

Refashioning the Past: Technology, Nostalgia, and (Neo-)Victorian Knitting Practices

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Abstract:

The recent rise in the popularity of knitting may seem to simply be a nostalgic anti-technological move. Of all knitting traditions, Victorian knitting stands out as a unique case of this turn to the past, because it is a temporal rather than geographic category. However, while the current interest in Victorian knitting (and in what I will call ‘neo-Victorian knitting’) signals a desire to return to the past, its connection to technology is more complex, as both the existence of the category of Victorian knitting as well as current access to the patterns that define this category are fundamentally shaped by the technologies of the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries, respectively. In drawing connections between the emergence of the category of Victorian knitting and the contemporary interest in neo-Victorian knitting, this paper unearths how these knitting traditions are fundamentally shaped both by contemporaneous technologies as well as a nostalgic yearning for times past.

Keywords: handicraft, industrialisation, the Internet, knitting, leisure, middle-class women, neo-Victorian, nostalgia, print technology.

Despite its current popularity, even trendiness, knitting is infused with nostalgia. For some people, this nostalgia is for a time a generation or two in the past, evoking memories of their mothers or grandmothers. While hand-knitting may seem outmoded, much of its recent appeal is precisely because of the way it connects its practitioners to the past. Debbie Stoller, editor of *Bust* magazine and writer of the popular *Stitch 'n Bitch* series (which has played an integral part in bringing knitting and crocheting to a new generation) writes, “[w]henever I would take up the needles I would find myself connected not only to my own mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother, but also to the women who lived centuries before me, the women who had developed the craft” (Stoller 2003: 9). Here she signals the

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way in which the nostalgia of knitting can be both a specific personal nostalgia and a general nostalgia for ‘times past’. For those whose practice of knitting involves the reproduction or interpretation of historical patterns and techniques, knitting can become doubly nostalgic, connecting its practitioners not only to earlier times in their lives but also to a historical past.

Historical knitting practices allow for a connection to the past that is seemingly experiential and concrete. This connection constitutes a presentification of the past, which Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht describes as consisting of “techniques that produce the impression (or rather the illusion) that worlds of the past can become tangible again” (Gumbrecht 2004: 94). It is for this reason that fibre arts such as knitting and spinning are staples of living history museums, places where historical artefacts and historical practices are brought together to create a sense of physical proximity to the past. At one such site, the New Lanark World Heritage Site in Scotland, visitors can have the experience of walking through the streets and buildings of the late-eighteenth-century cotton mills and village that were re-shaped by Robert Owen’s social utopian vision for factory work, after he assumed management of the enterprise in 1800. While New Lanark seems to allow one to step into a place frozen in time, this journey into the past also includes the opportunity to see a working spinning mule, thus creating a sense of a working and active village.

New Lanark typifies the heritage encounter as it offers a view of the past that is not only to be seen but also to be experienced. Such an experience exhibits how “the techniques of presentifying the past quite obviously tend to emphasize the dimension of space – for it is only in their spatial display that we are able to have the illusion of touching objects that we associate with the past” (Gumbrecht 2004: 123). But while a heritage site like New Lanark offers an immersive experience, the way in which the visitor encounters heritage need not end when the tour does. Those interested in practicing living history in their own living rooms can purchase yarn from the New Lanark gift shop that has been “produced by traditional methods in one of the historic mills, where a 19th century spinning mule is still working”, so that they may knit with materials that are akin to those used by craftspeople of the nineteenth century (New Lanark Trust 2015: n.p.). While the way in which the past may seem tangible may be dependent upon the larger space of the factory town, the presentifying of the past at

home equally engages with the spatial dimension as knitters' hands touch and move the yarn in ways that appear to make the past come alive in their very hands. The market that exists for such yarn is an example of how our contemporary desire to connect with the past in material ways extends beyond the kind of tourism that New Lanark and other heritage sites offer as we seek to bring the past into the midst of our modern world.

For twenty-first-century hand-knitters, the Victorian period is a historical time that offers itself as particularly tangible through what I call neo-Victorian knitting: the production of knitted objects using adapted or original Victorian-era patterns and techniques. Central to this practice is Jane Sowerby's collection of modified Victorian lace patterns, *Victorian Lace Today* (2007), which draws attention to the style of Victorian lace knitting, allowing hand-knitters to 'rediscover' Victorian knitting designs and practices. The ability to follow Victorian knitting patterns, whether adapted or original, has the potential to "render the Victorian past more material" through the practice of craft (Heiberg Madsen 2013: 127) – akin to visiting a living history museum or purchasing wool produced according to historical methods. Neo-Victorian knitting can thus fulfil what seems to be an increasing need to reconnect with the past as we "yearn for rooted legacies" (Lowenthal 1998: xv).

Knitting a pattern from *Victorian Lace Today* may seem a step removed from the immersive experience of history that one has visiting a site like New Lanark. Yet the mundane nature of reproducing a pattern using needles and a ball of wool has great power in presentifying the past, as "[o]ne way of likening past to present is to play down grand historical events and focus on ongoing usages of everyday life" (Lowenthal 1998: 139). In this way, the everyday lived experience of the Victorian knitter seems available to become a part of the everyday lived experience of the neo-Victorian knitter. Access to the kind of 'historically accurate' yarn produced at New Lanark also becomes mundane for the twenty-first-century knitter, since it does not require a special trip to the south of Scotland but rather, like most commodities today, may be purchased via the Internet, in this case, from the mill's own Internet store (see newlanarkshop.co.uk).

Visiting a website to purchase yarn produced according to historical methods may seem antithetical to an 'authentic' encounter with the historical past that nostalgia for the Victorian era seems to drive, but the interest that contemporary knitters have in Victorian knitting patterns and

techniques is not a straightforward and simple anti-technological move. Like most neo-Victorian activities, neo-Victorian knitting is “*self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 4, original emphasis), and inevitably it depends on “a translation necessary to convey things past to modern audiences” (Lowenthal 1998: 148). Neo-Victorian knitting shares a complex nostalgia that is akin to the experience of Victorians’ own nostalgia for craft seen, most famously but not exclusively, in the Arts and Crafts movement. Our own moment of rapid technological change echoes the speed of Victorian change, and our nostalgia for an imagined – or re-imagined – past echoes their own. The interest in knitting held by both Victorian knitters and contemporary knitters is both an expression of and a response to nostalgia *and* technological change. The practice of the craft in each era is not simply a means of escaping one’s own present day; rather, it is simultaneously a reaction to and a function of the new technologies of production and print in both eras.

1. The Rise of Victorian Knitting: Industrialisation and Nostalgia

The contemporary interest in Victorian knitting practices is most certainly nostalgic, as many hobbyists interested in the Victorian era “celebrate the romance and serenity of the past, so far from our ‘fast-paced world [...]’” (Bailin 2002: 42). Nevertheless, as any scholar of the era knows, there is a certain irony in turning to the Victorian era as a ‘simpler time’, since the nineteenth century was the age of industrialisation when many of the cultural and technological shifts that we associate with our own perceived lack of leisure and connection to the material world – rapid communication, mass production, and urbanisation – took root. If we decry the forty-hour working week and our social obligations outside of work today, in longing for the nineteenth century we ignore the fact that in spite of the Victorians’ introduction of working time regulations, the limits imposed on working hours still allowed for far less leisure time for the workforce than most citizens of developed countries now enjoy. Hence the turn to nostalgic handicraft begun by the Victorians suggests that the pressures and busyness that seem to define postmodern culture were already experienced by those who lived through the nineteenth century.

Nevertheless, the hustle and bustle of daily life and the working hours of the working class stand in stark contrast to the imagined leisure

hours of the middle-class woman, the main practitioner of hand-knitting in the Victorian era. While her working-class counterparts may have been pleased that the Factories Acts began to negotiate workweeks of seventy hours or less, the affordability and accessibility of the goods produced in those factories contributed to the growth of the middle class, their leisure time, and the interest in the past. As Miriam Bailin suggests in her study of Victoriana, “it is finally, in a minor but salient irony, the nineteenth-century invention and promotion of labor-saving devices and new technologies that have allowed us to indulge our own taste in the past, just as they did for the Victorians” (Bailin 2002: 42). The association of the Victorian era with a less hurried pace of life rests on the image of the idealised middle-class woman that can be seen to emerge through conduct books, which Nancy Armstrong argues “formulat[ed] what we now know as the middle-class household” (Armstrong 1987: 98). The ideal middle-class woman did not partake in mental or physical labour, and conduct books “represent the woman of the house as apparently having nothing to do. Ideally servants would perform most, if not all, of the work specified for maintaining the household” (Armstrong 1987: 79). Nevertheless, most middle-class women were limited to activities centred on the domestic space to fill their newfound ‘free’ time, since “[t]he model of a binary opposition between the sexes, which was socially realized in separate but supposedly equal ‘spheres,’ underwrote an entire system of institutional practises and conventions at mid-century” (Poovey 1989: 8-9). Admittedly, in the latter part of the nineteenth century women might engage in philanthropic work outside the home, but the social acceptability of such efforts was achieved by couching such work in “the rhetoric of domesticity in proclaiming [women’s] suitability to be social mothers engaged in housekeeping on a grand scale” (Koven 2002: 185-186); philanthropy was, in effect, a means of extending the domestic sphere rather than leaving it.¹

In order to distinguish the middle-class woman from the aristocratic lady, conduct books advocated against idleness and frivolity. In keeping with the middle-class work ethic, the leisure time of a middle-class woman whose role in the house was to supervise rather than to labour, still needed to be filled productively: “[w]hen they prohibited female labor, conduct books made many hours available for women to indulge in ‘trifling employment,’” and knitting adequately fit the bill (Armstrong 1987: 99).

The domestic arts, including knitting, were appropriate ways of filling one's time, since

knitting was seen to provide a creative outlet in the production of gifts. Knitting was also an acceptable means of raising money for gentlewomen in personal need, such as widows, or for charitable purposes, many items being sold to raise funds for good causes. (Black 2012: 120)

Though an 1838 article entitled 'On Knitting' in the *Magazine of Domestic Economy* suggests that knitting was merely a fanciful escape, as it supported "those schemes miscalled charitable, which require a constant supply of pretty articles, useless for every purpose except to get rid of those hours which, but for their aid, might not be so innocently disposed of" (Anon. 1838: 260), middle-class knitters tended to produce items that contributed to the needs of the household. Despite the odd 'recipe' (or pattern) for miniature knitted Grecian urns, the majority of designs were for useful items such as shawls, purses, baby clothes, and stockings, items whose utility suggests that those engaged in knitting were still doing so within a limited household budget. Commenting on an early writer of knitting books, for instance, Richard Rutt notes:

The contents of Jane Gaugain's books are not frivolous. She gives recipes for caps, counterpanes, purses, baby clothes, shawls, bags, pin-cushions, doyleys, cuffs, muffs, spencers, blankets, scarfs, mittens, stockings, re-footing stockings, and a variety of fabric-patterns. (Rutt 1987: 112)

Thus, knitting brought together the accomplishments of the upper classes and the work ethic of the middle class, while also reaching down to those in the lower middle class who might not simply need to *appear* productive but could actively benefit from the fruits of such labour. This perhaps also contributes to the appeal of neo-Victorian knitting: it lends itself to revisionism due to "the lively interaction and cross-fertilization between the high and low arts in this period" that also characterised the Victorian novel (Sanders 2006: 121). Neo-Victorian knitting likewise could be frivolously pleasurable, aesthetic, practical and/or profitable.

Still, technologies of production meant that hand-knitting in nineteenth-century England was no longer a cottage craft undertaken by the poorest classes but rather increasingly a mark of the leisured middle class. Indeed, as she did in so many different ways, Queen Victoria may have played an important role in adding knitting – a more practical and thus less valued needlecraft – to the list of accomplishments that ladies might be expected to have, as she began to knit as a princess and continued to knit throughout her life (Rutt 1987: 137). The ability to see knitting as useful but not strictly necessary for subsistence also supported its wider appeal to the middle classes that were enriched and politically empowered by industrialisation. Thus, as much as this interest in knitting may be seen as anti-industrial (as it is often viewed today), the practice of Victorian knitting, the drawing-room activity that speaks to leisure, physicality, and productivity, was very much a product of the technologies of the age.

Knitting by middle-class women in the Victorian era also hearkened to the past. As Talia Schaffer argues, “[d]omestic handicraft represented the allure of the past; it was a historical and historicizing pursuit that rhetorically connected women with preindustrial eras while it pragmatically enacted mid-Victorian ideas” since it “was associated with the sentimental and industrious domestic manager” (Schaffer 2011: 50). While many middle-class Victorian women had more leisure time, they were not immune from the rapid change that affected nineteenth-century Britain. In turning to knitting, like knitters today, these women were able to enact a sense of nostalgia for a simpler time and the simpler life – however falsely romanticised it might be – of a contented cottage worker.

Nostalgia was widespread in the Victorian era, and as scholars think through our own nostalgic interest in craft, they inevitably turn to the nineteenth century to understand the roots of this interest. Joanne Turney recognises that in contemporary discussions of hand-knitting,

there is a pervasive language of Romanticism. Largely, this involves a rhetoric emerging from nineteenth-century discourse surrounding the effects and impact of the newly industrialized world, which questions the contemporary and idealizes that which is seemingly lost. (Turney 2009: 42)

Turney specifically references the utopian anti-industrialism of William Morris – as does David Gauntlett – as the root of the discussions about contemporary knitting and nostalgia. Morris himself may have been uninterested in knitting, instead focusing on crafts such as weaving and embroidery that produced such characteristically neo-medievalist works as tapestries. Nevertheless, Morris is an important figure in considering craft and nostalgia in the Victorian era, because his practices are the best realised expression of a common feeling of loss amongst Victorians at the very moment that the majority of them seemed to embrace the products of industrialisation – something that is certainly true of Victorian knitters whose access to affordable patterns and yarns was a direct result of industrial improvements in printing and spinning technologies. While Morris's life and work intersected with many of his beliefs about the past, for most Victorians, the living out of their nostalgic anti-technological dreams was far more paradoxical.

While I will focus my discussion on the role of new print technologies in establishing Victorian knitting as a distinct tradition or category, I first want to draw attention to how developments in textile technologies and fashion played a role in shaping the interest in knitting and the kind of patterns that were to develop in the Victorian era. As the textile industry improved, the creation of knitted fabrics and items was increasingly mechanised and workers moved to urban environments, meaning a decrease in traditional cottage-industry knitting; to obtain hand-knitted goods, many women had to turn to creating them themselves. While John Ruskin and Morris may have lauded traditional manual craftsmanship as a reaction against industrialisation, for Victorian knitters, an interest in hand-knitted goods was shaped by the changing fashions of the Victorian era that were themselves shaped by technology.

Early mechanisations of knitting resulted in simple fabrics of plain stockingette stitch, which was practical if not beautiful. Although knitting frames dated back to the sixteenth century, as with many mechanisations, the complexity of knitting machines increased with the development of industrialisation. In 'The Power of Fashion: The Influence of Knitting Design on the Development of Knitting Technology', Vesna Marija Potočić Matković usefully traces the interrelationship between fashion and technology:

Drastic changes in the construction of the knitting frame in the second half of the eighteenth century were certainly caused by fashion demands for the open-work pattern on the gloves and stockings and lace. It was precisely lace that was very modern. Lace decorated the edges of sleeves, necklines and dresses, and the majority of new technologies appeared as a new way of making mesh fabric. Technological (and fashion) transformations mostly began in England and were slowly making their way through the rest of Europe. (Matković 2010: 127)

Ironically, such developments might be understood to result both in the increased availability of mass-produced goods and an increased demand for hand-knitted objects. Such mechanisation of open-work production was not terribly revolutionary, as “[f]ashionable open-work gloves relied on the tedious manual manufacturing process of transferring the loops from one needle to another by hand using a hooked wire”, resulting in a semi-mechanised process that remained very labour-intensive (Matković 2010: 127-128). While the ability to produce open-work accessories may have helped to solidify their fashionable status by making them more widely available than before, “[t]here remained, however, techniques that could not be mimicked exactly by machine”, as Sandy Black points out; these included “many fine examples of hand-knitted lace and beaded knitting from the eighteenth and nineteenth century [...] their growth fueled by the rapid rise of printed manuals containing ‘recipes’” (Black 2012: 40). Like the intricate tapestries that Morris & Co. commissioned, there remained beautiful things that could not be adequately reproduced via mechanisation. Still, the interest in lace in general and knitted lace in particular may have resulted in a sort of feedback loop, whereby the fashion shaped the technology and the technology fed the fashion, such that the popular interest in hand-knitting lace became an understandable side-effect of the technology. This interest in the fashion of knitted lace, as Black argues, fuelled the increase in the production and dissemination of lace patterns for knitters of the Victorian period.

2. Creating the Archive: Victorian Print Technology and Patterns

The factory production methods that moved knitwear and its producers into the factories and out of the cottage simultaneously affected the print industry, allowing for the creation of the category of Victorian knitting – a category that is, unlike other knitting categories, temporal rather than geographical – through the explosion and proliferation of a wide variety of affordable knitting texts. In *A History of Hand Knitting*, Rutt notes that “[a]bout 1835 knitting became a fashionable pastime for English and Scottish ladies”, fixing the date “by references in the first English knitting books, which appeared between 1835 and 1840. Their great popularity is proved by the huge numbers that were printed” (Rutt 1987: 111). The emergence of printed knitting patterns both reflected the trend and enabled it, yet the production of such texts and the great numbers in which they circulated is not merely reflective of fashion, but also of the print technologies of the day.

Prior to the Victorian era, folk knitting traditions were developed through the oral transmission of patterns. Victorian knitting, as I employ the term, thus must be understood to refer not to knitting of the latter part of the nineteenth century, but to knitting that was an effect of the patterns newly transcribed and circulated as published books and pamphlets from 1835 onwards. Unlike categories that derive from particular ethnic traditions, the category of Victorian knitting is primarily shaped by the print technology that allowed patterns to be shared among distant strangers. It is a version of an ancient individualised handicraft that was supported by the increasingly industrial techniques of mass-produced printing.

While the publishing industry was well established before the Victorian era, it was only the improvements brought about by the nineteenth-century industrialisation of printing technologies that enabled the mass production and broad circulation of printed knitting patterns. Initial patterns were expensive and thus simply reflect the way in which the craft was moving into upper-middle-class households where these books found their primary market. Indeed, these patterns might even be considered marketing tools, since two early writers of knitting books, Jane Gaugin and Cornelia Mee, were married to men in the wool trade. Gaugin’s early instructional manuals exemplify the way in which early printed knitting patterns relied on this new marketplace of gentlewomen: “[f]rom 1840 she published, with the help of over 500 high-society sponsors, three volumes

under the general title of *The Lady's Assistant*, offering knitting, netting and crochet instructions" (Black 2012: 121). However, while Gaugin's early books mark the beginning of the establishment of Victorian knitting patterns, they were limited in their audience. Both Gaugin and others would feel the pressure to reach out to those women in the middle classes for whom the productive aspects of knitting were perhaps more necessary:

Being privately sponsored, these manuals were relatively costly: volume I of *The Lady's Assistant* cost 5 shillings and 6 pence; volumes II and III cost 10 shillings and 6 pence. Conscious of their price and wishing to reach a wider audience, Jane Gaugin deliberately set out to produce more economical volumes such as [the] *Miniature Knitting, Netting and Crochet Book* of 1843, priced at 1 shilling. *The Knitter's Friend: A Selection of Receipts for the Most Useful and Saleable Articles in Knitting* (1846) was specifically targeted at an audience beyond the drawing room and [what Gaugin terms] "that numerous class of females whose pecuniary means are limited but whose minds and pursuits are well regulated and directed" – in other words, women in need of funds. (Black 2012: 123)

There were multiple changes that affected the ability of these early writers to produce affordable copies of knitting books to reach this audience, which, though middle-class in its values, operated within a much more limited budget.

The new technologies in mechanical paper production and stereographing of type lowered the cost of the production of books sufficiently to ensure the possibility of producing affordable manuals for a wider audience. Indeed, printing was taking off around the time that knitting books began to be widely produced, and the timing of these changes must not be understood to be simply coincidental, since "the period from 1846 to 1916 saw a fourfold increase in production and a halving of book prices" (Weedon 2003: 57). With industrialisation, there was a convergence of factors that made it possible to produce books that were practical, rather than simply books that might be of great artistic or informational value:

When printers moved to a factory system, replaced double with quad-sized presses and bought machine-made paper, they passed on to publishers the benefits of large-scale manufacturing through the reduction of the basic unit cost of a book. When they adopted stereo- and later electrotyping, conserving labour and allowing a more flexible mode of production, they enabled publishers to tailor their product more effectively to their market. (Weedon 2003: 85)

Personal libraries began to expand in the Victorian period – both in terms of the population that would hold them and in terms of their size – and thus could be found to hold more practical everyday books such as knitting manuals. Certainly, authors of knitting patterns took advantage of these advances. Even in the period from 1836 to 1856, when the lowering of prices due to new technologies was just beginning to take effect and where less than 10 percent of books cost less than two shillings (Eliot 1995: 30), one could purchase Frances Lambert’s *My Knitting Book* (1843) for a mere 1 shilling 6 pence; similarly, Cornelia Mee’s later books were “nothing bigger than 32 pages, usually priced at one shilling or sixpence” (Rutt 1987: 115). This strategy seemed to be effective in reaching a broader audience as Mee sold more than 300,000 copies of her books (Rutt 1987: 115).

Such low prices were not, however, simply brought about because books could be produced affordably or because it was necessary to do so to increase market share and appeal. Clearly what the market would bear was limited: the preface to Lambert’s *My Knitting Book* (1843) notes that

[t]he numerous piracies that have been committed on her last mentioned work [*The Handbook of Needlework* (1842), which sold at 9s 6pence] have been one inducement to publish this little volume; and from the low price at which it is fixed, nothing, but a very extended circulation, can ensure her from loss. (Lambert 1843: iv)

Lambert’s gamble certainly seems to have paid off; the seventh edition, published in 1844, contains this slight alteration to the preface: “[t]he numerous piracies that have been committed on her last-mentioned work, mainly led to the publication of this little volume; but she could scarcely

have anticipated the sale of so many thousands in so short a space of time” (Lambert 1844: iv). Such popularity showed that there certainly was a demand, but that this demand was dependent upon affordable production and pricing. Yet while these cheaply produced manuals found a wider audience and discouraged piracy of the patterns therein, there was a trade-off.

Early knitting books such as Lambert’s and Cornelia Mee’s *Exercises in Knitting* contained text-heavy patterns with limited engravings, which would have contributed greatly to the expense of a book (see Fig. 1 below); the knitter would be required to imagine the finished object by the briefest of descriptions and would follow the instructions word by word rather than visualising them. Nevertheless, the new Victorian technologies of printing meant that this would change toward the end of the century when “[t]here is a notable change in the quantity of illustration – largely the result of the supplanting of copperplate engraving by photographic techniques – and there is also a greater use of colour” (Weedon 2003: 59).

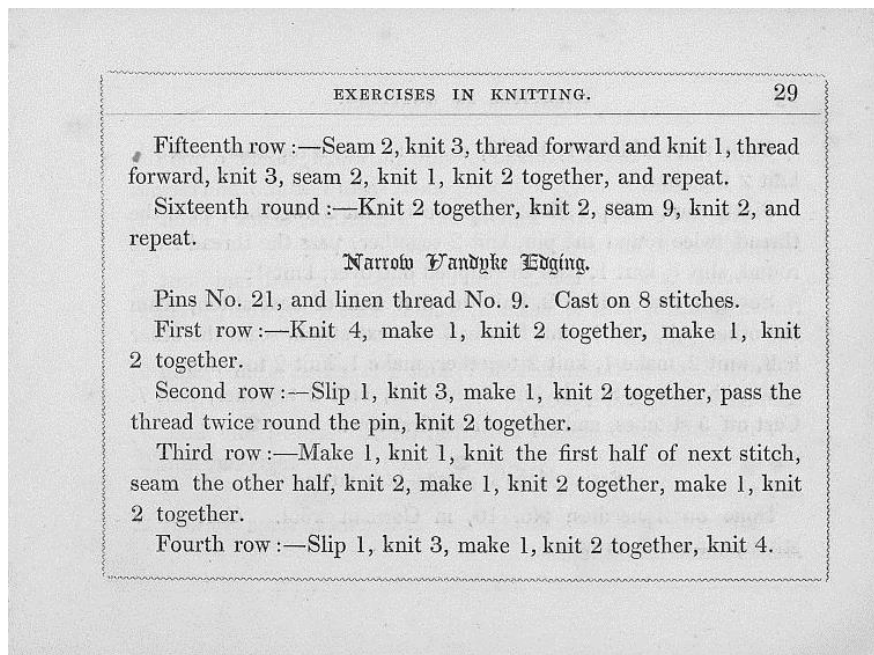


Figure No. 1: Page from *Exercises in Knitting* by Cornelia Mee.

London: David Bogue, 1847.

Image courtesy of the Knitting Reference Library, University of Southampton.

Photographic reproductions made it possible in the 1880s for Weldon & Co. to produce a series of illustrated monthly needlework newsletters at a modest price (see Fig. 2). "To reach this audience at more accessible prices than the drawing-room manuals", Black notes, "each issue of *Weldon's* cost just 2 pence until 1916 when it became 3 pence" (Black 2012: 124). Changes in publishing technology meant that patterns in the Victorian era went from being oral to written, and, increasingly as the century progressed, to being represented pictorially.

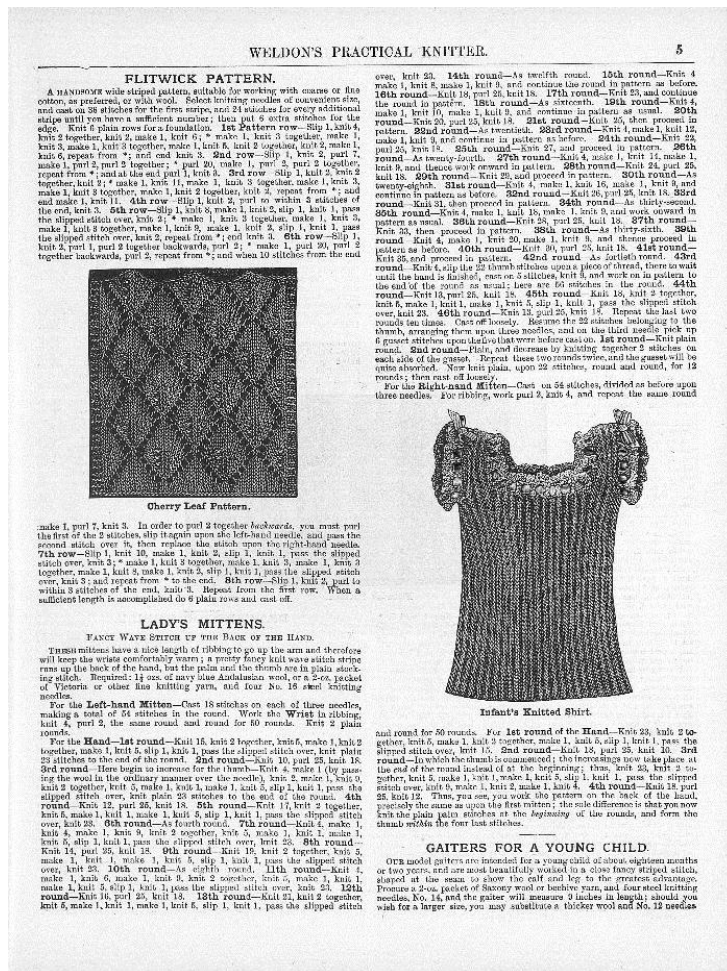


Figure No. 2: Page from *Weldon's Practical Knitter*, 33rd series, from *Weldon's Practical Needlework*, Volume 11. London: Weldon & Co., 1896. Image courtesy of the Knitting Reference Library, University of Southampton.

3. Neo-Victorian Knitting: Industriousness and Nostalgia

While knitting has a long history and has never really disappeared as a skill set, its popularity has waxed and waned. Over the last two decades, it has been experiencing a popular resurgence. Although reliable statistics are difficult to find (perhaps because the most detailed statistics are collected by retailers and such organisations as the Craft and Yarn Council of America, which recruits knitters rather than the general population), there are indications that knitting is gaining a larger public profile and greater popularity, particularly among a younger generation of knitters. Turney cites a 2004 survey by the Craft and Yarn Council of America that notes a 13-percent increase in knitting participation among twenty-five- to thirty-four-year-olds, and Stoller proclaims that there have been “4 million newcomers in last few years” (Stoller 2003: 10). Perhaps the most accurate data is the increase in printed media about knitting. Alla Myzelev remarks that “[t]he numbers of publications on knitting increased more than twice starting from year 2000; 462 books were published between 2000 to 2007, while only 215 were published from 1980 to 1990” (Myzelev 2009: 155). This recent increase of interest in knitting raises the question of why a presumably dying craft has experienced a resurgence in the twenty-first century. Those interested in knitting in the new millennium tend to view knitting’s current popularity as a reaction against our digital age, as the craft suggests both tactility and nostalgia.

In many ways the new popularity of knitting is a reaction to the way in which so much of our lives is lived virtually nowadays. As Stoller suggests, “[i]n a day and age when so many of us sit in front of computers all day long, we may feel the desire to create, to touch, to make something tactile with our hands” (Stoller 2003: 11). Similarly, Gauntlett argues for the way in which a (re)turn to the physical aspect of crafting is viewed as a kind of new or alternative lifestyle:

The DIY ethos, and a passion for craft, are not just about isolated projects, but spill over into everyday life more generally. Suggesting that people can make, fix, and repair things for themselves has much in common with sustainability and environmentalism. It also obviously connects with anti-consumerism – the rejection of the idea

that the answer to all of our needs and problems can be purchased from shops. (Gauntlett 2011: 57)

While there is no denial that there are connections to anti-consumerism and environmentalism in the practice of craft, such concerns may be secondary to the kind of personal empowerment experienced by knitters, since “craft diverts experience back to the physical” (Myzelev 2009: 151). In a sense, then, knitting could be read as a sort of preventive measure for avoiding the kind of future H.G. Wells depicts in *The Time Machine* (1895), where the Eloi evolve from the part of humanity that has become so reliant on technology that their bodies become mere objects of beauty, lacking any physical power.

While the material experience of knitting suggests a departure from our virtual lives, it also seems to offer a remedy to the busyness of contemporary life. Gauntlett connects craft to “the ‘slow’ movement – the growing feeling that the world is becoming too fast, crazy, and driven by demands and targets and pointless aspirations, and that we have to reclaim a gentler pace” (Gauntlett 2011: 60). Others, such as Sabrina Gschwandtner, see craft’s current popularity as “a reaction against a whole slew of things, including our hyper-fast culture [and] increasing reliance on digital technology” (Gschwandtner qtd. in Levine and Heimerl 2008: 26). While such desires for a different pace of life need not be inherently nostalgic, the way in which knitting is characterised as a “reaction” that might “reclaim” suggests a kind of repetition. Knitting’s ancient roots imbue it with a nostalgic power to act as a remedy for our current lives by constructing an encounter with a past that is – or is re-imagined as – less hurried:

knitting affords a link between the past (perceived as calm, anachronistic, simple, and worry-free) and the present postmodern condition (a constant move forward and the lack of luxurious leisure time) that can be seen as a positive and empowering phenomenon. (Myzelev 2009: 152)

Implicitly, therefore, the nostalgic aspect of knitting serves as both a critique of the stressful and increasingly impersonalised nature of contemporary life and as a form of personal protest, resistance and activism. Much as the Arts and Crafts movement hearkened back to idealised Medieval times, current

knitting practices tend to trade in nostalgia for a pre-industrialised time, as did the practices of the Victorians:

Craft objects and activities were interpreted as ‘wholesome,’ ‘untainted’ by the modern industrial world of ‘mass production,’ and therefore could be understood as a source of stability in an unstable world. The emphasis on comfort, as an alternative to everyday reality, as a non-challenging, non-changing aesthetic proved a significant element of the promotion of knitting and craft practices as a leisure activity, i.e., a ‘relaxing’ alternative to work, both comforting and home-centred. (Turney 2009: 46)

If our age is too busy, the nostalgia of craft suggests that there was a previous era that was not, something that might be reclaimed, if not through dramatic social changes, then through the individual practice of craft. Ironically, in the case of twenty-first-century knitting, the period so often ‘reclaimed’ is the nineteenth century – the very heyday of industrialisation and birthplace of mass production and consumer culture.

While the practice of hand-knitting seems to answer a particular desire in the twenty-first century, neo-Victorian knitting – the employment and adaptation of knitting patterns from the Victorian era – has an added appeal, because it seems to offer to put knitters in contact with a distant yet knowable and familiar past. While most knitting traditions tend to be categorised ethnically (Shetland, Icelandic, Turkish, etc.), Victorian knitting is positioned to speak to nostalgia in a particularly powerful way, as it is a uniquely temporal category. Due to its association with a time rather than a place, the Victorian knitting tradition foregrounds a sense of the past. Though such nostalgia is not absent from the interest in ethnic knitting traditions that often attempt to freeze cultures in time, other knitting traditions might be seen as lived traditions, while Victorian knitting is first and foremost a historical category.

The very physicality of knitting meets a desire for a sensory experience, as well as a sort of anti-technological experience that might be found in turning to the past. In suggesting the possibility of satiating a desire for both tactility and history, neo-Victorian knitting provides a very particular way of connecting with the past. Its resurgence is an example of

how, as Gumbrecht suggests, “some of the ‘special effects’ produced today by the most advanced communication technologies may turn out to be instrumental in reawakening a desire for presence” (Gumbrecht 2004: xv). Neo-Victorian knitting is engaged in presentifying the past as it fuses a sense of touch with a connection to a particular period in history. As a material practice, it has “materialising effects” analogous to neo-Victorian cookery “render[ing] history tangible and perceptible for and in many senses” (Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss 2011: 8). Neo-Victorian knitting thus seems to offer an antidote for the ills of our modern digital age in both its tactility and its facilitated connection to the past.

Nevertheless, despite the ability to access this historical category of knitting through its archive, contemporary knitters may relate to the Victorian era in much the same way that Morris’s Arts and Crafts movement related to the Middle Ages. In speaking of medievalism, the kind of “dreaming of the Middle Ages” that Morris engaged in in his utopian vision, Umberto Eco notes that this interest does not purport any verisimilitude to the ‘real’ Middle Ages, for “the Middle Ages have always been messed up in order to meet the vital requirements of different periods” (Eco 1986: 65, 68). Similarly, the interest in Victorian knitting practices might be seen to ‘mess up’ the Victorian era (or at the very least willingly disregard many of its lived realities), in order to fulfil this nostalgic desire to embrace a simpler and more wholesome past. Neo-Victorian knitting, in its practice of presentifying the past, holds much in common with heritage, which “is sometimes equated with reliving the past; more often it improves the past to suit the present needs” (Lowenthal 1998: 142).

Current practices of Victorian knitting, like other neo-Victorianist movements such as Steampunk, certainly entail a degree of adaptation to fit in the modern era. In her afterward to *Dress Culture in Late Victorian Women’s Fiction: Literacy, Textiles, and Activism*, Christine Bayles Kortsch argues that “[k]nitting has become modern. But, of course, only a certain kind of knitting, one that employs hand-spun, kettle-dyed, ‘artistic’ yarns and follows unconventional high-fashion patterns”, suggesting that the return to the craft is not simply an attempt at a precise recreation of the past (Kortsch 2009: 181). For some knitters, ‘modern’ knitting aesthetics can blend with the traditional, as when Victorian patterns become merged with contemporary knitting trends through yarn choice. In *Victorian Lace Today*,

which did much to popularise the category of neo-Victorian knitting, Jane Sowerby explains how

[i]n order to bring these patterns into the 21st century I experimented with needle sizes and yarns, as the results obtained from original ‘receipts’ must have been very close in texture – perhaps to keep out the cold. The answer for today’s transformation seems to be using greatly increased needle sizes and a fine fluffy yarn such as a kid mohair blend. (Sowerby 2006: 13)²

As Sowerby’s title suggests, this is not the Victorian knitting of the Victorian era. Neo-Victorian knitting is, therefore, truly an “imaginative re-engagement with the period” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 6), both in how the practice itself incorporates many contemporary elements, from modern knitting needles to current notation, and also in how the interest in Victorian knitting patterns constitutes a ‘dreaming’ of the Victorian era as a leisured anti-technological period.

4. Uncovering the Archive: The Internet and Victorian Patterns

While neo-Victorian knitting is shaped by the fashions of the twenty-first century, in many ways, like the Victorians who embraced hand-knitting before them, neo-Victorian knitters’ experience of the craft is also very much a product of current technologies. There is a certain symmetry to the role of technology in creating and revitalising this category of hand-knitting: much as Victorian knitting was a product of nineteenth-century changing print technologies, the interest in Victorian knitting is arguably supported by contemporary knitters’ sense of the possibility of unmediated access to the past available through the technology of the Internet.

Victorian knitting, due to its relative temporal proximity and the archival remnants left by the copious copies of printed knitting patterns, supports the fantasy of bridging this temporal distance in an authentic way:

knitting is one area in which heritage and the role of the past in the present is manifest [...] knitting communicates a tradition that is not merely gendered but is also vernacular, providing evidence of peoples and places that appear distant

to the industrial or post-industrial urban contemporary world.
(Turney 2009: 45)

But such a manifesting of the past is always shaped by present technologies as with the yarn milled in New Lanark and purchased via the Internet. The result of such an interaction with historical patterns and techniques suggests that neo-Victorian knitters' engagement with the past is necessarily self-conscious; nevertheless, "[s]hort of always being able to touch, hear, and smell the past, we certainly cherish the illusion of such perceptions" (Gumbrecht 2004: 121). Even the most sincere attempts to recreate Victorian patterns in an authentic manner bear marks of the integration of Victorian aesthetics and contemporary life, reminding neo-Victorian knitters of the illusory nature of this connection with the past, or, at the very least, highlighting the desired contrast between past and present as the knitter moves seamlessly between the two thanks to contemporary technologies.

This means of seeming to access an authentic, physical remnant of the past through the contemporary technology of the Internet infuses current cultural practices of knitting in general and of neo-Victorian knitting in particular. This return to traditional crafting is, paradoxically, also supported by the kinds of technologies that contribute to the rapid pace of contemporary society and create the very sense of disconnectedness that many contemporary crafters feel and try to counteract through individual handiwork. Knitting gains, like many hobbies according to Gauntlett, "new visibility [...] via the internet, which enables the excited enthusiasts in one corner of the world to inspire and encourage similarly energized individuals elsewhere" (Gauntlett 2011: 62). The conflation of these contradictory elements not only affects how people connect with modern iterations of the craft, but also with its historical roots.

In addition to the (false) promises of the authentic connection to knitting traditions of the past, the category of neo-Victorian knitting draws a certain interest because of its accessibility through new technologies. While ethnographic knitting research is limited to the few who have the time and funds and language skills to travel to learn from traditional knitters across the globe, the neo-Victorian knitter can engage in the research necessary to recreate (or play with and rework) Victorian knitting patterns from his or her own desk chair. As most scholars of history and literature are aware, research on out-of-print books is made increasingly easy and accessible

through the proliferation of such sites as *Project Gutenberg*, *Google Books*, and *The Internet Archive*, and amateur knitters interested in historical knitting traditions have also seized the opportunity of conducting historical research through such sites,³ an example of how “neo-Victorian negotiations of visibility draw on media technology, that is, the technology we inherited from nineteenth-century inventions” (Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss 2011: 11). At the same time, in much the same way as their Victorian predecessors made use of affordable new print technologies to disseminate knitting patterns, contemporary publishers of knitting books are meeting market demand for patterns in an affordable way through the use of digital editions. Since Victorian knitting patterns are ultimately a niche interest, and to keep costs down while responding to this limited demand, Interweave Press, for example, has opted to make copies of *Weldon’s Practical Knitter* available in e-book form.⁴

While digital copies of such books allow access to the same recipes that Victorian knitters accessed, this access is generally mediated through the technology of the Internet. For most knitters who engage in knitting Victorian patterns, these entrées into the past are not without other twenty-first century interventions. Many knitters interested in historical knitting patterns do not engage in primary research and instead circumvent the original patterns, which both Sowerby and Rutt note as being “muddled, inaccurate, and often in a style incomprehensible to the modern knitter” and “very poorly edited. Recipes are impossible to follow or contain alarming mistakes, though all claim to be edited with care and precision” (Sowerby 2006: vi; Rutt 1987: 116). There is an element of adaptation, “a simple attempt to make texts ‘relevant’ or easily comprehensible to new audiences and readerships via the process of proximation and updating” that suggests that this temporal distance is also indicative of cultural distance (Sanders 2006: 19). The modernisations in Sowerby’s book and those found in Franklin Habit’s column *Stitches in Time*, published in the free online knitting magazine, *Knitty* (see knitty.com), allow average knitters mediated access to such relics of the past by “featur[ing] antique patterns translated into language modern knitters can follow and often updated for more modern tastes” (Habit n.d.: n.p.).

However, while much of this access, whether translated or untranslated, is simply about the receipt of information, as Gauntlett suggests, the Internet is not simply a new way for crafters to learn their

craft. The Internet not only provides a means of accessing Victorian knitting patterns, but also a means of developing a kind of Victorian knitting 2.0 as knitters, a century and a half later, build on the foundations laid by Victorian pattern writers to develop resources and receipts that incorporate new mediums. The popularity of knitting and Victorian pattern books is supported by knitting websites that follow the Web 2.0 model of group contributions.

Perhaps one of the best examples of such a project is the *KnitWiki*, which followed the wiki model, and as such created an accessible database of terminology, techniques, and knitting patterns in the public domain.⁵ Though not devoted to Victorian knitting, the necessity of abiding by copyright laws invited contributions of nineteenth-century patterns. *KnitWiki* enabled the possibility of lending increased dimensions to the cheap knitting publications of the early Victorian era. Cornelia Mee's *Exercises in Knitting*, which can be found on *Gutenberg* and *LibriVox*, became the focus for a group of volunteers from *LibriVox* who write, "This 1846 knitting book did not include any illustrations. Over time the group of volunteers at *LibriVox* will be adding illustrations for each pattern along with a modern rewriting" (Anon. n.d.: n.p). These illustrations are photographs of examples of the knitting done by these volunteers (see Fig. 3).



Figure No. 3: Photograph of a contemporary interpretation of Cornelia Mee's [Narrow Vandyke Edging](#) from *Exercises in Knitting*, executed and photographed by a member of the LibriVox group for the KnitWiki project.

They bring the original 1846 book into the twenty-first century both by materially crafting its projects, recreating the experience of a Victorian knitter, and also by presenting the finished product as a part of a larger, shared Internet-based project. The simple reproduction of a knit lace border becomes something greater by the connections created in an online community: it becomes a communal work, a cooperative effort of crafters from the twenty-first century and an early pattern writer from the Victorian era.

Additionally, connecting online increases the creative uses of these Victorian archival sources. Though the creativity of crafting versus art is often questioned, such patterns, while providing guidance, notably stand against a mechanised sameness of the industrial age in much the same way as works from the Arts and Crafts movement did, since each individual brings his or her mark to the work through different tension, materials, and tastes. While providing updated patterns based on Victorian lace stitches that make exact reproductions more possible through clear directions that conform to a shared language and symbolic framework familiar to most contemporary knitters, Sowerby likewise encourages creativity in her readers, by offering ideas as to how different Victorian lace stitches might be combined in novel ways. Sowerby herself has re-imagined a nineteenth-century baby's cap and a veil as shawls, arguing that "sometimes it can be helpful to get a new 'take' on an original for inspiration" (Sowerby 2012: n.p.). Implicitly, she invites her readers to engage in comparable re-imaginings of their own.

Such connecting through the Internet to inspire creativity exists on the most popular of all knitting sites, *Ravelry*, a social networking site for knitters with over 5 million members worldwide. Rather than an organised effort to bring Victorian knitting books to life as with the *LibriVox* group, *Ravelry* allows individual members to share their projects (such as this author's project page for the Myrtle Leaf Shawl from *Victorian Lace Today*), so that others may see and learn from them (see Ravelry.com). While its focus is by no means historical, this way of connecting increases the accessibility of patterns, including ones repurposed from nineteenth-century sources, as users might record their own process in creating a neo-Victorian knitted object. Groups and discussion boards found on *Ravelry* include 'The Victorians', 'Weldon's Practical Needlework', 'Historical Knitting', and 'Crafting from the Past', which also allow knitters accessing

historical sources to find the support of others in decoding and understanding original Victorian knitting texts and patterns.

The technologies of the Victorian age created affordable printed patterns that are made extremely accessible to craftspeople of the twenty-first century through both Internet publications and community-created sites. It is both the reproducibility of these patterns created by printing, but also the limitations that one experiences as early patterns so often lack visual elements, that inspire contemporary crafters to decode and reproduce the patterns today. Like the Victorians who explored the globe and pioneered studies in geology, anthropology, and palaeontology, neo-Victorian knitters are able to approach their craft with a spirit of discovery and re-discovery. At the same time, contemporary crafters, much like their Victorian cousins, may also seek a slower pace, a means of connecting with a simpler way of life that emerges in response to today's fast-paced life and contemporary technology.

Not unlike their neo-Victorian counterparts, the large numbers of Victorian knitters who purchased the original nineteenth-century knitting publications were affected by the dramatic changes in technology of their age. As benefactors of industrialisation, more middle-class women looked for ways to spend their time that was suitably domestic and practical. The new abundance of leisure time allowed for the turn to handicrafts at the same time as new inventions limited their necessity. Because of this turn, knitting now bespoke leisure and marked a middle-class status where it had earlier been looked down upon as a peasant activity.

Today, many hand-knitters work in addition to managing a household, and certainly the vast majority do not have servants for domestic labour. As a result, knitting may no longer be a way of productively filling one's days; rather, the current trend for knitting may be a way of re-imagining oneself as a person, like the idealised middle-class woman of Victorian conduct manuals, who has an excess of free time that is best spent appropriately and creatively. Neo-Victorian knitting provides for a fantasy of escapism, of projecting oneself back to a time where knitting might be equated with productive leisure, of days spent waiting for the hours to pass, picking up the needles in order to "get rid of those hours which, but for their aid, might not be so innocently disposed of" (Anon. 1838: 260).

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Notes

1. See, e.g., F. K. Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century England* and Dorice Williams Elliot, *The Angel out of the House: Philanthropy and Gender in Nineteenth-Century England*.
2. Mohair is often blended with silk, making the fibre blend considerably more up-market
3. An invaluable addition to these primary sources has been realised in the digitisation of nineteenth-century knitting books from the personal library of Richard Rutt (author of *A History of Hand Knitting*) as part of the Knitting Reference Library at the University of Southampton (see southampton.ac.uk).
4. Interweave Press first published facsimiles from *Weldon's Practical Needlework* in book form from 1999 to 2005, but currently offers the patterns only in e-book form.
5. The format of KnitWiki has changed since its original inception and the LibriVox group project: "The KnitWiki opened on February 21st 2007 and has 328 articles. It was changed to a WordPress blog in April 2014 due to spam problems" (Anon. n.d.: n.p.).

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