ (Universidad

de Málaga; May 2017). I am grateful to the organisers and audiences at each event, particularly Catherine Han and Rosario Arias, for the invitations to speak. My allusion to Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) here and the Prologue to George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871) in the opening of the next section are indicative of the original delivery at the Chawton House Library.

2. The project was entitled 'Retrospective electronic cataloguing, St Deiniol's library, and an annotated database recreating William Gladstone's collection' (PI: Juliet John, University of Liverpool; Grant reference: AH112174/1 (see <http://gtr.rcuk.ac.uk/projects?ref=112174%2F1>).
3. For the history of the library and Gladstone's attitudes to it see Windscheffel 2008.
4. AHRC Grant reference: AH/J500174/1 (see <http://gtr.rcuk.ac.uk/projects?ref=AH%2FJ500174%2F1>).

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