

Victorian Negotiations with the Recent Past: History, Fiction, Utopia

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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Abstract

The challenges of contemporary-history-writing were brought into relief in Britain in the nineteenth century. Philosophical and pragmatic factors made the recent past a subject of discomfort for historians, but popular with novelists. Changing concepts of time and social value made it more difficult to draw boundaries on the remit of historiography, and to decide which individuals were worthy of inclusion. As a period still present in diverse living memories, the recent past was associated with multiplicity and particularity, in an era that valued grand and singular narratives, and looked to history to provide them.

This was exacerbated in the later Victorian period by the establishment of history as a university discipline. Historians sought professional credibility, and thus avoided including the as-yet inconclusive recent past in their national histories. Those historians who did incorporate it often struggled to maintain a consistent tone, seeking overview while aware of their lack of hindsight. They resorted to the trope of 'nation' to impose apparent social unity.

By contrast, the recent past was popular with novelists. This more personal genre enabled mid-century women writers to write provincial and localised narratives. By using polyphonic and ironic narrators, they commented on history without claiming definitive judgement, and gave voice to 'unhistoric' individuals. They included women, however, more successfully than they did the working class.

At the end of the century, socialist writers seeking social transformation set utopian fictions in the future, enabling them to look back with an imaginary hindsight, and write contemporary history with impunity. They were, however, still faced with the problem of agency. The quasi-religious significance that had earlier been attributed to 'History' was now transferred to the collective. These genres, therefore, all offered different opportunities for contemporary-history-writing, but could not solve its intrinsic challenges.

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Introduction

Who's afraid of contemporary history?

This thesis explores the challenges involved in writing contemporary history, through the particular lens of the Victorian era. It considers how Victorian writers dealt with the tension between the high cultural status accorded to a singular and unifying 'History', and the messy multiplicity of the recent past. It examines how this issue was approached by writers of three different genres, to find out how the associated generic expectations influenced the strategies they used to deal with these tensions. Contemporary history is always a thorny issue. In comparison with our relationship to more distant history, we lack sufficient hindsight to make definitive assessments, and even to select which people and events are the most significant. What is more, the sheer volume of experiential knowledge – still present in living memory – about the recent past makes it irreducibly multiple, and difficult to distil into a historical – singular and generalising – narrative. The challenges of this process can be illuminated by examining its manifestations in the Victorian period, when, I will argue, it became notably contested.

The nineteenth century has been designated 'The Age of History' by figures as diverse as Michel Foucault (1966) and Stephen Bann (1995).¹ This is a characterisation that has not merely been superimposed by twentieth-century critics, but was embraced even in its midst: J. S. Mill (1831) considered 'the idea of comparing one's own age with former ages' to be, as 'never before', the 'dominant idea' of his age.² This was the era in which a loosely Hegelian historicism transformed the cultural status and position of history.³ The period also saw a new pre-occupation with the particular details of the past, amply demonstrated in the Victorian period in the gothic and medievalist revivals.⁴ And the process by which

¹ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 217. Bann describes history becoming, between the French Revolution and the end of the nineteenth century, 'a substratum to almost every type of cultural activity.' Stephen Bann, *Romanticism and the Rise of History* (New York: Twayne, 1995), p. 7.

² J. S. Mill, *The Spirit of the Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942), p. 1.

³ See Lionel Gossman, 'History and Literature: Reproduction or Signification', in *Between History and Literature* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1990); Ann Rigney, *Imperfect Histories: The Elusive Past and the Legacy of Romantic Historicism* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2001).

⁴ See Alice Chandler, *A Dream of Order: The Medieval Ideal in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (London: Routledge, 1971); Chris Brooks, *The Gothic Revival* (London: Phaidon, 1999); Michael

the past becomes written and codified as ‘history’ also came under new scrutiny, culminating in the establishment of an academic discipline.⁵ The founders of the *English Historical Review*, perhaps unsurprisingly, used their inaugural issue in 1886 to declare that ‘history ... is the central study among human studies, capable of illuminating and enriching all the rest.’⁶

In the field of Victorian Studies, the era is so often characterised as pre-occupied with history as to make it almost a truism.⁷ Recent work that takes an interdisciplinary approach, and which looks beyond elite cultural products to examine the circulation of popular historical figures and narratives, has done a great deal to nuance this blanket characterisation.⁸ This thesis will tease apart the idea still further by demonstrating that Victorian attitudes towards the past, far from being homogeneous, diverged on the basis of a perceived difference between the grand narrative of (distant) history and the messy multiplicity of the recent past.

Little scholarly attention has been paid to Victorian relationships with their recent past. This has generally been considered in either of two ways. The first and predominant of these is nostalgia. Raymond Williams’ concept of the ‘moving escalator’ (1973) effectively characterised that recurrent tendency to look back just ‘over the last hill’, always situating an ideal pastoral past in the writer’s childhood, just beyond recovery.⁹ In the fiction of George Eliot, for example, the 1820s could be viewed as a pre-lapsarian moment, pre-Reform and pre-Victorian. It could be

Alexander, *Medievalism: The Middle Ages in Modern England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); Clare A. Simmons, *Popular Medievalism in Romantic-Era Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011).

⁵ See Rosemary Jann, *The Art and Science of Victorian History* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1985); Philippa Levine, *The Amateur and the Professional: Antiquarians, Historians and Archaeologists in Victorian England 1838–1886* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Reba N. Soffer, *Discipline and Power: The University, History, and the Making of an English Elite, 1870–1930* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1994); Ian Hesketh, *The Science of History in Victorian Britain: Making the Past Speak* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2011).

⁶ [James Bryce], ‘Prefatory Note’, *English Historical Review*, 1 (1886), 1–6 (p. 5).

⁷ Notable studies of Victorian historical-mindedness include: Jerome Buckley, *The Triumph of Time: Victorian Concepts of Time, History, Progress and Decadence* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966); A. Dwight Culler, *The Victorian Mirror of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); Raymond Chapman, *The Sense of the Past in Victorian Literature* (Beckenham: Croom Helm, 1986).

⁸ Chief among the former are the publications that have emerged from the Cambridge Victorian Studies Group through the Leverhulme-funded project on ‘Past versus Present: Abandoning the Past in an Age of Progress’. Forthcoming results of this project include Adelene Buckland and Sadiya Qureshi, eds., *Time Travellers: Victorian Perspectives on the Past* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Clare Pettitt, *Distant Contemporaries: The Invention of a Shared Present* (forthcoming, 2014). Chief among the latter are Stephanie Barczewski, *Myth and National Identity in Nineteenth-Century Britain: The Legends of King Arthur and Robin Hood* (Oxford University Press, 2000); Billie Melman, *The Culture of History: English Uses of the Past, 1800–1953* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁹ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Hogarth Press, 1985), pp. 9, 10.

imagined in pastoral terms, a time before the coming of the railways and before the rural population became outweighed by the urban.¹⁰ The second is shame. The more extended pre-Victorian period of the Industrial and French Revolutions, Napoleonic Wars and repressive reactionary governments, could also be characterised as a site of traumatic transformation and disruption. Important work has also been done in recent decades in a postcolonial framework, examining Victorian attempts to rewrite uncomfortable aspects of their history, most notably their involvement in the slave trade being reformulated as a history of the abolition movement.¹¹ But I will show that, for reasons that extend beyond these two emotional responses, Victorian writers of both fiction and history were intensely preoccupied by, and fraught with anxiety about, their recent past, and the question of how it could – or could not – be written into the national historical narrative.

While attention has been paid over the past half-century, notably under the aegis of the *Journal of Contemporary History*, to the issue of writing recent history, the discussion has been conducted primarily in terms of post-war history.¹² This is epitomised in Llewellyn Woodward's use of the term in the journal's inaugural issue in 1966. He delineates how

the arrangements of modern society, the necessity, from a practical point of view, of getting, recording and diffusing information, provide the historian with far more material than at any previous time. ... contemporary society

¹⁰ Robert Woods offers the 1850s as 'the decade in which half Britain's population can be classified as urban.' See Robert Woods, *The Population of Britain in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 11.

¹¹ Some events of the recent past, typically those colonial or imperial events whose shameful content could be rewritten as heroic defence of British liberties, were given significant attention by historians. These include slavery (and its abolition), the Afghan Wars, and even the 'Indian Mutiny'. On the Victorian re-writing of these phenomena, see, on slavery, Catherine Hall, *Civilizing Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830–1867* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002); Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837*, rev. ed. [1992] (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); Richard Huzzey, *Freedom Burning: Anti-Slavery and Empire in Victorian Britain* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2012). On the First Afghan War (1839–42) see Muireann O'Conneide, 'Conflict and Imperial Communication: Narrating the First Afghan War', in *Conflict and Difference in Nineteenth-Century Literature*, ed. by Dinah Birch and Mark Llewellyn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 52–65. On the 'Indian Mutiny' of 1857, see Gautam Chakravarty, *The Indian Mutiny and the British Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

In parallel to this, however, some traumatic events that seemed devoid of any constructive or morale-boosting message, even unrepresentable full stop, were largely left unwritten. See Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben, eds., *Neo-Victorian Tropes of Trauma: The Politics of Bearing After-Witness to Nineteenth-Century Suffering* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2010). Recent work has suggested that British reaction to nineteenth-century famines exemplifies this strategy. See Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* (London: Verso, 2001).

¹² See David Thomson, 'The Writing of Contemporary History', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 2 (1967), 25–34; Peter Catterall, 'What (If Anything) Is Distinctive About Contemporary History?', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 32 (1997), 441–52.

leave[s], in the normal course of its operations, a more complete record of its manifold business.¹³

Here the word ‘contemporary’ is used as interchangeable with ‘modern’ or ‘twentieth-century’, underlining my point that the *past* writing of contemporary histories has been largely overlooked. The possibility or otherwise of writing contemporary history was, however, a persistent concern in the Victorian period, and is thus worthy of further study.

The focus of this scholarly discussion on the post-Second World War context is perhaps unsurprising, because in the twenty-first century, contemporary history is ubiquitous. Oral history is an established research method, the genealogy industry is thriving, and the secondary school curriculum focuses primarily on the twentieth century.¹⁴ Knowledge of recent history is assumed to be the most necessary: more distant historical periods are viewed as the remit of specialists. In the nineteenth century, by contrast, the period within living memory was barely considered part of history. One account of elementary education in the 1890s relates:

‘History’, as taught by the board school, left us with a vague impression that up to the time of Queen Elizabeth, this country had been occupied exclusively by kings and queens, good, bad and indifferent and from Queen Elizabeth onwards were the Dark Ages, since we never heard of anything happening in that period. The American War of Independence, indeed the existence of the United States of America, was hushed up.¹⁵

As this demonstrates, late-Victorian history-teaching avoided anything that encroached upon ground familiar to its pupils. This applied in two dimensions, the

¹³ Llewellyn Woodward, ‘The Study of Contemporary History’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 1 (1966), 1–13 (p. 5).

¹⁴ The current Key Stage 2 (primary school) curriculum requires pupils to study one of ‘Victorian Britain’ or ‘Britain since 1930’. <<http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/teachingandlearning/curriculum/primary/b00199012/history/ks2>> [accessed 1 November 2012]. Key Stage 3 focuses on the twentieth century. In ‘European and World History’, options include ‘the nature and impact of the two world wars and the Holocaust’. <<http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/teachingandlearning/curriculum/secondary/b00199545/history/programme/range>> [accessed 1 November 2012] The A-level syllabus exacerbates this trend, with the AQA exam board’s A-level ‘Unit 2’ offering one medieval option, five broadly early-modern, two nineteenth-century, and ten twentieth-century. <<http://filestore.aqa.org.uk/subjects/AQA-2040-W-SP.PDF>> [accessed 23 August 2013]

Michael Gove’s proposed changes to the 2014 curriculum would implement something of a return to the Victorian rationale of distant history for children, with increasing temporal proximity correlating with increased specialisation. Although the National Curriculum for Key Stage 1 suggests study should include ‘changes within living memory’, the overall framework for Key Stages 1 and 2 teaches distant history, beginning with the Stone Age. It was initially proposed to run up to the 1707 Act of Union, but feasibility constraints have pushed this endpoint back to 1066. <https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/210969/NC_framework_document_-_FINAL.pdf> [accessed 18 July 2013]

¹⁵ Frederick Willis, *101 Jubilee Road: A Book of London Yesterdays* (London: Phoenix House, 1948), pp. 76–7.

temporal and the social. History that either dipped beneath the radar of ‘kings and queens’, or pressed forward chronologically to ‘the Dark Ages’ of recent history, was alike eschewed.¹⁶ In this, it mirrored the practice of university historians, who were becoming increasingly established in the academy by the end of the century. Without the hindsight they deemed necessary to view the recent past in its due proportions, such historians typically avoided writing about it altogether. Most Victorian national histories come to a sudden halt at least a century away from their time of writing: a favourite endpoint is the ‘Glorious Revolution’ of 1688.

As is already becoming obvious, in this study ‘recent past’ is a relatively fluid label and not measured in strictly numerical terms. It cannot be defined as ‘the last 20 years’ or ‘the last half-century’. It was sometimes defined negatively: whatever breadth of time was excluded from ‘history’ proper. Diverse writers of Victorian national histories describe the period beyond their temporal endpoint as too recent to judge properly, but, as discussed further in Chapter 2, this varies from 1815 as far back as 1688. ‘The recent past’ can also be seen as the period of time within living memory. This seems to be a particularly Victorian pre-occupation. The *OED* cites as the first known example of the notion of ‘living memory’ a phrase from the opening of Macaulay’s *History of England*, in which he proclaims his intention ‘to write the history of England from the accession of King James the Second down to a time which is within the memory of men still living’¹⁷ (although he was never to fulfil this ambition, his history eventually ending in 1702), and he goes on to repeat this combination of terms in the more familiar form of ‘living memory’.¹⁸ Taken literally, this phrase would be an oxymoron: ‘memory’ is categorically of the past, while ‘living’ suggests it is still present. It is in this paradox of absence and presence that the recent past finds its uncertain status. Exacerbating memory’s awkward relationship to history is the fact that it is an amorphous entity, composed of multiple strata. Since at any one time several generations are living simultaneously (and even one individual’s sense of generational identity may fluctuate in different familial,

¹⁶ Stephen Heathorn gives details of a 1914 Board of Education circular (no. 833), which suggested that in the historical readers that ‘were required to make up at least a third of reading texts after 1880’, the best topics of study were ‘the Crusades, the Civil War, the reign of Elizabeth, the great wars for Colonial Supremacy, and the war of American Independence.’ Stephen J. Heathorn, *For Home, Country, and Race: Gender, Class, and Englishness in the Elementary School, 1880–1914*, 1st edn (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), pp. 40, 43.

¹⁷ Thomas Babington Macaulay, *The History of England from the Accession of James the Second*, ed. by Charles Harding Firth, 6 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1913), I, 1.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, III, 1442.

social or public groupings), any particular historical event will always be ‘within living memory’ of only *some* of the population. We might talk of Scott’s ‘Sixty Years Since’ as being within living memory, since he spoke to people who could remember the Forty-Five, even though he himself had not lived through it.¹⁹ What characterises all these versions of the ‘recent past’ is that it resists generalisation: it exists not just on paper and in artefacts but in living people and their memories. It was partly this quality that made it a site of discomfort for Victorian culture: still present as experience in the minds of multiple individuals, it cannot easily be codified into generalised textual form.

The recent past was by no means unanimously eschewed by Victorian writers. Their relationship with it was one of anxiety in both senses, encompassing fascination as well as antipathy. A few unconventional historians did undertake the task of trying to write this liminal period in historical form. Despite these aberrations from the norm, however, there was a striking divergence on this issue along lines of genre. While the recent past was avoided by most historians, there was an upsurge in that most ‘living memory’-focused cluster of genres, autobiography, memoir and biography. And the trend was not only confined to avowedly factual forms. Inspired by Walter Scott’s historical novels, in the first half of the nineteenth century writers of both history and fiction sought to appropriate this profitable middle ground, a ‘picturesque’ history both particularist in its details and sweepingly historicist in its overview, for their own form.²⁰ The notion of a fictional narrative, set in the past, but in the past of living memory, came to be seen as not only possible but extremely attractive. An overwhelming number of Victorian novels – both canonical and otherwise – are set in precisely this liminal region of recent past, projected retrospectively by 30 or 40 years. Many of the novels that are received by twenty-first-century television audiences as ‘period dramas’, representing an amorphous nineteenth century of bonnets and breeches, would have been noticeably retrospective to their first readers, offering a specifically historical representation and commenting implicitly on the trajectory taken by their society in the intervening years between writing and setting.

As the phenomenon of the historical novel demonstrates, this was a situation distinctive to the nineteenth century. Early Victorian fiction and history were less

¹⁹ Walter Scott, *Waverley; or, 'Tis Sixty Years Since*, ed. by Claire Lamont (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

²⁰ For a discussion of the associations and significance of the term ‘picturesque’, see Rosemary Mitchell, *Picturing the Past: English History in Text and Image, 1830–1870* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000).

disparate genres, and thus trod on each other's feet more uncomfortably, than had their eighteenth-century counterparts. Although eighteenth-century novelists typically sought to ape the conventions of historiography, presenting their creations as historical documents, their historian peers did not reciprocate. They did not view the novelists as a threat, because they perceived their roles so differently. This thesis shows nineteenth-century novelists and historians struggling to balance the relative merits of the general and particular. This had been less of a problem in the previous century. While the nascent novel form sold itself on its intimacy and particularity, what was most highly valorised in eighteenth-century history-writing was generalisation. Mark Salber Phillips and Matthew Adams have usefully revised and complicated the traditional picture of an entirely impersonal or detached eighteenth-century history, pointing to the concern with sensibility and sympathetic proximity which permeated even 'general' history-writing in the later eighteenth century. However, as Adams concedes, 'though the sympathetic identification aimed for here was indeed powerful, it was also ... quite deliberately limited. These were sentimental *scenes*, studded within a more general, more abstract prose.'²¹ Engagement with individual lives was not completely outside the remit of history, but it was subordinated to a more elevated purpose. Philip Hicks explains that

The English saw in antiquity as well as contemporary England two distinct kinds of history, two different genres. On the one hand, they identified what they often designated 'particular' history, usually the history of one's own times, and on the other hand 'general' or 'complete' history, as it was sometimes called. A history of the world, a kingdom, or an empire was general history. The history of a monarch's reign, a war or a family was particular history.²²

In this way, the recent past was typically not part of the remit of the 'general' historian, but given over to those with an insider knowledge of the era's political figures. Earlier, baroque efforts at the genre – such as Bishop Gilbert Burnet's *History of My Own Time*, which was written throughout the reigns of the later Stuarts, and first published in 1724 – were known as 'secret history',²³ and had been highly personal, gossipy insiders'

²¹ Matthew Adams, 'A View of the Past: History, Painting and the Manipulation of Distance', *Literature and History*, 11 (2002), 20–40 (p. 21); Mark Salber Phillips, *Society and Sentiment: Genres of Historical Writing in Britain, 1740–1820* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000); Mark Salber Phillips, 'Relocating Inwardness: Historical Distance and the Transition from Enlightenment to Romantic Historiography', *PMLA*, 118 (2003), 436–49.

²² Philip Hicks, *Neoclassical History and English Culture* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), p. 13.

²³ See Richard Maxwell, *The Historical Novel in Europe, 1650–1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 15.

views of the period's political machinations, more memoir than 'history' as we know it.²⁴ The recent past was thus already associated with 'particular' detail and impossibility of overview.

'General' histories in the classical tradition, in contrast, consciously held back from such immersion. The 'sentimental scenes' described by Phillips and Adams were the result of the demands of classical rhetoric, which called for regular variation in tone, rather than an integral part of any project to evoke past worlds for the reader. Illustrative of this is the fact that the speeches in Hume's *History of England*, in the tradition of classical historians such as Livy and Thucydides, are often interpolated inventions by the author. As Hume characterised it, 'We shall relate, in a few words, the topics, by which each side supported, or *might* have supported, their scheme of policy.'²⁵ This approach evidently values style – and pedagogy – over 'authenticity': it is less important for Hume that his characters specifically recreate a past historical moment, than that they be eloquent, inspire high ideals, and provide effective moral exempla. Moreover, the easy slippage between the past and conditional tenses, in 'supported, or *might* have supported', reveals a typically Enlightenment belief in a universal human nature. It was acceptable to fill in the gaps in this way because – if human nature was universal – a historian could make a credible estimate as to the thoughts of classical politicians, on the basis of prior understanding of human behaviour. This understanding effectively gave the historian the authority of hindsight, even when the precise evidence was lacking and there was, in literal terms, nothing to see.

In contrast, from the Napoleonic period onwards, a historicist approach (developed most influentially by G. W. F. Hegel, and brought into British intellectual culture largely via the Romantic movement) came to dominate ideas of history.²⁶ Historicism is a slippery term, because it can be used in several senses. The *OED* offers three main definitions: first, a 'preoccupation with the styles or values of the past ... frequently used pejoratively', a sense that allies it with conservatism. Secondly, it can refer to 'various beliefs that social and cultural phenomena cannot be considered independently of their historical context', and thirdly, 'the belief that

²⁴ Bishop Gilbert Burnet, *History of His Own Time*, ed. by David Allen (London: Everyman, 1991).

²⁵ David Hume, *The History of England, from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution of 1688*, 8 vols. (London: A. Millar, 1783), iv, p. 450. Qtd. Hicks, p. 180.

²⁶ See Lionel Gossman, 'History as Decipherment: Romantic Historiography and the Discovery of the Other', *New Literary History*, 18 (1986), 23–57; Rigney, *Imperfect Histories*; Peter Fritzsche, *Stranded in the Present: Modern Time and the Melancholy of History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004).

historical processes are determined by natural laws rather than human choice and agency'.²⁷ It can be defined very widely, as in Morris R. Cohen's characterisation of 'a faith that history is the main road to wisdom in human affairs',²⁸ or, in F. R. Ankersmit's terms, 'a dynamization of the static world-view of the Enlightenment'.²⁹ Karl Mannheim famously described historicism as 'not a fad or a mere fashion' but 'the world view itself, which came into being after the religiously-conditioned medieval conception of the world had fallen apart and after the secularized world-picture of the Enlightenment which grew out of it – with its fundamental idea of a supra-temporal Reason – had been dialectically transcended.'³⁰ In the nineteenth century, historicism manifested itself in two ways relevant to this thesis: firstly, in a new concern with the specifics of a particular historical moment; secondly, in a belief in a continuum of past, present and future. Whereas Enlightenment concepts of history saw particularity as at most supplementary and supportive to generalisation, and for this reason among others excluded the recent past, in the historicist framework, the recent past is as much part of history as any other era.

The temporal continuum

Historicism's insistence that any past event could only be understood in its historical context assumed that human culture (if not human nature) changes through time. This demanded a new recognition of the people of the past as radically *unlike* those of the present. On the other hand, historicism's emphasis on underlying laws, which govern past, present and future, imply a temporal continuity through millennia. While each stage of historical development is unique, all are united by the same processes. Stephen Bann has encapsulated the double nature of historicism as one in which 'History as the Law, inscribed on tablets of stone, contrasts and combines with

²⁷ 'Historicism', *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, March 2012) <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/87304?redirectedFrom=historicism#eid>> [accessed 31 January 2013].

²⁸ Morris R. Cohen, *The Meaning of Human History* (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1947), p. 16.

²⁹ F. R. Ankersmit, 'Historicism: An Attempt at Synthesis', *History and Theory*, 34 (1995), 143–61 (p. 143).

³⁰ See Karl Mannheim, 'De Historismus', in *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*, ed. by Paul Kecskemeti (New York: Oxford University Press, 1952), pp. 246–7. Most proponents of historicism would reject Popper's antagonistic 1957 definition of it as a belief that historical laws enable prediction of future events. See Karl Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

history as a sustaining Otherness.’³¹ It is the strand of historicist thought concerned with continuum that comes to the forefront in this thesis. The most influential philosophical systems developed in the nineteenth century were all broadly historicist in this sense: Hegel was to influence thinkers as otherwise divergent in their implications as Comte and Marx. Despite marking sharp changes between stages in their models of development, their theories are notable for their sense of the ultimate *unity* of all timeframes, incorporating the recent past – and even the present and future – in an overarching historical trajectory. In historiography of this school, therefore, the recent past should logically be included. On the other hand, within a temporal continuum, where there is no clear dividing line between history and modernity, past and present, the inhabitants of the latter are denied any lofty platform to look back from. Acquiring the necessary position of detached hindsight becomes all the more difficult, and writing the recent past as history thus becomes problematic.

As a result, writings that adhere to this notion of a temporal continuum are characterised by a heightened sense of our own insignificance and the inadequacy of our immersed perspective, in relation to the judgements of posterity. The emergence of this viewpoint predates the Victorian period. Stephen Bann and those who have followed him have made a strong case for the Romantic era as the site of origin of a new ‘historical-mindedness’.³² Andrew Bennett suggests that ‘Romanticism itself might be described in terms of a certain value accorded the theory and practice of writing for posterity.’³³ Drawing on Leo Braudy’s argument that in modern, secular society, ‘fame and the approval of posterity replace belief in an afterlife’, he suggests that the ‘Romantic’ poets, lacking adequate recognition during their own lifetime, imagined future eras finally catching up with their insights and able to value them properly.³⁴ The post-Romantic generations of the Victorian period were, however, just as concerned as were the Romantics themselves with the judgements of posterity. John Burrow argues that after 1830, when Charles Lyell reinforced popular consciousness of the ‘deep time’ proposed by Hutton in the eighteenth century, and expounded his theory of sedimentary gradualism, the geological metaphors used in analogies shift from those of volcanic eruption to ones ‘almost invariably

³¹ Stephen Bann, *The Clothing of Clio: A Study of the Representation of History in Nineteenth-Century Britain and France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 177.

³² Bann, *Romanticism and the Rise of History*, p. 52; Rigney, *Imperfect Histories*; Fritzsche, *Stranded in the Present*.

³³ Andrew Bennett, *Romantic Poets and the Culture of Posterity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 2.

³⁴ Leo Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and Its History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), p. 28.

sedimentary. ... Henry Maine uses it for law, Bagehot for society as a whole.³⁵ Burrow argues that the image of history as a sedimentary process makes it one 'whose longer-term significance lay far beyond the knowledge of the actors engaged in it, for it could only be perceived retrospectively and therefore necessarily ironically, though perhaps reverentially.'³⁶ People were unlikely ever to have enough hindsight to judge the eventual outcomes of events that happened in their own lifetime. A heightened consciousness of the enormous time-scale of geological and, by implication, historical impact, made it all the more difficult to acquire an external perspective on historical events. It forced writers of history to reconcile themselves to the fact that the full impact of the events they describe and debate might still be unknown.

As a result, an absence of hindsight is often used to defer judgement to posterity, to position the contemporary generation as a mere link in a larger chain. This is a position traceable back to the Romantic era, and the pronouncements of self-proclaimed 'Old Whig' Edmund Burke. In his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), he had insisted that the social contract 'becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are yet to be born'.³⁷ This deference to preceding and subsequent generations was taken up by historicist thinkers of the Victorian period. In 'The Lamp of Memory' (1849), almost three decades before the establishment of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, John Ruskin condemns architectural 'restoration' on the grounds that

it is ... no question of expediency or feeling whether we shall preserve the buildings of past times or not. We have no right whatever to touch them. They are not ours. They belong partly to those who built them, and partly to all the generations of mankind who are to follow us.³⁸

In this striking passage, in which Ruskin self-consciously challenges the standard definition of ownership, he attempts to take the reader from a position immersed in the all-consuming demands of their present to one of elevated overview. This latter

³⁵ J. W. Burrow, 'Images of Time: From Carlylean Vulcanism to Sedimentary Gradualism', in *History, Religion and Culture: British Intellectual History, 1750–1950*, ed. by Stefan Collini, Richard Whatmore, and Brian Young (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 198–223 (p. 215).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

³⁷ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. by Leslie George Mitchell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 96.

³⁸ John Ruskin, 'Seven Lamps of Architecture', in *The Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, ed. by E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols. (London: George Allen, 1903), VIII, 245.

perspective moves away from the primacy of the contemporary individual to privilege both past and future over the present, viewing these timeframes as just as concrete – just as ‘present’ – as the present itself.

A plea for self-sacrifice in the name of posterity can also be heard in George Eliot’s writings. In ‘A Political Molecule’, one of the fragmentary essays that make up her last published work, *The Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1879), the narrator satirises an anonymous ‘celebrated person’ who had resentfully ‘asked what Posterity had done for him that he should care for Posterity?’³⁹ This ironic line points to the problem of what has been represented variously by Walter Benjamin as ‘the angel of history’, and by Stephen Gould as ‘time’s arrow’: the fact that while we must work for the future, it cannot reciprocate – at least not when we want it to.⁴⁰ The impossible dual perspective imagined by Theophrastus looks back from an unknowable but nonetheless concretised future at the same time as looking forward into it from a past that is still a work in progress. This quotation from *Theophrastus Such* is striking in its subversion of the normal progression of past to present to future, bringing these three timeframes into a more malleable, reciprocal relationship, one in which past and future actually impact upon one another, rather than lying in a sequence of strict linear progression. In this framework, the future has a responsibility towards the past as much as vice versa. As these two examples demonstrate, a commitment to the idea of a historical continuum both encourages and dissuades the inclusion of the recent past in history. Ruskin and Eliot assume that the recent past is just as much part of ‘History’ as every other time span – including the future – but they also both problematise the role of hindsight, undermining the means by which historians might attempt to gain some leverage over the period.

The sense of a larger, transcendent historical significance to human actions runs through much nineteenth-century writing. In a period in which literal Biblical interpretations of human history were being challenged from several directions, ideals of transcendence were being dispersed more widely and even diverted into new channels.⁴¹ Several critics have argued that ‘History’ came to represent a secular

³⁹ George Eliot, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such, Essays, and Leaves from a Note-Book* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1902), p. 71.

⁴⁰ Walter Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), p. 249; Stephen Jay Gould, *Time’s Arrow, Time’s Cycle: Myth and Metaphor in the Discovery of Geological Time* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987).

⁴¹ It should be noted that this thesis argues for a dispersal rather than a disappearance of religious feeling in the nineteenth century. Recent scholarly work has done a lot to nuance the stereotype of the

substitute. In Christina Crosby's exposition of its centrality to nineteenth-century thought, she asserts that via history, man 'is disqualified from immediate self-presence; he cannot know himself simply through reflection because he is inscribed in a history that precedes and exceeds him, which, in fact, determines his mode of being. ... History is, thus, first a displacement and then a reconfirmation, at a more abstract level, of man himself.'⁴² This pattern of self-sacrifice and self-abnegation, followed ultimately by salvation and reunion, is one reminiscent, perhaps not coincidentally, of the central narrative arc of Christianity.

Despite generally being emphatically anti-religious – in the cases of Comte and Marx even attempting to theorise the death of religion – the innovative philosophies of the nineteenth century retain from the Judeo-Christian worldview a sense of historical teleology. John D. Rosenberg captures this quality in his analysis that

much has rightly been made of the 'disappearance of God' in the literature of the nineteenth century ... but the metaphor of 'displacement' rather than 'disappearance' more truly describes the wrenching shift felt in the locus of the divine. The divine energies had not been dissipated so much as transmuted, the Word not eradicated but discovered in new places.⁴³

The most potent of these 'new places' was what Rosenberg terms the 'temporal scripture' of History.⁴⁴ In this new framework, in which history was characterised as both mystical and purposive, it took on some of the attributes of a revealed religion.

Drawing on Hegel's anatomisation of the word 'history' (*Geschichte*),⁴⁵ Jim Reilly has emphasised this term's 'particular duality of reference', as

both a form of study and that study's referent As a term it resists any separation, let alone ordering in priority, of being and discourse, of the signified and the sign. Thus in the context of our Western intellectual traditions the term history carries an aura almost magical. By compounding these apparently opposed registers it suggests a promise of hidden synthesis, hints at

'death of religion' in the Victorian era, with Callum Brown arguing for the 1960s, rather than the Darwinian 1860s, as the key period for the loss of faith, and Miriam Burstein demonstrating the continued use of religious and theological frameworks to structure and inform historical thinking. See Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation, 1800–2000*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2009); Miriam Elizabeth Burstein, *Victorian Reformations: Historical Fiction and Religious Controversy, 1820–1900* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013).

⁴² Christina Crosby, *The Ends of History: Victorians and 'the Woman Question'* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 2.

⁴³ John D. Rosenberg, *Carlyle and the Burden of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 9.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. by J. Sibree, [1830–1] (New York: Dover, 1956), p. 60.

a healing of the great rift dividing action and significance, matter and meaning.⁴⁶

Extending Reilly's analysis, I would suggest that this transcendent quality represents a third sense of the term, which came to prominence in nineteenth-century historicism. This thesis distinguishes between three referents of the term 'history', using lower-case and upper-case initial 'H' to aid clarity. Neil McCaw has already distinguished (in a footnote to an essay that shares much ground with this thesis) 'between history (as events) and History (as historiography)'.⁴⁷ My distinctions, however, are tripartite. In this thesis, 'history' with a lower-case 'h' refers to the events of the past. I use 'historiography' where McCaw uses 'History', to avoid overlap, because for me, 'History' with an upper-case 'H' can refer to two further senses of the term. 'History' is used to label an academic discipline with its own codes and institutional apparatus. I recognise that historiography can be written both inside and outside that establishment, so the two terms are not synonymous. My final sense is that evoked by Rosenberg in the quotation above: History as a 'temporal scripture'.

In the context of this transcendent view of History, however, the messy multiplicity of the recent past becomes particularly problematic. This ideal of a unitary history is difficult to reconcile with the practicalities of experiencing, remembering and assessing the time period within living memory. The generalisation and narrative unity so prized by Hegelian historicism becomes virtually impossible to hold on to at the juncture where a grand historical past comes crashing into the messy detail of still-current lives. In his inaugural lecture as Professor of Poetry at Oxford, delivered in 1857, Matthew Arnold imagined a comprehension of 'present and past' through general laws as a 'deliverance' from

that impatient irritation of mind which we feel in presence of an immense, moving, confused spectacle which, while it perpetually excites our curiosity, perpetually baffles our comprehension.⁴⁸

In the term 'deliverance', the power of the discipline of History to superimpose coherence takes on an almost messianic character. But how does one create a manageable mental image, a shorthand, for the recent past, a period still multiple in

⁴⁶ Jim Reilly, *Shadowtime: History and Representation in Hardy, Conrad and George Eliot* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 8–9.

⁴⁷ Neil McCaw, 'Toward a Literary Historiography in Gaskell and Eliot', in *Clio's Daughters: British Women Making History, 1790–1899*, ed. by Lynette Felber (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2007), pp. 179–97 (p. 194).

⁴⁸ Matthew Arnold, *On the Classical Tradition*, ed. by R. H. Super (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1960), p. 20.

its associations? While the medieval era could be mythologised as spiritual, and the Restoration could be stereotyped as licentious, it was rather more difficult to create an archetype of several million living individuals.

The social continuum

This sense of what I have been calling ‘History’, or historicist time, has two crucial dimensions: temporal and social. Its transcendent quality stems both from the enormity of the time it encompasses, and the breadth and number of people living through history, in a context in which definitive knowledge of either seems impossible. As well as a temporal continuum, we have the problem of a social continuum: all people as well as all time periods are at least potentially ‘historical’. The confluence of these two sites of (non)knowledge has been the subject of recent critical discussion. A collection of essays edited by Suzy Anger asks, bringing together these two concerns: ‘can we know others or the past?’⁴⁹ Both that study and my own proceed in a framework articulated by Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, who proposes the interchangeability, from the Victorian period onwards, of ‘history’ and ‘social time’. She insists, ‘History *is* social time. Social time is history. The very idea of society as an entity depends upon the historical convention ‘in’ which ‘it’ can be perceived according to a particular grammar of perspective.’⁵⁰ This shift simultaneously assuaged and challenged the Victorian desire for epistemological unity. The idea that all times and peoples are part of the same fabric enables a transcendent, unifying conception of existence. At the same time, however, it insistently emphasises that all people are equally *real*, and equally part of history, in a social continuum. In that case, can historiography ever provide an adequate representation of society?

For the Victorian generations, the writer most associated with this issue was the Scottish essayist, polemicist and historian Thomas Carlyle. In an 1830 article in *Fraser’s Magazine*, one of his earliest publications, he challenged accepted norms of what determines historical significance.

When the oak-tree is felled, the whole forest echoes with it; but a hundred acorns are planted silently by some unnoticed breeze. Battles and war-

⁴⁹ Suzy Anger, ed., *Knowing the Past: Victorian Literature and Culture* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2001), p. ix.

⁵⁰ Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, *The English Novel in History, 1840–1895* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 70.

tumults ... are remembered by accident, not by desert. ... Well may we say that of our History the most important part is lost without recovery; and – as thanksgivings were once wont to be offered ‘for unrecognised mercies’ – look with reverence into the dark untenanted places of the Past, where in formless oblivion, our chief benefactors, with all their sedulous endeavours, but not with the fruit of these, lie entombed.⁵¹

This passage contains an enormous preponderance of terms of negation: ‘unnoticed’, ‘unrecognised’, ‘untenanted’. Implicit, though unvoiced, is the parallel term used later by George Eliot in her description of those who lie in ‘unvisited tombs’: ‘unhistoric’.⁵² Carlyle both declares the historical record a hopelessly inadequate representation of real experience, and insists that it is nonetheless the historian’s (Sisyphian) task to rewrite it in a more authentic form. Nineteenth-century writers were by no means the first to recognise that some types of events and individuals make their mark more forcefully than others on the historical record. They were, however, the first to suggest *en masse* that this might be a serious problem. In the nineteenth century’s newly expanded framework for ‘History’, this discrepancy compromised history’s ability to fulfil its transcendent and all-encompassing role. This was perhaps most apparent with regard to the recent past. The invisible history that Carlyle alerts us to, one constituted by those off the public stage and hidden from the historical record, is one that is almost impossible to recreate for any period *except* that still present in living memory. In a way impossible in the study of (say) medieval history, it was hypothetically possible to recover the lives of ‘unhistoric’ individuals. If writers were not doing this, it begged the question: why not?

Carlyle has a strange dual significance in narratives of Victorian culture and ideology. Despite repeated statements like this one, he is frequently invoked as the chief proponent of the cult of hero-worship, elevating so-called ‘great men’ to superhuman status. In a discussion of novels that seek to include ordinary men and women in the realm of ‘history’, for example, Robert A. Colby refers to Charles Reade’s attempt to resuscitate ‘obscure heroes, philosophers and martyrs’ in *The Cloister and the Hearth* as an ‘anti-Carlylean’ project.⁵³ How can this apparent paradox be reconciled? David Amigoni has argued that Carlyle’s dominance in the

⁵¹ [Thomas Carlyle], ‘Thoughts on History’, *Fraser’s Magazine*, 2 (1830), 413–18 (p. 414).

⁵² George Eliot, *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life*, ed. by W. J. Harvey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p. 896.

⁵³ Robert A. Colby, ‘“Rational Amusement”: Fiction Vs. Useful Knowledge’, in *Victorian Literature and Society: Essays Presented to Richard D. Altick*, ed. by James R. Kincaid and Albert J. Kuhn (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1984), pp. 46–73 (p. 63).

field of Victorian life-writing resulted from the fact that his legacy is ‘open to multiple cultural appropriations’.⁵⁴ Juliette Atkinson reminds us that ‘an astonishing number of writers who decided to go against the biographical grain by publishing the lives of unknown or unsuccessful men and women either openly declared Carlyle as their influence or were associated with him through work or friendship.’⁵⁵ Despite a shift in his late career towards a pre-occupation with more conventional and conservative hero figures,⁵⁶ the icon of Carlyle remained open to appropriation as the champion of the unhistoric individual. His *French Revolution: A History* (1837), with its famous depictions of the ‘mob’ and the ‘crowd’, and its engagement with a recent past of less than fifty years hence, represented an attempt to write contemporary history, and demonstrate the significance of the ‘unhistoric’ mass.

The assumption that the most visible or ‘historic’ part of society is necessarily the most important was also questioned by Thomas Babington Macaulay, the other towering influence on early Victorian history-writing. An article published two years before Carlyle’s *Fraser’s* article, ‘The Romance of History’, marked Macaulay’s first foray into the subject of history. Here he drew on the deliberately paradoxical Romantic discourse of ‘truth’ (which I will discuss further in Chapter 1) with the assertion that

a history, in which every particular incident may be true, may on the whole be false. The circumstances which have most influence on the happiness of mankind, the changes of manners and morals, the transition of communities from poverty to wealth, from knowledge to ignorance, from ferocity to humanity – these are, for the most part, noiseless revolutions. Their progress is rarely indicated by what historians are pleased to call important events. They are sanctioned by no treaties, and recorded in no archives. They are carried on in every school, in every church, behind ten thousand counters, at ten thousand firesides. The upper current of society presents no certain criterion by which we can judge of the direction in which the under current flows.⁵⁷

This multiplicity of the ‘ten thousand firesides’ is, strikingly, not the chaotic and threatening multiplicity of Carlyle’s *The French Revolution*; it is rather an ‘under current’ whose mundane and insignificant appearance hides an essential unity. The composite nature of history is an organic one, moving all in the same direction. This

⁵⁴ David Amigoni, ed., *Life Writing and Victorian Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), p. 19.

⁵⁵ Juliette Atkinson, *Victorian Biography Reconsidered: A Study of Nineteenth-Century ‘Hidden’ Lives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 9.

⁵⁶ See, for example, Thomas Carlyle, *History of Friedrich II of Prussia, Called Frederick the Great* (1858)

⁵⁷ [Thomas Babington Macaulay], ‘The Romance of History’, *Edinburgh Review*, 47 (1828), 331–67 (p. 362).

image of history as a current would have been familiar to Macaulay from *Waverley*, in whose ‘Postscript, which should have been a Preface’, Scott likens the past sixty years of change in Scottish society to the movement of ‘those who drift down the stream of a deep and smooth river’: ‘we are not aware of the progress we have made until we fix our eye on the now-distant point from which we set out.’⁵⁸ While in some ways an homage to Scott’s vision of history, Macaulay also acts to nuance and modify it (though Scott himself was not unaware of such an undercurrent, as I will show in Chapter 3). He suggests that the ‘upper current’ perceived by Scott’s narrator may in fact be misleading, and the unhistoric under current may be telling a different story.

Scientific developments in this period reinforced a sense of the importance of apparently insignificant individuals in the historical process. Charles Lyell’s theories emphasised the importance of gradual and imperceptible (sedimentary and uniformitarian) processes,⁵⁹ rather than the dramatic tectonic transformations so omnipresent in Romantic culture.⁶⁰ In Burrow’s analysis, this encouraged a view of the historical process as equally sedimentary, and affected the social as well as the temporal remit of historiography. Victorian historians were faced with the problem of ‘how one speaks of a history without heroes, almost without events, a history essentially of largely anonymous agents and unintended consequences’,⁶¹ a problem only exacerbated after 1859 by Darwin’s evolutionary theory, which made change a process of incremental change, removed from direct agency. Carlyle’s dialectical insistence on the need to see beyond obvious heroes, in tandem with an irrepressible desire for heroism, can be seen as a response to this sense of a sedimentary history of anonymity. Dominated by the sense of a history ‘without heroes’, which would always outweigh and overshadow the individual, Victorian writers became obsessed with the question of the relationship between the individual and history, and the extent to which any individual can influence their surroundings.

The problems inherent in the notion of the social continuum are particularly evident in works dealing with the recent past. The first half of the nineteenth century saw repeated attempts to characterise the contemporary era in ways that blurred the

⁵⁸ Scott, *Waverley*, p. 340.

⁵⁹ Charles Lyell, *Principles of Geology, Being an Attempt to Explain the Former Changes of the Earth’s Surface, by Changes Now in Operation*, 3 vols. (London: John Murray, 1830).

⁶⁰ This strain in Romanticism was influenced, for example, by the eruption of Mount Tambora in 1815 (the occasion for Byron’s 1816 poem ‘Darkness’), and evidenced by John Martin’s apocalyptic paintings.

⁶¹ Burrow, ‘Images of Time: From Carlylean Vulcanism to Sedimentary Gradualism’, p. 218.

distinction between the heroic and the representative individual. Johann Gottfried Herder's concept of the *Zeitgeist*, further developed by Hegel, was adopted in Britain by William Hazlitt in *The Spirit of the Age* (1825), and repeatedly invoked by Victorian imitators. Hazlitt's shift from an initial plan to call his portrait *Spirits of the Age* to a singular *Zeitgeist* awards time itself an agency of its own. It also refuses to allow for anything other than homogeneity across a population. This format was then re-used by J. S. Mill in his *The Spirit of the Age* (1831), and in R. H. Horne's *The New Spirit of the Age* (1844). These works, which identify and extract key figures in their contemporary era, attempt to impose some distinction of light and shadow on what might otherwise seem an unnervingly amorphous mass of individuals. However, they all remain unclear on whether these individuals *create* the 'spirit of the age', or are moulded by it; whether their significance lies in a role as historical agents, or in representing the impact of another agency: that of History itself.

In Hazlitt's pantheon of representative individuals, his essay on Walter Scott stands out as particularly relevant to this study. The portrait closes with a scathing denunciation (framed as hypothetical, but evidently describing Scott himself), which accuses him of having sold out to the very establishment he should be challenging. Whether the responsibility for this inadequacy lies with Scott or with some impersonal force outside individual control, however, is left ambiguous. At its end, Hazlitt qualifies his condemnation with the declaration: 'But we believe there is no other age or country of the world (but ours), in which such genius could have been so degraded!'⁶² This diffuses some of the guilt for Scott's 'degradation' from his own personal defects to the contemporary context in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, with the reactionary government of Lord Liverpool clamping down on political radicalism. But Hazlitt's transfer of responsibility goes beyond this. Outspoken as his critique is, he makes no attempt to blame specific members of the government, but gestures rather towards a quality of the time itself: 'the spirit of the age'. Whether Scott is an influential or dangerous conservative, or is influenced and degraded by a dangerous (impersonal) conservatism – whether he makes the age, or the age makes him – Hazlitt appears unable to decide.

Two decades later, in his homage to Hazlitt, *The New Spirit of the Age* (1844), R. H. Horne draws a slightly more precise relationship between particular individuals

⁶² William Hazlitt, *The Spirit of the Age; or Contemporary Portraits* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1990), p. 112.

and the general state of national morality. His first publication, which had been received with some hostility, had been entitled *The Exposition of the False Medium and Barriers Excluding Men of Genius from the Public* (1833), and in *The New Spirit of the Age* he unsurprisingly assigns significant cultural sway to ‘great men’. In his essay on Carlyle, he comments,

It is well to talk of the progress of the public mind. The public mind – that is, the average intelligence of the many – never does make progress, except by imbibing great principles from great men, which, after long and frequent reiteration, become part of the moral sense of a people. ... And to return to our first figure – what the senses are to the individual mind, men of genius are to the general mind.⁶³

Here the centrality given to ‘great men’, and the top-down structure of moral influence, suggests a hierarchical vision of society. However, these ‘great men’ are not detached from the mass of ordinary people, instead acting as the ‘senses’ of ‘the general mind’. This proposes an organicist model of society, in which heroic individuals attempt to influence the whole but are themselves part of it. Any attempt to drive or control the development of this social and temporal organism, such as through so-called ‘false medium and barriers’, is thus all the more difficult.

Both Hazlitt and Horne attempt to claim a unified quality for their ‘age’, personified in the image of the ‘spirit’, but both are hampered by a consciousness both of the ephemerality of their assessment – for Horne, the twenty years since Hazlitt’s text necessitated a new version – and of the sheer multiplicity of the individuals under their gaze. The dialectic between the ‘age’ they discuss and the distinctive-representative individuals they choose to focus on is crucially a two-way movement, from great man to milieu, but also from milieu to individual. The relative proportions, and thus ultimate direction, of this flow of influence, is what remained up for debate throughout the period. Writing about the recent past raised and crystallised this problem in its most acute form.

At the end of the nineteenth century, when the mammoth project to write a *Dictionary of National Biography* was undertaken in the 1880s, it had two key characteristics that overlap with this study. As Atkinson has shown, the *DNB* included a significant, even disproportionate, number of individuals who lived during the nineteenth century itself. In fact, ‘Most biographies published during the Victorian period narrated the lives of men and women who had died within the period,

⁶³ R. H. Horne, *The New Spirit of the Age*, 2 vols. (Farnborough: Gregg, 1971), II, 256.

or only shortly before.’⁶⁴ No-one could be included in the pages of the *DNB* while still alive, but many of its figures were only recently deceased: they were inhabitants of the recent past. Secondly, part of its explicit purpose was to represent ‘unhistoric’ lives, to give voice to people whose *DNB* portrait was their only monument.⁶⁵ Leslie Stephen claimed the ‘smaller articles’ to be ‘perhaps the most valuable part of the book’.⁶⁶ He suggested that ‘it is the second-rate people’, who are otherwise largely forgotten, and ‘who really become generally accessible through the dictionary alone – that provide the really useful reading.’⁶⁷ In this formulation, the *DNB*’s primary value lay in providing a representative spread across the social continuum as much as in celebrating heroic historical agents. It did not solve – and did not even attempt to solve – the problems of the social continuum outlined above. It abandoned the idea of an overarching narrative, and, as a multi-authored publication (although under the initial iconic editorship of Stephen and, subsequently, Sidney Lee), downplayed emphasis on singular authorial authority. It dealt with its lack of hindsight by denying temporal primacy: its analyses were offered in alphabetical rather than chronological order. Apart from the varying lengths of their biographies, nothing in the dictionary indicates a hierarchy of individual importance. And it coped with the multiplicity of the social continuum by itself becoming multiple. Individuals who were barely distinctive were sometimes selected for inclusion largely because sufficient sources existed from which to compile a biographical sketch. In this way, facilitating a prosopographical approach, they might offer a representative example of a wider group, gesturing towards a more extensive ‘under current’.⁶⁸

By the end of the nineteenth century, the Carlylean model of historiography had influentially diffused into other genres. It did not, however, fit the current definition of respectable historiography. Although the Romantic school of historiography flourished on the continent, in Britain it found few champions among self-proclaimed historians beyond Carlyle.⁶⁹ (As we have seen, Macaulay’s early

⁶⁴ Atkinson, *Victorian Biography Reconsidered*, p. 31.

⁶⁵ See Gaye Tuchman and Nina E. Fortin, *Edging Women Out: Victorian Novelists, Publishers and Social Change* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 95.

⁶⁶ Leslie Stephen, ‘Some Early Impressions – Editing’, *National Review*, 42 (1903), 563–81 (p. 572).

⁶⁷ Leslie Stephen, ‘National Biography’, in *Studies of a Biographer*, 2 vols. (London: Duckworth, 1898), I, 2–36 (p. 22).

⁶⁸ See Lawrence Stone, ‘Prosopography’, *Daedalus*, 100 (1971), 46–79; Alison Booth, ‘Men and Women of the Time: Victorian Prosopographies’, in *Life Writing and Victorian Culture*, ed. by David Amigoni (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 41–66.

⁶⁹ Its proponents in Germany included Barthold Georg Niebuhr and Phillip August Böckh; in France, François Guizot, Prosper de Barante, Augustin Thierry, Jules Michelet and Edgar Quinet. For

writings voice recognisably Carlylean paradoxes, but other than the Romantic sense of national organicism, little of this remained in the magisterial Whig narrative of his *History of England from the Accession of James I* (1848–55.) As I will discuss in Chapter 1, late-nineteenth-century professionalising historians sought authority and credibility for their newly institutionalised discipline. While Carlyle viewed the archive as an unfathomable chasm of irretrievable pasts, they saw it as something they could aspire to conquer. Advocating prestigious, singular topics such as ‘the state’ rather than the multiplicity of the ‘unhistoric’ masses, they generally dismissed the Carlylean model of history as inherently flawed. J. R. Seeley, for example, passed stern judgement on Carlyle’s prioritisation of literary effect over empirical clarity:

Considering the difficulty of finding truth it seems to me a sheer waste of time to listen to any man who professes to think that truth is only one of his objects and gives me reason to think that it is not the first among them. To my mind these two men [Carlyle and Macaulay] may be expected to be remembered some day as representing an extraordinary aberration in the English mind, an extraordinary misconception of the nature of history.⁷⁰

Carlyle’s influence over particularly early- and mid-Victorian culture cannot be denied, but he found his most ardent followers among writers of forms other than history. His dual insistence, both on the interrelation of past, present and future, and on the significance of even those people hidden from the historical record, found its most numerous champions among novelists.

So far, this Introduction has delineated the problem posed by the recent past, explaining it as one comprised of two facets, the temporal and the social. One of the indispensable tools of the historian is hindsight. The distilling effect of time, both on the volume of historical records available, and on the events and individuals remembered by posterity, facilitates the historian’s judgements about the relative significances of a past era. The recent past, however, is not amenable to this method of distillation. The fear of making premature judgements was exacerbated in the later Victorian period by the precarious institutional position of History as an academic discipline. It was not in the interest of historians, either newly granted professional posts, or keen to attain them, to get involved in the controversial and inconclusive

Romantic historiography in Britain, see Gossman, ‘History as Decipherment: Romantic Historiography and the Discovery of the Other’; Bann, *Romanticism and the Rise of History*; Ann Rigney, ‘The Untenanted Places of the Past: Thomas Carlyle and the Varieties of Historical Ignorance’, *History and Theory*, 35 (1996), 338–57.

⁷⁰ J. R. Seeley to C. E. Maurice, 8 April 1880. Qtd. Deborah Wormell, *Sir John Seeley and the Uses of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 126.

arena of the recent past. The recent past also seemed irreducibly multiple in its social dimension. Uncertainty about which living individuals will turn out to be the most significant was exacerbated in this period by increasing concerns over democratic representation, and by the Carlylean view that influential undercurrents might pass unnoticed by either the short-sighted observer or the historical record. Both these problems, therefore, manifest themselves in an unmanageable multiplicity, irreducible to any singular generalisable narrative. The final part of this Introduction outlines how the subsequent chapters will examine Victorian writers' responses to these twin problems in their writings about the recent past, explaining my choice and grouping of sources, and how I will approach them.

Methodology

My analysis is ultimately a problem-based one. The evidence examined in this thesis does not support any monolithic narrative of progress, or propose any single 'solution' to the problem of how to assimilate the recent past into a historical framework. While I do trace chronological shifts – for example, in the status of the historical novel – I view these as shifts of *strategy* rather than from falsity or misconception to truth or clarity. I see the question of how to conceptualise and represent the 'recent past' as a perpetual and ultimately irreconcilable one, that, while particularly problematic for Victorian culture in its desire to view history as totalising and transcendent, poses a challenge to any and every era. This study will, therefore, try to view those resultant coping strategies from a position that avoids judgements of 'success' or 'failure'. In his seminal *Metahistory* (1973), Hayden White championed a formalist approach that similarly refused to 'decide whether a given historian's work is a better, or more correct, account of a specific set of events or segment of the historical process than some other historian's account of them'.⁷¹ Although I do not impose such a schematic structure on my texts as White does, which expects them to conform to a small number of categories, my analysis does follow his in assessing historiography primarily in relation to its textual construction rather than its referential merit.

One of the ways in which this thesis might be seen as taking a formalist approach is in its liberal use of graphical and spatial metaphors to conceptualise its writers' various strategies. This is exemplified in my use of Thomas Gieryn's

⁷¹ Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), pp. 3–4.

metaphor of ‘boundary-work’ to consider the processes of separation between academic disciplines.⁷² This evocative term refers to the process of establishing a secure and exclusive disciplinary space for science by labelling undesirable elements as ‘unscientific’, and is a particularly fruitful concept for the analysis of Chapter 1. My study is less concerned with the representations of specific events in the recent past than with the narrative shapes and tropes employed to make sense of it. I thus use spatial metaphors most pervasively to conceptualise time, as exemplified in the notions of temporal and spatial ‘dimensions’ to the problem of writing the recent past.

As recent work has demonstrated, the use of spatial metaphors to represent time is widespread and often unselfconscious.⁷³ This was also a recurrent trope among nineteenth-century writers.⁷⁴ As will be delineated in Chapter 2, historians of the recent past often evoked a spatially elevated, almost deistical viewpoint to substitute for their lack of temporal distance. This practice will become relevant again in the final chapter of the thesis, because it was also popular with *fin-de-siècle* utopian writers as a means of representing detachment from their vision, demonstrable in H. G. Wells’s decision to place his futuristic *A Modern Utopia* (1905) at a nominally spatial remove. This conceptual similarity between temporal and spatial distance might also be relevant to other critical discussions, particularly of the relationship of Victorian colony and metropole. A longstanding strand of scholarship, for example, has considered the trope of writing class anxieties as racial ones.⁷⁵ More work could be done on why, as demonstrated by histories of the colonial recent past such as John Kaye’s *History of the War in Afghanistan* (1851) and Charles Ball’s *History of the Indian Mutiny* (c. 1859), contemporary colonial events were written about with relative impunity, in a way that those at home in Britain were not. This study cannot devote time to a full examination of these issues, concerned as it is with specifically British ‘national’ historiography. But my discussion of the relative

⁷² Thomas F. Gieryn, ‘Boundary-Work and the Demarcation of Science from Non-Science: Strains and Interests in Professional Ideologies of Scientists’, *American Sociological Review*, 46 (1983), 781–95.

⁷³ Eviatar Zerubavel, *Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

⁷⁴ Karl Kroeber, ‘Romantic Historicism: The Temporal Sublime’, in *Images of Romanticism: Verbal and Visual Affinities*, ed. by Karl Kroeber and William Walling (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), pp. 149–65.

⁷⁵ See Philip Mason, *Prospero’s Magic: Some Thoughts on Class and Race* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962); Chris Vanden Bossche, *Carlyle and the Search for Authority* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1991); Catherine Hall, Keith McClelland and Jane Rendall, *Defining the Victorian Nation: Class, Race, Gender and the British Reform Act of 1867* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

interrelationship of conceptions of time and space may nonetheless be pertinent beyond the bounds of this study.

As its title indicates, this thesis is structured by genre, and the varying aims and expectations of different genres are therefore a focus of analysis. The discussions of genre that followed Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) were generally formalist and even ahistoricist. More recently, however, increasingly historicist approaches to the ways genres shift and develop have been enunciated, both from theoretical perspectives⁷⁶ and in specifically nineteenth-century conversations.⁷⁷ Nonetheless, Mark Salber Phillips suggests that even though 'a much more historical understanding of genre has come to prominence', 'one large exception of this general move towards historicization has been the study of historical writing'.⁷⁸ For Phillips, the thrall of White's *Metahistory* has held historicisation of historiography at bay. This thesis will try to counteract this uneven development, bringing into step the frameworks in which both the genres of fiction and history are conceived.

This thesis is also a contribution to the scholarly field of Victorian Studies, and thus attempts to combine its conceptual approach with a contextualist one, viewing sources as embedded in the specific conditions and discourse of the Victorian period, and as part of the various precise cultural moments at which they were written. It examines a wide range of nineteenth-century texts, including not only formal histories and historical novels but also periodical articles, reviews, essays, letters, autobiographical writing and social commentary. In common with Gillian Beer, 'my project does not use the metaphor of "background"'; within my nineteenth-century period of study, I make no binary distinction between primary and secondary texts.⁷⁹ A contemporaneous review of a novel, that might in some studies be considered as a 'secondary' text, is deemed just as indicative – albeit, necessarily, in a different way – of prevailing cultural attitudes as the novel under review. My analysis is focused on texts rather than authors, concerned with textual reading rather than biographical assessment of its key figures. As such, any discussion of their letters and

⁷⁶ Brian Caraher, 'Genre Theory: Cultural and Historical Motives Engendering Literary Genre', in *Genre Matters: Essays in Theory and Criticism*, ed. by Garin Dowd, Lesley Stevenson, and Jeremy Strong (Bristol: Intellect, 2006), pp. 29–39.

⁷⁷ Ina Ferris, *The Achievement of Literary Authority: Gender, History, and the Waverley Novels* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1991).

⁷⁸ Mark Salber Phillips, 'History, Micro- and Literary: Problems of Genre and Distance', *New Literary History*, 34 (2003), 211–29 (p. 211).

⁷⁹ Gillian Beer, *Arguing with the Past: Essays in Narrative from Woolf to Sidney* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 14.

other papers will take the form of supportive references rather than extensive explorations. In the interests of providing a broad range of examples to support my case, moreover, the discussion of each case-study is therefore inevitably relatively short.

This study is, therefore, not immune to the problems of prioritising the general over the particular, the perennial historiographical conundrum of singularity versus multiplicity, that dogged the very nineteenth-century writers that are the subject of its analysis. It is at once a specifically Victorian-focused project, and offers a conceptual analysis which is intended to be relevant and illuminating to debates on historiography and contemporary-history-writing. In juggling the varied and at times contradictory demands of contextual and conceptual approaches, it might in part be allied with the Foucauldian and New Historicist projects, and like the latter, evinces ‘a reciprocal concern with the historicity of texts and the textuality of history’.⁸⁰ Contrary to the stereotype of the New Historicist, however (as invoked for example by Claudia Brodsky Lacour), I do not accuse narrative of ‘iniquitous activities’, but instead am interested in *how* narratives come to be formed, shaped and utilised to place one’s contemporary society within an extended historical framework.⁸¹

The central question of my thesis is this: how did Victorian writers reconcile their grand theories of historical development and linearity with the messy proximity of their own recent past? Their debates on this issue revolved insistently around the question: ‘what counts as historic?’ This can be interpreted in two senses, chronological and social, that combine to fuel my study, and which I have described above as the ‘temporal’ and ‘social’ continua. After an opening chapter that shows how these anxieties were channelled through a framework of cultural discourses about genre and gender, the remaining chapters each focus on a specific genre. The central chapters examine the mid-nineteenth century history and novel forms, to analyse their respective approaches to the challenges of writing narratives of the recent past. The final chapter moves forward in time to the 1880s and 1890s. It discusses utopian fiction set in the future, a genre that blossomed in these decades, to consider whether this allowed writers to escape the apparent dichotomy of evasion and pre-occupation visible in the history and novel genres respectively.

⁸⁰ Louis Montrose, ‘Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture’, in *The New Historicism*, ed. by H. Aram Veveser (New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. 15–36 (p. 20). See also Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 155.

⁸¹ Claudia Brodsky Lacour, ‘Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* and Hegel’s “Truth in Art”: Concept, Reference, and History’, *ELH*, 59 (1992), 597–623 (p. 599).

Chapter 1 outlines a set of discourses, prevalent in Victorian culture, that illuminate its discomfort about writing the recent past as history. It situates the thesis in a broader critical and conceptual framework, which allows us to make sense of how Victorian culture – valorising the singular, universal ‘Truth’ previously provided by religion – responded to the threat of the multiple and the particular. While the relationship between nineteenth-century culture and its recent past has not been entirely neglected, it is generally discussed in terms of nostalgia, or considered in relation to particular historical events. My analysis of it in conceptual terms of multiplicity and particularity, therefore, offers something new, as does the cross-generic discussion this provokes. Other critics in disparate areas (such as Christina Crosby, Mike Goode, and Kate Flint) have, however, been active in tracing similar valorisations of singularity over multiplicity, generality over particularity, in relation to other issues including gender and genre. My original contribution to knowledge, therefore, lies in part in bringing the recent past into this critical discussion.

I situate the Victorian preoccupation with the status of the recent past in the context of the later-nineteenth-century professionalisation of history, and the consequent solidification of a division between the genres of history and fiction. In both of these processes, an apparently inferior mode was rejected by the eventually dominant and successful mode. In establishing a professional discipline of history, professionalising historians successfully disinherited one of their subject’s origins, antiquarianism. They also disavowed their subject’s recent brush with fiction in the genre that had been immensely popular in the first half of the nineteenth century, the historical novel. They disclaimed all relationship with fiction by devaluing the fictional mode itself. And in both these processes, the rejected Other was denigrated by being labelled as ‘feminine’. In the prevailing nineteenth-century discourse of gender, the ‘feminine’ was characterised as short-sighted, concerned with particularity and detail rather than overarching or singular meaning. I want to bring the recent past into this discourse as a third example of this pattern of subordination, since it was perceived and treated in ways analogous to those other sites of anxiety. The eclectic range of texts discussed here is distilled from my overall reading for this study, and as such is inevitably impressionistic and exemplary rather than intended to provide an exhaustive or self-contained data set. My sources are chronologically wide-ranging, covering the entire period, and draw from letters, diaries, and other materials unintended for publication, as well as the broad spectrum of the periodical

press, to demonstrate the widespread nature of the cultural attitudes delineated in my analysis.

In Chapter 2, I develop my analysis of the problematic status of the recent past, by demonstrating how the establishment of history as an academic discipline both reinforced and exacerbated existing emphases on the importance of hindsight. I use three case studies: national histories of England by Harriet Martineau (1849), J. R. Green (1874, with an epilogue added by his widow, Alice Stopford Green, in 1916), and Spencer Walpole (1878). My sources thus demonstrate both a chronological spread across (and beyond) the period, and a combination of male and female historians. They are all united by their liminal position in relation to the historical establishment, although their writings span a period of great change in historiographical norms. Martineau was part of a largely pre-disciplinary ‘world of letters’, whereas while Green and Walpole were writing, history was becoming increasingly professionalised. Although a university post was gradually becoming a badge of authority, none of my historians ever held one. This position, slightly outside the citadel of the academy, reflects – or is reflected in – their decisions to break with orthodoxy in writing histories of the recent past. As discussed further in the chapter itself, these sources were chosen for their attempts to write all-encompassing national history, including proto-social history. Although these texts do not form a complete sample, since several other Victorian contemporary histories exist, these took a narrower remit, and either functioned as partisan accounts, or limited themselves to a narrowly thematic – specifically economic or political – remit. This choice of sources mirrors my decision (discussed below) not to examine auto/biographical writings: neither auto/biography nor narrowly thematic histories claim to offer all-inclusive national histories, and it is the particular challenge posed by this task that is the subject of my thesis.

My case studies are united by a mutual intention to narrate the history of England’s recent past in the absence of hindsight, and in the process to revise historical orthodoxy about what counts as ‘historic’. This chapter demonstrates how all four historians set out with high ambitions, but are ultimately limited in their ability to carry them out. Although they theoretically disavow the necessity of hindsight, they eventually shy away from making conclusive judgements about their own era. And although they aim to include unconventionally ‘unhistoric’ individuals in their work, they all end up reverting to the trope of ‘nation’ to codify and

characterise this disparate multiplicity, restoring agency to the people only by removing their individuality.

Chapter 3 reconsiders these issues in relation to history's younger and partially disowned sibling genre: the novel. A striking proportion of Victorian novels are set in precisely the 'recent past' period that historians avoided. While many of them have received ample critical attention, their status as fictionalised contemporary-history-writing has rarely been at the forefront of such analyses. They have conventionally been dismissed as too chronologically proximate to qualify for the title of 'historical novel', and instead left in limbo as 'novels of the recent past'.⁸² However, the critical orthodoxy that marks a distinction between genuinely 'historical' novels and those of merely 'recent past' effectively disregards the fact that contemporaries would have read such novels as manifestly retrospective. I do not seek to treat my group of case-study novels as veiled historical sources, to mine them for information about the recent past. If anything, the emphasis moves in the opposite direction: they are useful less as sources about early-nineteenth-century life than as evidence of the later nineteenth century's desire to find a means through which to inscribe its recent history. The genre of the realist novel facilitated this in ways that the dominant mode of Victorian national historiography could not. Choosing to write fiction rather than history protected a writer against the charge of fallibility. On the one hand, the realist novel takes place in the real world, situated (as Ermarth has shown) in real history. On the other hand, it is nonetheless, and intrinsically, only one person's account, written by an individual writer about individual characters. This enables the novelist to embrace the temporal continuum, and express their (however hypothetical) vision of their society's recent history, but without asserting that this narrative is applicable to all members of the society, or should count as an authoritative, monolithic, hegemonic narrative.

While the sources for Chapter 2 provide a range of both chronology and gender, in Chapter 3 the analysis is focused more precisely in both these terms. It discusses a sub-genre of the historical novel, particularly prominent in the mid-Victorian period: the provincial realist novel set in the recent past. In order to contain the analysis, and build upon the framework outlined in Chapter 1, my discussion of the social continuum here focuses on the horizontal – gender – dimension rather than the vertical – class – dimension. As a result, the key texts are all novels by women

⁸² Kathleen Tillotson, *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954), p. 93.

writers, who challenge historiographical orthodoxy most explicitly with regard to the ‘historic’ status of their women characters: Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley* (1849), Elizabeth Gaskell’s *My Lady Ludlow* (1859), and George Eliot’s *Felix Holt, the Radical* (1866) and *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life* (1871-2). In their chronology, therefore, these texts echo my core case studies of Chapter 2: *Shirley* was published in the same year as Martineau’s *History of the Thirty Years’ Peace*, and *Middlemarch* only a few years before Green’s and Walpole’s histories. Although all novels by canonical authors, they are not necessarily their best known texts; and even when they have been extensively analysed (as in the case of *Middlemarch*), little scholarship has examined them as attempts to write the recent past. In contrast to the historians examined in Chapter 2, who seek to create distance between themselves and their recent past subject matter, these novelists embrace the notion of a temporal continuum.

These novels are still dogged by the perennial question of contemporary history-writing, ‘what counts as historic?’, but the relative freedom of their more individualised genre allows them to focus on the social, rather than the chronological, dimension. Using the example of Walter Scott’s *Waverley* (1814) to offer a preliminary analysis of the issues at stake, I show how these three women novelists not only embraced Scott’s self-consciously retrospective style and recent past setting, but also retained, and amplified, his ideological ambivalence and his valorisation of the ‘unhistoric’. Brontë, Gaskell and Eliot all eschew any attempt to offer a national or political history on the model of Martineau or Walpole. Instead, they depict local and provincial communities. These women writers suggest that an ordinary, undistinguished, unobtrusive life of domesticity – a woman’s life, even – can be worth writing. In this particular sub-genre, the impulse to assert the value of ‘unhistoric’ lives, that Carlylean-influenced histories had avowed but proved unable to enact, came to expressive fruition.

In the final chapter, the focus of my analysis moves to the closing decades of the century. Chapter 4 demonstrates that in the outpouring of utopian texts produced at the *fin de siècle*, writers could find a potential solution to the problems of contemporary history by situating their narratives in the future. As a result, unlike previous chapters, its case studies offer not a chronological spread but a tight chronological focus. It discusses three key texts that unite imaginary history of the future with the genre of fictional utopia, while additional illumination is provided by

comparison with other relevant contemporaneous texts, most notably Edwin A. Abbott's *Flatland* (1884). American writer Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward 2000–1887* (1888) was arguably the first of this precise sub-genre. This is compared to William Morris's defiant response to Bellamy's statist vision, *News from Nowhere* (1890), and, taking us just beyond the Victorian era, H. G. Wells's *A Modern Utopia* (1905) which attempts to synthesise both these previous Socialist utopias into a futuristic vision of his own. By writing narratives set in the future, Bellamy and Morris created an artificial hindsight on their own Victorian age, enabling them to hypothesise about which features of their present would have lasting significance. The utopian form also brought together the grand overview of the history genre with the novel's focus on the understudied section of society. It enabled all three writers to overthrow the social constraints embodied in the notion of the 'unhistoric' individual. Insisting on the necessity of collective action – difficult though this may be to achieve – they envisage an ideal society in which hierarchies of historicity might become meaningless at last.

Inevitably, in keeping this thesis within manageable bounds, some topics could not be included. In a thesis largely structured along genre lines, the genre clusters most notable for their absence are journalism, and autobiography and biography (often characterised in recent theoretical discussion as auto/biography).⁸³ The most common genres for writing the recent past in the Victorian period, as today, were journalistic and personal accounts.⁸⁴ These genres overlap in many of their concerns and conventions with those of historiography. However, both are genres with quite different aims and ambitions to those I discuss here. Journalism underwent considerable professionalisation over the course of the nineteenth century, which saw such innovations as the establishment of the war correspondent (a role pioneered in

⁸³ The journal *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* has been running since 1985. See also Laura Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994).

⁸⁴ On auto/biography, see Avrom Fleishman, *Figures of Autobiography: The Language of Self-writing in Victorian and Modern England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); Regenia Gagnier, *Subjectivities: A History of Self-representation in Britain, 1832–1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Linda H. Peterson, *Traditions of Victorian Women's Autobiography: The Poetics and Politics of Life Writing* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999); Trev Lynn Broughton, *Men of Letters, Writing Lives: Masculinity and Literary Auto/Biography in the Late Victorian Period* (London: Routledge, 1999). On journalism and its relationship to other literary forms, see Lucy Brown, *Victorian News and Newspapers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985); Laurel Brake, Aled Gruffydd Jones and Lionel Madden, eds., *Investigating Victorian Journalism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990); Dallas Liddle, *The Dynamics of Genre: Journalism and the Practice of Literature in Mid-Victorian Britain* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009); Matthew Rubery, *The Novelty of Newspapers: Victorian Fiction after the Invention of the News* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

the 1850s by William Howard Russell in the Crimea), and, from the 1880s, the journalist as interviewer. Like the historians of Chapter 2, these writers refused to prioritise detachment, and embraced an immersive approach. Journalism was, however, as its practitioners recognised, a transient genre, which could not substitute, and did not even attempt, the grand temporal overview of the national history.

Auto/biography, similarly, shared much with history, but as a highly personalised medium, this genre could not compete with history on the social dimension. In choosing the form of biography for their accounts of the recent past, writers were effectively stepping away from the boundary that professionalising historians had drawn tightly around the historical discipline by the close of the nineteenth century. When three-times Prime Minister Lord Salisbury died in 1903, for example, his daughter, Lady Gwendolyn Gascoigne-Cecil, cemented his legacy not in a history of his premiership, but in a four-volume biography.⁸⁵ Only by writing as a confidante and family member, and couching her assessment of her times in terms of personalised life-writing, could she present as respectable and authoritative this history of the recent past. Through auto/biography and memoir, therefore, the insistent desire to write the ‘history’ of the recent past was channelled into alternative, more manageable means.

Collective biography, which has received substantial attention recently, complicates this hypothesis, as my earlier analysis of Hazlitt and Horne demonstrates.⁸⁶ The huge project that was the *DNB* might well modify and challenge the binary contrast often drawn in this thesis between historiographical and fictional willingness to write contemporary history.⁸⁷ I do, however, want to draw a distinction between the deliberately diffuse form of collective biography represented by the *DNB* – in which, apart from the unifying umbrella of the ‘national’, any attempt at any overarching narrative is denied, and singularity is subordinated to multiplicity – and the narrative form of grand, long-range national contemporary-history-writing, whose

⁸⁵ Lady Gwendolyn Gascoigne-Cecil, *The Life of Robert, Marquis of Salisbury*, 4 vols. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1921).

⁸⁶ Alison Booth, *How to Make It as a Woman: Collective Biographical History from Victoria to the Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Booth, ‘Men and Women of the Time: Victorian Prosopographies’.

⁸⁷ See Richard D. Altick, *Lives and Letters: A History of Literary Biography in England and America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965); Ian Hamilton, *Keepers of the Flame: Literary Estates and the Rise of Biography* (London: Pimlico, 1992); David Amigoni, *Victorian Biography: Intellectuals and the Ordering of Discourse* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993); Joe Law and Linda K. Hughes, eds., *Biographical Passages: Essays on Victorian and Modernist Biography* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000); Amigoni, *Life Writing and Victorian Culture* (2006).

relative dearth in the period, and simultaneous diffusion into other genres, is the focus of this study. This thesis focuses on those texts which face the problems of contemporary history-writing head-on. What exactly those problems are, and why they were a particular source of anxiety for Victorian writers, is the subject of the following chapter.

Chapter 1

Analogous anxieties: situating the recent past in a conceptual framework

The historian is oppressed with the prodigious number of details with which he is encumbered: from all this the historical novelist escapes.¹

As this comment from an 1874 article on ‘The Historical Romance’ exemplifies, the multiplicity and particularity represented by ‘detail’ was not valued very highly in Victorian culture. It also offers us a glimpse of the ongoing debate at that point about the relative merits of different genres. This anonymous journalist views conventional historiography as the realm of a blinkered particularity, while the historical novel is deemed the site of the general and the universal. This thesis traces the divergent ways in which Victorian practitioners of three genres responded to the challenges of writing about the recent past as history, demonstrating that it was largely avoided in national histories of England, but overwhelmingly popular with mid-century novelists, and again with *fin-de-siècle* writers of utopia. This chapter, therefore, analyses what it was about this recent past that made it a site of such divergent generic responses. I propose that the problematic status of the recent past lay in the fact that, as a period of history still within living memory, and thus still being remembered and contested by an ever-expanding population, the material it offered for narrative was neither singular nor linear, but irreducibly multiple and particular. But why was this multiplicity was such a problem? I suggest that the prevailing elite culture favoured singularity over multiplicity, generality over particularity, exalting the former and feeling uncomfortable with the latter.

As traced in the Introduction, what has often been characterised as ‘the death of religion’ in the nineteenth century might more appropriately be viewed as a transfer of religious feeling. While many thinkers moved away from the doctrinal framework of the established Christian religion, they retained the sense of a grand narrative and purpose that transcends the individual, the localised, the everyday and the temporary. This was a culture that still sought transcendent narratives, but that looked for them on a human rather than a supernatural plane. History seemed to offer

¹ Anonymous, ‘The Historical Romance’, *Argosy*, 17 (1874), 364–68 (p. 367).

just such a substitute narrative. As Rohan Maitzen describes it, ‘historical explanations were, potentially, secularized theodicies; they replaced chaos and tumult with order fixed not in abstractions but in the lives of real human beings in a real social environment.’² However, History could only provide this historicist ‘secularized theodicy’ as long as it remained linear and teleological. Once it got mixed up in the everyday experience and unfinished business of the recent past, it risked compromising that ability to offer transcendence. Incorporating the recent past into the continuum of History threatened its quality of ‘order’ with a dangerous open-endedness and multiplicity.

Expectations and judgements about the nature and purpose of history-writing were far from static in this period, but unitary, authoritative narratives, which were valorised as part of a historicist philosophy in the first half of the nineteenth century, were valorised again, for perhaps more pragmatic reasons, by its end. The second half of the century saw History established as an academic discipline. This was a slow and hard-fought process: it was only first included as an explicit subject of study at the universities of Oxford and Cambridge in the 1860s and 1870s, and in 1866 History was even removed from its first manifestation in the Moral Sciences Tripos at Cambridge.³ In this context, historians were very conscious of their precarious intellectual position, and keen to gain authority and credibility for their endeavours. This offered little incentive to get involved in the controversial and inconclusive arena of the recent past, where, twenty years down the line, their conclusions might be mocked as obviously misguided and short-sighted.

This chapter seeks to situate this problem within a broader framework, which will allow us to make sense of what Victorian cultural commentators found so uncomfortable about the multiple and the particular. In the prevailing nineteenth-century discourse of gender, the ‘feminine’ was characterised as multiple, short-sighted, concerned with particularity and detail rather than overarching or singular meaning. As Bonnie Smith has convincingly argued, as history became professionalised in the nineteenth century, its practitioners strove to attain status and

² Rohan Amanda Maitzen, *Gender, Genre, and Victorian Historical Writing* (New York: Garland, 1998), p. 4.

³ Peter R. H. Slee, *Learning and a Liberal Education: The Study of History in the Universities of Oxford, Cambridge and Manchester, 1800–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), p. 36.

respect by defining it as intrinsically (and exclusively) masculine.⁴ In the process, marginal and apparently inferior modes of knowledge and writing were rejected as ‘Other’ by the eventually dominant and successful mode.⁵ As history established itself as a discipline, it successfully disinherited one of its origins, antiquarianism. Historians attempted to sideline fiction in the same way, in part to distance themselves from what had seemed the perfect union of genres in the first half of the nineteenth century, the historical novel. In both these processes, this denigration was enacted and rationalised through a gendered discourse, which labelled them as ‘feminine’. I want to bring the recent past into this discourse as a third example of this pattern of subordination, since it was perceived and treated in ways analogous to these three other sites of anxiety.

In this chapter, therefore, I take each of these sites of subordination in turn. After a brief opening case-study showcasing these challenges through the genre of biography, I will address three areas that nineteenth-century writers attempted to devalue as multiple and particular. I will begin with the ‘feminine’, since this was the core discourse employed to undermine the others. I will then move on to discuss antiquarianism, and finally historical fiction. The latter will receive the most extended discussion, since the conventions and expectations of the history and novel genres are a central focus of this thesis.

Antiquarianism was very effectively sidelined as a valid mode of study: by the end of the century, the newly professionalised discipline of history had managed to exclude it from the mainstream. Historians attempted to denigrate fiction in similar terms, as an inadequately ‘truthful’ representational form, but as I will show, advocates of fiction-writing (both novelists and commentators) effectively resisted this attempt, turning the discourse round to their advantage. Both genres claimed they were better equipped to offer a singular and generalisable ‘Truth’ than was the other. In this process, however, the genre once seen as the perfect fusion of these two modes, the historical novel, was effectively edged out of both camps, as both sought refuge in professionalisation and tighter policing of their epistemological and aesthetic borders. I will discuss these processes as acts of ‘boundary-work’, in the

⁴ Bonnie G. Smith, *The Gender of History: Men, Women, and Historical Practice* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2000).

⁵ For extended discussion of the concept of the ‘Other’, see Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* [1961], trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969); Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being, or, Beyond Essence* [1974], trans. by Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1981).

model of Thomas Gieryn.⁶ This term is useful in evoking conceptual areas of inclusion and exclusion in similarly spatial terms to those I use throughout this thesis. As I will show in the final section of this chapter, in establishing an academic discipline in the latter part of the century, professional historians redefined the boundaries of their craft. They now reclaimed the multiple and particular – as located in the archive – as part of a masculine endeavour. But in doing so, they effectively excluded women from this sphere. Focus on the detail, which had been feared as inherently superficial and purposeless, was now reconceived as severely rational: the correct route to the kind of historical objectivity so difficult to attain when considering the recent past.

Particularity and generality

Any text written for an unknown audience has to balance the dual demands of the particular and the general: the need for specificity with that of accessibility. By way of an illustrative prologue, two texts on biography-writing, drawn from the end of the Victorian period and soon after, can usefully illuminate this difficulty and the strategies used to deal with it. As delineated in the Introduction, the genre of biography is not the focus of substantial analysis in this thesis, because its challenges in writing the recent past are often of a more personal nature, and on a proportionally smaller scale, than those of national historiography. It can, however, offer a useful microcosm of the divergent pulls of particularity and generality, and their ethical and aesthetic implications.

The first of these is by Margaret Oliphant, from an article on ‘The Ethics of Biography’ (1883). In this assessment of a genre that had become particularly common during her lifetime, she queries the full value of the biographical method.⁷ Is it really beneficial, she asks, to destroy reverence by revealing all the vulgar particularities of our heroes? As she acknowledges, it would be ‘quite possible’ for biographers

to deprive us of every noble name that now gives lustre to humanity, and to leave the past as naked of all veneration or respect as it is in the present. That fine St George, who has given an emblem of spotless valour and conquest over the impure image of fleshly lust and cruelty to two great nations ... turns out,

⁶ Gieryn, ‘Boundary-Work and the Demarcation of Science from Non-Science’.

⁷ For a recent discussion of the prevalence of biographical commemoration in the period, and particularly the two-volume ‘life and letters’ format, see Atkinson, *Victorian Biography Reconsidered*.

they say, to have been an army contractor, furnishing the shoddy of his time to the commissariat; and a great deal the better we all are for that exquisite discovery.⁸

The frankly sarcastic tone of that final line suggests that on the contrary, the softening veil of myth, which reduces and distils the particularities of life into a generalised and thus universalisable whole, is far more productive in stimulating both ‘veneration’ and ‘valour’ in its believers.

Oliphant ties the over-particularity that threatens to weaken biography to the over-particularity of the recent past, and thus of contemporary history. As she puts it,

A man who has been dead twenty days is enveloped in a mystery and solemnity which the most heartless will not disturb. ... But he who has been dead twenty years, has, as it were, emerged from death altogether. He has been, and to our senses is, no longer; but the mystery and awe have departed, and he is restored to the cheerful atmosphere of common day, though of a day that is past.⁹

With a greater temporal distance, she suggests, ‘the personages of previous generations’ can be viewed as ‘permanent figures upon the clear horizon of the past.’¹⁰ The ‘twenty years’ offered by Oliphant as sufficient hindsight to write a biography demonstrates the difference between it and national history-writing. Biography’s remit is more self-contained, the single individual rather than the multifarious population. Twenty years is rarely viewed as sufficient, by the historians I examine later in this thesis, to enable a view either ‘permanent’ or ‘clear’. While biography can serve effectively as an exemplar for the kinds of conceptual issues at stake in historiography, these two forms deal with proportionally different timescales.

Even with the benefit of hindsight, Oliphant cautions, biography still runs the risk of excessive particularity and multiplicity. When, as often happens, the biography is written by ‘the most beloved friend’, he

does not attempt to criticize or judge, he records; and as all things small and great are important to his affectionate recollection, he crowds the annals with detail and explanation ... leaving us without guidance or enlightenment where elucidation is most required. ... It is not from such witnesses that we can expect the uncoloured chronicle of absolute truth.¹¹

This unfiltered, indiscriminate recording (which Oliphant explicitly associates with the earliest forms of systematic history-writing, the annals) does not fulfil its purpose.

⁸ Margaret Oliphant, ‘The Ethics of Biography’, *The Contemporary Review*, 44 (1883), 76–93 (p. 77).

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 79–80.

Instead she calls for a kind of ‘uncoloured’ steely gaze that echoes the calls of William Stubbs (then Professor of History at Oxford) for a ‘colourless’ style of historical writing, in the model of Ranke.¹² In this way, she endorses the tenets of the newly professionalised historical discipline: hindsight and objectivity.

These two issues – temporal proximity and personal emotional investment – are precisely what Victorian historians saw as the sources of the recent past’s oppressive multiplicity and particularity. This is epitomised in Lytton Strachey’s preface to his *Eminent Victorians* (1918), though he considers them with a newly laconic and ironic post-Great War scepticism.

The history of the Victorian Age will never be written; we know too much about it. For ignorance is the first requisite of the historian – ignorance, which simplifies and clarifies, which selects and omits, with a placid perfection unattainable by the highest art. ... [T]he explorer of the past ... will row out over that great ocean of material, and lower down into it, here and there, a little bucket, which will bring up to the light of day some characteristic specimen, from those far depths, to be examined with a careful curiosity.¹³

There are striking differences between these two texts, which posit different levels of unity as their ideal. Oliphant still values the unitary ‘truth’ offered by the mythic mode. Strachey’s response to the problem of multiplicity, by contrast, is to resign himself to its inevitability. His apparently wistful statement is a highly pragmatic self-justification, absolving him from shying away from the genre of history in favour of the ‘lesser’ (less generalising) genre of biography. The preface assumes that the most one can hope to achieve in the challenging field of his recent past is to sample a specimen – a scientifically infused language that owes much to late-nineteenth-century discourses of disciplinary professionalisation.

What unites both these texts, however, is a recognition that particularity and multiplicity get in the way of effective history-writing. Distance, whether of time, space or sympathy, is required in order to generalise, unify and render comprehensible the details of the recent past, and the everyday, individual lives that make it up. In all the three sites of cultural anxiety that this chapter will now go on to examine – gender, antiquarianism and fiction – the subordinated ‘Other’ is defined in

¹² In his inaugural lecture at Cambridge (1895), Lord Acton paid homage to Ranke for teaching him that history ought ‘to be critical, to be colourless, and to be new.’ Lord Acton, *Lectures on Modern History*, ed. by J. N. Figgis and R. V. Laurence (London: Macmillan, 1960), p. 18.

¹³ Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians*, ed. by John Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 5.

part as being too proximate, too closely allied to its subject-matter, to offer the transcendent ‘Truth’ that Victorian culture so desired.

1. Gender

Let us first turn to look at gender, since this is the core discourse that was taken up and used to devalue other rejected modes of knowledge. The idea that our concepts of history are gendered is not a new one. Christina Crosby argues in *The Ends of History: Victorians and ‘the Woman Question’* (1991) that in the nineteenth century, men were associated with universality and linearity – History – while women were, in the process, demoted to the realm of cyclical, circular time. For her, “‘Women’ are the unhistorical other of history.”¹⁴ This idea of the ‘unhistorical’ woman, moreover, is conceived in my key terms. In Crosby’s reading, woman is atemporal and essentialised, and thus, on one level, singular. The character of this essentialisation, however, is one of multiplicity, in the form of domesticity, superficiality and particularity. Claire Colebrook concludes, in an analysis of the changing relationship between the ‘nature-culture binary’ and the ‘male-female’ binary, ‘Woman may appear as the natural, biological and embodied origin of being, or she can be associated with surface, display, artifice and fashion.’¹⁵ In my analysis, it is the latter orientation of the nature-culture binary, one where women are associated with ‘surface’, that is most prominent in Victorian attempts to use ‘feminine’ as a tool of discursive deprecation. This dual referent of ‘woman’ is what makes it such a flexible and frequently appropriated signifier, and what brings it into an analogous relationship with so many other sites of anxiety.

This position has been further developed by Brigid Lowe, who in a recent monograph has taken Crosby’s thesis and to a certain extent turned it on its head. Discussing an 1858 article by R. H. Hutton (which I will discuss further below, and which essentialises women as concerned with circumstantial detail rather than, like men, with abstract ideas), she suggests that ‘Hutton really hit on something: there is such a thing as a feminine imaginative perspective as he describes it’.¹⁶ She associates a group of realist novels with the multiplicity of the female, but reclaims

¹⁴ Crosby, p. 1.

¹⁵ Claire Colebrook, *Gender* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), p. 44.

¹⁶ Brigid Lowe, *Victorian Fiction and the Insights of Sympathy: An Alternative to the Hermeneutics of Suspicion* (London: Anthem Press, 2007), pp. 64–5.

these as a positive, proposing that this multiplicity is a deliberate authorial strategy. As Lowe reminds her reader, ‘contemporary criticism has not retained Hutton’s esteem for the universal.’¹⁷ In the nineteenth century, to judge a text as multiple (and thus feminine) was derogatory; now critics such as Crosby condemn even the realist novels that Lowe deems ‘feminine fiction’¹⁸ by characterising them as covertly monolithic in their message.

Anxieties about ‘the particular’ are not confined to the Victorian period, although neither have they remained static. Naomi Schor’s work on aesthetics is illuminating in tracing this anxiety across a broader timeframe, and demonstrating how cultural attitudes towards ‘the particular’ have shifted. She suggests that

The censure of the particular is one of the enabling gestures of neo-classicism, which recycled into the modern age the classical equation of the Ideal with the absence of all particularity.¹⁹

And she explicitly recognises that this particularity is inextricably associated with the feminine.

To focus on the detail and more particularly on the detail as negativity is to become aware, as I discovered, of its participation in a larger semantic network, bounded on the one side by the ornamental, with its traditional connotations of effeminacy and decadence, and on the other, by the everyday, whose ‘prosiness’ is rooted in the domestic sphere of social life presided over by women. ... The detail does not occupy a conceptual space beyond the laws of sexual difference: the detail is gendered and doubly gendered as feminine.²⁰

The key words here for my study are ‘ornamental’ and ‘everyday’. Schor’s association of ‘the detail’ with the former’s superficiality and the latter’s domesticity draws out the parallels at the heart of my analogy between Victorian ideas of the feminine and anxieties about writing of the recent past.

In the final section of this chapter, I will show that the multiplicity and particularity of the ‘feminine’ authorial model described by Lowe – one primarily concerned with detail and determined to forestall any premature conclusions – was appropriated at the end of the nineteenth century by the archive-based practices of the emergent professional historian. Here as well, Schor offers a valuable springboard.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 64. Lowe offers George Eliot’s *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1857), Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley* (1849) and Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* (1848), as well as less-studied novels such as Elizabeth Sewell’s *The Experience of Life* (1853), as examples of realist Victorian fictions that are consciously concerned with evoking particularity of detail rather than providing a monolithic ‘Significant’ message.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 19.

¹⁹ Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (London: Methuen, 1987), p. 3.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 4.

Although she celebrates the fact that Roland Barthes and other post-structuralist theorists have ushered in a new age that champions the detail, ‘from a feminist perspective a new and nagging question emerges’:

does the triumph of the detail signify a triumph of the feminine with which it has so long been linked? Or has the detail achieved its new prestige by being taken over by the masculine, triumphing at the very moment when it ceases to be associated with the feminine, or ceasing to be connoted as feminine at the very moment when it is taken up by the male-dominated cultural establishment?²¹

I propose that the appropriation of the detail by the ‘male-dominated cultural establishment’ is not solely a late-twentieth-century phenomenon, but was a crucial part of the process by which history-writing could become a professional and academically sanctioned activity.

Femininity and the particular in nineteenth-century discourse

The rhetoric of an over-attention to detail that undermines all sense of overview is prevalent in mid-nineteenth-century depictions of the female mind. Women are assumed to be especially suited to observing, assessing and creating detail of a level that is far too frivolous, superficial and small-scale for men to notice or be distracted by.

We can see this in just about any female conduct book of the era. This genre relies on a conceptual framework that assumes an essential gendered character for ‘woman’. Although advice literature for men was also available, this was a niche genre in comparison to the prolific publications for women. Only if the female sex is deemed homogenous in its characteristics – and to repeat itself in its flaws – can this form of behavioural literature be of any effective use. This is eminently illustrated in the writings of the prolific educationist Sarah Stickney Ellis, who published in 1839 the first of her successful series of conduct books, *The Women of England, their Social Duties and Domestic Habits*. From its very outset, she sets up an opposition between the historical and the feminine, via binaries of public and private, masculine and feminine, general and particular. In her Preface she defensively both depreciates and justifies the volume with the statement:

²¹ Ibid., p. 6.

At a time when the pressure of stirring events, and the urgency of public and private interests, render it increasingly desirable that every variety of labour should be attended with an immediate and adequate return; I feel that some apology is necessary for the presumption of inviting the attention of the public to a work, in which I have been compelled to enter into the apparently insignificant detail of familiar and ordinary life. The often-repeated truth – that ‘trifles make the sum of human things,’ must plead my excuse.²²

She first places her volume within the framework of an economic realm of direct, ‘immediate’ and mathematical cause and effect: an implicitly masculine nineteenth-century realm of industrial production and grand historical forces. In the second half of this protracted sentence, however, after the semi-colon, she shifts to the position of a mediator between masculine and feminine worlds. ‘Compelled’ to draw the public’s attention to particulars they might consider below their notice, she presents her role as one of duty rather than the product of an inherent ‘feminine’ allegiance to such ‘insignificant detail’. In this way, she claims privileged insights into the female world, while also claiming to stand sufficiently apart from it to be able to judge its shortcomings.

This elision of ‘woman’ with the particular, the detailed, the domestic and the small-scale is perpetuated throughout the tract. For example, at one point Ellis remarks:

I have said before, that the sphere of a domestic woman’s observation is microscopic. She is therefore sensible of defects within that sphere, which, to a more extended vision, would be imperceptible. ... If her interest and her energies were diffused through a wider range, she would be less alive to the minuter claims upon her attention. It is possible she may sometimes attach too much importance to the minutiae of her own domestic world ... but, on the other hand, there arises, from the same cause, a scrupulous exactness, a studious observance, of the means of happiness, a delicacy of perception, ... for which the women of England are unrivalled by those of any other nation.²³

This passage works to lead the reader to a conclusion through three stages. First, woman is essentialised as being inherently focused on the particular and localised. These are first offered up as positives, making her ‘sensible’ and ‘alive’, but then acknowledged as possible flaws. She is limited not only to the domestic instead of the public, but even to ‘the minutiae of *her own* domestic world’ (my italics), a highly individualised attention rather than even a higher generalised ideal of domesticity. Finally, however, the feminine is salvaged and recovered. Although carried out

²² Sarah Ellis, *The Women of England: Their Social Duties, and Domestic Habits* (London: Fisher, Son & Co., 1839), p. 2.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

surreptitiously, in a discourse of self-exculpation, Ellis's reminder that 'trifles make the sum of human things' could be used to argue for the kind of social history – a history of the 'unhistoric' elements and individuals – that will be a subject of further analysis in Chapters 2 and 3. In her image of the 'microscopic' attention of the female mind, we are led to feel that the 'imperceptible' details that come within her vision are only *apparently* insignificant. It should be acknowledged, however, what the feminine is salvaged for in Ellis's text. It is not for history exactly, but for that alternative unifying trope, discussed further in Chapter 2: the 'nation'.

Such essentialisations of the female mind were commonplace and acceptable in behavioural literature in the subsequent decades. These clusters of 'feminine' and 'masculine' characteristics were expressed by women – particularly those who sought to distance themselves from the norms of their sex – as well as men, and indeed were often presented in less approbatory terms than Ellis's. Another such writer, Marian Evans, evoked this stereotype in an anonymous article of 1856 (before her re-incarnation as George Eliot), the famous 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists'. Here, she argues that given the present state of female behaviour, men 'can hardly help saying' that a woman's 'knowledge remains acquisition, instead of passing into culture',²⁴ it remains fragmented, multiple and purposeless rather than being absorbed into a single, purposive whole. This association of the feminine with the particular is perhaps best demonstrated in the publications – both formal advice manuals and periodical reviews – of Unitarian writer and theologian Richard Holt Hutton. Hutton opens an article of 1858 with the statement, with which he assumes the reader's acquiescence, that 'It is clear that, hitherto at least, feminine ability has found for itself a far more suitable sphere in novel-writing than in any other branch of literature.'²⁵ And this is the case because, in a reasoning he sees as 'not very recondite', the female mind is pre-occupied with 'circumstantial descriptiveness' rather than the 'abstract ... rights of electors, ... kings, and wars, and statesmen, past and present, ... laws of thought, and laws of harmony' that are deliberated in the male brain.²⁶ In an extended development of the themes of this article, an advice manual published four years later, he comes even closer to enunciating the parallel tropes examined in this chapter. Women, he argues,

²⁴ [George Eliot], 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists', *Westminster Review*, 66 (1856), 442–61 (p. 454).

²⁵ R. H. Hutton, 'Novels by the Authoress of "John Halifax"', *North British Review*, 29 (1858), 466–81 (p. 466).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 466–67.

care to conquer each point as they reach it, but not to understand its exact bearing on the last, and those before it. They are not eager to map or plan their world of thought. With men, the pleasure of understanding clearly how different facts are related, is often greater than the pleasure of studying any of them individually; with women it is the reverse.²⁷

Here, particular, microscopic, blinkered detail is squarely associated with the feminine, which is in turn, as in Evans' article, associated with the novel form. The 'map' form of the grand overview, by contrast, and the construction of details into a linear trajectory, are seen as man's domain. Hutton does not explicitly claim superiority for the latter traits; indeed, he goes on to argue that this feminine aptitude for detail is what gives them some skill as novelists. But to the male mind is attributed all the qualities that allow for creation of, and inclusion in, the transcendent narrative of 'History' that was so important to Victorian culture.

These texts all disassociate women from the transcendent continuum of 'History', and associate 'men' with abstract 'laws'. These laws require a mode of historical thinking in perpetual movement away from the particular towards the general. It is in part a refusal to adhere to such laws that provoked professionalising historians to undermine a form of historical activity that had previously been a source of essential lifeblood in their endeavours: antiquarianism.

2. Antiquarianism

Antiquarianism is not perhaps an obvious analogy for contemporary-history-writing. Often associated with zeal for remote history, it might seem more to be the recent past's antithesis than its equivalent. The point at which the two overlap, however, is their non-narrative form: they both offer a discomfiting shapelessness. In a review of Thomas Arnold's 1842 lectures on history, the anonymous writer deems that Arnold 'justly observes' how

Mere antiquarianism ... is calculated to contract and enfeeble the understanding. It is a pedantic love of detail, with an indifference to the result, for which alone it can be considered valuable. It is the mistake, into which men are perpetually falling, of the means for the end.²⁸

²⁷ R. H. Hutton, *The Relative Value of Studies and Accomplishments in the Education of Women* (London, 1862), p. 19.

²⁸ Anonymous, 'Arnold's Lectures on History', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 53 (1843), 141–65 (p. 146).

The antiquarian approach to historical subject-matter might, in this vein, be defined as one uninterested in the task of distillation, in honing down its findings to a single ‘Significant’ message. In this sense, fears and hostilities among historians of the professionalising stamp towards the antiquarian approach mirror very closely those towards the idea of writing the recent past as history. It is this apparent irreducibility of antiquarian researches that brings them in parallel with Victorian approaches to the recent past.

Concerns about antiquarianism’s pedantry and obsession with inconsequential detail were not new in the nineteenth century, as Joseph Levine has demonstrated.²⁹ Nonetheless, at the beginning of the period, it was a significant and respectable strand of historical study. Its first manifestations in Britain were as an offshoot of Italian humanist scholarship, as the sixteenth-century antiquary John Leland sought to demonstrate that the topography and ancient remains in Britain could be as valuable and informative as those of Mediterranean civilisation. Important work has been done by Rosemary Sweet in bringing the figure of the eighteenth-century antiquary to scholarly attention.³⁰ As Philippa Levine has shown, building on the type of statistical analysis Richard Altick had applied to nineteenth-century British writers, 40% of the Victorian historical, antiquarian and archaeological communities were Fellows of the Society of Antiquaries of London, making it clearly more than a marginal concern.³¹ At the turn of the nineteenth century, antiquarianism formed an important part of historical endeavour, particularly as a means of reclaiming the importance of British, and often specifically local, heritage. Walter Scott himself was an antiquarian enthusiast, and a self-confessed model for the eponymous character of Jonathan Oldbuck in *The Antiquary* (1816).

However, as critics including Philippa Levine and Martin Myrone and Lucy Peltz have shown, this branch of learning, and its attendant approaches and frameworks, fell out of favour as history was established as an academic discipline in the second half of the nineteenth century.³² As Levine herself highlights, from the

²⁹ Joseph M. Levine, *Dr Woodward’s Shield: History, Science, and Satire in Augustan England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977).

³⁰ Rosemary Sweet, *Antiquaries: The Discovery of the Past in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (London: Hambledon, 2004).

³¹ Philippa Levine, *The Amateur and the Professional*, p. 9. See Richard D. Altick, ‘The Sociology of Authorship: The Social Origins, Education, Occupation of 1100 British Writers, 1800–1935’, *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, 66 (1962), 389–404.

³² Altick, ‘The Sociology of Authorship’; Philippa Levine; Martin Myrone and Lucy Peltz, eds., *Producing the Past: Aspects of Antiquarian Culture and Practice, 1700–1850* (Brookfield, Vermont: Ashgate, 1999).

1880s onwards, the proportion of her sample who were members of the Society of Antiquaries ‘drops substantially.’³³ In *The Antiquary*, Scott pokes relatively gentle fun at Oldbuck for his immersion in his collection of utterly diffuse historical paraphernalia, but by the 1870s, antiquarianism had become further discredited. George Eliot admitted to a certain affinity with her *Middlemarch* scholar, Casaubon, especially after her exhaustive, exhausting, and in many ways unrewarding researches for the writing of *Romola* (1862–63).³⁴ Nonetheless, Casaubon’s historical approach is more decidedly ridiculed than Oldbuck’s ever is. Casaubon is condemned not only for his fascination with redundant details, but also for his refusal – despite his claims to be working towards that most generalising and unitary of projects, ‘the Key to all Mythologies’ – to condense his vast researches into any communicable form.

Not all critics are in accord with this narrative trajectory of a nineteenth-century divergence between antiquarian and professionalised history. Mark Salber Phillips, using a temporal outline of Arnaldo Momigliano’s, suggests instead a ‘convergence’.³⁵ However, this stems from Salber Phillips framing antiquarianism in different terms from mine, and in different terms to those used by ‘boundary-working’ Victorian historians. He states that ‘a modern historical discipline has grown up in which systematic research has become indivisible from the task of representing the past in narrative, with the consequence that the ancient separation of history and antiquities has at last been transcended.’³⁶ For the professional historians of the late-Victorian period, however, ‘systematic research’ was exactly what they believed antiquarians did not bother to adhere to. The positivistic rigour that characterised at least the avowed aims of the Stubbsian school was not, such historians would have insisted, an inheritance from their antiquarian predecessors.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, writers influenced by Romantic historicism sought broader, more transcendent narratives than the particularity offered by antiquarianism. Mike Goode argues that what made antiquaries the butt of disparagement was their apparently circular and thus fruitless – rather than narrative and directed – attitude to their subject matter. They were cast as ‘unmanly on the

³³ Philippa Levine, p. 9.

³⁴ G. S. Haight, *George Eliot: A Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), p. 450.

³⁵ Mark Salber Phillips, ‘Reconsiderations on History and Antiquarianism: Arnaldo Momigliano and the Historiography of Eighteenth-Century Britain’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 57 (1996), 297–16 (p. 298).

³⁶ *Ibid.*

grounds that they failed to produce forward-looking knowledge or policy'.³⁷ He reads Thomas Rowlandson's famous caricature of emasculating antiquarianism, *Modern Antiques* (1811) as both implicitly sexual and implicitly queer, in a way that (though Goode himself does not cite her) mirrors Eve Sedgwick's emphasis on the bond between male rivals in a nominally heterosexual erotic triangle.³⁸ For him, Rowlandson's engraving emphasises 'the sexual nature of the antiquary's pursuits while registering their distance from, even their power to make him oblivious to, proper – that is, both heteronormative and vital – sexual impulses'.³⁹ The several 'Others' of history that this chapter examines are strikingly elided in Walter Scott's journal entry for 9 March 1828. He commented on activities that he called 'antiquarian old-womanries', which, 'like knitting a stocking, divert ... the mind without occupying it.'⁴⁰ This image of 'divert[ing] without occupying' suggests a spatial misdirection without any substantive content. In this tiny textual fragment, unacceptable modes of history come together with feminine-gendered forms of activity, and with the lack of progressive trajectory attendant on recent time, in a composite image of degradation.

In the latter half of the century, antiquarianism became even less reputable, as its devoted amateurism became decidedly incompatible with the self-conscious empirical detachment of the manly professional historian. At the beginning of the century a gentleman of letters avoided commercial contagion by remaining amateur, but by its end, the figure of the professional had been successfully invested with respectability, while the idea of a professional antiquary remained a contradiction in terms.⁴¹ However, the two new university subjects of History and Archaeology

³⁷ Mike Goode, 'Dryasdust Antiquarianism and Sappy Masculinity: The Waverley Novels and the Gender of History', *Representations*, 82 (2003), 52–86 (p. 61).

³⁸ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 21.

³⁹ Mike Goode, *Sentimental Masculinity and the Rise of History, 1790–1890* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 104. Rowlandson's engraving is discussed in detail in Goode's monograph, and features as its cover image.

⁴⁰ Walter Scott, *The Journal of Sir Walter Scott*, ed. by W. E. K. Anderson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), p. 441.

⁴¹ For discussion of the anxieties surrounding the commercialisation and professionalisation of men of letters, see Carol T. Christ, "'The Hero as Man of Letters': Masculinity and Victorian Non-Fiction Prose', in *Victorian Sages and Cultural Discourse: Renegotiating Gender and Power*, ed. by Thais E. Morgan (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), pp. 19–31; Martin A. Danahay, *Gender at Work in Victorian Culture: Literature, Art and Masculinity* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2005); Clare Pettitt, *Patent Inventions: Intellectual Property and the Victorian Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Jennifer Ruth, *Novel Professions: Interested Disinterest And the Making of the Professional in the Victorian Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006).

managed to carve out disciplinary spaces for themselves that effectively disenfranchised antiquarianism completely.

Antiquarianism might seem – as in Salber Phillips’ interpretation – to have more in common with later-nineteenth-century forms of history, as they came to fetishize what Richard Hoare, in an epigraph to his *Ancient Wiltshire* (1810), had proudly characterised as ‘facts, not theory’.⁴² However, professionalised history located its specificity in textual archives rather than the material object, and claimed to approach these facts with dispassionate objectivity rather than the necrophilic overenthusiasm it ascribed to the antiquarian. Authoritative assessment of the material object, meanwhile, as Sam Smiles has demonstrated, was claimed by archaeologists.⁴³ These first historical professionals deliberately distanced themselves from their antiquarian predecessors and colleagues, who they labelled as amateur, unsystematic, short-sighted and obsessive.

In their infancy, these disciplinary terms were used with relative fluidity, as demonstrated by an 1853 article in *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal*. It suggests that until recently, antiquarianism was ‘a vague indefinite dream, a chaotic jumble of opinions and theories – in fact, anything but a science’,⁴⁴ but declares that this is ‘now happily rare among antiquaries ... for archaeology has firmly taken root’ among them.⁴⁵ It sees no mutually exclusive relationship between these two pursuits: the latter is an influx that informs the former. Despite nominally taking this optimistic stance, however, the vast majority of the article is given over to examples of precisely the kinds of over-eager misinterpretations that the writer has suggested are ‘now happily rare’, and seems more keen to offer these renditions than to prove its brief. It even concludes with an antiquarian error ‘of recent promulgation, which, it seems to us, has rarely been equalled in pure extravagance’.⁴⁶

Indeed, as Stephen Bann has described historiographical assessments of antiquarianism, ‘It is as if Dr Jekyll had written his autobiography and carefully set a distance between his own eminent career and the disreputable doings of a certain Mr

⁴² Epigraph to Richard Hoare, *Ancient Wiltshire* (1810), qtd. Stuart Piggott, *Ruins in a Landscape: Essays in Antiquarianism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1976), p. 127.

⁴³ Sam Smiles, *The Image of Antiquity: Ancient Britain and the Romantic Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 1994).

⁴⁴ Anonymous, ‘Antiquarian Delusions’, *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal*, 499 (1853), 56–59 (p. 56).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

Hyde.⁴⁷ And this split personality is not the result merely of twentieth-century retrospections. In a lecture at Oxford in 1884, Montagu Burrows, Chichele Professor of History, dismissed the antiquarian approach on the grounds that ‘facts, naked, unadorned facts, are the objects of the love and reverence of the rigid antiquarian.’⁴⁸ Many of the conventional strategies whereby scientific historians attempted to cast aspersions on antiquarianism are evident in Burrows’ evocation, which views the antiquary as dwelling on his artefacts with questionable levels of fascination. His imagined figure is at once ‘rigid’, full of excessive ‘reverence’, in the mould of an overly clerical and thus emasculated Casaubon, and drawn obsessively to ‘naked’ facts, hinting at a perverted sexualisation of his subject-matter.

In recent decades, however, the dynamic between particularity and generality that for the Victorians was so heavily weighted in favour of the latter seems to have come full circle. As Sweet, Bann, and Peltz and Myrone have suggested, the concerns and practices of the antiquarian have in a revised sense come back into their own in recent historical practice. Peltz and Myrone suggest that the antiquarian’s

concern with material as well as textual evidence, the obsession with detail – almost as a means of stalling the conclusive historical text – the fixation on the disjecta and marginalia of the past, the willingness to extract meaning from the most trivial and neglected of things are all strangely typical of modern historical studies. In particular, they are characteristic of the new (as Bann points out, post-Foucauldian) historical analysis, analysis which refuses to predict grand historical narratives and rather concerns itself with the minute manifestations of power apparent in the anecdotal and trivial, and in the material traces of history.⁴⁹

If antiquarianism so delights in detail, margins and inconclusive readings, perhaps a successful history of the recent past would be an antiquarian one? Paradoxical as this may sound, this might be another way of looking at histories developed out of particularity and personal memory rather than social or political generalisations. Peltz and Myrone align the antiquarian approach with that of New Historicism, so it would not be a huge leap to suggest that this is a relevant way to approach unorthodox contemporary-history-writing. If the defining feature of antiquarianism rests in a refusal to draw final conclusions, this makes it the perfect mode in which to write a

⁴⁷ Stephen Bann, ‘Preface’, in *Producing the Past: Aspects of Antiquarian Culture and Practice, 1700-1850*, ed. by Martin Myrone and Lucy Peltz (Brookfield, Vermont: Ashgate, 1999), pp. xvii–xxiii (p. xviii).

⁴⁸ Montagu Burrows, *Antiquarianism and History. A Lecture Delivered before the University of Oxford, May 26 1884* (Oxford, 1885), p. 7.

⁴⁹ Myrone and Peltz, p. 7.

history of the recent past, about which it is impossible to draw any such conclusions. In addition, the sorts of subject matter (history of manners, costumes and domestic matters) and sources (often material as opposed to purely textual) with which antiquaries were habitually associated brings them into striking conjunction with our other sites of anxiety. Highly particular and domestic, these subjects were associated with the feminine. And they are also the fields that often made up the content of the nineteenth-century realist novel.

3. Historical fiction

As has been compellingly detailed by Kate Flint in *The Woman Reader* (1993), in the nineteenth century the novel form was associated with the female, both commercially, in its readership, and metaphorically, in its content and style.⁵⁰ It was a critical commonplace that the novel represented multiplicity and particularity rather than unified singularity, while history was ascribed the opposite characteristics. However, the respective attribution of these qualities was not always stable. Influential Romantic writers from William Godwin to Thomas Carlyle used ‘truth’ as an independent term to transgress – or rather sidestep – these generic dividing lines. By the end of the nineteenth century, with ‘History’ relatively securely established as a professional discipline, proponents of fiction who wanted to elevate ‘Literature’ to the same capitalised status appealed again to universal and transcendent ‘Truth’ as a characteristic of their preferred genre. In this second wave of professionalisation, however, literature’s advocates *opposed* fiction to fact rather than attempting to fuse them.

‘We have more than once called attention to the aphorism that “the perfection of fiction is truth.” In other words, “fiction is the general, and fact the individual, truth.”’⁵¹ So declares an anonymous reviewer of 1837, in a statement that strikingly encapsulates the problem that faced historians in the nineteenth century, and especially historians of the nineteenth century. While they might wish to claim transcendent significance for their writings, these terms were already being used by proponents of ‘Literature’, often, by implication, denigrating the value of mere

⁵⁰ Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader, 1837–1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

⁵¹ Anonymous, ‘National and Historical Novels’, *Court Magazine and Monthly Critic*, 10 (1837), 272–78 (p. 272).

history. Thirty years later, these same sentiments were expressed by Margaret Oliphant in *Blackwood's*:

Fact is no guide at all to art. ... Truth is one thing and fact is another. Truth is that grand general rule of humanity, the harmonious law which runs through everything Fact is the exceptional and contradictory, which breaks rudely into the sweet breath of use and wont. ... A man who follows fact in art at the expense of truth, is accordingly taking the lawless instead of the harmonious, the exceptional instead of the natural.⁵²

In Vernon Lee's 'A Dialogue on Novels', published in the *Contemporary Review* the following decade, the character of Baldwin muses, 'I believe that ... we should find that a good third of what we take to be instinctive knowledge, or knowledge vaguely acquired from personal experience, is really obtained from the novels which we or our friends have read.'⁵³ This belief that novels offer us a breadth of human wisdom we would be unable to learn simply through personal experience is prevalent throughout the nineteenth century, as it still is in the twenty-first. What is more peculiarly characteristic of the Victorian era are its parallel beliefs in the genre's power both to elevate and to degrade.

Of course, 'fiction' cannot be treated as a single cohesive and undifferentiated category, despite the blithe generalisations of Victorian reviewers. Most of the texts produced under the banner of the 'historical novel' in the nineteenth century were written in the 'romance' mode, although, as I will examine further in Chapter 3, the historical novel form was also adopted, and adapted, by realist writers, who often set their historical narratives in the recent past. The term 'romance' did not map solely or straightforwardly on to 'feminine' characteristics. Its primary referent was as a medieval form, whose conventions offered a tale of chivalry that employed mythical and legendary tropes through a story of quest and adversity, and which came into its own again in the Romantic period.⁵⁴ Scott's historical fictions, which Ina Ferris and others have argued successfully masculinised the novel form, were from *Ivanhoe* (1819) onward often subtitled as 'a historical romance'.⁵⁵ All these uses of the term evoke its medieval traditions, whose conventional character types and narrative shapes render it singular rather than multiple, mythically unified rather than

⁵² [Margaret Oliphant], 'New Books', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 108 (1870), 166–88 (p. 185).

⁵³ Vernon Lee, 'A Dialogue on Novels', *Contemporary Review*, 48 (1885), 378–401 (p. 401).

⁵⁴ One early example of the term used in conjunction with 'historical' is Thomas Leland, *Longsword, Earl of Salisbury: An Historical Romance* (1762)

⁵⁵ Ferris, *Achievement of Literary Authority*; Mike Goode, 'Dryasdust Antiquarianism and Sappy Masculinity'.

concretely particularised. For William Godwin, for example, as I will demonstrate below, romance is used as a signifier of comparative unity in contrast to history-writing.

So does the realist mode map more closely onto the characteristics of the ‘feminine’? After all, as Lowe emphasises, it abounds in particularist detail, and advocates of historiography certainly presented it as their genre’s subordinate ‘feminine’ counterpart. Its nineteenth-century proponents, however, defended it as masculine. For Flaubert, Zola and Gissing in the latter part of the century, ‘scientific realism’ was a manly mode, with high-status ideals and goals. When George Eliot claimed it as her chosen style in opposition to ‘silly novels by lady novelists’, those she eschews are those of the romantic mode (which by now has taken on connotations of femininity), while the realism she explicitly avows in *Adam Bede* (1859) embraces the concrete detail and lowly protagonists of the new wave of social scientists.⁵⁶ The importance of this movement in the mid-Victorian period is evidenced by the establishment of the Social Science Association (SSA) under the presidency of Lord Brougham in 1857, and its immense popularity over the following three decades.⁵⁷

The interplay between romance and realism can be usefully illuminated by considering the example of Charles Reade. He attempted to invent a new fictional mode that would unite these two facets of fiction-writing, and incorporate the statistical methods advocated by the SSA. The sub-title he gave six of his fourteen novels, ‘a matter-of-fact romance’,⁵⁸ brings together the concern with the everyday that typifies the realist mode with a promise of the naïve perspective and mythic unity attendant on romance. At the outset of his novel-writing career, in 1853, Reade avowed in his diary, ‘The plan I propose to myself in writing stories will, I see, cost me undeniable labour. I propose never to guess where I can know.’⁵⁹ This rhetoric of authorship as ‘undeniable labour’ is a familiar one in mid-Victorian defences of the man of letters, in a period when writers (and male writers in particular) were struggling to shift the grounds of their self-valorisation from disinterested amateurism

⁵⁶ George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, ed. by Robert Speaight (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1960), pp. 171–75.

⁵⁷ see Lawrence Goldman, *Science, Reform, and Politics in Victorian Britain: The Social Science Association, 1857-1886* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁵⁸ These included *It is Never Too Late to Mend* (1856), *Hard Cash* (1863) and *The Cloister and the Hearth* (1861).

⁵⁹ Charles Reade’s diary, 20th June 1853. Qtd. Wayne Burns, *Charles Reade: A Study in Victorian Authorship* (New York: Bookman, 1961), p. 130.

to hard-working professionalism.⁶⁰ Tom Bragg views Reade's methods as having been successful in 'masculinizing' his genre.⁶¹ But this writer's record is full of contradictions.⁶² Reade saw himself as opposed to Carlylean medievalism, instead embracing Benthamite statistical approaches with what he termed his 'Great System' of note-taking.⁶³ The scientific and objective nature of this pursuit was, however, heavily discredited in Wayne Burns' 1961 study of Reade, and a recent survey of the Sensation Novel characterises his methodology as the product of an 'undigested melange of newspaper reports, propaganda, and surprising sexual explicitness'.⁶⁴ Even by 1940, George Orwell was evoking his shortcomings in terms that parallel those ascribed to the feminine and the antiquarian in the nineteenth century. Orwell describes him as having 'possessed vast stocks of disconnected information which a lively narrative gift allowed him to cram into books', and concluded that 'the attraction of Reade' was 'the charm of useless knowledge.'⁶⁵ Orwell figures Reade's output as fragmentary, multiple and purposeless: a bundle of knowledge that lacks both unity and linear direction.

In Victorian commentary, fiction was repeatedly castigated and devalued for the same sort of short-sighted particularity that dogged representatives of the feminine, the antiquarian and, I suggest, the recent past. As Flint has shown, women's novel-reading was denigrated by characterisation as gluttonous consumption, elided with childish sweets or indigestion.⁶⁶ Ruskin pronounced in *Fors Clavigera* (1876) that 'gluttonous reading is a worse vice than gluttonous eating', and this comparison was by no means a new one.⁶⁷ In an advice manual of 1855, Matilda Pullan compares a girl's appetite for fiction to 'that of a child for cakes', which 'must be restrained within due bounds, or it will be injurious. No pastry will ever be a proper substitute

⁶⁰ See Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Pettitt, *Patent Inventions*; Ruth, *Novel Professions*.

⁶¹ Tom Bragg, 'Charles Reade', in *A Companion to Sensation Fiction*, ed. by Pamela K. Gilbert (Oxford: Blackwell, 2011), pp. 293–305 (p. 294).

⁶² On the shifts in Reade's reputation, see Mary Poovey, 'Forgotten Writers, Neglected Histories: Charles Reade and the Nineteenth-Century Transformation of the British Literary Field', *ELH*, 71 (2004), 433–53.

⁶³ Burns, p. 53.

⁶⁴ Winifred Hughes, 'The Sensation Novel', in *A Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. by Patrick Brantlinger and William B. Thesing (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), p. 272.

⁶⁵ George Orwell, *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, ed. by Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, 4 vols. (London: Secker & Warburg, 1968), II, pp. 34–5. Qtd. Elton E. Smith, *Charles Reade* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1976), p. 105.

⁶⁶ Flint, pp. 50–52.

⁶⁷ John Ruskin, *The Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, ed. by E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols. (London: G. Allen, 1903), XXVIII, 501.

for a solid joint.’⁶⁸ Such comparisons between fiction and confectionary were revived in the anxiety over ‘New Woman’ fiction of the 1890s. In an article of 1896, women’s suffrage campaigner Lady Laura Ridding conjured up an image of fashionable fiction so decadent that it is prone to melt and collapse upon examination:

The strawberry ices of literature glow on every railway bookstall in the shape of the lighter magazines, the society and comic papers, fashion journals, sensational stories. These are harmless occasional reading, but a mind glutted with them needs medicine as much as a greedy child after a surfeit of sugar-plums.⁶⁹

This connection between fiction and sugary food was made even by some readers themselves. The Mothers’ Union journal of 1893 relates a tale of decadent young women who on Saturday morning ‘liked to be in bed with a shilling shocker and a shilling’s worth of sweeties’.⁷⁰ In all these evocations of fiction as innutritious, it is elided both with the superficial – appearing attractive in its facile sweetness – and with the multiple, where it is the sheer quantity and ‘surfeit’ of their consumption that is problematic. In contrast to the ‘solid joint’ of masculine productions and consumptions, fiction, femininity and decadence reinforce each other in a tight-knit association of rejected ‘Others’. This is hardly the repository of that elusive singular quality, ‘Truth’, that I will now show was many Victorian readers’ fundamental criterion of value.

Claiming singularity: ‘Truth’

Both historiography and the novel depend on an assertion of authority to represent and impart ‘truth’. Unlike, for example, a political tract, or a shopping list, they claim to recreate lived experience. These two forms glean authority from their similarity to each other, at the same time as competing with each other for pre-eminence. Is the kind of ‘truth’ expressed in history and in fiction simply qualitatively different, or is it comparable? For the purposes of this study, what is notable about this struggle is that it is so often conducted in the rhetoric of particularity and generality. Each genre claims superiority by attributing to itself a more universal ‘truth’, while it denigrates the other by assigning its ‘truths’ to a category of the particular, multiple and context-specific.

⁶⁸ Matilda Marian Pullen, *Maternal Counsels to a Daughter* (London: Dent & Co., 1855), pp. 51–2.

⁶⁹ Lady Laura Ridding, ‘What Should Women Read?’, *Woman at Home*, 37 (1896), p. 29.

⁷⁰ Hon. Mrs Joyce, ‘Need of a Mothers’ Union in All Classes’, *Mothers in Council*, 3 (1893), p. 113.

This now-familiar rhetoric, however, did not always allocate particularity and generality in the same way between the genres. In the fourth century BC, Aristotle famously argued that ‘poetry is more philosophical and more serious than history. Poetry tends to express universals, and history particulars.’⁷¹ The ‘novel’ form, nonetheless, a latecomer to the literary scene, did not attain high cultural status until the Romantic period. Eighteenth-century novels typically presented themselves as a historical document: Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740), for example, is wadded with paratexts that insist on the veracity of the eponymous heroine’s journals. With the advent of Romanticism, by contrast, literature ‘came to be regarded as a magical or religious mission, which only those endowed with the gift of prophecy or second sight could fulfil.’⁷² However, the Romantic movement also valorised History (with a capital H) to an unprecedented extent.⁷³ Carlyle, the foremost proponent of Romantic historicism in Britain, transferred ideas about the sublime ‘from the domain of natural forces (that had been the principal concern of Burke and Kant) to the domain of history.’⁷⁴

The remainder of the nineteenth century, therefore, saw a tussle between the proponents of the genres of fiction and history, in which both sought to claim their own genre as the preserve of a singular, unified, transcendent ‘truth’. Lionel Gossman highlights the instability of cultural discourses in which history becomes associated with ‘the unexpected, the uncontrollable, the unsystematic’, and fiction with the ‘ordered, the coherent, the general or universal’. In such environments, he argues, writers of both forms tend to react not by emphasising this divergence but by undermining it. ‘While historians are striving to achieve maximum narrative coherency and to approximate to the forms of fiction, certain novelists are trying to undercut these very forms and conventions by an appeal to “history”.’⁷⁵ And this is certainly visible in the nineteenth century. Writers and readers sought in both

⁷¹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. by Malcolm Heath (London: Penguin, 1996), p. 16.

⁷² Gossman, ‘History and Literature: Reproduction or Signification’, p. 229. For literature’s rise to generic pre-eminence, see also Jonathan Arac, *Critical Genealogies: Historical Situations for Postmodern Literary Studies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), p. 3; Clifford Siskin, *The Work of Writing: Literature and Social Change in Britain, 1700–1830* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

⁷³ See Karl Kroeber, ‘Romantic Historicism: The Temporal Sublime’, in *Images of Romanticism: Verbal and Visual Affinities*, ed. by Karl Kroeber and William Walling (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), pp. 149–65; A. Dwight Culler, *The Victorian Mirror of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); Crosby (1991); Stephen Bann, *Romanticism and the Rise of History* (New York: Twayne, 1995).

⁷⁴ Rigney, *Imperfect Histories*, p. 115.

⁷⁵ Gossman, p. 233.

literature and history the kind of transcendent unifying ‘mission’ that Crosby and others have viewed as the successor to religious certainty, and Gossman as ‘the successor of epic’.

A paradigmatic illustration of this Romantic-era tussle over generality and particularity can be seen in an unpublished essay of 1797 by William Godwin, which offers a radical attempt to turn the tables on generic convention. His usage of the term ‘truth’ is highly slippery in this text, reflecting its awkward multiplicity as a referent for signifieds as diverse as ‘accurate’, ‘mimetic’, ‘honest’ and ‘profound’. For example, halfway through the essay ‘Of History and Romance’, he declares:

That history which comes nearest to truth, is the mere chronicle of facts, places and dates. But this is in reality no history. He that knows only what day the Bastille was taken and on what spot Louis XVI perished, knows nothing. He professes the mere skeleton of history. The muscles, the articulations, every thing in which the life emphatically resides, is absent.⁷⁶

Here the term ‘truth’ is used in the lowly sense of ‘least fabricated’. In fact, ‘history’ is figured as something even more elevated than truth, a life of which this sort of ‘truth’ is merely the ‘skeleton’. However, Godwin repeatedly shifts the terms of the debate.⁷⁷ He soon blurs these demarcations, bringing these two previously opposed terms together to state that ‘*true history* consists in a delineation of consistent, human character’, which is, in fact, most reliably found in ‘romance’.⁷⁸ While no-one can definitively or entirely ascertain the characteristics of historical figures such as ‘Alexander, Caesar, Cicero and Queen Elizabeth’, he argues, the ‘writer of romance ... must be permitted ... to understand the character which is the creature of his own fancy.’⁷⁹ While every historian’s portrait of Elizabeth I will be different from each other, a fictional character can be certain and unitary, conceived in its entirety in the writer’s mind. Ultimately, Godwin concludes that neither genre can be wholly successful in resurrecting the past, since human beings possess a complexity and unpredictability unfathomable to any other individual: ‘to tell precisely how such a

⁷⁶ William Godwin, ‘Of History and Romance’, in *Things as They Are; or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams*, ed. by Maurice Hindle (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), pp. 367–78.

⁷⁷ On the deliberately paradoxical nature of Godwin’s argument, see also Jon Klancher, ‘Godwin and the Genre Reformers: On Necessity and Contingency in Romantic Narrative Theory’, in *Romanticism, History, and the Possibilities of Genre: Re-forming Literature, 1789–1837*, ed. by Tilottama Rajan and Julia M. Wright (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 21–38. On ‘the significance of the shifting of terms’, see Jared Michael McGeough, ‘The Falsehood of History, and Reality of Romance: William Godwin’s “Of History and Romance”’, *Clio*, 38 (2009), 269–92 (p. 272).

⁷⁸ Godwin, p. 372. My italics.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 371–72.

person would act in a given situation, requires a sagacity scarcely less than divine.’⁸⁰ The simultaneous scope and limitation of humanity is the cause of any historian’s ultimate failure to attain a complete unitary ‘truth’.

In the generations that followed the Romantic valorisation of the fictional realm, historians attempted to appropriate this sense of ‘truth’ – something more intangible, but more potent, than mere accuracy – for their own side of the fence. In an 1828 article in the *Edinburgh Review*, a young Thomas Macaulay appears to adhere to the Godwinian position, as he argues that ‘Perfectly and absolutely true [history] cannot be: for to be perfectly and absolutely true, it ought to record *all* the slightest particulars of the slightest transactions ... If history were written thus, the Bodleian library would not contain the occurrences of a week.’⁸¹ Despite this, however, Macaulay attempts to claim a transcendent form of ‘truth’ for history: the extreme challenges posed by history-writing, for him, do not undermine it as a form of endeavour still superior to that of fiction. Perhaps this sense of the simultaneous necessity and impossibility of history-writing is best encapsulated in Thomas Carlyle’s declaration in his own early essay ‘Thoughts on History’ (1830), which evokes the extreme particularity of the historical texture: ‘Narrative is *linear*, Action is *solid*.’⁸²

The Romantic sense of a ‘truth’ at once particular in its examples and transcendently universal in its resonance lies behind Carlyle’s *The French Revolution: A History* (1837). The very title of this work – which uses the indefinite article ‘a’, rather than ‘the’, for its status as history – emphasises both its avowed provisionality and its awareness, with Godwin, that writing a complete history of any such event is impossible. A significant lens through which *The French Revolution* was mediated to the public was its review by J. S. Mill, then a close friend of Carlyle (and probably feeling responsible for the destruction of Carlyle’s original first volume manuscript, since it was his maid who threw it into the fire as rubbish). The terms in which he writes of the text are repeatedly those of poetry rather than history. These generic categories are invoked not to undermine Carlyle’s text, however, but rather to denigrate the general state of the historical genre, and suggest that Carlyle’s very dissimilarity to it is the source of his superior ‘truth’ value. The opening paragraph of the review declares: ‘This is not so much a history, as an epic poem; and

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 372.

⁸¹ [Macaulay], pp. 337–78.

⁸² [Carlyle], ‘Thoughts on History’, p. 415.

notwithstanding, or even in consequence of this, the truest of histories.’⁸³ As Godwin had done, Mill blurs the terms of debate, at once evoking ‘history’ as a weak, flawed genre, and as the most elevated of forms. And this response to the work is not confined to Mill. Ralph Waldo Emerson echoes this framework in his review of *Past and Present* in *The Dial* in 1843. He presents this new work as ‘Carlyle’s new poem, his *Iliad* of English woes, to follow his poem on France, entitled the *History of the French Revolution*.’⁸⁴ And Mill attributes to Carlyle, as ‘a favourite doctrine’, ‘that poetry has not naturally any thing to do with fiction, nor is fiction in these days even the most appropriate vehicle and vesture of it.’⁸⁵ This tactical separation of truth-value, under the name of ‘poetry’, from any particular genre or form, as well as from mere factual accuracy, is a pervasive theme in Romantic history, and demonstrates a widespread unease – even crisis – in the state of history-writing.

It took most of the rest of the century for the genres’ tussle over possession of ‘truth’ to reach a state of equilibrium, and this was most clearly reflected in the genre that hovered on the borders of both history and fiction, and that seemed to offer a way of solving the problem of particularity and generality. The historical novel went through a dramatic change of status – from niche sub-genre to ideal form, and back again – over the nineteenth century. Advocates of the genre went as far as to present it as a step forward for human progress. Archibald Alison, conservative historian and lawyer and countryman of Scott’s, wrote in 1845 of ‘the prodigious addition which the happy idea of the historical romance has made to the stories of elevated literature, and through it to the happiness and improvement of the human race’.⁸⁶ He declared that ‘considered in its highest aspect, no art was ever attempted by man more elevated and ennobling than the historical romance.’⁸⁷ These descriptors – ‘elevated’ and ‘ennobling’ – are terms previously associated with philosophical history, and evoke a monumental genre emphatically detached from the petty and superficial concerns of the non-historical novel. The full extent of the genre’s ‘elevated’ nature, however, is revealed in his description of *Waverley* as having been ‘given to the world in July,

⁸³ [J. S. Mill], ‘The French Revolution: A History’, *London and Westminster Review*, 5 (1837), 17–53 (p. 17).

⁸⁴ [Ralph Waldo Emerson], ‘The French Revolution’, *The Dial*, 1843, 96–102 (p. 96).

⁸⁵ [Mill], p. 21.

⁸⁶ Archibald Alison, ‘The Historical Romance’, *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, 58 (1845), 341–56 (p. 345). Also reprinted in J. C. Olmsted, ed., *A Victorian Art of Fiction: Essays on the Novel in British Periodicals, 1850–1870* (New York: Garland, 1979).

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 347.

1814. From that moment the historical romance was born for mankind'.⁸⁸ In this characterisation, the genre takes on messianic qualities. An 1874 article that opened this chapter is worth referring to again, because it contemplated precisely that relationship of particular detail and general truth that is the subject of this study. It declared that 'The historian is oppressed with the prodigious number of details with which he is encumbered: from all this the historical novelist escapes.'⁸⁹ It certainly seemed to some as if the conflicts of history and fiction had been solved by the emergence of this composite genre.

This very proximity between history-writing and historical fiction, however, at times caused confusion and conflict. Works that we would now comfortably view as fictions were, in these decades, judged seriously on their historical merit. Edward Bulwer Lytton's novels of the 1830s and 1840s were, James C. Simmons claims, 'treated by the reviewers as history, not fiction, and judged as such. And at least one journal, *The Gentleman's Magazine*, in a series of reviews on Froude's volumes of his *History of England* refused to consider them as history, but did think them excellent romance and compared him to Ainsworth in his treatment of the sixteenth century.'⁹⁰ However, while Simmons views this as evidence that 'the distinction, hitherto clearly defined, between historical fiction and formal history broke down completely at this time', I would interpret it rather as a sign that faith in distinction between the genres was surprisingly sturdy.⁹¹ In all these instances, the reviewer did not neglect to ask whether the text was history or fiction. In their very refusal to consider Froude's *History of England* as history, *The Gentleman's Magazine* was effectively laying down boundaries for their definition of the genre.

By the mid-century, the tide was turning. The historian and philologist J. M. Kemble, who had become engrossed in the fledgling study of archaeology and was planning a systematic account of the archaeology of northern Europe, wrote in an 1855 review:

We do assuredly lament that people should be found to write history who ought to be writing novels; and that the public require history to be written like novels in order to read it. We find, in short, by daily recurring experience that a certain amount of vagrant talent, which formerly provided for itself in other

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 346.

⁸⁹ Anonymous, 'The Historical Romance', p. 367.

⁹⁰ James C. Simmons, *The Novelist as Historian: Essays on the Victorian Historical Novel* (The Hague: Mouton, 1973), p. 240.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 240.

ways, has now directed itself upon subjects very important to be treated indeed, but not to be treated in a light and careless way.’⁹²

Historical subject-matter is evoked here as a sacrosanct body of ‘truth’, which should be separated both socially (from ‘vagrant’ individuals) and disciplinarily (from the ‘light and careless’ approach of ‘novels’) to ensure its safe progress. In another such review, G. H. Lewes attributes the success of historical romance chiefly to ‘Idleness; – a wish to get at knowledge by a royal route.’⁹³ Characterising its readers as ‘very good-natured, or very ignorant; or both’, he argues that in consequence of this idleness, ‘we have false history, and a bad story, palmed upon us for a novel’.⁹⁴ In Lewes’ formulation, not only historical accuracy, but also novelistic quality, are sacrificed in the production of this shoddy hybrid form that allows lazy readers to feel a sense of complacency that their reading is not a waste of time.

The desire, expressed by both Kemble and Lewes, not for the two forms to meld more perfectly into one, but rather to be separated into two more respectable genres for the good of historical study, became increasingly prevalent. The genre had always been criticised by some for its over-attention to detail: an 1832 *Athenaeum* article joked about ‘the wardrobe school of novelists’,⁹⁵ and novelists such as W. H. Ainsworth exemplified the trend for so-called ‘footnote novels’.⁹⁶ But by the 1860s, not only unfortunate side-effects, but even disabling limitations, were being pronounced of the genre. Journalists commonly talked of the writing of a successful historical novel as a task comparable to squaring the circle. A writer in the *Saturday Review* of December 1864 assured his readers that ‘we do not venture to assert that in all cases an historical novel is a monstrosity in literature ... but, begging every reader to make such exceptions as he chooses, we believe the general rule to be that a good historical novel, like a good translation, is amongst the rarest of literary products.’⁹⁷ And the historical novel was repeatedly judged as the locus of the multiple and particular, the distracting detail rather than the generalising interpretation. One anonymous reviewer of George Eliot’s 1862-3 novel *Romola* (probably the journalist, biographer and Radical politician John Morley) felt that her overzealous attention to

⁹² J. M. Kemble, ‘Queens of England of the House of Hanover’, *Fraser’s Magazine*, 52 (1855), 135–49 (p. 136).

⁹³ G. H. Lewes, ‘The Foster Brother; a Tale of the War of Chiozza’, *Westminster Review*, XLV (1846), 34–55 (p. 35).

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁹⁵ Anonymous, ‘Tales of the Early Ages’, *The Athenaeum*, 1832, 251–52 (p. 251).

⁹⁶ Rosemary Mitchell, *Picturing the Past*, p. 85.

⁹⁷ Anonymous, ‘Historical Novels’, *The Saturday Review*, 18 (1864), 714–16 (p. 715).

detail meant that ‘sometimes the antiquarian quite drowns the novelist’.⁹⁸ By the end of the century, therefore, the genre had attained a rather ambivalent footing in intellectual culture.⁹⁹ In 1887, an article in *Macmillan’s Magazine* opened with the declaration that ‘the historical novel is no longer in fashion’.¹⁰⁰

Historical fiction did still continue to be written in the closing decades of the century, of course: such popular novels as Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* (1883), and G. A. Henry’s *The Dragon and the Raven, or The Days of King Alfred* (1885) and *Bonnie Prince Charlie: A Tale of Fontenoy and Culloden* (1888), were set in more or less distant pasts. However, these were presented, and received, as ‘historical romances’, closer in purpose and function to H. Rider Haggard’s empire adventure stories than any serious historiographical project. The only kinds of historical novels that did manage to maintain a status of respectability, and remained popular throughout the century (and today), were those set in the recent past, within the era of living memory. These will be the focus of Chapter 3. They were granted amnesty from critics in part because they were generally written in the realist rather than the romance mode, and thus acknowledged a concern with the particularity of everyday life rather than the mythic generality so prized by both romance novelists and Romantic historians. In being set in living memory, moreover, they were also more avowedly personal than temporally distanced narratives, and dealt with a period largely eschewed by historians. As such, they did not intrude into the more distant temporal period deemed worthy of historical study, or appear to threaten its remit.

4. Drawing the boundaries

In the closing decades of the nineteenth century, as history was established as an academic discipline with its own professional norms, a whole array of unsatisfactory, subordinated ‘Others’ were excluded from its fold. Gieryn’s term ‘boundary-work’, which he describes as ‘an ideological style found in scientists’ attempts to create a

⁹⁸ [John Morley], ‘Romola’, *Saturday Review*, 16 (1863), 124–25. Reprinted in David Carroll, ed., *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1971), p. 208.

⁹⁹ This sunken reputation was not without its defenders. The early decades of the twentieth century produced several substantial guides to the genre. See Jonathan Nield, *A Guide to the Best Historical Novels and Tales* (London: Elkin Matthews, 1902); Ernest Baker, *History in Fiction: A Guide to the Best Historical Romances, Sagas, Novels and Tales* (London: Routledge, 1907). Baker’s guide was extended in Ernest Baker, *A Guide to Historical Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1914).

¹⁰⁰ [William Price James], ‘The Historical Novel’, *Macmillan’s Magazine*, 57 (1887), 41–49 (p. 41).

public image for science by contrasting it favourably to non-scientific intellectual or technical activities', can be applied to this type of process of demarcation and exclusion.¹⁰¹ Reba Soffer, in common with T. W. Heyck, has argued that the final quarter of the nineteenth century marked a decisive shift in disciplinary ideals, and Gieryn affirms the centrality of the late-Victorian decades to this process.¹⁰² Ian Hesketh takes up Gieryn's framework in his discussion of how J. A. Froude was demonised by fellow historians, appropriating the term 'boundary-work' for the concurrent process of defining the 'scientific' historical discipline.¹⁰³ I would like to widen this concept to apply to the whole set of processes discussed in this chapter. The exclusion of the irreducibly multiple and particular – in the form of the feminine, the antiquarian, the fictional and the recent – from the unitary, singular realm named 'History' can all be viewed as a form of 'boundary-work'. As we will see in later chapters, the recent past was never completely excluded from history. In fact, as the nineteenth century drew to a close, it was becoming if anything a more acceptable topic of study. However, those other modes of knowledge were very effectively purged from the historical discipline in these decades, as I will now go on to demonstrate.

Readers of the new Tory periodical, *Fraser's Magazine*, in November 1830 would have encountered an anonymous article (by the then unknown Scottish occasional journalist Thomas Carlyle), entitled 'Thoughts on History'. This article declared that 'A talent for History may be said to be born with us, as our chief inheritance. In a certain sense all men are historians.'¹⁰⁴ This all-dominating, all-encompassing sense of 'history' is emphasised through the subsequent pages, and revived in a further article, published in *Fraser's* three years later. Here Carlyle leads his reader to the conclusion that 'All Books, therefore, were they but Song-books or treatises on Mathematics, are in the long-run historical documents – as indeed all Speech itself is: thus might we say, History is not only the fittest study, but the only study, and includes all others whatsoever.'¹⁰⁵ Carlyle conceives of this most transcendent of ideals in a way that comprehends no boundaries. 'All books' are

¹⁰¹ Gieryn, p. 781.

¹⁰² Soffer; T. W. Heyck, *The Transformation of Intellectual Life in Victorian England* (London: Croom Helm, 1982), p. 15. Gieryn uses the writings of John Tyndall (1820–1893) as his opening case study (p. 784).

¹⁰³ Ian Hesketh, 'Diagnosing Froude's Disease: Boundary Work and the Discipline of History in Late-Victorian Britain', *History and Theory*, 47 (2008), 373–95.

¹⁰⁴ [Carlyle], 'Thoughts on History', p. 413.

¹⁰⁵ [Thomas Carlyle], 'Quae Cogitavit', *Fraser's Magazine*, 7 (1833), 585–89 (p. 585).

‘historical documents’, and ‘all men are historians’: a codified or confined academic discipline, with its own rules, constraints and entry examinations, would be anathema to this utterly un-disciplinary sense of history.

In a less hyperbolic but equally un-disciplinary article published in the *Edinburgh Review* two years earlier, an equally anonymous and almost equally unknown young Thomas Macaulay expressed a desire to unite what he conceived of as history’s two territorial regions, ‘Reason’ and ‘Imagination’, into an organic whole.

This province of literature [History] is a debateable land. It lies on the confines of two distinct territories. It is under the jurisdiction of two hostile powers; and, like other districts similarly situated, it is ill-defined, ill cultivated, and ill regulated. Instead of being equally shared between its two rulers, the Reason and the Imagination, it falls alternately under the sole and absolute dominion of each. It is sometimes fiction. It is sometimes theory.¹⁰⁶

He characterises its current state as a constant compromise between these two poles: ‘what the philosophy gains in soundness and depth, the examples generally lose in vividness.’¹⁰⁷ His article calls for a historian to try to fulfil the necessary role of bringing the two poles together, but, in a heightening of expectations that prepares the way for his own later celebrity as a historian, declares that such a figure would have to be an ‘intellectual prodigy’, so challenging is the task.¹⁰⁸

Half a century later, many things had changed. In August 1879, if you spent a shilling on the cheap monthly *Macmillan’s Magazine*, a periodical that had not even existed in 1830, the front page would proudly identify the author of the opening article: ‘Professor Seeley’. And if you read on through his article, ‘History and Politics’, you would notice more far-reaching conceptual shifts. Having characterised the divergent historical styles of Macaulay and Buckle, Seeley states

it should be understood how radically hostile they are to each other. ... [T]he historians of the eighteenth century never seem to know clearly whether they are philosophers or poets ... But now that the two sorts of history are clearly distinguished, every historian should make up his mind whether he means to write poetry or prose.’¹⁰⁹

No more the all-encompassing, all-inclusive history of Carlyle, or even the unifying ‘Reason’ and ‘Imagination’ of Macaulay. Indeed, Seeley concludes dryly: ‘I need

¹⁰⁶ [Macaulay], p. 331.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 367.

¹⁰⁹ J. R. Seeley, ‘History and Politics’, *Macmillan’s Magazine*, 40 (1879), 289–99 (p. 295).

hardly say that it is as a department of science rather than as a branch of poetry that we study history at Cambridge. It is indeed only in this shape that history can be included among the studies of a university.’¹¹⁰ With this dogma, which he assumes to be self-evident, Seeley draws tight boundaries around the subject, which exclude what, only a few decades earlier, eminent historians had seen as half their subject’s vitality. Through concerted cold-shouldering of this sort, the literary history associated with Froude, as well as with Carlyle and Macaulay, was effectively marginalised.

Seeley is not just keen to create generic and stylistic boundaries for his new academic discipline, but also ones of subject matter. Even the expansive social continuum, which was a focus both of early-nineteenth-century Romantic historians and (as I will show in Chapter 3) of mid-century novelists, is rejected from the realm of history proper. Although Seeley recognises the value of emergent social history, he argues that this should not detract from the primary importance of political history. ‘The political phenomena should not be studied less, but the social phenomena more.’ And, he insists, this should be done in a newly segregated way.

‘Manners and customs’, so called, instead of having a larger number of chapters in our histories, should have histories to themselves. The child is grown up; should it then have a larger share in the house? No, but it should have a house of its own. And that means that it should have no place at all in the original house.¹¹¹

In this way, Seeley effectively severs the conceptual link between politics and society. An organicist impulse to bring together political and social history had fuelled Macaulay’s *History of England* (1849), just as, as Chapter 2 will show, it had J. R. Green’s *Short History of the English People* (1874) and Spencer Walpole’s *History of England since the Conclusion of the Great War* (1878). But in his capacity as the Regius Professor of History at Cambridge, with these comments Seeley stamps an institutional disregard on such attempts as both futile and foolish.

The new disciplinary history envisaged not only by Seeley, but concurrently by his corresponding Professor at Oxford, William Stubbs, and other professionalising historians across Europe and North America, was deliberately conceived in terms of exclusivity. This professional ideal was not unanimously supported. Indeed, as Soffer has shown, even in Oxford and Cambridge, the

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 297.

professors faced opposition from the other – and, for the students, more prominent – element in the teaching system, the college tutors. Soffer explains that ‘Oxford tutors adamantly resisted the creation of a professional discipline of history, in the sense proposed by the professors, as both inappropriate to a liberal arts education and as an infringement on the autonomy of the college’.¹¹² However, since these tutors did not typically undertake historical research or writing, the professorial model was able to make the more lasting mark on historiographical convention. When a long-held dream for a historical journal came to fruition in 1886 with the foundation of the *English Historical Review*, it was explicitly designed to address not ‘the person called the “general reader”’, but ‘professional students of history’.¹¹³

The ‘feminine’ was most effectively excluded from this new discipline of History by its reconceptualisation – in part through Seeley – as a study in the service of imperial mission. Academic History therefore shifted from the relatively inclusive form espoused by Macaulay to a specifically professional and therefore male prerogative. Not only was it concerned with politics and government, the preserve of men, but could only be successfully studied in the context of a university, still virtually exclusively male in its personnel and in its degree-holders.¹¹⁴ Bonnie Smith (1998) has shown how the precise conventions and rituals of the seminar room acted to bolster the image of history as a collaborative and pioneering, and therefore both scientific and manly, study. She describes how Herbert Baxter Adams, of Johns Hopkins University, ‘create[d] and publish[ed] an actual blueprint for the perfect seminar room’, including storage and display space for newspapers, maps and card catalogues, along with study space for both teachers and students.¹¹⁵ His own room also featured ‘portraits of great historians gracing the walls, and a large banner proclaiming, “History Is Past Politics, and Politics Present History.”’¹¹⁶ Through a mutual acquaintance with the American academician and champion of university research, Daniel Coit Gilman, William Stubbs even sent a plea to Adams for ‘the

¹¹² Soffer, pp. 79–80.

¹¹³ [Bryce], p. 5.

¹¹⁴ Although the University of London allowed women to take degrees from 1878, the prestigious ancient universities held out much longer. The first degree ceremony for women at the University of Oxford took place in 1920, and its Cambridge equivalent in 1921.

¹¹⁵ Bonnie G. Smith, p. 109.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

diagram, etc. of your historical laboratory,' in terms which envisage both a precision and a research practice equal to any science.¹¹⁷

In this increased focus on the particularity of newspapers and maps, history was returning to, and reclaiming, elements of the antiquarianism it had so derided earlier in the century – and continued to deride as a way of masking their increasing convergence. This is where Salber Phillips' interpretation of antiquarianism intersects with mine. However, while professional historians reclaimed some of its concerns, they did not retain its approach. To return to the trajectory sketched out by Schor, 'the detail achieved its new prestige by being taken over by the masculine, triumphing at the very moment when it ceases to be associated with the feminine'.¹¹⁸ Historians championed a system of communal collaboration that, as delineated above, made their study of history appropriate for the modern imperial age. This method was even, as Heyck has pointed out, conceived of in Smithean terms, as an efficient 'division of labour'.¹¹⁹ This level of self-effacing disinterest, they suggested, was one of which those obsessive and even necrophilic antiquaries were incapable. However, as Smith has shown, this disinterestedness was little more than a façade. The terms in which historians wrote about their encounters with the archive were just as sexual (though now with additionally violent and rapacious overtones) as those satirised by Rowlandson at the beginning of the century.¹²⁰

Not only was the historian implicitly a man (and made 'manly' by the activity), but the archive was gendered as feminine. In the first half of the nineteenth century, Carlyle had propagated an idea of the archive as inherently and irretrievably mysterious, a cavernous site too multiple ever to be codified.¹²¹ For the professionalised historians of the late-century, however, the archive – while no less feminine in its associations – became something to be conquered. Smith traces a pervasive discourse in which historians imagined unexplored archives as virgins to be ravished and jealously guarded. Leopold von Ranke, commonly viewed as the founding father of the modern historical discipline, described in a letter of 1827 how 'Yesterday I had a sweet, magnificent fling with the object of my love, a beautiful Italian, and I hope to produce a beautiful Roman-German prodigy. I rose at noon,

¹¹⁷ Daniel Coit Gilman to Herbert Baxter Adams, 15 July 1883, in W. Stull Hult, ed., *Historical Scholarship in the United States, 1876–1901, as Revealed in the Correspondence of Herbert B. Adams* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1938), p. 69.

¹¹⁸ Schor, p. 6.

¹¹⁹ Heyck, p. 137.

¹²⁰ Bonnie G. Smith, pp. 116–29.

¹²¹ See Rigney, 'The Untenanted Places of the Past'.

completely exhausted.’¹²² He conceives of one archive collection as ‘absolutely a virgin. I long for the moment I have access to her, ... whether she is pretty or not.’¹²³ Later in the century, as the urge to professionalise expanded, this discourse was adopted by aspiring Rankean scholars. In the 1870s, the young French historian Gabriel Hanotaux described his desire to access foreign ministry archives in terms of a determination ‘to force open the doors and thrust past the keepers of the harem.’¹²⁴ This discourse, as was the case for many developments in the historical discipline, was slower to reach Britain. But by the closing decades of the nineteenth century, not only philosophical, generalising history, but also the particularised, microscopic history-writing that had previously been the province of women historians, was claimed as the preserve of the professional (and male) historian. The archive, rather than the archival historian, was now gendered as female. As Joan Thirsk (1995) has traced in relation to historiography, and Gaye Tuchman and Nina Fortin (1989) in relation to novel-writing, women had been prominent and even numerically predominant in the genre’s early blossoming. As both analyses show, however, as new fields such as these become ‘institutionalised, formalised, and organised’, they ‘always fall under the control of men’,¹²⁵ who ‘edge ... out’¹²⁶ their female counterparts.

This form of historical study was evidently not the all-inclusive and all-encompassing phenomenon imagined by Carlyle. But history was still being talked about as the key to truth. Bonnie Smith encapsulates these contradictions:

Everyone said that historical science transcended all contingent categories, yet for many decades it appeared normal that those who practised it professionally were mostly (and in some countries exclusively) men. The very naturalness of scientific political history belied the omnipresence of gender (history was about men only, and distinctly not about women) and its invisibility (history was about universal truth, not about men) in the nineteenth century.¹²⁷

The true power of boundary-work lay in its ability to render itself invisible: even those who were effectively excluded from its realm could believe in its universal

¹²² Letter to Henrich Ritter, 28 October 1827. In Leopold Von Ranke, *Sämmtliche Werke*, ed. by Alfred Dove, 54 vols. (Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1890), LIII–LIV, 175.

¹²³ Letter to Ferdinand Ranke, 11 November 1836. In Leopold Von Ranke, *Neue Briefe*, ed. by Bernhard Hoelt and Hans Herzfeld (Hamburg: Hoffman und Campe, 1949), p. 230.

¹²⁴ Gabriel Hanotaux, *Mon Temps*, 3 vols. (Paris: Plon, 1933), II, 8.

¹²⁵ Joan Thirsk, ‘The History Women’, in *Chattel, Servant or Citizen: Women’s Status in Church, State and Society*, ed. by Mary O’Dowd and Sabine Wichert (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, The Queen’s University of Belfast, 1995), pp. 1–11 (p. 2).

¹²⁶ Tuchman and Fortin, p. 46.

¹²⁷ Bonnie G. Smith, p. 132.

reach and constituency. This is a tendency highlighted by Crosby (1991). The novelists whom she charges with being implicated in the hegemonic project of excluding women from history are, many of them, female themselves, and constrained by the very cultural structures they unwittingly work to perpetuate. The texts that laid bare these constructions were often those engaging directly with the realm that seemed to offer the greatest threat to this apparent universality: the provisional, democratic realm of the recent past.

The establishment of professional history acted to reclaim multiplicity and particularity for history, embodied in the documentary detail of the archive. This had two divergent implications for study of the recent past. On the one hand, it opened up the possibility of a history written without knowledge of an overall trajectory, in which detail could be privileged, and still received as a respectable academic production rather than an antiquarian absurdity. In this framework, a history of the recent past might seem more possible and more acceptable. On the other hand, in making detail the preserve of the archive, it disenfranchised the other key distinction of the recent past, its existence in living memory. The lived experience of an ordinary individual loses some of its value, with access to precise detail becoming the possession – if not the exclusive preserve – of the professional historian.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that the multiplicity and particularity characteristic of the recent past, which (as the following chapters will demonstrate) made it a site of both anxiety and pre-occupation in Victorian history- and fiction-writing, are shared by the other modes of knowledge excluded from the period's elite culture. A wide range of thinkers and writers, from male literary critics to women offering behavioural advice for other women, functioned on the assumption that women were inherently superficial in their focus, concerned, as Schor has described it, with 'the detail' rather than the overall picture so necessary for historiographical generalisation. Historians seeking to define the boundaries of their gradually professionalising discipline used this discourse of the 'feminine' to characterise, and therefore denigrate, those modes of knowledge that they wished to exclude from the institutional discipline.

Antiquarianism had been a widespread and relatively respected practice at the beginning of the nineteenth century, but satirical suggestions that it facilitated a necrophilic obsession with its subject matter were revived later in the century by

historians who were keen to bolster their academic credentials. The new university discipline of history, choosing to place value in the quasi-scientific empirical evidence of the archive, was determined to characterise its interest in archival sources as manly and even imperialist, and thus reinforced this image by disassociating themselves from a caricatured, effeminate antiquarianism of insufficient detachment and insufficient generalisation. Fiction, however, relatively successfully resisted historians' attempts to pigeonhole it as the preserve of superficial detail rather than generalisable 'Truth'. The association of 'art' with a 'truth' beyond facts, which had existed since Aristotle and was strong in the Romantic movement, was the site of a tussle throughout the central portion of the nineteenth century, as proponents of both Literature and History claimed this transcendent, unitary discourse of 'truth' for their own genre. Those commentators whom we saw defending fiction against the charge of superficial detail, did so at the expense of historical fiction. Eventually, proponents of English Literature and History both defined their subject in part against the picturesque – and overly particular – qualities characteristic of the historical novel. Both invested in boundary-work that denigrated and marginalised the genre which had looked to unite them and, in doing so, to resolve the competing pull of particularity and generality.

As these analyses have demonstrated, the discourse of multiplicity and particularity is applicable to what Laurel Brake might characterise as 'subjugated knowledges': the feminine, the antiquarian and the fictional.¹²⁸ As a result, my discussion of the recent past in these terms can be situated in the critical discourse developed to analyse these other 'Others'. What is more, it needs to be incorporated into accounts of Victorian cultural ideals, anxieties and exclusions. As I have already delineated in the Introduction, the recent past is irreducible to singularity in two important ways, temporal and social. As a result, it resists representation in the linear narrative form conventionally valorised, and used, by historians. These challenges, and the strategies used to confront them, by those few Victorian historians who did write histories of the recent past, will be the subject of the next chapter.

¹²⁸ Laurel Brake, *Subjugated Knowledges: Journalism, Gender and Literature in the Nineteenth Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1994).

Chapter 2

Historians and the recent past

Any Victorian writer setting out to include the recent past in their national history of England would have to confront considerable cultural obstacles to such an undertaking. In gaining the trust of their readers, they would have to acknowledge their lack of hindsight, while claiming a substitute form of authority on which to base their demand for a readership. And in the writing process, they would have to transform the common currency of living memory – diverse and contradictory as it is – into a coherent and apparently monolithic narrative. How could the notion of a grand sweep of history be reconciled with the multiplicity of the ever-changing present? This chapter will argue that in the development of a Victorian historiographical academy, the ideal of hindsight was increasingly valorised, in part as a means of bolstering its uncertain professional credentials. As a result, few canonical historians wrote contemporary history. Those who did, resorted to various defensive strategies to legitimise their assessments, which could never be more than provisional.

As described in the Introduction, the question this thesis views as ubiquitous in Victorian attempts to write their recent past as history is ‘what counts as historic?’ This has a dual signification, assessing the boundaries of history in both chronological and social terms. This chapter will focus first on the temporal dimension, demonstrating how hindsight was valorised in nineteenth-century historiographical culture, and examining how historians writing about the recent past dealt with their lack of it. The latter section of the chapter will turn to consider the social dimension, demonstrating how contemporary histories of England were constrained in their ability to accommodate ‘unhistoric’ individuals in anything other than massed form.

Writers of contemporary history have to negotiate between two polarised perspectives: immersion and overview.¹ The immersed perspective situates the

¹ These are characterised by Mark Currie in recent work as ‘A-series’ and ‘B-series’ respectively, terms he borrows from an Anglo-American philosophical tradition that builds on their more specific use by idealist philosopher John McTaggart, ‘The Unreality of Time’, *Mind*, 17 (1908), 457–74 (p. 458); Mark Currie, *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 17.

writer, and thus their reader, in the very continuum they are attempting to observe. By contrast, that of overview allows time to be examined from an external perspective, as a contained spatial entity rather than a continuum. This framework enables overarching analysis and judgments, and a narrative arc, whether of progress, decline, rise and fall, adversity and triumph or cyclical repetition. In narratological terms, it offers the opportunity to examine an entire ‘plot’, or ‘fabula’, in a single glance.² While historians of the more distant past typically claim authority from their ability to offer an overview of their subject-matter, this advantage is lost when they address the recent past. As individuals immersed in at least the impact of the events they narrate, they have to choose between conjecturing as to the ultimate product of the events at hand, or embracing their state of immersion and abandoning all attempt to take an elevated perspective.

While, as many theorists have emphasised, we use the perspective of overview to make sense of our lives,³ no living individual can maintain a single consistent self-contained narrative arc for themselves, since the continuation of time and events is perpetually reshaping that narrative. When historians claim a self-contained overview, moreover, all they are really drawing on is the incomplete perspective of hindsight. Our hindsight is always partial and relative, never complete and absolute. Although I will use the term ‘overview’ to refer to the approach of some Victorian historians, this should always be taken to refer to their intended or ideal stance, rather than their actual practice, since they can never become truly external to the events they relate.

Since the dichotomy of immersion versus overview is so central to any attempt to write a history of the recent past, these will be the predominant terms structuring the present chapter. As we have seen in Chapter 1, the particularity and fragmentation inherent in the immersive approach was devalued by association with the feminine by many Victorian commentators, and this chapter will consider the implications of this value-scheme for those rare historians who wrote contemporary history. It will begin by examining the place of hindsight in the academy and the wider culture. Then it will move to consider in more depth three case studies: Harriet

² It is, therefore, an approach intrinsic to the kinds of graphic mappings of collective memory that Eviatar Zerubavel argues we all engage in as a means of constructing national histories. See Zerubavel, *Time Maps*.

³ See Hayden White, ‘The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality’, *Critical Inquiry*, 7 (1980), 5–27 (p. 5); Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 1, 3.

Martineau's *History of England During the Thirty Years' Peace* (1849); J. R. Green's *A Short History of the English People* (1874), with a continuation by his widow Alice Stopford Green, published in 1916; and Spencer Walpole's *History of England from the Conclusion of the Great War in 1815* (1878).

While these are by no means the only Victorian histories to cover the recent past, they are all distinctive in aiming to provide a wide view that embraces social as well as political history. This gives them greater challenges of prioritisation than those that take a more narrowly thematic approach. Economic histories by John Wade (1833) and Anton Menger (1886; English translation 1899), for example, tie their present era into a specifically single-strand narrative,⁴ while other writers focus solely on the high-political dimension of their chosen period.⁵ These do not even attempt the wider social scope of Martineau, Green and Walpole, and thus are not subject to quite the same problems of selection in the face of an overwhelmingly multiple and multifarious population. Similarly discounted from this discussion are edited collections, such as *The Reign of Queen Victoria: A Survey of Fifty Years of Progress*, edited by Thomas Humphry Ward (1887).⁶ This text, in which each chapter has a different writer take a different theme, avoids many of the problems of authorial authority I analyse here. The fact that it does not view itself as a national history in the same category as those discussed in this chapter is evident in its citation of Spencer Walpole's *History of England from the Conclusion of the Great War* in its Introduction: Ward does not see his text as a competitor.

Each of this chapter's three case-study texts negotiates the challenge of writing the recent past as history in different ways. There are certain characteristics that unite them all: none of these writers ever held an academic post, and they

⁴ John Wade, *History of the Middle and Working Classes* (London: Effingham Wilson, 1833); George Porter, *The Progress of the Nation in Its Various Social and Economical Relations, from the Beginning of the Nineteenth Century* (London: John Murray, 1836); Anton Menger, *The Right to the Whole Produce of Labour: the Origin and Development of the Theory of Labour's Claim to the Whole Product of Industry*, ed. by H. S. Foxwell, trans. by M. E. Tanner (London: Macmillan, 1899).

⁵ Albany Fonblanque, *England Under Seven Administrations* (London: Bentley, 1837); John Roebuck, *History of the Whig Ministry of 1830 to the Passing of the Reform Bill* (London: John W. Parker and Son, 1852); William Nassau Molesworth, *The History of England from the Year 1830–[date of publication]*, 3 vols. (London: Chapman & Hall, 1871-73); Justin McCarthy, *A History of Our Own Times, from the Accession of Queen Victoria to the General Election of 1880*, 4 vols. (London: Chatto & Windus, 1880); James Taylor, *The Age We Live In: A History of the Nineteenth Century, from the Peace of 1815 to the Present Time*, 5 vols. (London: William Mackenzie, [c.1884]).

⁶ Thomas Humphry Ward, ed., *The Reign of Queen Victoria: A Survey of Fifty Years of Progress*, 2 vols. (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1887).

claimed their authority as public intellectuals rather than as expert professionals.⁷ However, they were writing in quite different historiographical cultures. When Harriet Martineau undertook the challenge of completing Charles Knight's attempt at a contemporary history of the post-Napoleonic era, she was writing in a pre-disciplinary environment. In her *History*, therefore, she refuses to choose between overview and immersion, and instead tries to juggle the two. She embraces her role of witness in a history that is relatively personal and experiential, while also gesturing outwards to grand narratives.

J. R. Green, writing a quarter of a century later, in some respects resisted the tide of his proto-scientific contemporaries, and sought instead to offer an engaging – and commercially viable – narrative in what Rosemary Mitchell has usefully characterised as the 'picturesque' mode.⁸ Green is in some respects the most immersive of our historians: in his depictions of chronologically distant – especially medieval – life, he draws colourful portraits and picturesque scenes with zeal. He embraces the intimate approach for time periods beyond living memory. These are historical periods he can imagine without compunction, over the experience of which he cannot be contradicted, and over which he feels he can also adjudicate from a lofty perspective. When it comes to his own century, however, he declines to declare on either the experiential nature or the conclusive meaning of his content, shrinking from anything more than a sparse catalogue of political manoeuvres. The 1916 Epilogue to his *Short History*, by his widow Alice Stopford Green, written outside the Victorian period that is the focus of this study, is nonetheless illuminating for its revisions and modifications of Green's thesis. Her text enacts what we might characterise as a double vision: she evokes the immersive view but holds it at a distance through an ironising commentary. Dedicated to furthering her late husband's work, but herself an Irish rather than an English nationalist, her text resounds with both enthusiasm and ambivalence about existing grand narratives of English endeavour.

Of the four writers at hand, Spencer Walpole, Green's chronological contemporary but – as a civil servant of the British Crown – moving in very different circles, most decisively seeks to codify the lessons of his era. His is a technique

⁷ On the changing status of the 'intellectual' and the 'academy', see Heyck, *Transformation of Intellectual Life*; Soffer, *Discipline and Power*.

⁸ Rosemary Mitchell, *Picturing the Past*.

reminiscent of the Enlightenment: he aims to use the data at his disposal to point to England's current position and trajectory on a stadial timeline. To this end, he offers the reader an overview, attempting to trace trends and draw morals from this schematic perspective, and claiming narratorial authority not from a position as historical witness, but from an assertion of lofty detachment. The bulk of this chapter will focus on these case studies, but first I hope to illuminate the challenges faced in writing them by a consideration of the general status of immersion and hindsight – proximity and distance – in wider Victorian historiography.

The status of hindsight

The necessity of chronological distance from one's material was a subject of debate and division among historians, as their subject found a university foothold in the second half of the nineteenth century. Important work has been done by J. W. Burrow in demonstrating the centrality of grand narratives – particularly the Whig narrative of national progress – to Victorian historiography.⁹ More recently, a picture has been built up of changes in the historiographical scene over the nineteenth century, which has emphasised the transformative effects of professionalisation. These included hardening the edges of the discipline to exclude practitioners of more particularist and less generalising approaches (the archaeologist and the antiquarian);¹⁰ increasing the sway of the publisher as the market grew for popular and school-orientated History textbooks;¹¹ and emphasising the 'scientific' over the 'artistic' elements of the historical enterprise.¹² There has been no sustained attention, however, to what we might see as the confluence of these issues: what was the effect of the professionalising drive on that section of historiography where it was most difficult either to sustain a unified (Whig or otherwise) narrative, or to claim the kind of distanced objectivity necessary for a 'scientific' approach: contemporary-history-writing?

⁹ J. W. Burrow, *A Liberal Descent: Victorian Historians and the English Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

¹⁰ Philippa Levine, *The Amateur and the Professional*.

¹¹ Heathorn, *For Home, Country, and Race*; Leslie Howsam, *Past into Print: The Publishing of History in Britain, 1850–1950* (London and Toronto: The British Library and University of Toronto Press, 2009).

¹² Hesketh, *Science of History*.

In the early Victorian period, while history was still a branch of the ‘world of letters’, some influential historians questioned an overreliance on hindsight. Thomas Carlyle’s *Past and Present* (1843) offered a catastrophic vision of contemporary society. This implied a conception of history that deviated from the Whig orthodoxy not only in its view of the present, but also in its epistemology. Carlyle subverted the Whig thesis to argue that the impression of progress was the result of excessive reliance on hindsight. In Whig hands, he claimed, history had been ‘sacrilegiously mishandled; effaced, and what is worse, defaced!’¹³ He argued that because contemporary society was in such a state of evil, Whigs had created a history in their own image, projecting this evil onto the past and thus generating a negative picture of earlier ages. Carlyle’s counter-claim is one of ‘a godless century, looking back on centuries that were godly’ and unable to recognise or comprehend their superior piety.¹⁴ In his view, the entire direction of history had been misconceived by Whigs implicated in the obsession with material success that was the prime evil of the age. In fact, the message of history was an apocalyptic one.

Even Thomas Babington Macaulay, popular apostle of ‘progress’, exploited this doctrine to poke gentle fun at the real value of hindsight. In the celebrated third chapter of his *History of England* (1848), he predicted that

We too shall, in our turn, be outstripped, and in our turn be envied. ... And yet it may then be the mode to assert that the increase of wealth and the progress of science have benefited the few at the expense of the many, and to talk of the reign of Queen Victoria as the time when England was truly merry England, when all classes were bound together by brotherly sympathy, when the richer did not grind the faces of the poor, and when the poor did not envy the splendour of the rich.¹⁵

Here, in a surprisingly relativist passage, Macaulay admits that nostalgia is a recurrent habit, foreshadowing Raymond Williams’ memorable image of the ‘moving escalator’.¹⁶ This nostalgic hindsight leads us to distort and even seriously misread earlier periods, imposing backwards onto them all our aspirations for the future. Macaulay’s more cynical implications seem to be that social harmony is an impossible dream. This might best be discarded, if it were not for its utility as a

¹³ Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present*, ed. by Richard Daniel Altick (New York: NYU Press, 1977), p. 239.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Macaulay, I, 421.

¹⁶ Williams, p. 9.

means of propelling us forward in an attempt to revive the illusory glory days of our imagined past.

As history became professionalised, however, the importance of detachment from its subject matter became a subject of increasingly explicit debate, though not always with the same outcome. The divergent positions in this debate can be epitomised in the two contemporaneous denizens of the Oxford and Cambridge history schools, William Stubbs and J. R. Seeley. Stubbs was Regius Professor of History at the University of Oxford from 1866 to 1884; Seeley held the equivalent position at the University of Cambridge from 1869 until his death in 1895. Even an untrained observer, slipping in at the back to attend the respective inaugural professorial lectures of these two men, would quickly note a dramatic difference between these two men's legitimising strategies for the study of history. Both sought to assert its value and significance for Victorian culture; both sought to carve out for it a place in the previously select but rapidly expanding pantheon of recognised academic disciplines. But they used rather different tactics, and called on rather different audience constituencies in rallying support for their subject.

When William Stubbs was appointed Regius Professor in 1866, he was already an established, published professional historian.¹⁷ Seeley's previous work, by contrast, had been as a classicist and theological critic.¹⁸ In his inaugural lecture, Stubbs valorised the study of history for its accumulation of facts, for the additions it could give to humankind's store of knowledge. He announced himself 'not as a philosopher nor as a politician, but as a worker at history.'¹⁹ The sense of manual labour this evokes is reinforced by his description of 'the great German hive of historical workers busy as we are on our archives', equating the work of historical research with that of a colony of bees.²⁰ History is envisaged as a process of husbandry. The implication is that the facts exist; we merely need to develop and systemise a means of extracting and compiling them. Although it is frequently said both of and by the late Victorian historians that they sought to make history 'scientific', this usage of the word should not be read uncritically as indicating, as

¹⁷ He had already been responsible for editing two volumes for the Rolls Series: *Chronicles and Memorials of Richard I*, 19 vols. (1864-89). See James Campbell, *Stubbs and the English State (The Stenton Lecture 1987)* (University of Reading, 1989).

¹⁸ See Wormell.

¹⁹ William Stubbs, *Seventeen Lectures on the Study of Medieval and Modern History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1886), p. 15.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

Karl Popper assumes, a science of events following strict laws.²¹ As Ian Hesketh has delineated, for someone like Stubbs, ‘scientific’ essentially implied ‘disinterested’.²² In the first half of the nineteenth century, historicism’s primary significance was in implying a temporal continuum; in the Stubbsian historiography of the second half, a consciousness of the *difference* of the past, and its distance from ourselves, came to the fore.

J. R. Seeley, on the other hand, appropriated the earlier nineteenth-century rhetoric of a liberal education to claim for History, as had been claimed for Classics and Mathematics, the ability to train the mind – with the added advantage that a study of modern history supplied the student with practical information applicable to future work of statesmanship in the civil service and government. Leopold Von Ranke’s famous insistence on complete disassociation between present and past, the historian’s concerns and those of his subject-matter, was not something Seeley accepted. He was less interested in the historian’s archival role than in their educative role. Faced with the challenge of carving out a remit for History as Regius Professor at the University of Cambridge, Deborah Wormell describes his position as one where ‘Natural History had taken over the study of physical phenomena, and so on. What was still called “history” in 1870 was, according to Seeley, a “residuum” of material left over from this process of differentiation.’²³ Within this ‘residuum’, he chose political history – specifically that of states – as the remit of the historical discipline. In his view, as he declared in his inaugural professorial lecture, ‘everyone ... who studies political institutions, whether in the past or in the present, studies history.’²⁴ In fact, he proposed to use the term ‘history’ ‘without any thought of time past or present. ‘There are multitudes of past occurrences which do not belong, in my view, to history, and there are multitudes of phenomena belonging to the present time which do.’²⁵ As a result, while Stubbs advocated the study of distant periods of history whose issues are no longer contentious and which can be judged with a disinterested, dispassionate gaze, Seeley saw no inherent reason why more contemporary history could not become part of the curriculum, and his *The Expansion of England* (1883), on the recent history of the British Empire, emerged

²¹ Popper, *Poverty of Historicism*.

²² Hesketh, *Science of History*, p. 6.

²³ Wormell, p. 122.

²⁴ J. R. Seeley, ‘The Teaching of Politics:— an Inaugural Lecture Delivered at Cambridge’, in *Lectures and Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1870), p. 302.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

from two of his Cambridge lecture series. This was not, however, the kind of all-embracing ‘history of the people’ espoused by Martineau, Green and Walpole. Given that, as we saw in Chapter 1, Seeley was only prepared to include *political* history in his teaching and writing, excluding those ‘manners and customs’, he did not really address the problems of multiplicity and particularity confronted by those historians of the recent past.²⁶

Those historians who, unlike Seeley, prioritised research – and particularly archival research – were emphatic about the necessity of hindsight and chronological distance from one’s material. Some of the discipline’s founding practitioners consciously demarcated its remit by refusing to teach contemporary history. The notion of ‘boundary-work’, Thomas F. Gieryn’s term that Ian Hesketh has fruitfully drawn on in explaining the exclusion of J. A. Froude from the realm of acceptable history-writing in the 1850s and 1860s, is particularly useful for this analysis.²⁷ In the fields of history and literature, the second half of the nineteenth century saw two such processes of boundary-work. Simultaneous with the process discussed in Chapter 1, whereby history and literature were demarcated from one another, both disciplines were undergoing a parallel process of boundary-work in rejecting subject-matter deemed too recent. William Stubbs’ famous pronouncement to an 1876 Oxford lecture-theatre that ‘modern politics’ should be eschewed in the curriculum is especially notable for the fact that, in his eyes, this extended to include ‘the Great Rebellion’ and ‘the struggles of puritanism and absolutism’ of the seventeenth century.²⁸ This comment gives weight to W. E. H. Lecky’s famous 1892 assertion that ‘We are cavaliers and roundheads before we are Liberals and Conservatives’.²⁹ This period, moreover, is deemed especially unsuitable for study because it is a period of civil war whose issues are apparently still contentious.³⁰ As

²⁶ Seeley, ‘History and Politics’, p. 297.

²⁷ Hesketh, ‘Diagnosing Froude’s Disease: Boundary Work and the Discipline of History in Late-Victorian Britain’; Gieryn, p. 782. Froude’s exclusion from the academic historical community did not result from attention to contemporary history; his approach was viewed rather as insufficiently rigorous and conscientious, placing disproportionate weight on unrepresentative examples. The idea of ‘boundary-work’, however, applies equally well to the temporal issue.

²⁸ Stubbs, p. 53.

²⁹ W. E. H. Lecky, ‘The Political Value of History’, in *Historical and Political Essays* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1908), p. 19.

³⁰ Timothy Lang has suggested that Victorian historians’ anxiety about the seventeenth century lies in its ‘sectarian disputes’, which found an echo in their own era, and that ‘as the English state lost its Anglican exclusiveness, so the Puritan past became integrated into a comprehensive national history.’ Timothy Lang, *The Victorians and the Stuart Heritage: Interpretations of a Discordant Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. xii.

a result, it is not amenable for usage in what – as this chapter will go on to show – was often used as an alternative to temporal coherence, national unity.

One reason why contemporary history was avoided was the sense that its judgements would be no more than temporary. In a society keen to build lasting monuments, and a discipline keen to establish itself, it was readily agreed that a history without hindsight was likely to become rapidly outmoded, irrelevant and even laughable. In an article in the *Contemporary Review* of 1884, Mandell Creighton (soon to become the first Dixie Professor of Ecclesiastical History at Cambridge) is certain that ‘Everyone will sympathise with his [Seeley’s] regret that English history is pronounced less interesting as it approaches our own day.’³¹ However, the ideal reader this passage evokes evidently does not actually represent ‘everyone’, since if it were so, who is the source of the unidentified orthodoxy that ‘pronounce[s]’ recent history ‘less interesting’? And even this apparent clarion cry for the study of the recent past is immediately undermined by an explanation: ‘This is no doubt owing to the fact that modern historians are not clear about the point which they are working up to.’ Later he adds, in a shift towards condescension: ‘The modern historian cannot be overwise. He may be pardoned if, while the issue of events is doubtful, he directs his attention chiefly to those whose influence is most keenly felt.’³² It is ambiguous whether the verb ‘cannot’ is a lament or an injunction; whether Creighton is recognising the modern historian’s lack of hindsight as a sad but unavoidable fact, or berating those who attempt excessively authoritative judgements. In either case, history-writing of the recent past is firmly characterised as provisional and therefore impermanent.

The practice of avoiding contemporary issues in academia was not confined to the discipline of History. In a similar vein to Stubbs, George Saintsbury, Regius Professor of Rhetoric and English Literature at Edinburgh from 1895, made the decision to ‘include no living writer’ (except, strikingly, John Ruskin) in his *History of Nineteenth-Century Literature* (1896) because ‘Time has not performed his office, beneficent to the reader but more beneficent to the historian, of sifting and riddling out writers whom it is no longer necessary to consider, save in a spirit of adventurous or affectionate antiquarianism’.³³ In Stubbs’ and Saintsbury’s

³¹ Mandell Creighton, ‘Modern History’, *Contemporary Review*, 45 (1884), 280–88 (p. 281).

³² Creighton, p. 282.

³³ George Saintsbury, *A History of Nineteenth-Century Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1896), pp. v–vi.

determination to shy away from ‘modern’ literature and history lies a fear of making judgments that will be proved *wrong* by later generations. These writers are perpetually conscious, and fearful, of the judgements of posterity, and want to be able to exploit their own hindsight to its best advantage. In Saintsbury’s formulation, ‘Time’ is a personified agent in the creation of history. Although his usage can be seen as a metonym for ‘changes in public opinion’, it is nonetheless a striking image in granting time itself a necessary and dominant agency in creating a canon by imposing a pattern and shape (strikingly seen as the antithesis of antiquarianism) on the initially unmanageable multiplicity of literary production.

These writers express anxiety at making judgements that might be judged as flawed or false by later generations. This results from a confluence of two axioms of nineteenth-century historical thought: faith in a constant trajectory of upward progress, and faith that there exists a body of knowledge, however difficult to extract, that forms the ‘truth’ about the past. If truth is an accessible, attainable body of knowledge, and more of this ‘truth’ will be available to each successive generation of historians, this renders one’s own work merely provisional and ultimately subservient to texts that have not yet been written. While it is not atypical for modern historians to view their work as provisional, this results in part from a relativisation of ‘truth’. The model of history espoused by William Stubbs is far from any such relativity. His description of ‘the great German hive of historical workers busy as we are on our archives’ envisages a series of small achievements that work cumulatively towards a great though imperceptible end.³⁴ To believe both in the existence of an intrinsic truth, and that later generations will inevitably reach closer to it than you are ever able to, is a particularly poisonous combination for the aspiring historian, since it should logically halt historical inquiry – or at least historical judgement – in its tracks. The only reason it did not is that while Stubbs’ teaching model emphasised the need for hindsight, his model of historical research stepped away from a temporal emphasis towards a textual, empirical one.

The practices of late-nineteenth-century historians, led by the example of Stubbs’s *Select Charters*, has recently been the subject of analysis by Michael Riordan, who has shown in an Oxford-based case study how these historians prioritised the collection and publication of selected documents over unfiltered

³⁴ Stubbs, p. 13.

archival searching itself.³⁵ This reluctance to get mired in the archive itself, however, added to rather than detracting from their sense of the urgency of characterising themselves as serious archival scholars. The metaphor of the ‘colony of bees’ renders history a communal activity, one with a straightforward methodology requiring little executive facility. Rather than identifying the historian as individual witness or judge, immersed or overarching in their view, it idealises the archive as the repository of truth to such an extent that each individual ‘worker at history’ does not *need* hindsight: instead the facts themselves will offer the impersonal objectivity comparable to a collective hindsight. Without this abnegation of self in subservience to the archive, any individual decision or judgement would be little more than ephemeral in the face of the continuum of history.

Our historians of the recent past are certainly not immune to this sense of relativity, and provisionality, in the face of perpetual transformation, and repeatedly acknowledge that their contemporary accounts will be superseded. They also, however, go further either than Carlyle and Macaulay in the pre-disciplinary era, or Seeley later in the century, in challenging the value of hindsight in itself. How they do so, and the extent and limitations of their radical intentions, will be the subject of the remainder of this chapter. First, however, it is necessary to consider briefly how these histories of the recent past fit into the wider context of Victorian national history-writing.

Where does history end?

A ‘history of the world’ or ‘history of Britain’ published today, whatever its ideological stance, most commonly ends with a consideration of the contemporary situation.³⁶ By contrast, the status quo among nineteenth-century historians, one inherited from their eighteenth-century predecessors, was to close the discussion at some chronological remove from the present day. David Hume’s monumental *History of England* (1754–62), the text which, as Mitchell has shown, remained the primary history textbook until a long way into the nineteenth century, closed with

³⁵ Michael Riordan, ‘Printing, Selection and the Cataloguing of Oxford Archives, c. 1850–1950’, *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, 32 (2011), 51–62.

³⁶ See Kenneth O. Morgan, *The Oxford History of Britain*, (Oxford: OUP, 1984; updated edition 2010); Simon Schama, *A History of Britain, Volume III: The Fate of Empire, 1776-2000* (London: BBC, 2002); Rebecca Fraser, *A People’s History of Britain* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2003).

the ‘Glorious Revolution’ of 1688.³⁷ It was repeatedly updated by later writers (including Tobias Smollett in a text written alongside Hume’s during 1760–65, but published in a joint edition, after Hume’s death, in 1777; T. S. Hughes in 1834; and Henry Stebbings in 1838), but these were all conceived very much as ‘continuations’ rather than as stand-alone histories in their own right.³⁸ Henry Hallam’s *Constitutional History of England* (1823) runs, as its subtitle announces, ‘from the accession of Henry VII, to the death of George II’ in 1760.³⁹ John Lingard’s *History of England* (1819–30) proposed a revisionist, Catholic interpretation, but approached no nearer the present day than Hume, covering the period from the Roman invasion of Britain to 1688.⁴⁰ When Charles Dickens undertook *A Child’s History of England*, serialised in *Household Words* between January 1851 and December 1853, he evidently felt similarly constrained, despite the less formal publication genre and context, and a willingness otherwise to express political partisanship. He offered a similar chronological remit to Lingard’s, starting with ‘the Ancient Times’ and coming to a sudden halt with the Glorious Revolution. The final instalment, which follows the narration of this apparently momentous event, opens with the peremptory declaration: ‘I have now arrived at the close of my history. The events which succeeded the famous Revolution of one thousand six hundred and eighty-eight, would neither be easily related nor easily understood in such a book as this.’⁴¹ Thomas Macaulay initially speculated that his *History of England from the Accession of James the Second* (1848–59) might extend to ‘the death of George the Fourth’ (in 1830), but as he acknowledged, ‘there are great and obvious objections to contemporary history.’⁴² It was ultimately curtailed by its over-ambitious remit, and halted at the death of William III, in 1702.

This does not mean that histories that approached a more recent past, or were constructed to continue to the present and even into the future, were never published in the nineteenth century. These works, however, were typically undertaken by more

³⁷ David Hume, *The History of England from the Invasion of Julius Cæsar to the Revolution in 1688*, 8 vols. (London: A. Millar, 1783). See Rosemary Mitchell, *Picturing the Past*.

³⁸ See Rosemary Mitchell, *Picturing the Past*, pp. 43, 45.

³⁹ Henry Hallam, *The Constitutional History of England: From the Accession of Henry VII to the Death of George II*, 2 vols. (London: John Murray, 1842).

⁴⁰ John Lingard, *The History of England: From the First Invasion by the Romans to the Accession of William and Mary in 1688*, 6th ed., 9 vols. (London: C. Dolman, 1855). See Peter Phillips, *John Lingard: Priest and Historian* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2008).

⁴¹ Charles Dickens, ‘A Child’s History of England’, *Household Words*, VIII (1853), 360.

⁴² George Otto Trevelyan, *The Life and Letters of Lord Macaulay*, 2 vols. (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1876), II, 13–14.

radical writers. Winwood Reade's militantly agnostic world history, *The Martyrdom of Man* (1872), telling the story of mankind's gradual emergence out of religion towards rationalism and featuring a chapter on 'The Future of the Human Race', faced 'a bitterly or contemptuously hostile literary and newspaper press' and was never likely to become a library or classroom classic.⁴³ The Chartist Robert Gammage published a *History of the Chartist Movement* in 1854 that of necessity covered a period right up to his present. Despite protestations of objectivity, however, this was unsurprisingly a politically charged text, and indeed his Preface closes with a wish that 'his effort, however humble, will not be deemed unworthy of a place in the historical and political literature of his country.'⁴⁴ J. R. Green's *Short History of the English People*, which was vilified by some reviewers as a radical democratic manifesto, still shies away from freely discussing the history of his own lifetime. It was left to his widow, Alice Stopford Green, to add – in a posthumous edition of 1916 – an epilogue which updated the *History* to her present.⁴⁵ This substitution reveals two very interesting elements of the shifting attitude towards hindsight. Stopford Green appears to invest in the valorisation of hindsight enough to feel that her husband's epilogue was limited by his lack of it. On the other hand, her replacement shows that by the Edwardian period, the implicit embargo on contemporary history had eased.⁴⁶ Her history continues right up to her present, in the midst of the First World War.

It is in this Edwardian era, the close of our chronological period of focus for this study, that contemporary history began to be more freely included. S. R. Gardiner's *Student's History of England*, first published in 1890, included Victorian history up to 1885, although like Green, he covered the most recent period (in his case since 1874) in a terse 'Summary of Events'.⁴⁷ In later editions published after his death, anonymous editors extended the work to the death of Queen Victoria and

⁴³ John Robertson, 'Introduction', in *The Martyrdom of Man*, by Winwood Reade (London: Watts & Co., 1924), p. vii.

⁴⁴ R. G. Gammage, *History of the Chartist Movement, 1837–1854* (Newcastle-on-Tyne: Browne & Browne, 1894), p. x.

⁴⁵ J. R. Green, *A Short History of the English People*, ed. by Alice Stopford Green (London: Macmillan, 1916).

⁴⁶ See, for example, H. D. Traill and J. S. Mann, eds., *Social England: A Record of the Progress of the People*, 6 vols. (London: Cassell & Co., 1897), which extends to 1885; Herbert Paul, *A History of Modern England*, 5 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1906), which extends to 1895; C. R. L. Fletcher and Rudyard Kipling, *A School History of England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911), which gives an overview of the Victorian period.

⁴⁷ S. R. Gardiner, *A Student's History of England, from the Earliest Times to 1885*, 3 vols. (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1897), III, 969.

beyond.⁴⁸ By this time, there was a sense of obligation for writers of histories of England to proceed within touching distance of their present day. Charlotte Yonge's *The Victorian Half Century* (1887) had done so for the Queen's Golden Jubilee, but this was a brief sketch aimed explicitly at children.⁴⁹ H. O. Arnold-Forster's history readers for Cassell & Co. included a more extended *A History of England from the Landing of Julius Caesar to the Present Day* (1897), which, when reissued in 1904, extended right up to 1901.⁵⁰ This offered an unremarkable political and technological sketch featuring (with names in bold type) those deemed the worthies of the age.

There remained a certain discomfort, however, about either selecting or assessing the key events of the period within living memory. The final chapter of C. R. L. Fletcher's conservative and imperialist *A School History of England* (1911) (to which Rudyard Kipling contributed 23 poems, although he was later to be sheepish about his role in this text aptly described by Stephen Heathorn as 'extremely jingoistic'),⁵¹ opens with the caveat:

The period of English History which remains for me to tell you about will bring us down to our own days. It is a much more difficult story to understand than any that I have already told you. It is also much more difficult to write about.

For people hold such diverse opinions about the events of the present day and of the last hundred years. These opinions are very often the result of their upbringing; 'we have heard with our ears and our fathers have told us.' Men are still alive who were born before Waterloo was fought. As you get older you will form opinions about these events for yourselves; and so it is desirable for me, in this last chapter, rather to state what did take place than to try to guide your opinions. And it will be easier to do this if you, my readers, will allow me to treat the period as all one, rather than narrate the events year by year.⁵²

The two final sentences here rather contradict one another: the simple chronicling promised by 'state what did take place rather than to try to guide your opinions' does not sit easily with a method that 'treat[s] the period as all one', thus necessitating generalising judgements about it. The appeal to 'as you get older' serves to absolve Fletcher of responsibility, effectively handing the onus of generating hindsight onto

⁴⁸ See S. R. Gardiner, *A Student's History of England, from the Earliest Times to the Conclusion of the Great War*, 3 vols. (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1920).

⁴⁹ Charlotte M. Yonge, *The Victorian Half Century: A Jubilee Book* (London: Macmillan, 1887).

⁵⁰ H. O. Arnold-Forster, *A History of England from the Landing of Julius Caesar to the Present Day* (London: Cassell and Company Ltd., 1904).

⁵¹ Heathorn, p. 7.

⁵² Fletcher and Kipling, p. 220.

the readers themselves. What is most evident here is that even in the Edwardian period, and even in a children's history, where one might expect the writers to give themselves free rein to pontificate without fear of contradiction, the text teems with attempts to pre-empt potential criticism. In the wider context of fearful, controversial and complicated contemporary histories, therefore, Martineau's, Walpole's and Stopford Green's stand out as even more striking in their embrace of contemporary subject-matter.

This chapter will now go on to examine these histories of the recent past, to trace how they sought to expand the remit of acceptable historical study, and the problems they encountered in doing so. The first part of my analysis, focusing on how the temporal continuum is approached in their histories, will examine the strategies they used, in a position deficient in hindsight, to assert authority for their pronouncements. I will examine their use of stadial models of history to allow them to codify the process of change. I will show how in seeking an authorial persona that balanced authority and intimacy, overview and immersion, these historians tend to oscillate between one extreme and the other. The second part will demonstrate how the challenges attendant on trying to represent the social continuum ultimately led all four historians to employ the figure of 'nation' as a source of unity in their otherwise potentially fragmentary texts. Initially, however, because these writers are not widely known now as historians, they need some measure of introduction. One reason why they are mostly better known nowadays for other roles is that they all fall into the gap between the amateur and the professional. They neither fit into the amateur model of 'men of letters' that prevailed at the beginning of the nineteenth century among historians, nor into the professional model that prevailed at its end. None of them ever held an academic post. With the exception of Spencer Walpole (who is only exempt from this category by his salaried position in the civil service), they all needed their histories to be commercially successful. These texts were all written, therefore, for a popular rather than an academic audience. They were, however, written in different intellectual environments, and demonstrate a microcosm of the changes that took place between the 1840s and 1870s (and again by the 1910s) in historiographical expectations.

The temporal continuum: overview and immersion

In trying to narrate a historical era within their own – and their readers’ – living memory, Martineau, Green and Walpole are faced with an obligation to validate their credentials for the role. Since they are narrating events that form part of not only their own experience but also that of their readers, they need to legitimise having set themselves apart from all other participants in this history, and positing themselves in the role of the historian. They have to assert an authority that makes their account worth exchanging money for. At the same time, however, they cannot claim the quasi-omniscience available to historians of the more distant past, since they are obliged to acknowledge the inevitable constraints imposed by their lack of hindsight. How, then, did the three writers negotiate these challenges?

Harriet Martineau

Harriet Martineau’s *History of England During the Thirty Years’ Peace* (1849), authored by a ‘miscellaneous writer’⁵³ at a point when the process of disciplinary boundary-work had not yet begun in earnest, goes further than Green or Walpole were later able to in challenging the function of hindsight. Martineau (1802–76), journalist, novelist, educationalist and populariser, proto-sociologist and, briefly, historian, at once represents many facets of the Victorian ‘man of letters’, and, as a woman, outstrips any generalisations about it. She does not fit comfortably into any single category, and neither do her writings.⁵⁴ As Valerie Sanders has expressed it, ‘her mode is essentially impure; she blurs the lines between fact and fiction, travelogue and theology, national history and autobiography.’⁵⁵ Martineau has not been ignored in modern Victorian studies: there is a notable body of criticism on her place in the histories of sociology and feminism,⁵⁶ and on her *Autobiography* (1855;

⁵³ Leslie Stephen, ‘Harriet Martineau’, *The Dictionary of National Biography*, 1893 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/olddnb/18228>> [accessed 21 May 2013].

⁵⁴ Thus she has been defined variously as ‘radical’ and ‘moralising’: see Robert Kiefer Webb, *Harriet Martineau: A Radical Victorian* (London: Heinemann, 1960); Shelagh Hunter, *Harriet Martineau: The Poetics of Moralism* (Brookfield, Vermont: Scolar Press, 1996).

⁵⁵ Valerie Sanders, *Reason over Passion: Harriet Martineau and the Victorian Novel* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1986), p. xiii.

⁵⁶ Valerie K. Pichanick, *Harriet Martineau: The Woman and Her Work, 1802–76* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1980); Valerie Sanders; Deirdre David, *Intellectual Women and Victorian Patriarchy: Harriet Martineau, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987); Michael R. Hill and Susan Hoecker-Drysdale, eds., *Harriet Martineau: Theoretical*

published 1877), which details her unhappy and disturbed childhood, her loss of religion (and resultant estrangement from her beloved brother, Unitarian theologian James Martineau) and her Positivist faith in a secular teleology of progress.⁵⁷ Her *History of England During the Thirty Years' Peace* has recently drawn new attention for its relationship to this autobiography,⁵⁸ as well as for its national and imperial implications,⁵⁹ but there has been little specific recognition of its anomalous status as a history of the recent past. Although her only distinguished predecessor as a female historian, Catharine Macaulay (1731–1791), had begun a *History of England from the Revolution to the Present Time in a Series of Letters to a Friend* (1778), her focus was solely on political history, and only the first volume was ever completed (covering 1688 to 1733).⁶⁰ Martineau's work, by contrast, both attempts a social panorama, and directly refutes any suspicion of contemporary-history-writing.

As discussed above, Victorian historians were not unanimous in their valorisation of hindsight, but neither Macaulay nor Carlyle goes as far as Martineau in challenging the purpose of hindsight in itself. Her *History of England* (1849) takes as its subject area the thirty years following the Battle of Waterloo, from 1815 to 1846, thus concluding a mere three years before its publication. Already an established journalist when she wrote her *History*, she embraces to an unparalleled extent the immediacy of the 'history of one's own times'. It is striking that when, in 1864, her *History* was republished in America, Martineau added an additional chapter which brought the text up to 1854. Strangely, she claimed to have written this piece as if in the midst of the Crimean War, 'as if it were written in 1855 rather than 1863', a stance that makes a virtue of immediacy and lack of hindsight.⁶¹ It privileges, even fetishises the immersed perspective, in a way strikingly at odds with the later-nineteenth-century emphasis on detachment we have already traced.

and *Methodological Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2001); Caroline Roberts, *The Woman and the Hour: Harriet Martineau and Victorian Ideologies* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002).

⁵⁷ Mitzi Myers, 'Harriet Martineau's Autobiography: The Making of a Female Philosopher', in *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*, ed. by Estelle Jelinek (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), pp. 53–70; Peterson, *Traditions of Victorian Women's Autobiography*.

⁵⁸ Alexis Easley, 'Harriet Martineau: Gender, National Identity, and the Contemporary Historian', *Women's History Review*, 20 (2011), 765–84.

⁵⁹ Deborah A. Logan, *Harriet Martineau, Victorian Imperialism, and the Civilizing Mission* (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2010).

⁶⁰ Bridget Hill, *The Republican Virago: The Life and Times of Catharine Macaulay, Historian* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), pp. 45–46.

⁶¹ Robert Kiefer Webb, p. 278.

Martineau's *History* was published in three stages over a number of years. Her first edition, which will be the focus in this chapter, *The History of England During the Thirty Years Peace* (1849), was taken over from her publisher Charles Knight, who had begun the work in 1846 but found he lacked the time to complete it. He was later to undertake an eight-volume *Popular History of England* (1855–62), which, as Valerie Grey has recently delineated, did devote substantial attention to 'the events of his lifetime', but in 1848 he obviously felt unequal to the task.⁶² Martineau's *History* covered the period since the end of the Napoleonic Wars, running from 1815 to 1846. A later edition added a study of the first fifteen years of the century, producing a work that covered the years 1800 to 1846. And in 1864, she added a final section that updated the work to an endpoint of 1854. This latter work was renamed *History of the Peace*, since the 'thirty year' descriptor was no longer relevant. Copies of the extended (and again renamed) edition of Martineau's work, *The History of England from the Commencement of the XIXth Century to the Crimean War* (1864),⁶³ feature opposite its title page an advert for 'Standard Histories for Every Library: Uniform in Style', which it lists in chronological order of subject-matter: Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*, Hume's *History of England*, Macaulay's *History of England*, and Harriet Martineau's. This presents the latter's work as the logical continuation of a grand narrative stretching from 'the second century of the Christian Era' to the almost-present, situating Martineau's history in an eminent (and otherwise male) tradition.⁶⁴

As delineated in Chapter 1, in a prevailing Victorian cultural discourse, women were seen as suited to the spheres of domesticity, detail and particularity. These are also the characteristics associated with the recent past. In this framework, it is unsurprising that writing about the recent past was often produced by women. This was typically done, however, in those relatively particularised genres: the autobiography, the biography, the novel. What was unusual about Martineau's *History of England During the Thirty Years' Peace*, as Catherine Hall has emphasised in a recent essay, 'was that this was a national history, a form rarely

⁶² Valerie Grey, *Charles Knight: Educator, Publisher, Writer* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), p. 113.

⁶³ Harriet Martineau, *The History of England from the Commencement of the XIXth Century to the Crimean War*, 4 vols. (Philadelphia: Porter & Coates, 1864).

⁶⁴ Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. by David Womersley, 4 vols. (Harmondsworth: Allen Lane, 1994), I, 31.

associated with women'.⁶⁵ Most Victorian women historians approached their task at an oblique angle, writing to most popular acclaim when they did so in quasi-biographical modes,⁶⁶ or in texts for children.⁶⁷ In contrast to these texts – and indeed the reason why it qualifies for inclusion in this chapter, alongside the *Histories* of Green and Walpole – Martineau's *History* 'encompassed the whole social and political world.' In Hall's eyes, at least, 'It made no concessions to her womanly status'.⁶⁸

Martineau's own description of her approach to writing this history, however, shows her as subject to the same value-scheme of multiplicity and singularity that Chapter 1 demonstrated as prevalent in (masculine-dominated) Victorian intellectual culture. As Deirdre David has influentially argued, Martineau was both 'resistan[t] to and complicit ... with hegemonic patriarchy'.⁶⁹ As she described in her *Autobiography*,

I doubt whether, at any point of my career, I ever felt so oppressed by what I had undertaken as during the first two or three weeks after I had begun the History. ... the quantity and variety of details fairly overpowered my spirits, in that hot month of August. I feel my weakness – more in body than (consciously) in mind – in having to deal with many details.⁷⁰

Like J. R. Green, as we will see below, she sees her (feared) inability to synthesise the multiple details of contemporary history as a 'weakness'. By explaining it as a bodily weakness, Martineau goes even further than Green would in associating this with unmanliness and femininity. Unlike Green, however, Martineau sees this multitude of detail as antithetical to her natural character. While what Green fears is his instinctive attraction to particularity rather than generalisation, Martineau craves the latter and fears the former, allying herself with the singularity of masculine history.

⁶⁵ Catherine Hall, 'Writing History, Writing a Nation: Harriet Martineau's *History of the Peace*', in *Harriet Martineau: Authorship, Society and Empire*, ed. by Ella Dzelzainis and Cora Kaplan (Manchester University Press, 2011), pp. 231–53 (p. 236).

⁶⁶ See Hannah Lawrance, *Historical Memoirs of the Queens of England* (1838) and *The History of Woman in England* (1843); Agnes and Elizabeth Strickland, *Lives of the Queens of England* (1840–48). For recent work on Lawrance, see Benjamin Dabby, 'Hannah Lawrance and The Claims of Women's History in Nineteenth-Century England', *The Historical Journal*, 53 (2010), 699–722.

⁶⁷ See Mrs Markham [Elizabeth Penrose], *A History of England from the First Invasion by the Romans to the End of the Reign of George III* (1823); Maria Graham, *Little Arthur's History of England* (1835)

⁶⁸ Hall, 'Writing History, Writing a Nation', p. 238.

⁶⁹ David, p. 24.

⁷⁰ Harriet Martineau, *Autobiography*, 2 vols. (London: Virago, 1983), II, 318.

Martineau was all too conscious of her anomalous position as a contemporary historian, and particularly as a woman contemporary historian. Given her lack of hindsight, she insisted that her *History* was no more than provisional and temporary. As she explained in the obituary she wrote for herself,

Without taking the chronicle form this history could not, from the nature of the case, be cast in the ultimate form of perfected history. All that can be done with contemporary history is to collect and methodize the greatest amount of reliable facts and distinct impressions, to amass sound material for the veritable historian of a future day, – so consolidating, assimilating, and vivifying the structure as to do for the future writer precisely that which the lapse of time and the oblivion which creeps over all transactions must prevent his doing for himself. This auxiliary usefulness is the aim of Harriet Martineau’s history; and she was probably not mistaken in hoping for that much result from her labour.⁷¹

This characterisation offers her *History* as an unambitious and ‘auxiliary’ production, subservient to the later productions of a (male) historian. On the other hand, it also leaves space for the ‘proto-feminist subtext’ that Alexis Easley sees in the *History*.⁷² In this prophecy, Martineau modifies and undermines the role of hindsight: her successor would have lost the ability to ‘vivify’ the historical records for ‘himself’, and thus needs her preliminary work as much as it needs a later codifier. In this passage, as in many places throughout her *History*, Martineau equivocates between arguing for the importance of the particularist detail, prioritising the value of the overview while declaring it unavailable to her, and assuming an elevated perspective for herself.

This last approach is clearly demonstrated in Martineau’s creative use of stadial models of history. While stadialism was most commonly used to draw comparisons between nations, it could also be used to assert a trajectory of social progress within the nation. In the near-contemporaneous histories of Martineau and Macaulay, both writers transfer its concept of stages of progress from nation to class. In trying to combat nostalgia and conservatism, and to prove to his reader that the current state of society really is superior to that of the seventeenth century, Macaulay declares:

Every bricklayer who falls from a scaffold, every sweeper of a crossing who is run over by a carriage, may now have his wounds dressed and his limbs set

⁷¹ [Harriet Martineau], ‘An Autobiographical Memoir’, *The Daily News* (London, 29 June 1876), p. 2.

⁷² Easley, p. 769.

with a skill such as, a hundred and sixty years ago, all the wealth of a great lord like Ormond, or of a merchant prince like Clayton, could not have purchased.⁷³

Similarly, in Martineau's discussion of technological improvement throughout the last thirty years, she notes that

In waterproof clothing, the poor have obtained a great benefit. Large classes of labourers may soon be better protected from wet at their out-door work than are the policemen of the present day.⁷⁴

The stadial model of history that both writers express, therefore, is one in which technological improvement moves up the social scale in stages: the aristocrat's luxury of today will be the worker's staple of tomorrow. This striking similarity across the two historians is not the result of any mere imitation: the first volume of Macaulay's *History of England* was only published in December 1848, and Martineau's *History of the Thirty Years' Peace* went to press in the following month. This shared motif enables both writers, writing in the face of the evident destitution of the 'hungry forties', to bolster their progressivist liberal narratives: by drawing cross-class parallels across historical stages, they offer hope of this pattern being repeated *ad infinitum* in an upward future trajectory.

Martineau's attachment to stadial models of history can be seen as an attempt to seek singular meaning in apparent multiplicity. She even tries to attribute a stadial character to her own post-Napoleonic period. The only way she finds to do this, however, is to depict it as defined by a lack of definition. In the same year in which her *History* was published, she sent a letter to the American abolitionist journal *Liberty Bell*, which expresses a belief in her 'modernity' as an age of transition. She declares:

The war of Opinion which Canning foresaw was in fact a war between the further and nearer centuries, – between Asia and Europe, – between despotism and self-government. The preparations were begun long ago. The Barons at Runnymede beat up for recruits when they hailed the signature of Magna Charta; and the princes of York and Lancaster did their best to clear the field for us and those who are to come after us. The Italian Republics wrought well for us, and so did the French Revolutions, one after the other, as hints and warnings; and so did the voyage of your Mayflower, – and the Swiss League, and German Zollverein, and in short, every thing that has happened for several hundreds of years. ... It is my belief that the war has actually begun, and that,

⁷³ Macaulay, *History of England*, I, 421.

⁷⁴ Harriet Martineau, *The History of England During the Thirty Years' Peace*, 2 vols. (London: Charles Knight, 1849), II, 708.

though there may be occasional lulls, no man now living will see the end of it.⁷⁵

Thus, Martineau suggests, the Victorian era is defined by conflict and internal division, irreducible to any single characteristic. We can see, in this, the contradiction inherent in attempting to impose a stadial framework on a narrative in which one is still immersed. As a concept of history, stadialism sees time as a sequence of clearly categorised blocks, and requires an external viewing perspective. Martineau is only able to characterise the debates of her present as the culmination of centuries of historical ‘preparations’, and to claim authority for her interpretation by clutching at an assortment of oddly ill-assorted civil wars. Although in her *History of England During the Thirty Years’ Peace*, she attempts to claim the apparently ‘empty’ condition of ‘peace’ as a historical condition just as much as war, in this *Liberty Bell* letter we find her reaching for military metaphors to dramatise and dynamise just such a period of peace.

As Martineau’s letter demonstrates, those historians who do embrace the immersive viewpoint tend to struggle between different registers of address. Both Martineau and Alice Stopford Green find themselves jumping, even within individual passages, between treating their subject-matter as a past historical era, and speaking directly to an audience contemporary with the events they describe. In Stopford Green’s continuation of her late husband’s *Short History*, her tone sometimes wavers between that of a historian and that of a journalist, between retrospection and personal involvement. She sets out on an assessment of the trade union movement quite securely in the past tense, but this does not last long.

As the wave of trade unionism spread into every corner of British industry, the half million members of thirty years ago have now increased to three and a quarter millions, with an income of over four million pounds ... It formed in fact a State within the State, governing itself by Congresses after the model of Parliament.⁷⁶

Here she shifts from past to present and back again in scarcely more than a sentence, from ‘spread’ to ‘have now increased’ and back to ‘formed’. She struggles to maintain the historian’s conventional distant impartiality in the consciousness of up-to-date information she is keen to impart to her reader. Martineau similarly struggles

⁷⁵ Martineau, *Autobiography*, II, 451.

⁷⁶ Alice Stopford Green, ‘Epilogue’, in *A Short History of the English People*, by J. R. Green (London: Macmillan, 1916), pp. 837–1008 (p. 892).

with this conflict between a necessity for historical disinterest and the emotional relevance of the topics she discusses. On the subject of Queen Victoria and her family, she states:

With the charm of a youthful sovereign and a fresh royal generation came, necessarily, the mournfulness of seeing the old drop off; – the old princes and statesmen and warriors, whose names had been familiar to us all our lives.⁷⁷

In referring to ‘us all our lives’, Martineau brings this narrative, which had been kept at arm’s length by the pluperfect of ‘had been familiar’, back not only to closeness but – as with Stopford Green – to journalism, in which we the readers are implicated in the action: we are brought not only close to the action, but into the fold that is being discussed. At times, indeed, she explicitly steps away from her authoritative stance, pleading humility in her lack of hindsight. Concluding, for instance, that ‘it will be for the men of [a] future time to assign to Faraday his place in the history of his country’, she is forced to defer judgement to later generations.⁷⁸

J. R. Green

J. R. Green (1837–1883) now generally features in the story of nineteenth-century historiography as an adjunct to other historians.⁷⁹ Although illuminating work has been done by Rosemary Jann on his contribution to and place in the milieu of mid-Victorian historiography, he is not guaranteed a substantial place in every survey of Victorian historians.⁸⁰ Often mentioned as a Teutonist follower of William Stubbs, or as a protégé of Edward Freeman, he never held an academic post in a period when this was gradually becoming the route to historical credibility. His *Short History of the English People* (1874), however, was one of the best-selling history books of the century, appealing to a general audience and tracing a compelling narrative of a nation he saw descending from the Anglo-Saxon settlers of the seventh century. At the age of 16 he had a run-in with his headmaster and was expelled from Magdalen College School after writing an essay critical of Charles I. This defiance of the pronouncements of authority in favour of liberal principles was to continue

⁷⁷ Martineau, *The History of England During the Thirty Years’ Peace*, II, 687.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, II, 706.

⁷⁹ See G. P. Gooch, *History and Historians in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Longmans, 1952); Hesketh, *Science of History*.

⁸⁰ He is granted him a chapter of his own in Jann, *The Art and Science of Victorian History*. J. W. Burrow, however, recognises his potential eligibility for substantial treatment, but ultimately chooses to address Freeman instead. See Burrow, *A Liberal Descent*, p. 7.

throughout his career, and his *Short History* declares from its title onwards to be one of ‘the People’ rather than of the high politics previously seen as the proper subject matter of a national history.

Throughout his career as a historian, he was constrained by consumptive illness and the possibility of impending death, and thus chose to publish the *Short History* before the extended version he had originally planned. Although he did go on to publish a four-volume *History of the English People* (1877-80), this chapter will focus on the *Short History*. As the text in which Green made his first foray as a self-defined historian, this is the one in which his critique of extant approaches to British national historiography, and his intentions to revise and reframe it, are most boldly stated. It is also the most widely read of his publications, both during his lifetime and afterwards, and thus is the text with the greatest influence on subsequent history-writing.

Green declared in his diary as early as 1862 that he planned on becoming the ‘historian of England’, but added,

With full consciousness of many great deficiencies, I devote myself to the task. The greatest of them is, perhaps, a dislike for abstract thought, which would ever tempt me to subordinate general tendencies to particular events and principles to individuals. But by two great helps I can – and by God’s help, purpose to bring to its execution – unflinching labour and an earnest desire for Truth. ... I pray God, in whose name and to whose glory I undertake this work, to grant me in it, above all, the earnest love and patient toil after historical truth.⁸¹

Here Green, like Martineau, briefly aligns himself with the kind of multiplicity and particularity that, as shown in Chapter 1, was associated in Victorian culture with a culpable effeminacy. This alignment, unsurprisingly, is seen as a source of shame: it is a sinful ‘tempt[ation]’ and ‘the greatest ... of many great deficiencies’. Green’s lament demonstrates the speed with which disciples of Ranke and Stubbs managed to transform the norms of the historical discipline. Only a few decades later, when particularity had been effectively reclaimed for the discipline, historians were proudly declaring an eye for the most minute details. In 1862, however, history had not yet even become a subject of university study in its own right, and Green views his innate tendency as both unmanly and unsuitable for a student of history. To counteract his natural tendency towards the particular, Green seeks refuge in those

⁸¹ Leslie Stephen, ed., *The Letters of John Richard Green* (London: Macmillan, 1901), p. 104.

paired tenets of the professionalisation of history: ‘unflinching labour and an earnest desire for Truth’. Through these dual supports of hard graft and a yearning for a capitalised, transcendent singularity, he hopes to gain the fruits of the ‘abstract thought’ to which he feels unsuited. While he capitalises this first use of ‘Truth’, however, when it returns at the end of the passage it has been re-formulated and qualified as ‘historical truth’. This slippage encapsulates a moment of transition between two modes of history. The Romantic transcendence of Carlyle’s capitalised ‘History’ and ‘Truth’ gives way to a more modest, Stubbsian image of ‘historical truth’ that can be attained through small-scale dedicated labour and attention to detail.

Green’s brief self-identification with the particularity that this study has associated with the recent past does not, however, lead him to focus his *History* on this period. The *Short History*’s single volume, which had begun with the first Anglo-Saxon settlements in England and followed an unbroken narrative through thirteen subsequent centuries, comes to an abrupt conclusion after a detailed description of the Battle of Waterloo. In contrast, an epilogue, offering a bald political outline of the nineteenth century, lasts only seven pages. Anthony Brundage argues that the inadequacy of the nineteenth-century section stems from Green being ‘impatient to complete the book’ due to his sense of impending morbidity, and Green did indeed draw up an outline of a more substantial intended final chapter.⁸² A letter to Edward Freeman suggests practical considerations were a factor: ‘The truth was that when I reached 1660 I had to face the fact that the book must have an end, and that I *must* end it in about 800 pp.’⁸³ At the end of the same letter, he comments on Gladstone’s retirement that ‘it makes me want to carry out my notion of writing a history from 1815 to now, if only to say that I for one love and honour Gladstone as I love and honour no other living statesman.’⁸⁴ While this suggests that Green was theoretically open to the possibility of writing contemporary history, it is clear from this description that it would be undertaken more in the service of eulogy than of historical overview. Notably, when Green developed his *History* into an extended four-volume edition (1878–1880), it does not extend any further chronologically

⁸² Anthony Brundage, *The People’s Historian: John Richard Green and the Writing of History in Victorian England* (London: Greenwood Press, 1994), p. 95.

⁸³ J. R. Green to Edward Freeman, 18 Jan 1875. Reprinted in Stephen, *The Letters of John Richard Green*, p. 408.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 409.

than the *Short History*; in fact, it ends decisively with ‘the return of Louis the Eighteenth to the throne of the Bourbons’ in 1815, and completely eschews any depiction of Britain post-Napoleonic Wars.⁸⁵ The brief epilogue that Green offers in his *Short History* on events post-1815 certainly reveals a discomfort about pronouncing on the significances of his own lifetime.

The vast majority of Green’s *Short History* is written from the lofty heights of an illuminating hindsight. For example, a section about the fourteenth-century founder of the Lollard movement, John Wyclif, is entitled ‘The First Protestant’, despite the fact that this term, not invented until the end of the 1520s, would have meant absolutely nothing to Wyclif himself or his followers.⁸⁶ These assessments, however, are often tempered with personal detail, as evident in this description of a famous historical figure:

William the Great, as men of his own day styled him, William the Conqueror, as by one event he stamped himself on our history[,] was now Duke of Normandy. The full grandeur of his indomitable will, his large and patient statesmanship, the loftiness of aim which lifts him out of the petty incidents of his age, were as yet only partly disclosed.⁸⁷

This kind of character sketch, which presents ‘William the Great’ as an individual with whom Green is well acquainted, takes us momentarily into the eleventh century as a witness to his personality. Almost immediately, though, we – and he – are ‘lift[ed] ... out of the petty incidents of his age’. This passage assumes previous knowledge of William the Conqueror on the part of the audience. It also implies that there exists an intrinsic truth about his character, one which is revealed only to the observers of the modern era. His contemporaries were immersed in their present, but William himself saw further, elevated above ‘the petty incidents’ that surrounded him; now, with hindsight, Green suggests, we can all gain an authoritative overview.

Like Martineau, Green employs stadial motifs to make judgements that link across periods. They allow him to demarcate historical periods in terms of distinctive social characteristics, claiming that these different stages possess distinctive mindsets. This is epitomised by his depiction of Henry VIII’s chief minister and mastermind of the English Reformation, Thomas Cromwell. ‘The marriage of Anne of Cleves,’ Green states,

⁸⁵ J. R. Green, *A History of the English People*, 5 vols. (New York: Useful Knowledge Publishing Company, 1882), v, 490.

⁸⁶ Green, *Short History*, ed. Alice Stopford Green, p. 240.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

was but the first step in a policy which, had it been carried out as [Cromwell] designed it, would have anticipated the triumphs of Richelieu. ... Had he succeeded, the whole face of Europe would have been changed, Southern Germany would have been secured for Protestantism, and the Thirty Years War averted. He failed as men fail who stand ahead of their age.⁸⁸

This statement demonstrates a meeting of the eighteenth-century stadial model with the newer nineteenth-century historicist model of human development. From the philosophy of historicism, Green takes the view that human nature is context-bound rather than universal. He retains from stadialism, however, the idea that different eras possess different dominant characteristics, opening up the possibility of Cromwell as an anachronistic individual. His use of stadial motifs, therefore, allows him to draw direct comparisons between eras, comparing Cromwell and Richelieu despite their disparate contextual bounds.

In the brief epilogue dedicated to the events of British history since the end of the Napoleonic Wars, however, Green can no longer claim an external viewpoint.

With the victory of Waterloo we reach a time within the memory of some now living, and the opening of a period of our history, the greatest indeed of all in real importance and interest, but perhaps too near to us as yet to admit of a cool and purely historical treatment. In a work such as the present at any rate it will be advisable to limit ourselves from this point to a brief summary of the more noteworthy events which have occurred in our political history since 1815.⁸⁹

As this opening paragraph acknowledges, the epilogue is decidedly ‘brief’, taking little more than a cursory glance at the main political events of the period, and proceeding year by year with each sentence rather than taking time to delineate those vivid panoramas and portraits that populate the earlier pages of the *History*. The reason for this is all too apparent in his opening caveat: he believes the period of living memory is ‘too near to us as yet’ to allow a ‘purely historical treatment’. In this small phrase, Green detaches the post-Napoleonic period from the realm of ‘history’. The concluding sentence of his epic *History* makes no attempt to take an overview of proceedings:

Mr Gladstone felt himself forced in 1874 to consult public opinion by a dissolution of Parliament; and the return of a Conservative majority of nearly

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 348.

⁸⁹ J. R. Green, *A Short History of the English People*, ed. by Mrs J. R. Green and Miss Kate Norgate, illustrated edition, 4 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1892), iv, 1829.

seventy members was necessarily followed by his retirement from office, Mr Disraeli again becoming First Minister of the Crown.⁹⁰

This abrupt ending to the grand narrative of ‘the English People’ is strangely out of keeping with the tone of the main body of the text. In the rest of the volume, Green is unafraid to make politically partisan comments on his protagonists; in this final section, however, he takes pains to retain a strictly neutral tone, the passive rhetoric of ‘felt himself forced’ and ‘necessarily followed’ refusing to arbitrate between arch-rivals Gladstone and Disraeli. It demonstrates the extent of Green’s evident discomfort about making any overarching generalisations or judgments on the history of his own recent past.

If it cannot be part of ‘history’, therefore, what is this ‘recent past’? Nineteenth-century historians often justified their decision to eschew any discussion of this period by identifying the era within their living memory as qualitatively different from all previous time: what we would call ‘modernity’. This term signifies a chronological era effectively demarcated from, and even diametrically opposed to ‘history’. If modernity was ahistorical, it could not possibly be represented in historical terms. This term had been in use since at least the seventeenth century as a descriptor of objects,⁹¹ but since the industrial revolution, it has come to hold new potency as an abstract noun, becoming not only a referent for objects but itself a temporal category.⁹² This usage of the term was grounded in the pervasive model of history as developing in stages, which survived beyond its original eighteenth-century origins in the mode of conjectural history. As we have seen in Martineau’s *History*, the stadial model could also be used as a tool to impose order and unity on a section of the temporal continuum. Green, however, used a stadial view of history to justify the cursory and peremptory nature of his ‘treatment’ of ‘modernity’.

⁹⁰ Ibid., IV, 1850.

⁹¹ The *Oxford English Dictionary*’s primary definition is ‘the quality or condition of being modern’, with its first example of this usage a quotation from 1635. Its second definition is the closest to the temporal sense I highlight here: ‘An intellectual tendency or social perspective characterized by departure from or repudiation of traditional ideas, doctrines, and cultural values in favour of contemporary or radical values and beliefs (chiefly those of scientific rationalism and liberalism).’ The first example given dates from 1900, but, the *sense* encapsulated in the phrase ‘modern era’ or ‘modern age’ is widespread in nineteenth-century writing. See ‘Modernity’, *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2002 <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/120626?redirectedFrom=modernity#eid>> [accessed 20 November 2012].

⁹² While a search of the ProQuest database *British Periodicals* finds not a single usage of the word in 94 journals from 1730 to 1809, each of the seven subsequent decades offers several usages. In the 1880s this shoots up to 36, and in the 1890s (in 31 journals) to an astounding 603.

Spencer Walpole

In his *History of England from the Conclusion of the Great War in 1815* (1878), Sir Spencer Walpole (1839–1907) manages more consistently than either Green or Martineau to impose a systematic view of his temporal remit, between 1815 and the mid-1850s. He does so by giving up any attempt to characterise it as a single entity, instead breaking it down into more manageable units. Although now the least known of the four writers under discussion, he was a quietly distinguished figure during his lifetime, a long-standing civil service career culminating in a post as Governor of the Isle of Man between 1882 and 1893, and knighted in 1898. He was born into an eminent political family, as the son of Spencer Horatio Walpole – three times Conservative Home Secretary – and Isabella, daughter of Prime Minister Spencer Perceval. He ultimately shook off this prestigious Tory heritage in protest against Disraeli's foreign policy of the 1870s, and Walpole's two works of national British history, *A History of England from the Conclusion of the Great War in 1815* (1878–86), and *The History of Twenty-Five Years, 1856–1880* (1904), present a liberal and progressivist view of the nineteenth century and its historical trajectory.

Although on their first publication, his histories were well-received, he has since faded into obscurity. Even P. B. M. Blaas' in-depth study of late-Victorian and early-twentieth-century Whig historiography only mentions Walpole's *Life of Lord John Russell* (1889).⁹³ H. C. G. Matthew's portrait of Walpole for the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* judges his legacy in muted terms. He writes that

Walpole was not a great historian, and was no stylist, but he was a very thorough writer and editor whose biographies and history of his own times held the field well into the twentieth century and represented the optimistic orthodoxy which historians between the wars so energetically sought to refute.⁹⁴

Matthew's assessment locates Walpole's significance in the representative nature of his liberal views. As he states, 'Walpole's lists of progressive achievements were not original, but they played an important part in codifying the progressive calendar'.⁹⁵ It is this practice of 'codifying' that is of most interest to the present study. Following

⁹³ P. B. M. Blaas, *Continuity and Anachronism: Parliamentary and Constitutional Development in Whig Historiography and in the Anti-Whig Reaction Between 1890 and 1930* (The Hague; Boston: M. Nijhoff, 1978), p. 101.

⁹⁴ H. C. G. Matthew, 'Walpole, Sir Spencer (1839–1907)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/36712>> [accessed 17 January 2012].

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

Martineau's and J. R. Green's relatively uncomfortable depictions of the recent past, Spencer Walpole's work is most illuminating in this context for its relative self-assurance in dealing with the contemporary era. He negotiates its challenges by eschewing the immersive approach, and instead seeking to draw out more depersonalised trends over the period.

The opening of Walpole's 'Preface to the Revised Edition' of 1890 exemplifies this tendency to 'codify'. It declares,

The History of England from 1815 to the present time may be conveniently grouped into distinct periods. ... The first of these periods, during which Englishmen enjoyed less real liberty than at any time since the Revolution of 1688, was a period of Reaction; the second of them, memorable for five great revolutions in law, in commerce, in foreign policy, in religion, and in organic politics, was a period of Reform; the third, which deals not only with the successes of the Whigs under Grey, but with their failures under Melbourne, is concerned with the decline and fall of the Whig Ministry; the fourth relates the triumph of Free Trade.⁹⁶

This comfortable and confident division of the years from 1815 to 1849 into four clear temporal categories acts to turn this complex and multiple time period into a manageable, compartmentalised narrative. It views it as a self-contained entity: Walpole's narratorial viewpoint here is utterly external to these events. Viewing them from above in their entirety allows him to partition them into their 'distinct periods'. It uses a stadial model of history to help transform the multiplicity of memory into the singularity of history, and by 1890, when Walpole wrote this Preface, at least the first half of the nineteenth century seemed distant enough to be codified into such stadial units.

Walpole deals with the challenge of moulding an engaging narrative from such cut and dried categories by employing a rhetoric of organic development. The first volume's fifth chapter, for example, on the events from the close of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 until the death of George III in 1820, is entitled 'The Last of the Ebb Tide'. This instantly labels this period as the end of an era, and moreover, as a 'tide', renders it part of a larger inevitable shift. This evocation of organic narrative shapes is continued in the main text. In assessing the causes of and responsibility for the French Revolution, Walpole writes,

⁹⁶ Spencer Walpole, *A History of England from the Conclusion of the Great War in 1815*, 6 vols. (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1890), I, p. v.

The course which the Revolution took was horrible, but its excesses may more justly be attributed to the previous conduct of the court than to the ferocity of the people. The farther the arrow is drawn back the farther it will fly, the harder the blow the stronger the rebound. The strength of reaction is measured by the force of the movement which it succeeds. ... The force of the flood swept away the men who had raised the sluice gates.⁹⁷

This use of axioms and truisms drawn from the laws of physics imply that historical causation is a force of unassailable power. And Walpole does not use valuable time or text arguing for the validity of his metaphors. His tone assumes that these narrative shapes – these tides, forces and floods – are self-evident.

The narrative arcs Walpole evokes through these metaphors are presented as not only natural but inevitable, in a framework that makes the historian an utterly detached and omniscient figure. His first chapter opens:

The story of Waterloo forms the natural and appropriate conclusion of the long and exciting chapter of European history by which it is preceded. The dark war cloud, which has lowered for a quarter of a century over Europe, rolled away with the last wreath of smoke which hung over Napoleon's defeated and disorganised host. A long and cruel war was to be followed by a long and remarkable peace. A brighter dawn was to usher in a happier day. ... The ploughshare had been beaten, twenty-four years before, into the sword; the sword was to be converted into a pruning-hook.⁹⁸

This intertextual allusion to the Book of Isaiah 2:4 is more than mere echo: it actively transforms the temporal mode of the Biblical image. In the original, 'they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks' takes place in an atemporal heavenly realm. Here, Walpole appropriates a sense of cosmic grandeur for his history by transforming this into a chronological process of which war is a necessary part, and in which the 'pruning-hook' signifies God's approval of the reforms to come. The strange past-future tense of this passage, evident in 'was to be followed ... was to usher ... was to be converted', enacts a strange temporal positioning that further enhances this elision between author and deity. Walpole is narrating the future from a nominal point in the past, in 1815. However, there is more than a hint of stage directions about this phrasing: 'was to be followed' sounds like it had been instructed to happen. In assuming the mantle of this omniscient figure, temporally and causally detached from the events he narrates, Walpole removes his assessment from any sense of provisionality. He disavows any

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, I, 4.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, I, 1.

qualitative continuity with his own time, placing it firmly in a separate category of ‘history’. At the time of publication in 1878, the Battle of Waterloo, at little more than ‘sixty years hence’, was still on the edge of living memory; nonetheless, his presentation of this period is more insistently ‘historical’ than that of J. R. Green only four years earlier.

The social continuum: what counts as history?

It is not only along the temporal continuum that these historians challenge the boundaries of historical convention. They also seek to extend the remit of history along the social continuum. All four writers – Martineau, Green, Walpole and Stopford Green – take a consciously revisionist approach to the question of which events and individuals are worthy to enter the realm of ‘history’. In the following analysis, I will begin with Green, as the writer who most explicitly set out to challenge historiographical convention on this score, and who also found the greatest impediments to doing so; and I will compare his approach with the less individualised and more categorising inclusion of the ‘unhistoric’ masses in Walpole’s text. I will then show how Martineau achieved relative success in incorporating the breadth of the social continuum, but only by figuring them en masse as ‘the nation’. This motif will then become the focus of the final part of my analysis, which will trace how its meaning was expanded and contracted and even shifted, as it was used in different ways to serve different agendas.

The title of Green’s *Short History* proclaims it emphatically one of the *English People* rather than its lands or laws, and his opening pages live up to this claim, set as they are not in the beloved green hills of the English landscape, but in the marshes of modern Denmark.

For the fatherland of the English race we must look far away from England itself. In the fifth century after the birth of Christ, the one country which we know to have borne the name of Angeln or the Engleland lay in the district which we now call Sleswick, a district in the heart of the peninsula which parts the Baltic from the northern seas.⁹⁹

This opening places the germ of English heritage in racial rather than territorial, linguistic or constitutional origins, drawing a line of continuity that pleads affection

⁹⁹ Green, *Short History*, ed. by Alice Stopford Green, p. 1.

from his readers for these people of Sleswick on the grounds of their shared ancestry. The Anglo-Saxon emphasis was to draw fierce criticism from some reviewers, but had the backing of Freeman and Stubbs. Moreover, as Heathorn has shown, it was to gain currency in the English classroom towards the end of the century, as a racialised interpretation of national history became increasingly valuable to the imperial project.¹⁰⁰ In this now-discredited way, Green's *History* can be seen as a trail-blazer.

Green's text was also notable in being a one-volume version of the traditional 'multi-volume history': namely, it purported to cover everything, but did so in an affordable and accessible – as well as physically manageable – form. What is more, Green deliberately broke with the convention of structuring his text by regnal dates, an approach he defended with the declaration that 'I *won't* divide by Kings, a system whereby History is made Tory unawares and infants are made to hate history'.¹⁰¹ This controversial decision effectively proclaimed that monarchs are not always the most important contributors to historical change, transferring agency more widely to 'the people'. This brought him disdain from Tudor historian John Sherren Brewer in *The Quarterly Review*, who condemned 'such divisions' as 'the Hundred Years' War' and 'England Under Foreign Kings' as 'too arbitrary, too wide, and too indeterminate to be of any real service'.¹⁰²

Green's text became a school classroom staple in the last decades of the century, and was read both cheaply and widely, selling 500,000 copies by the end of the century.¹⁰³ P. L. Gell, secretary to the Clarendon Press, wrote to Sir James Ramsay in 1896, refusing to cover the losses sustained by his eight-volume *History of England*: 'I think one cannot fail to perceive the strength of the argument that the average person only reads his English History in one form, and that with Green's book before him, he will read no other in the present generation.'¹⁰⁴ Gell suggests that Green's history held a dominating, even exclusive, place in the historical imagination. For this reason, and for his declared focus on the *English People*, his biographer Anthony Brundage deems Green worthy of the title of 'People's Historian'.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁰ Heathorn, *For Home, Country, and Race*.

¹⁰¹ Qtd. Brundage, *The People's Historian*, p. 105.

¹⁰² John Sherren Brewer, 'A Short History of the English People. By J. R. Green', *The Quarterly Review*, 141 (1876), 285–23 (p. 293).

¹⁰³ See Hesketh, *Science of History*, p. 123.

¹⁰⁴ P. L. Gell to J. Ramsay, 27th May 1896 (OUP Letter Books 65/195)

¹⁰⁵ Brundage, *The People's Historian*.

The identity and breadth of the ‘people’ of Green’s title, however, is open to question. In an assessment of the previous historical bestseller, Henry Buckle’s *History of Civilisation in England* (1857), Lord Acton had pointed out that Buckle proclaimed to discover the fixed and impersonal laws of history, but in practice ‘makes persons his centres’.¹⁰⁶ Similarly, Green aimed to focus on the mass of ‘the English People’, but in practice filled his text with individuals who could be more easily anecdotalised. The vast majority of the content of his *History* actually focuses on high politics, populated with the monarchs and ministers familiar to political history. Despite proclaiming a sociological approach, practical and artistic considerations prevented him from actually fulfilling this promise. A quantitative comparison by Gertrude Himmelfarb of the relative proportions of political and military history, compared to social and economic history (by the simple expedient of counting the number of pages assigned to each topic), concludes that Green’s practice is less radical than his intentions.¹⁰⁷

Brewer’s review of Green’s *Short History* declares scathingly that ‘to map out with precision the rise and gradations of political tendencies or of social development is impossible’.¹⁰⁸ For both Green and Walpole, historians working outside the academy in the 1870s, this was a genuine problem. Not only were the necessary archival sources often simply not available to them (especially, in Green’s case, writing from his invalid sick-bed), but they sought to create engaging narratives. Green responded to this problem by drawing his *History* away from what would have been necessarily rather sketchy outlines of socio-economic trends, towards the vivid stories of known historical individuals. Indeed, one reviewer later declared that ‘The fault of his style ... is a uniformity, sometimes almost a monotony, of picturesqueness. We sometimes feel a fatigue like that experienced in turning over the pages of a picture book.’¹⁰⁹ This comment encapsulates in miniature the shifting ground of history as a discipline in this period. ‘Picturesqueness’, which Mitchell has shown to be a key concern in the early decades of the Victorian period,¹¹⁰ had by now become associated with an infantile approach to the past. Just as Walter Scott’s

¹⁰⁶ Lord Acton, ‘Mr Buckle’s Thesis and Method’, in *Essays in the Liberal Interpretation of History: Selected Papers*, ed. by W. H. McNeill (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), pp. 3–21 (p. 3). See Hesketh, *Science of History*, p. 41.

¹⁰⁷ Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The New History and the Old: Critical Essays and Reappraisals* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 152.

¹⁰⁸ Brewer, p. 293.

¹⁰⁹ Anonymous, ‘Letters of John Richard Green’, *Edinburgh Review*, 195 (1902), 429–55 (p. 441).

¹¹⁰ Rosemary Mitchell, *Picturing the Past*.

novels, feted in their prime as the pinnacle of historical and literary achievement, were gradually consigned to the realm of children's literature,¹¹¹ this anonymous reviewer implies that 'real' history is targeted at higher faculties than the senses, enacting a smear campaign by suggesting Green's work is suitable only for the passive, repetitious and simplistic mind of the child.

Spencer Walpole's *History of England from the Conclusion of the Great War in 1815* similarly avows a socio-economic approach, but takes a very different approach to Brewer's 'impossible' task. Unlike Green, he does attempt to pursue a study of 'the rise and gradations' of impersonal trends. The Preface added to an 1890 revised edition states that

A mere narrative of the domestic and foreign policy of a nation forms only a portion, and, as some people would say, an unimportant portion, of the history of the nation. ... In the present work, stress has been laid on the causes which have led to the moral and material development of the nation.¹¹²

In accordance with this promise, at the close of the six-volume work, Walpole draws up a list of 'the ten great lessons to be drawn from the history of England from 1815 to 1861'. These include such gems as the statement that 'The moral progress of the people was accompanied by a striking change in their habits, which may be traced in a slightly decreased consumption of alcohol and a large increase in the consumption of tea.'¹¹³ The reader is encouraged to imagine a hypothetical graph demonstrating the inverse correlation of the intake of these beverages over the fifty-year period: by positing his observations in quasi-mathematical form, Walpole aims to justify his inclusion of domestic habits as worthy of historical note. True to the promise of the Preface, large swathes of the opening volume are dedicated to such indicators of 'moral and material development' as 'The Material Condition of England in 1815' and 'Society in England in 1815', in a manner reminiscent of Macaulay's famous panoramic Chapter 3 in the first volume of his *History of England* (1848).

This Preface is, nonetheless, the site of contradictory impulses. The statement about the relative 'unimportance' of political history is undermined by the principles that are used to structure his *History*. As quoted in part above, this declares:

The History of England from 1815 to the present time may be conveniently grouped into distinct periods. The first of these periods dates from the Peace, and terminates soon after the accession of George IV to the throne; the second

¹¹¹ See Maxwell, *The Historical Novel in Europe*.

¹¹² Walpole, I, p. vi.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, vi, 401.

commences with the reconstruction of the Liverpool Administration, by the appointment of Peel to the Home Office and of Canning to the Colonial Office, and ends soon after the passage of the Reform Act; the third comprises the history of the Whig Ministry from the passage of the Reform Act to the fall of Melbourne in 1841; the fourth, concerned with the gradual adoption of Free Trade under Peel and Russell, was inaugurated by the Budget of 1842, and was crowned by the repeal of the Navigation Acts in 1849.¹¹⁴

This uses high political events to divide the years from 1815 to 1849 into compartmentalised units, and to designate the turning-points of the study. In this context, the promise of a sociological focus loses some of its power. Walpole deliberately aimed to write a revisionist historical narrative in his *History of England*. In order to do so, he downplays the significance of the heroes of high politics in comparison to impersonal socio-economic trends. It is still politics, however, that provides its overall temporal framework.

Harriet Martineau is less imperious, and more self-conscious, about her struggles to reconcile the dialectic of individual agency and historical inevitability. At the close of her two-volume *History of England*, she attempts to synthesise the conclusions of her study through an assessment of its most prominent individuals. Charles Dickens – who at the time of writing in 1848–9, of course, had only published a small fraction of his eventual oeuvre – is selected as one of these outstanding figures. Of this writer, selected for the power of his productions, Martineau comments, ‘We have in Charles Dickens a man of a genius which cannot but mark the time, and accelerate or retard its tendencies.’¹¹⁵ This ambivalent statement, that begins with a celebration of agency, manages to move within a sentence to an almost entirely opposite state of affairs. In this context, even the use of the word ‘mark’ is ambiguous: while the most plausible intended reading is in the sense of ‘affect’, it could equally mean ‘take note of’. Echoing the conundrums faced by Hazlitt and Horne in their attempts to define the ‘Spirit of the Age’, Martineau struggles over the issue of where to ascribe agency. Deirdre David has suggested that Martineau’s whole career – and certainly her depiction of it in her *Autobiography* – deals in this disingenuous denial of agency. As David points out, ‘she lived an extraordinarily active, constructive life devoted to passive observation of a rapidly changing society in whose “making” she believed she had no part. Either she could not see, or was compelled to disguise such knowledge, that her female work of

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, I, p. v.

¹¹⁵ Martineau, *The History of England During the Thirty Years’ Peace*, II, 705.

journalistic popularisation “made” Victorian England just as much as did the male work of banking, business and politics.’¹¹⁶ The ability Martineau attributes to Dickens to ‘accelerate or retard’ the process of history might seem powerful. However, for Martineau time is not merely a composite of individuals, but has its own agency and characteristics: the phrase ‘its tendencies’ sets it apart from any individual input. Whatever his genius, Dickens cannot transform anything, only affect its rate of enactment: history, Martineau effectively implies, has a power of its own. ‘Time’ is an impersonal force.

Martineau’s *History* covers much the same temporal ground as Walpole’s. Both open in the aftermath of the Battle of Waterloo, and the initial version of Martineau’s text finishes in 1846, while Walpole describes his *History* as covering ‘the forty years which followed the conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars’, though his final overview extends to 1861.¹¹⁷ Since Walpole’s text was written over a period between 1878 and 1886, however, Martineau’s 1849 viewpoint is much closer to the events it describes, and its attempt to present them as ‘historical’ all the more radical. Its immersed perspective is, moreover, not the only way in which it seeks to modify the tenets of historical orthodoxy. Its allusive title signalling at once an equivalence and contrast to the Thirty Years’ War, Martineau seeks to demonstrate that war is not the only state of interest, and military history not the only type worth studying. In fact, she argues, a state of peace, far from being static or boring, is where we can see the ‘natural laws of society’ at work. In wartime they are ‘obscured’ by the actions of ‘political hero[es]’ and ‘statesmen’, but ‘when war is over ... an organic state succeeds, wherein all individual will succumb to the working of general laws.’¹¹⁸ Thus, after a passage describing the episodes of disorder that broke out during the campaign for the Reform Bill, she adds:

It is necessary to note the social disturbances which followed upon the rejection of the Second Reform Bill; but it is no less necessary to point out, that the turbulence of this, as of all seasons, is easy to observe, while no account can be given which can represent to the imagination the prevailing calmness and order of the time. Calmness and order present no salient point for narrative and description: but their existence must not therefore be overlooked. A truly heroic state of self-discipline and obedience to law prevailed over the land, while in particular spots the turbulent were able to excite the giddy and the ignorant to riot. The nation was steadily rising to its most heroic mood; that

¹¹⁶ David, p. 31.

¹¹⁷ Walpole, VI, 380.

¹¹⁸ Martineau, *The History of England During the Thirty Years’ Peace*, I, 317-18.

mood in which, the next year, it carried through the sublime enterprise which no man, in the darkest moment, had any thought of surrendering.¹¹⁹

Thus Martineau flatters her reader by appealing to her/him to look past the illusion of dynamism created by the sound and fury of disorder, to see the heroism latent in ‘self-discipline and obedience to law’. Indeed, she seeks to bolster both her and her reader’s intellectual credentials by claiming for them both the ability to see beyond apparent monotony to the real source of historical change.

This passage is strikingly redolent of Thomas Carlyle’s stance in *The French Revolution: A History* (1837). Stance is an appropriate term here, in both an ideological and a narratorial sense, as Carlyle often locates the source of his narratorial viewpoint in a realm both geographically and temporally outside that of his narrative. In a passage about the night before the final collapse of the Bourbon Monarchy on 10th August 1792, for example, he takes us on a journey whose physical impossibility – and demonic associations – do not detract from its vividness:

Could the Reader take an Asmodeus’s Flight, and waving open all roofs and privacies, look down from the Tower of Notre Dame, what a Paris were it! Of treble-voice whimperings or vehemence, or bass-voice growlings, dubitations; Courage screwing itself to desperate defiance; Cowardice trembling silent within barred doors; – and all round, Dulness calmly snoring.¹²⁰

In an echo of this Carlylean style, Martineau claims to view ‘the land’ from an elevated, almost supernatural perspective, able to survey both the overall picture and zoom in on ‘spots’ of particular interest. She stated in an earlier work that ‘to stand on the highest pinnacle is the best way of obtaining an accurate general view, in contemplating a society as well as a city’.¹²¹ The two writers shared a close friendship in the late 1830s, although they drifted apart as they recognised the insurmountable ideological differences between them: Carlyle’s mystical theology was not easily compatible with Martineau’s rather dogmatic Positivism.¹²² He evocatively characterised her as ‘a soul clean as river sand, but which would evidently grow no flowers of our planting.’¹²³ R. K. Webb has described Martineau

¹¹⁹ Ibid., II, 50.

¹²⁰ Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution: A History*, 3 vols. (London: Chapman & Hall, 1896), II, 291.

¹²¹ Harriet Martineau, *How to Observe Morals and Manners* (London: Charles Knight and Co., 1838), p. 50.

¹²² Valerie Sanders, *Reason over Passion*, pp. 11–12.

¹²³ Thomas Carlyle, *Reminiscences*, ed. by J. A. Froude, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1881), II, 216.

as ‘anything but Carlylean in history’.¹²⁴ However, these two writers shared more than perhaps even they realised in their approach to history-writing.

Both writers use free and often disembodied indirect discourse in their histories, a technique many of their readers found disconcerting. In his *French Revolution*, Carlyle gives the reader passages like the following, on Charlotte Corday’s plan to assassinate Marat:

About eight on the Saturday morning, she purchases a large sheath-knife in the Palais Royal; then straightway, in the Place des Victoires, takes a hackney-coach: ‘To the Rue de l’Ecole de Médecine, No. 44.’ It is the residence of the Citoyen Marat! – The Citoyen Marat is ill, and cannot be seen; which seems to disappoint her much. Her business is with Marat, then? Hapless beautiful Charlotte; hapless squalid Marat!¹²⁵

John Rosenberg comments that ‘Nothing is more characteristic of *The French Revolution* than these narrative glides from third person to first and back again. With the enhanced mobility of the dramatic present, the narrator crosses the barriers of time, place and person that separate *then* from *now*, *there* from *here*, *they* from *we*, thought from speech.’¹²⁶ And the influence of this style can be seen in Martineau’s history. During the struggle over the first Reform Bill, we are told,

Lord Abermarle was at his late breakfast, but started up on the entrance of Lord Durham, asking what was the matter. ‘You must have the King’s carriages ready instantly.’ – ‘The King’s carriages! Very well: – I will just finish my breakfast.’ – ‘Finish your breakfast! Not you! You must not lose a moment. The King ought to be at the House.’ – ‘Lord bless me! Is there a revolution?’ – ‘Not at this moment; but there will be if you stay to finish your breakfast.’ – So the tea and roll were left, and the royal carriages drove up to the palace in an incredibly short time.¹²⁷

This style by no means met with universal approval: as Valerie Sanders comments, it read ‘rather oddly in a serious history’.¹²⁸ Although enacted with less virtuosity than Carlyle, we can see it as an attempt to follow his example. The notable effect of this style is to bring the iconic figures of the past down to an equal level with her reader: even the eminent Lord Abermarle eats breakfast – late – and has difficulty in shaking off immediate culinary concerns to attend to those of state.

¹²⁴ Robert Kiefer Webb, *Harriet Martineau*, p. 280.

¹²⁵ Carlyle, *The French Revolution*, III, 168.

¹²⁶ Rosenberg, *Carlyle and the Burden of History*, p. 77.

¹²⁷ Martineau, *The History of England During the Thirty Years’ Peace*, II, 35.

¹²⁸ Valerie Sanders, *Reason over Passion*, p. 122.

Perhaps the most significant point of overlap with Carlyle's approach to history is Martineau's insistence on the significance of the silent multitude. As the passage quoted above demonstrates, her *History* works to shift attention from military activity and the outstanding 'heroic' individual to the quiet, faceless majority. Both writers, however, struggled with the challenge this posed. Despite avowing the value of unremarkable people, they found it impossible to represent them as individuals, and Carlyle's *French Revolution* is infamous for its chaotic crowd scenes. In Martineau's writing we can see a dialectic of apparently antithetical desires. She evidently wants to claim these apparently 'unhistoric' individuals for her *History*, but simultaneously yearns to be able to characterise this multiplicity as a unified entity. Her solution to this problem is to figure them as 'the nation'. In her *Liberty Bell* article of 1849 Martineau seeks to assimilate the contradictions within her contemporary era into a recognisably 'historical' form by figuring it as a dualistic conflict. Here, instead, 'nation' is used as an alternative axis to that of time.

The 'nation'

All four of the historians under consideration here employ this trope of 'nation'. The ways in which this both aids them and limits them in their writing of the recent past is the subject of the remainder of this chapter. The atemporal concept of 'nation' enables our historians to circumnavigate many of the problems caused by writing a history of the recent past. As a referent for an entity that, in name at least, might remain constant through time, it creates a line of continuity between past, present and future. It thus removes the text from the conflicting demands of immersion and hindsight, and sidesteps the chronological disjunction between 'history' and 'modernity' that discouraged contemporary historiography. And it cuts across the social as well as the temporal axis, representing and unifying the social continuum. By appealing to the idea of 'nation' in a history of the recent past, a historian can make the reader feel not merely invested in, but part of, the story being related: after all, the 'nation' surely includes everyone?

As many historians and critics have shown, however, the nineteenth-century concept of 'nation' was not straightforwardly singular or unified. All the histories under examination here are histories of 'England', rather than 'Britain' or even 'the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland', a tendency in nineteenth-century

historiography that has gained increasing scholarly attention.¹²⁹ As Stephanie Barczewski has shown in her recent work on the legends of King Arthur and Robin Hood, although legendary figures such as these were ‘utilized in literary efforts to identify and promote certain elements considered essential to British national identity’, ‘the past they were used to construct was a narrowly *English* one which left out the other constituent parts of the British Isles’.¹³⁰ Even within the ‘nation’ of England, as we shall see, asserting an all-encompassing singularity was not always possible or even advantageous to the writer’s agenda.

The remit and identity of this term was not only geographically contested, but was used to refer to various specific and selective parts of the social spectrum. Over the course of the nineteenth century, Britain experienced an unprecedented population explosion. As Heyck has described it, ‘The population of England and Wales had doubled between 1801 and 1851, and it more than doubled again between 1850 and 1901’, rising from less than 9 million at the beginning of the century to 40 million at its end.¹³¹ The proportion of this population that worked in the new industrial sector, in huge metropolises, rose at a similar rate. From the 1850s onwards, more than half of the English people were urban residents.¹³² Faced with this rapidly expanding and changing population, and seeking a means of characterising their subject-matter, writers resorted to evoking one relatively homogeneous section of the population as representative of the whole. Writers used ‘the nation’ and related terms to denote whichever social class to which they wished to attribute value.¹³³ For example, after the passing of the 1867 Reform Act – which broadened the narrowly middle-class electoral roll of 1832, and enfranchised the artisan class, while still excluding those men who did not qualify as ‘householders’ – John Morley, then editor of the *Fortnightly Review*, wrote that power had been transferred ‘from a class to the nation’.¹³⁴ The radical Positivist lawyer Frederic Harrison, in comparison, concluded from his first visit to the industrial north that ‘The working class is the only class

¹²⁹ See David Cannadine, ‘British History as a “New Subject”?’ in *Uniting the Kingdom?: The Making of British History*, ed. by Alexander Grant and Keith Stringer (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 12–28 (p. 16).

¹³⁰ Barczewski, *Myth and National Identity*.

¹³¹ Heyck, *Transformation of Intellectual Life*, p. 199.

¹³² See Woods, *Population of Britain*, p. 11.

¹³³ See Asa Briggs, ‘The Language of “Class” in Early Nineteenth-Century England’, in *The Collected Essays of Asa Briggs*, 2 vols. (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1985), 1, 3–33.

¹³⁴ John Morley, ‘The Liberal Programme’, *The Fortnightly Review*, 2 (1867), 359–69 (p. 359).

which (to use a paradox) is not a class ... It is the nation.'¹³⁵ Many writers, however, including all four of this chapter's case studies, attribute this synecdochal quality to the middle class.

In a review of Harriet Martineau's *History*, G. H. Lewes commented that 'in looking over the records of these thirty years we are struck with the deficiency in great men, but are compensated by the greatness of the People.'¹³⁶ This designation of the 'People' acts to exclude 'great men' – whether of high birth or high genius – from its ranks. Other uses of the term, however, also acted to exclude the working classes from the fold. Despite Martineau's patron Henry Brougham's role as a campaigner for educational reform (co-founder of both the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge in 1825 and University College London in 1828), his use of the category only extends marginally below his own rank as a member of the minor gentry. He famously declared that 'by the people ... I mean the middle classes, the wealth and intelligence of the country, the glory of the British name'.¹³⁷ This common elision between (middle-class) part and whole is evident in the histories under consideration here. As Hall has characterised Martineau's use of the concept, 'the nation, in her rendition, personified the critical ideas of the age: the nation had a heart, a soul, a mind, and a will. It also had a character: middle-class Englishness.'¹³⁸

Martineau is certainly not alone in investing the (middle-class) 'nation' with a special destiny. In his depiction of the passing of the 1832 Reform Act, Walpole paints a panorama of a country divided by class. One group is, however, exempt from such factionalism, which he defines paradoxically as the 'nation'.

King and queen sat sullenly apart in their palace. Peer and country gentleman moodily awaited the ruin of their country and the destruction of their property. Fanaticism still raved at the wickedness of a people; the people, clamouring for work, still succumbed before the mysterious disease which was continually claiming more and more victims. But the nation cared not for the sullenness of the court, the forebodings of the landed classes, the ravings of the pulpit, or even the mysterious operations of a new plague. The deep gloom which had overshadowed the land had been relieved by one single ray. The victory had been won. The bill had become law.¹³⁹

¹³⁵ Qtd. in C. Kent, *Brains and Numbers: Elitism, Comtism and Democracy in Mid-Victorian England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), p. 68.

¹³⁶ G. H. Lewes, 'Review of *The History of England During the Thirty Years' Peace*', *British Quarterly Review*, 11 (1850), p. 360.

¹³⁷ Qtd. Briggs, 'The Language of Class', in *Collected Essays*, I, 11.

¹³⁸ Hall, 'Writing History, Writing a Nation', p. 239.

¹³⁹ Walpole, III, 245.

This mysterious ‘nation’, distinct at once from ‘court ... landed classes ... pulpits’, even ‘Government’, and also from ‘the people, clamouring for work’, must be the middle classes. Walpole continues to use this term to refer to the enfranchised of 1832 in the next volume of his *History*, where he relates how ‘the reformed House of Commons’ was populated by new ‘earnest men’. ‘Representing not a class, but a people, they brought the House into harmony with the nation.’¹⁴⁰ In a burst of hyperbole that blurs the very categories he has just established, he now figures the enfranchised of 1832 not only as ‘the people’ but also as ‘the nation’, and their moral and representative status is elevated even further. A similarly worshipful vision of ‘the nation’ is expressed by Alice Stopford Green in her epilogue to her husband’s *Short History*. She writes about the reforms of the Victorian period as being crucially different from previous such periods of reform, being the result not of the impositions of a monarch but ‘the work of the nation itself’.¹⁴¹ This synecdoche, in which the nation possesses intrinsic characteristics, embodying and embodied in its individuals, is a potent means of making sense of the disparate mass of lives which we have seen is one of the challenges for these writers of the recent past.

Alice Stopford Green’s response to the idea of British nationhood is particularly interesting, and is neither entirely disinterested nor unproblematic. As Sandra Holton has emphasised, throughout the latter part of her life, after her husband’s death in 1888 and particularly after the mid-1890s, Irish history and the ‘Irish question’ dominated her work.¹⁴² She published an openly Celtic-nationalist history, *The Making of Ireland and its Undoing, 1200-1600*, in 1908.¹⁴³ The previous year, her determination to support Sir Anthony MacDonnell, under-secretary in Ireland, in his Irish Council Bill to establish a representative Irish body to manage several departments of the country’s government, extended even to arranging a meeting for him with Richard Burdon Haldane, the Secretary of War. Seven years later, in the spring of 1914, she was the leading contributor to a fund of £1500 established for the purpose of arming a group of Irish National volunteers, who even

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., IV, 340.

¹⁴¹ Stopford Green, ‘Epilogue’, p. 897.

¹⁴² Sandra Holton, ‘Gender Difference, National Identity and Professing History: The Case of Alice Stopford Green’, *History Workshop Journal*, 53 (2002), 118–27.

¹⁴³ Alice Stopford Green, *The Making of Ireland and Its Undoing, 1200–1600* (London: Macmillan, 1908).

then met secretly at her house in Dublin.¹⁴⁴ Unsurprisingly, therefore, her epilogue presents a rather critical view of the benefits of English imperialism, and a conflicted attitude to the ‘English People’ her husband had so eulogised. She concludes her text with two epigraphs from J. R. Green that act as badges of authorisation for her historical interpretation:

‘The sympathies of peoples with peoples, the sense of a common humanity between nations, the aspirations of nationalities after freedom and independence, are real political forces.’ *Feb. 1877*¹⁴⁵

‘The great force which has transformed Europe, which has been the secret of its history ever since 1815, is a political “sentiment” – that of Nationality.’ *April 1880*¹⁴⁶

These epigraphs serve as an endorsement of both founding principles of her epilogue, presenting a doctrine of nationalism at once passionate and qualified. She is at pains to argue, in her appendix to her husband’s influential text, that nationalism need not be synonymous with chauvinism: that faith in a common humanity *across* nations is as vital as that *within* nations. These sentiments, of course, strike a particular chord in the context of the war in which, in 1915, her world was currently immersed.

Stopford Green’s hostility towards a nationalism that transgresses its borders – and thus transforms into imperialism – is evident in the tone of her epilogue to the *Short History*. Walpole places great significance in his *History* on the impact of population growth. With a triumphalist confidence, he declares, ‘This prodigious increase in the number of the English-speaking people is not merely the chief fact in the history of the nineteenth century, it is the most important circumstance in the history of the world. ... The British have swept over the largest portion of the world, and they have brought light instead of darkness in their wake.’¹⁴⁷ Stopford Green evokes this same rhetoric in the opening to her epilogue, but in a context which closer inspection reveals to be decidedly tongue-in-cheek. In her depiction of the aftermath of Waterloo, she writes that

Once more, as after the Armada, a lofty pride stirred the nation. ‘England,’ it was said, ‘seems destined by Providence to lead the moral condition of the world. Year after year we are sending forth thousands and hundreds of thousands of our citizens to people the vast solitudes and islands of another hemisphere; the Anglo-Saxon race will shortly overspread half the habitable

¹⁴⁴ See Robert Brendan McDowell, *Alice Stopford Green: a Passionate Historian* (Dublin: Allen Figgis, 1967).

¹⁴⁵ Stephen, *The Letters of John Richard Green*, p. 447.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 480.

¹⁴⁷ Walpole, VI, 381.

globe. What a mighty and what a rapid addition to the happiness of mankind, if these thousands should carry with them, and plant in those distant regions, our freedom, our laws, our morality, and our religion!’¹⁴⁸

The key phrase in this passage is that unobtrusive little aside, ‘it was said’. This is decidedly not Stopford Green’s own call to imperialism, but a wry illustration of the early nineteenth century’s naïve ideals. She at once recognises and offers up to the reader the power of these kind of messianic imperialist narratives, and undermines them, both within the text and in her own nationalist histories of Ireland. Although her epilogue calls for self-determination, the English and Irish nationalisms she voices cannot exist in tandem without coming into conflict with each other.

It is through such surreptitious means as these that J. R. Green’s widow uses her late husband’s influential and popular textbook as the conduit of revisionist and even radical ideas. This technique – restating views she implicitly seeks to critique – lays her text open to the constant dangers of irony: both the risk that it will be misinterpreted as straightforwardly triumphalist, and the inevitable by-product of ironic semantics, namely that the process of quoting nonetheless gives voice to – and at some level reaffirms in the public consciousness – the very sentiments it seeks to decry. This sweeping statement of patriotic pride, even with whatever misgivings, is a much more attractive and accessible opening to her epilogue than a wry comment about the shortcomings of post-Waterloo England would have been. In the oblique mode of these kind of embodied sentiments lies the strength and the constraints of her critique.

Stopford Green’s writings went on to be influential in Ireland. Their reception history demonstrates the extent to which the appeal of historiography is symbiotically dependent on its contemporary applicability. Her *Irish Nationality* (1911) – her equivalent in some ways to J. R. Green’s *Short History of the English People*, in being a social-minded history of a nation from its earliest origins to the present – had a quiet reception on its initial publication, but then, as Nadia Smith has traced, was produced in second, third and fourth impressions between 1919 and 1922. As Smith points out, ‘it appears to have been most popular during the War of Independence, rather than right after its publication a decade earlier.’¹⁴⁹ After the Irish Free State was established in 1922, and Alice Stopford Green became a member of the new Senate, what Smith characterises as a ‘conservative ... ending

¹⁴⁸ Stopford Green, ‘Epilogue’, p. 837.

¹⁴⁹ Nadia Smith, *A ‘Manly Study’?: Irish Women Historians, 1868–1949* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 50.

which offered closure' was added to subsequent reprints of the text.¹⁵⁰ This later edition contained determinedly conclusive statements. It proclaimed that 'The long tradition of foreign rule has been broken ... The story of national life has been resumed ... [and under the new representative government] is free to develop as it may.'¹⁵¹ In such passages, Stopford Green suggested that Irish colonial history had reached its end. As this example demonstrates, the weakness of any work of contemporary history is the risk – of which, as we have seen above, professional late-nineteenth-century historians were all too conscious – that it will soon be superseded. Especially on a volatile issue such as Irish independence, the text's relevance and its limitation are one and the same. A subject may be worth writing about because it is relevant to the demands of the moment, but these same demands also render it speedily out-dated. None of the histories under examination in this chapter were allowed to remain in their original state for long. They were all revised and extended over time, changing shape and significances in the process. The form they were eventually forced to take – one of caveats and epilogues, corrections and appendices – is one that decidedly does not match the kind of singularity, generality or universality so dear to conventional Victorian historiographical ideals.

Conclusion

As this chapter has demonstrated, the necessity or otherwise of hindsight was a subject of debate among historians as their subject became gradually established as a university discipline in the second half of the nineteenth century. Although some historians within the academy, such as Seeley, saw recent events as equally valid material for study as distant ones, these were to be viewed through a high-political filter. The kind of proto-social history that attempted to incorporate the whole multiplicity of the contemporary era into a unified narrative was avoided by most canonical historians, and marks out the contemporary historians discussed in this chapter as strikingly unusual.

Martineau, Green, Walpole and Stopford Green all confronted the same problem: how to create a coherent narrative out of the diverse, contentious and

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Alice Stopford Green, *Irish Nationality* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1929), p. 251.

inconclusive material of their nation's recent past. They did so, however, in quite different historiographical environments. When Martineau was writing in the 1840s, the academic discipline of History had not yet been established, and so she was freer to move between the perspectives of overview and immersion than were Green and Walpole in the 1870s. Drawing on Carlyle's combination of the rooftop view and free indirect discourse, she leaps between an elevated stance and evocations of everyday scenes. She also attempts to include those events and individuals who normally fall below the radar of the historical record, another Carlylean project. In her *History*, however, we already begin to see overview accorded a superior status to that of immersion, and she ultimately succumbs to a desire for singularity in the form of the trope of 'nation'.

By the time that Green and Walpole were writing, in the 1870s, this hierarchy of historiographical priorities had become increasingly dominant. Green, like Martineau, struggled with contradictory desires. He proclaimed his *History* one of the 'English People', and sought like Martineau to challenge the pre-eminence of military history, but in practice the text is largely inhabited by familiar political figures. Once he reaches the period of living memory, moreover, he retreats both from partisan investment, and from any attempt at overview. Walpole, attempting to identify impersonal trends in his own century, proclaims a detached viewpoint, and adheres most consistently to one perspective. In doing so, however, he sacrifices some of the vitality of the other two texts, disingenuously disavowing any personal engagement with a subject-matter still current, not only for him, but also for his readers. Stopford Green, writing beyond the Victorian period, and in an Irish rather than an English nationalist context, is perhaps unsurprisingly the most revisionist of the four historians, but even she ends up reaching for the unifying motif of 'nation', and thus aligning herself, however ironically, with a Whiggish historical narrative.

This recurrent trope of 'nation' is useful for our historians in offering an alternative, atemporal axis to the contentious one of distant and proximate past, and sidestepping the conflict of immersion versus hindsight. It gave these historians a surreptitious means with which to break that implicit temporal barrier separating history 'proper' from the period within living memory. Crosby talks of history's relationship to 'mankind' as one that, in messianic mode, first denies and then re-grants; in these texts the rough texture of the recent past is taken away from the individual and personal so that it can then be given back to the people as part of a

universalised fabric.¹⁵² In Raphael Samuel's characterisation of Maurice Halbwachs' delineation of the division between 'memory' and 'history', he declares: 'History began when memory faded'.¹⁵³ Harriet Martineau, Spencer Walpole, J. R. Green and Alice Stopford Green refuse to wait for this memory to fade.

These historians defy historiographical convention by redefining the temporal boundaries of history, but they are less successful at challenging the equivalent social boundaries. They all endorse the notion of a social continuum, and proclaim the tenets of social history, but are ultimately unable to enact them. As we will see in the next chapter, novelists were able to use their more personalised and individual-focused genre to rewrite the social limits of history. For our historians, however, the challenges inherent in turning a live and rapidly growing population into a coherent entity for historical study stymies their ambition in this direction. Their desire to bring 'unhistoric' individuals into history pales in the face of their determination to assimilate the multiplicity of their present into a narrative arc that puts English society on a unified, upward trajectory towards a transcendent end.

¹⁵² Crosby, *The Ends of History*, p. 2.

¹⁵³ Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture*, 2 vols. (London: Verso, 1996), I, p. ix.

Chapter 3

The recent past in the mid-Victorian provincial novel

In the closing paragraph of *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life*, George Eliot's narrator famously declares that 'the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts'.¹ In this small half-sentence, rather muted in its tone, Eliot problematises the very definition of historicity she appears to invoke, throwing it open to challenge in several directions. In writing the story of Dorothea Brooke as she does in *Middlemarch*, Eliot is recording (making historical) the everyday (domestic, feminine, and thus unhistorical) actions of a fictional (unhistorical) figure. In terming her actions 'unhistoric', Eliot reminds us that, despite her earlier aspirations to go beyond the common lot of woman, Dorothea's primary role ends up being to provide 'wifely help' to Ladislaw.² These 'acts' – feminine in the double sense of being confined to the home and being enacted by a woman – are not of the sort normally deemed worthy of mention in the historical record. However, if history can be defined by what is retained and remembered, then surely Eliot's recuperation of this hidden life effectively brings it into the historical realm. On the other hand, the specific actions that Eliot describes never took place in the precise form she invents: Dorothea's is a fictional life. Can such an individual ever be considered part of 'history'?

In this chapter, I show that in contrast to the dominant Victorian model of national history-writing, the period's novelists embraced the recent past as a valid – even a vital – object of study. For their first readers, novels such as George Eliot's *Felix Holt* (1866) and *Middlemarch* (1871-2), Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (1849) and Gaskell's *My Lady Ludlow* (1859) would have been noticeably retrospective, and rightly recognised as assessing how that recent history related to the current trajectory of Victorian society and culture. As a result, these novels are able to play around with the relationship between past and present, setting and writing, narrator and reader. At times, even, those questions about hindsight and the temporal dimension of history, which had so dogged the period's historians, are able to recede from the foreground. The social continuum can instead become the focus of discussion about history's

¹ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 896.

² *Ibid.*, p. 894.

remit and limitations. We return to that perpetual question of Victorian contemporary-history-writing across the genres: what (and who) counts as historic? This chapter will continue the analysis instigated in Chapter 2, to consider whether the novel genre enabled writers to represent the social continuum more successfully than was possible in historiography.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, as I showed in Chapter 1, boundary-working historians sought to exclude the fictional elements which had been so commercially and imaginatively successful in the historical novel. They invoked the model of the new experimental scientific disciplines to assert the primacy of induction over deduction. Opinion was more divided, however, on the range of the social spectrum that should come within the historian's purview. Early social historians attempted to bring classes of people near the conventionally 'unhistoric' end of the spectrum into the fold of historical study. This included women and the working classes: the apparently unremarkable individuals notable for their cumulative impact rather than their individual significance. However, lack of available resources, especially for the economic history that would need to form the basis for later such systematic analyses, limited their ability to fulfil their intentions.³ By the end of the century, the impulse to social history had been forced into two divergent channels. Incipient social scientists were carrying out studies of *contemporary* working-class life. Adrian Wilson characterises this trend as clustered round 'a particular set of social and institutional moorings', being typically 'progressivist, ... Fabian ... [and] strongly connected to the LSE'.⁴ Amongst historians, by contrast, other areas of enquiry were being more highly valorised. J. R. Seeley at Cambridge had pronounced true academic history to be the history of states; that of "'manners and customs", so called', should quite literally move out and 'have a house of its own'.⁵ In novels, these problems of primary resources did not apply in the same way. Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot all drew rhetorically on the discourse of living memory for their depictions of the society of 'five-and-thirty years ago'.⁶ By not

³ As Maxine Berg and Alon Kadish have delineated, economic history did not take off as a sub-discipline of its own until the beginning of the twentieth century. See Alon Kadish, *Historians, Economists, and Economic History* (New York: Routledge, 1989); Maxine Berg, 'The First Women Economic Historians', *The Economic History Review*, 45 (1992), 308–29; Maxine Berg, *A Woman in History: Eileen Power, 1889–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

⁴ Adrian Wilson, 'A Critical Portrait of Social History', in *Rethinking Social History: English Society 1570–1920 and its Interpretation*, ed. by Adrian Wilson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), pp. 9–58 (p. 12).

⁵ Seeley, 'History and Politics', p. 297.

⁶ George Eliot, *Felix Holt, the Radical*, ed. by Peter Coveney (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 75.

claiming the ‘detached’ role of the historian, these writers did not have to assert impartiality, nor an exclusively factual approach. They could admit their emotional investment in this recent past, and embrace a self-conscious retrospection that situated the writer in a continuum along the timeline of the novel’s world rather than on an entirely external, elevated viewing platform provided by hindsight.

These novelists also addressed the questions that had been raised earlier in the century by commentators such as Carlyle and Macaulay. Although they had insisted on the historic value of ‘ordinary’ individuals, their attempts to include these individuals in history featured them only as representative faceless examples. Their significance lay in their cumulative force, not in their specific individuality. The contemporary-histories of Chapter 2 all gave up their initial intention to focus on ‘unhistoric’ individuals, and ultimately subsumed them under the trope of ‘nation’. These novelists, on the other hand, trod a middle ground between the highly personalised genres of auto/biography and memoir, and the all-encompassing national history. All four novels depict provincial rather than national communities. As John Plotz has recently highlighted, these novels constantly gesture outwards from their particular local circumstance to wider implications and analogies.⁷ They are, however, at once implicated in wider developments, and largely self-sufficient, so that they can be examined as a microcosm. Plotz characterises the provincial novel sub-genre as ‘built around what we might call significantly insignificant lives’.⁸ This form, with a focus on the local community rather than the impersonal ‘nation’, is more amenable to representing ‘unhistoric’ figures as people with an individual historicity of their own.

Perhaps most crucially, by not claiming totality or completeness in their depiction of the recent past, these novelists gained the freedom to acknowledge and recognise, rather than turn away from, the multiplicity of this historical era. Whereas the historians examined in Chapter 2 wavered between admitting an immersed viewpoint and claiming the necessary overview for a linear narrative, Brontë, Gaskell and Eliot’s novels embrace an immersive perspective. This allows them to embody a relationship between the particular and general that (as delineated in the Introduction) Carlyle had called for as intrinsic to any ‘true’ representation of history, but which had proved so far beyond the capabilities of Victorian historiography: they focus on

⁷ John Plotz, ‘The Semi-Detached Provincial Novel’, *Victorian Studies*, 53 (2011), 405–16 (p. 412).

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 413.

apparently low-level, microscopic and ‘unhistoric’ lives but claim them as part of an all-encompassing definition of history. The combination of this immersion with a highly self-conscious and ironic narratorial voice offers the reader an insistently ambivalent view of the historical developments that intercede between the chronological present of the embedded characters and that of the narrator and first reader.

I will thus begin by showing how these novels have suffered from the critical orthodoxy of a dividing line between ‘history’ and the recent past, and explain why I view them as an intrinsic and often overlooked part of the Victorian pre-occupation with contemporary-history-writing. This chapter will then briefly consider the implications of their position as history-writing in fictional form, and the social implications of this ontological paradox. It will also consider the challenges these writers faced by setting their narratives in the liminal timezone of ‘recent past’. Finally, drawing on the example of Walter Scott, whom I argue prefigures these novelists in several ways, it will examine the effects of the retrospective and polyphonic narrative structure of *Felix Holt*, *Middlemarch*, *Shirley* and *My Lady Ludlow*. This case-study analysis will consider both their approach to the temporal continuum, as demonstrated in the historical trajectories these novels trace between their two timeframes, and how successfully they represent the ‘unhistoric’ parts of the social continuum.

‘Novels of the recent past’

The chronological boundaries of the historical novel genre have been heavily policed ever since its heyday, with various endpoints deemed self-evident by various commentators. G. H. Lewes said of George Eliot in 1861 that ‘I often tell her most of the scenes and characters of her books are quite as historical to her direct experience, as the fifteenth century of Florence.’⁹ Here he defines as ‘historical’ any period of time outside the personal adult memory of the individual. In 1894, literary critic George Saintsbury, soon to become Regius Professor of Rhetoric and English Literature at the University of Edinburgh, was already expressing restrictive ideas about what qualified as a historical novel. He declared that ‘Some of the best of

⁹ George Henry Lewes to John Blackwood, 28 May 1861, in Gordon S. Haight, ed., *The George Eliot Letters 1836–1880*, 9 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), III, 420.

Scott's novels (including *Guy Mannering* and *The Antiquary*) are not historical novels at all.¹⁰ Here *The Antiquary*, which was published in 1816 and set in summer 1794, a year and a half into the first of the Napoleonic Wars, is summarily dismissed from the category. It is only a 'novel of the recent past'.¹¹

This no-man's-land category, invented by Kathleen Tillotson in 1954, and revived and endorsed by Avrom Fleishman in 1971,¹² allowed critics of the 1970s in particular to dismiss the novels they placed in it as irrelevant to discussions of the wider genre. In their surveys of the Victorian historical novel, James C. Simmons (1973) confines his attention to romances set in the distant past, and Andrew Sanders (1978) limits his discussion of George Eliot to *Romola*.¹³ More recently, Richard Maxwell's *The Historical Novel in Europe, 1650–1950* (2009) has powerfully refuted the orthodoxy that locates the birth of the genre in Walter Scott, but while both he and Brian Hamnett (2011) draw our attention outside the narrow national confines of Britain, they do not apply a similar strategy to the confines of chronological setting.¹⁴ Even those recent critics who recognise the relative dearth of scholarship on the topic of 'novels of the recent past' often do not move beyond this impasse. In a synoptic overview of the Victorian historical novel, John Bowen (2002) acknowledges that the time-gap between setting and writing of *Middlemarch*, *Shirley* and *Great Expectations* may be significant, but miscalculates it as a minor 'twenty or thirty' years, while in fact all these novels are set back by 35 years or more.¹⁵ Jerome de Groot's slim survey on *The Historical Novel* (2010) includes *Middlemarch*, but attempts no more than a cursory glance.¹⁶ However, the critical orthodoxy that marks a distinction between genuinely 'historical' novels and those of merely 'recent past' effectively disregards the fact that contemporaries would have read such novels as manifestly retrospective.

These definitions of what counts as 'historical' posit it as measurable along a temporal axis. Recently, however, critics have proposed a definition that places more emphasis on the self-conscious differentiation entailed in our conception of the

¹⁰ [George Saintsbury], 'The Historical Novel', *Macmillan's Magazine*, 70 (1894), 256–64 (p. 263).

¹¹ Tillotson, *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties*, p. 93.

¹² Avrom Fleishman, *The English Historical Novel: Walter Scott to Virginia Woolf* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), p. 3.

¹³ James C. Simmons, *The Novelist as Historian*; Andrew Sanders, *The Victorian Historical Novel, 1840–1880* (London: Macmillan, 1978).

¹⁴ Maxwell, *The Historical Novel in Europe*; Brian Hamnett, *The Historical Novel in Nineteenth-Century Europe: Representations of Reality in History and Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

¹⁵ John Bowen, 'The Historical Novel', in *A Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. by Patrick Brantlinger and William B. Thesing (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 244–59 (p. 247).

¹⁶ Jerome De Groot, *The Historical Novel* (London: Routledge, 2010).

‘historical’. George Dekker suggests: ‘For a fiction to qualify as “historical”, what more can be required than that the leading or (more to the point) determinate social and psychological traits it represents clearly belong to a period historically distinct from our own?’¹⁷ This broad definition of the historical novel effectively embraces anything conscious of historical difference across time. The kind of broadening of the category of ‘historical novel’ I seek to achieve in this chapter also owes a great deal to the work of Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, who has suggested that the nineteenth century saw a new relationship between the individual and their surroundings (history). She argues that

The ‘historical’ novel thus has everything to do with a particular construction of time, and nothing essential to do with antiquarian subject matter. This point is worth a moment’s attention, because usage of the phrase ‘historical novel’ has tended to emphasise precisely period costume. By the present definition, however, *virtually all nineteenth-century social novels are historical novels* because they exploit fully the powers of the past tense.¹⁸

This shifts the relationship between novel and history from one of parallel co-existence to one of absorption: from ‘novel *and* history’ to ‘novel *in* history’.¹⁹ In 1971, Fleishman proposed that ‘When life is seen in the context of history, we have a novel; when the novel’s characters live in the same world with historical persons, we have a historical novel.’²⁰ Ermarth employs the same terms Fleishman uses to define the novel overall – ‘life seen in the context of history’ – to define what she views as an important nineteenth-century development in the form, the novel *in* history.

The presence, in a group of mid-nineteenth-century novels, of an all-pervasive sense of history, uniting the microscopic with the epic scale, the recent with the chronologically distant, is the focus of this chapter. However, I diverge from Ermarth in distinguishing my sub-genre of novels from, for example, contemporary social-problem novels such as Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* (1848) or Dickens’ *Little Dorrit* (1855-7). The novels I seek to reclaim as historical novels are not only concerned with broad socio-historical issues, but are also notably retrospective.

Far more Victorian novels than are commonly recognised as such are set in the recent past, and thus demonstrate their writers’ choice to position them quite

¹⁷ George Dekker, *American Historical Romance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 14.

¹⁸ Ermarth, *The English Novel in History*, p. 82. Italics in original.

¹⁹ This formulation has proved popular with critics willing to view ‘novels of the recent past’ as in some sense historical novels. Ruth Livesey, for example, has recently described *Jane Eyre* as an example of ‘near-historical fiction – the novel-in-history’. Ruth Livesey, ‘Communicating with *Jane Eyre*: Stagecoach, Mail, and the Tory Nation’, *Victorian Studies*, 53 (2011), 615–38 (p. 161).

²⁰ Fleishman, *The English Historical Novel*, pp. 3–4.

consciously as ‘historical’ novels. Even many canonical texts, which in the twenty-first century have received a new popular audience as ‘period dramas’ set in a generic ‘Victorian’ past, are actually not set in the time of their first readership, but removed by 20, 30 or 40 years. Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847), for example, is introduced specifically as taking place in 1801, and this chronological distance is compounded by the fact that most of the narrative relates a period several decades previously.²¹ Charlotte Brontë’s 1849 novel *Shirley* is set in the Napoleonic Wars, covering a period from 1811 to 1812. Even her less explicitly historical novels are retrospective. *Villette* (1853) narrates a relatively distant memory; details in *Jane Eyre* (1847) show that it is actually set at the turn of the nineteenth century. *David Copperfield* (1850), a semi-autobiographical narrative, is partly set in the time of Dickens’ childhood, opening therefore in approximately 1812. Even Dickens’ last novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870), Ray Dubberke has proposed, is actually set back into the 1840s.²² Many of Charlotte Yonge’s Tory-inflected novels are historical: notably, *Chantry House* (1886) and *The Carbonels* (1895) are both set in the 1820s and early 1830s. None of George Eliot’s novels are set in the time of their writing. Although *Romola* is often referred to as her only historical novel, *Adam Bede* and *Silas Marner* are set back to the turn of the nineteenth century, and *Mill on the Floss*, *Felix Holt* and *Middlemarch* into the 1830s. Even *Daniel Deronda* (1876), often viewed as Eliot’s one contemporary novel,²³ is actually dated, by details of the financial crash that loses Mrs Davilow her income, to the economic insecurities of the mid-1860s, ten years before the time of writing.²⁴

This myriad of potential case studies displays diverse approaches to, and reasons for, writing about the recent past. Many of these novels never comment explicitly on their historical setting. Although *Wuthering Heights* is marked at its opening by the date ‘1801’, in the isolated world of the two houses around which the entire novel takes place, little of the state of the wider world in this year of warfare against Napoleon overseas, and industrial strife at home, impinges openly on its

²¹ The idea of the novel as precisely dated was first delineated in C. P. Sanger, *The Structure of Wuthering Heights* (London: Hogarth Press, 1926). For a synthesis of the dates of the novel’s events, see David Daiches, ‘Introduction’, in *Wuthering Heights*, by Emily Brontë, ed. by David Daiches (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), pp. 7–29.

²² Ray Dubberke, ‘The Murder of Edwin Drood: Dating *Edwin Drood*’, *The Dickensian*, 88 (1992), 19–24.

²³ For example, see Williams, *The Country and the City*, p. 177.

²⁴ George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, ed. by Terence Cave (London: Penguin, 1995), p. 15.

characters' claustrophobic family struggles.²⁵ *Edwin Drood* is similarly only recognisable as a novel of the recent past through details of clothing and allusion. These two novels both draw on gothic conventions for their plots, and thus arguably benefit from the romanticising effect of temporal distance by rendering their melodramatic plots more believable to readers. Other novels of the recent past require the temporal distance for reasons of narrative structure. *Villette* is revealed as retrospective by a comment at the novel's opening that 'I speak of a time gone by', and the narrator's self-description as now white-haired.²⁶ *Jane Eyre* can be dated by St John's gift to our heroine of a copy of Walter Scott's newly published *Marmion*, and whether this represents its first printing in 1808, or the 'Magnum Opus' edition of 1834, either would set the novel as explicitly non-contemporary.²⁷ However, the *Bildungsroman* genre to which both *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* can be said to adhere, along with *David Copperfield*, requires a narratorial voice that is distanced in time from the events it describes. Although the main content of the narrative takes place thirty or forty years previously, the text achieves narrative continuity by being recalled and related by its protagonist, in a present contemporary with its first readers. Thus these novels are retrospective by structural necessity, rather than through a desire to depict a specific past historical moment.

In this chapter, therefore, I will focus on four novels that I suggest represent a particular sub-genre: Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (1849), Elizabeth Gaskell's *My Lady Ludlow* (1859), and George Eliot's *Felix Holt* (1866) and *Middlemarch* (1871-2). Valuable work has been done on the retrospective and historically grounded narratives of some of these individual works, but rarely has this kind of group been brought together to examine the reasons for, and implications of, those choices.²⁸ The content and structure of these novels requires neither a romanticising gothic distance (unlike *Wuthering Heights* or *Edwin Drood*) nor the personal retrospection of the *Bildungsroman*. Their setting in the recent past, therefore, must stem from a different

²⁵ See Anne Leslie Harris, 'Psychological Time in *Wuthering Heights*', *International Fiction Review*, 7 (1980), 112–17.

²⁶ Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*, ed. by Margaret Lane (London: J. M. Dent, 1972), p. 37.

²⁷ John Sutherland argues that it is more likely to be the 1834 'Magnum Opus' edition, since 1808 would 'give Jane ... a birth-date of 1777', and involve Rochester 'gallivanting round France during the Napoleonic Wars' (p. 74), which he sees as highly implausible. John Sutherland, *Can Jane Eyre Be Happy? More Puzzles in Classic Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 74.

²⁸ On *Middlemarch*, see Gillian Beer, 'Circulatory Systems: Money, Gossip, and Blood in Middlemarch'; Beer, 'What's Not in *Middlemarch*', in *Middlemarch in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Karen Chase (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 15–36 (pp. 17–18). On *Shirley*, see Heather Glen, *Charlotte Brontë: The Imagination in History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

impulse. They all eschew any explicit attempt to offer a national or political history on the model of Martineau or Walpole. Instead, they depict local and provincial communities. They are all about, and by, women writers, and feature heroines who are decidedly ‘unhistoric’ figures. In this particular sub-genre, the impulse to assert the value of the full breadth of the social continuum, which history-writing had avowed but proved unable to enact, comes to expressive fruition.

These novels are also distinctive for their self-conscious and ambivalent portrayal of the relationship between the recent past and present. They are all notable for their constant awareness of their own retrospective mode. They make comments about the historical trajectory that links past and present in a temporal continuum, at once offering it to the reader as progress and as decline. They use a richly ironic narratorial voice, keeping the reader in a constant state of ambivalence about such issues as the value of technological development, moral universalism and the quality of memory. It is these qualities that I suggest has enabled them to retain for modern readers a sense of aesthetic integrity that, as I have shown in Chapter 1, came to be seen as lacking in the wider historical novel genre by the end of the nineteenth century.

The social continuum: who counts as historic?

The challenges of representing ‘unhistoric’ individuals, those marginalised in the historical record, are crystallised – for mid-Victorian novelists and recent theorists alike – by the task of writing women’s lives as history. As touched upon in Chapter 1’s analysis of Sarah Stickney Ellis, for example, one substantial problem is the ‘unhistoric’ nature of much of their daily activity. It is difficult to know how to write about something whose very importance lies in its nature as replicated ad infinitum. As Ann D. Gordon, Mari Jo Buhle and Nancy Schrom Dye have suggested, any project to validate women’s history requires us to ‘redefin[e] and enlarg[e] traditional notions of historical significance’.²⁹ Miriam Burstein, examining in depth the ideological challenges facing writers of women’s history in Victorian Britain, has shown that most Victorian histories of women’s lives depict ‘lives lacking any

²⁹ Ann D. Gordon, Mari Jo Buhle and Nancy Schrom Dye, ‘The Problem of Women’s History’, in *Liberating Women’s History: Theoretical and Critical Essays*, ed. by Berenice Carroll (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976), pp. 75–92 (p. 89).

“eruption” whatsoever. ... This language of uneventfulness collapses distinctions between class and profession into a single plot that resists narration.³⁰

Could individuals not featured in the conventional historical record be reclaimed as part of history? This discussion extends horizontally, across the gender divide: can women be considered ‘influential’ despite their practical impotence in the historical moment (at least as traditionally construed)? It also extends vertically, through the class structure: can lowly working or even simply undistinguished bourgeois individuals be considered to have an influence on history? This chapter examines novels by three Victorian women writers, with women as their central characters, and focuses most closely on the horizontal (gender) dimension. Several of these texts, however, acknowledge the analogous position of women and the working class, as I will discuss. Rohan Maitzen has recognised the parallel between the ‘unhistoric’ actions of women and the working classes, commenting on ‘social history’s potential to become women’s history’.³¹ Here she encapsulates the strange equivalence, as others have before her, between the way women and the underclasses share in the state of being the understudied.³² Maitzen suggests that in the nineteenth century,

The new historiographical emphasis on indirect agency, on effects stemming from diffuse causes rather than decisive acts, on an infinitude of tiny changes bringing about gradual revolutions, created a new model of historical explanation, one that was entirely consistent with women’s accepted form of power: influence.³³

Maitzen describes her monograph as ‘mak[ing] the case that history as both a subject and a practice was feminized during the nineteenth century.’ She explains that ‘In making this argument I discuss the turn to social history as an important step in legitimising women’s history because in social history the private sphere, rather than the public sphere (from which Victorian women were largely excluded), is the site of historical significance.’³⁴ However, as demonstrated in Chapter 2, nineteenth-century historians’ attempts to write social history were fraught with both practical and cultural difficulties, and were only partially successful. Maitzen’s terms are more

³⁰ Miriam Elizabeth Burstein, *Narrating Women’s History in Britain, 1770-1902* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), p. 115.

³¹ Maitzen, *Gender, Genre, and Victorian Historical Writing*, p. 199.

³² See Hall, McClelland and Rendall, *Defining the Victorian Nation*.

³³ Maitzen, *Gender, Genre, and Victorian Historical Writing*, p. 40.

³⁴ Rohan Amanda Maitzen, ‘Plotting Women: Froude and Strickland on Elizabeth I and Mary Queen of Scots’, in *Clio’s Daughters: British Women Making History, 1790–1899*, ed. by Lynette Felber (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2007), pp. 123–50 (p. 123).

directly applicable, I would suggest, to my case studies in this chapter: historical novels set in the recent past.

If such novels enabled the lives of women and those similarly marginalised in the historical record to be represented and recovered, however, it poses a new problem. Could a fictional character be historical and if so, in what way? We need to consider to what extent the ‘unhistoric’ individuals reclaimed by nineteenth-century writers could be anything other than straightforwardly ‘factual’. Since part of what renders an individual ‘unhistoric’ is their absence from the historical record, it is difficult to conceive how they could be revived, resurrected, without some degree of imaginative development. Could, for example, a statistically representative individual – one who serves as an average of many other lives, but him/herself never existed in precisely that form – count as part of history? And what about a character with no specific historical basis at all? The texts examined in this chapter are all explicitly fictions. They are both attempts to write contemporary history and aesthetic constructions, whose presentation to the reader comes with its own consequent expectations and limitations.

As the Introduction’s analysis of texts by Carlyle, Macaulay, Hazlitt and Horne demonstrates, early-nineteenth century writings on the remit of history repeatedly avow the value of the multiple, cumulative, quotidian but otherwise ‘unhistoric’ acts of undistinguished individuals. Threading through this discourse is a discomfort about the unrepresentative nature of historical narrative: the fact that the unusual events and individuals are those that come to form the historical canon. No text, either novel or history, can, of course, depict everyone who has lived. This limitation became all the more obvious in the nineteenth-century context. As readerships widened and printing costs fell, a text could reach an increasingly large audience, but a widening demographic also meant more diverse readerships and more competition for their attention; this new reading climate made it more difficult – even impossible – to be confident in speaking to the whole of the ‘nation’. This sense of the impossibility of including everyone was exacerbated, if your subject was the recent past, by the awareness that you could not include the full multiplicity of the possible evidence in your representation. It was still alive in the memories of millions of individuals, and thus could not be reliably contained or distilled.

The most a writer of historical fiction could hope to do, therefore, in trying to offer a convincing picture of a society or a period, was to offer characters who were

representative in some way: of their class, locale or historical moment. This was encapsulated by György Lukács (1937) in his identification in Scott's novels of the 'mediocre' hero.³⁵ As Alex Woloch has demonstrated, a discrimination between major and minor characters – and different expectations from the two categories – is intrinsic to our reading of the realist novel.³⁶ Even after this genre's heyday, later attempts to depict a 'nobody' as hero have done so in comic form, his mediocrity the object of satire rather than reverence.³⁷ The problem is that representativeness conventionally forms the backdrop, the ground of the tapestry rather than its subject. The statistically average individual, who was becoming more possible to envisage through the studies of a burgeoning social science movement from mid-century, might not even exist in precisely that form anywhere in reality.³⁸ Representativeness, therefore, this might suggest, is implicitly unrepresentable. This is the problem our three novelists had to deal with, as I will go on to show.

Retrospection and the temporal continuum

What distinguishes the period this thesis terms 'recent past' from the undisputed temporal category of 'history' is its position within living memory. This term is of course not a singular one. Mary Ann Evans was born in November 1819, so the 1832 setting of *Felix Holt* fell within her own lifetime (albeit years when her twelve-year-old attention, though precocious, was probably taken up with more personal concerns than the Reform Bill).³⁹ By contrast, while Scott explicitly viewed his first novel, *Waverley*, as being set within living memory, the 1745 Jacobite Rebellion had not taken place within his own lifetime, but rather that of other people on whose memories he could draw. However, the same point applies: locating a fictional narrative within the time of living memory forces its writer to address the question of whether memory is opposed to history or can be assimilated into it. A recent trend in

³⁵ György Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. by Hannah Mitchell and Stanley Mitchell (London: Merlin, 1962), p. 33.

³⁶ Alex Woloch, *The One Vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2009).

³⁷ See George Grossmith, *The Diary of a Nobody*, (1888–89 in *Punch*; 1892)

³⁸ For the social science movement in Britain, see Goldman. For the use of statistics to develop concepts of 'normal' people, see Ian Hacking, *The Taming of Chance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

³⁹ In 1832, for example, she was moving schools, leaving her place as a boarder at Mrs Wallington's school in Nuneaton to transfer to Mary and Rebecca Franklin's school in Coventry. See Rosemary Ashton, *George Eliot: a Life* (London: Penguin, 1996), p. 20.

cultural studies has acted to differentiate and even oppose ‘memory’ and ‘history’. This has been seen as the successor to the ‘linguistic turn’ of the 1960s and the ‘cultural turn’ of the 1980s.⁴⁰ Advocates often view it as history’s repressed Other, personal, local and organic in contrast to history’s top-down linearity and rigidity. Pierre Nora, for example, has suggested that whereas history is ‘the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer’, ‘memory is life’ and ‘remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation’.⁴¹ For him and many other historians and theorists invested in the ‘turn to memory’, it is a site of mystique and unmined treasures, possessing an attraction which more conventional history cannot match.

By contrast, the nineteenth-century writers under discussion here acknowledged that, on initial appearance, the period within living memory was a decidedly unprepossessing subject for their writing. Victorian culture is famed for its embrace of all things medieval, from Pugin’s Gothic architecture to Carlyle’s elevation of the Abbot Samson in *Past and Present* (1843), to the pre-Raphaelites’ rejection of post-Renaissance developments in painting, to Tennyson’s Arthurian poetry and to William Morris’ medievalist utopia *News from Nowhere* (1890). This fascination with the styles and – in a sanitised version, at least – the ideals of that distant past went hand in hand with a disdain for the period that directly preceded their own. Henry Knight Miller suggested that for Victorian writers, the eighteenth century was ‘the necessary negative type, or antithesis’,⁴² and this kind of wholesale repudiation is exemplified most famously in Carlyle’s 1841 judgement on it as ‘a sceptical century’.⁴³ This discourse employed the recent past as a site of those practices, standards and morals against which a Victorian generation could set itself up as radically different and superior.

A recent collection of essays edited by Francis O’Gorman and Katherine Turner has usefully challenged and nuanced this uniformly disdainful view.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ See Andreas Kitzmann, Conny Mithander and John Sundholm, eds., *Memory Work: The Theory And Practice of Memory* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2005).

⁴¹ Pierre Nora, ‘Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire’, *Representations*, 1989, 7–24 (p. 8).

⁴² Henry Knight Miller, ‘The “Whig” Interpretation of Literary History’, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 6 (1972), 60–84 (p. 63).

⁴³ Thomas Carlyle, ‘Lecture V: The Hero as Man of Letters’, in *Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (London: J. M. Dent, 1959), p. 398.

⁴⁴ Francis O’Gorman and Katherine Turner, eds., *The Victorians and the Eighteenth Century: Reassessing the Tradition* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004). Elizabeth Jay’s essay, ‘The Cultural Politics of

Although the Romantic and post-Romantic generations had little shared sympathy with the Augustan poets – Matthew Arnold judged Dryden and Pope as masters not of poetry but of ‘prose’ – there was more recognition of the eminent precedent set by the mid-eighteenth-century novel.⁴⁵ Henry Fielding was the subject of admiration both from George Eliot (as is clear from her invocation of him in *Middlemarch* as ‘a great historian’) and from William Makepeace Thackeray.⁴⁶ Thackeray’s novelistic oeuvre demonstrates a fascination with the eighteenth century, as *The Luck of Barry Lyndon* (1844; set during the Seven Years’ War of 1756–63), *The Virginians* (1857–59; set during the American War of Independence of the 1770s), and *Henry Esmond* (1852; set between 1691 and 1718) make obvious.⁴⁷

Although the mid-eighteenth century could be valorised, the period immediately preceding the Victorian, their recent past within living memory, was a site of discomfort even for Thackeray. In his lecture series *The Four Georges* (1855–56), we hear both embarrassment and contempt at the example of English morality transmitted abroad in the early nineteenth century by its national figurehead, George IV.⁴⁸ Thackeray tells the story of how he ‘met lately a very old German gentleman, who had served in our army at the beginning of the century.’ This gentleman has been cut off from English society since the Napoleonic Wars, but ‘possesses perfectly’ the language of the men he knew. ‘When this highly bred old man began to speak English to me almost every other word was an oath’.⁴⁹ Thackeray’s text is full of incredulity at the norms of the 1820s:

He [George IV] is dead but thirty years, and one asks how a great society could have tolerated him? Would we bear him now? In this quarter of a century, what a silent revolution has been working! how it has separated us from old times and manners! How it has changed men themselves! I can see old gentlemen now among us, of perfect good breeding, of quiet lives, with venerable grey

Eighteenth-Century Representation in Victorian Literary Histories’ (pp. 98–118) shows how Thackeray appropriated and championed elements of eighteenth-century cultural life to his advantage, including aligning himself with the ‘manly’ Fielding against a Dickens-esque ‘puny cockney’ Samuel Richardson (p. 98).

⁴⁵ R. H. Super, ed., *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, 11 vols. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960), IX, 181.

⁴⁶ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 170.

⁴⁷ *Vanity Fair* (1847; set during the 1810s) could have been a suitable case study for this thesis, but its male authorship, and metropolitan and international setting, set it apart from the sub-genre of novels examined in this chapter.

⁴⁸ *The Four Georges* was first given as a series of lectures in the United States over the course of 1855 and 1856, and subsequently published in book form in 1860.

⁴⁹ W. M. Thackeray, *The Works of William Makepeace Thackeray*, 26 vols. (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1893), xxiii, 98.

heads, fondling their grandchildren; and look at them, and wonder what they were once.⁵⁰

Thackeray uses the ‘quarter of a century’ between George’s death and his own present as a moral buffer between the two states of mind, and draws a decisive dividing line between the two eras. Before this ‘silent revolution’ – an evocation, perhaps not wholly reverent, of Macaulay’s ‘noiseless revolutions’ – men acted in repulsive and alien ways; now we can laugh about its sordid state. However, memory cannot wholly be repressed by such temporal dividing lines: the ‘old gentlemen’ with ‘their grandchildren’ still contain the memory – and thus the trace – of that debauchery.

In a context of some disdain for the morals and mores of the immediately pre-Victorian period, persuading a reader that this recent past is worthy of evocation and remembrance is by no means straightforward. Both Walter Scott, in *Waverley* (1814), and later George Eliot, in *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1879), work hard to justify and defend their valorisation of the recent past. They do so partly by questioning the kind of temporal dividing lines imposed by Thackeray in his *Four Georges*, and they propose instead a temporal continuum. Scott invokes the recent past as an intermediate category between ‘history’ and ‘modernity’ in his ‘Introductory’ statement to *Waverley*. Implicitly flattering the reader who can see past superficial details to recognise the value of his narrative, he asks, ‘Who, meaning the costume of his hero to be impressive, would willingly attire him in the court dress of George the Second’s reign, with its no collar, large sleeves, and low pocket-holes?’⁵¹ After a contrast of the picturesque value both of the ‘Gothic hall’ and the ‘modern fete’, Scott concludes, ‘it will readily be seen how much the painter of antique or of fashionable manners gains over him who delineates those of the last generation.’⁵² Here the distant and the present time are set up as a bracketing pair, each attractive in their own way, into which the relatively unprepossessing world of the recent past is offered as a contrast, an ugly middle sister. Although Scott cultivates a defensive tone in this opening chapter, however, this nervousness is a little disingenuous. ‘Like a maiden knight with white shield’, he has given his hero ‘Waverley, an uncontaminated name’, and is conscious of offering his audience something new. He

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Scott, *Waverley*, p. 5.

⁵² Ibid.

knows he is stepping into uncharted territory with this novel, even if he cannot know what a lasting impact it will have.

George Eliot adopts a similar strategy of valorisation in her last full-length work, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1879), questioning the imaginary distinction that divides the romanticised eras of history that lie beyond living memory from a more prosaic recent past. In ‘Looking Backward’, one of the vignettes that make up *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, our eccentric narrator notes that while it is common ‘for a man to wail that he was not the son of another age and another nation’, ‘no impassioned personage wishes he had been born in the age of Pitt’, since this age is too recent to have acquired an aura of romance.⁵³ Theophrastus Such defies this arbitrary division in declaring that ‘for my part I can call no age absolutely unpoetic’.⁵⁴ This seems to echo the famous passage in Book V of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* (1856), which acknowledges that ‘every age / Appears to souls who live in’t (ask Carlyle) / Most unheroic’, but insists that ‘All men [are] possible heroes: every age / Heroic in proportions’.⁵⁵ All these writers reclaim the recent past as a potential site of ‘passion’ and ‘poetry’, but present their choice as if they anticipate it being unpopular, unfashionable and controversial.

Mark Salber Phillips has characterised the appeal of the ‘Sixty Years Since’ set-up of *Waverley* as comprised of a tension between familiarity and distance.

Two generations put the ’45 just on the horizon of living memory. At this remove, when events are still close enough to recall, yet distant enough to have been overtaken by other developments, there is a need both to recover past events and to begin to resolve their singularity into the wider patterns and plots of history. At just such a distance, in short, both recuperation and resolution seem possible.⁵⁶

This potential to ‘recuperate’ – to bring the past back to life – is both complemented and undermined by a desire to ‘resolve’ its conflicts and agree upon its ultimate significance. I have been using ‘particularity’ where Phillips uses ‘singularity’, so I can avoid confusion with any idea of ‘unity’. Our interpretations converge, nonetheless, in proposing that the urge to ‘recuperate’ stems from a desire for the multiple, particularised immediacy of everyday life. In contrast, ‘resolution’ searches for a singular interpretation of the significance of

⁵³ Eliot, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such, Essays, and Leaves from a Note-Book*, p. 16.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁵⁵ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, ed. by Mary Reynolds (London: Norton, 1996), p. 147. Book V, ll.155-7, 152-3.

⁵⁶ Mark Salber Phillips, *Society and Sentiment*, p. 33.

the period's events in an historical narrative. Thus this liminal 'recent past' moment lies poised on the boundary of particularity and generality. This goes some way towards explaining the Victorian fascination with this chronological distance.

Trying to pin down these writers' attitudes to their recent past subject – whether their agendas are conservative or progressive, and thus what trajectories they envisage between the times of setting and writing – is not straightforward, since any sense of 'contrasts' along Puginesque lines is disrupted by their faith in a temporal continuum. The ambivalence generated by this double vision is exacerbated, in all these texts, by an ironic narratorial voice, and taken still further in the Victorian novels by a polyphonic structure. In this way these novelists refuse to take the authoritative overview our historians sought, and instead embrace a more immersive mode. Of course, Eliot and Brontë present their narratives via omniscient narrators, a centralising focus that cannot be described as straightforwardly immersive. But these narrators exist in tandem with other polyphonic voices, and Gaskell's *My Lady Ludlow* does not even offer us any overriding omniscient narrator, but rather a succession of voices that tell their own stories. This polyphonic structure also highlights – albeit within limitations – the 'unhistoric' end of the social spectrum. I will consider each writer in turn, and will begin by considering Walter Scott as a conceptual model for those later Victorian writers.

Nostalgia resisted: *Waverley* as a foundational paradigm

Walter Scott's first novel, *Waverley* (1814), famously set 'sixty years since', was a vital – even inescapable – precursor of my case-studies. I suggest that it acted as a conceptual model for Gaskell, Brontë and Eliot in more ways than simply its setting. Scott repeatedly escapes critical attempts to pigeonhole him as either progressive or conservative, as he refuses to make final 'overview' judgements about his recent past. The novel also denies heroic agency for his characters, undermining the posturing of Captain Wogan, Fergus Mac-Ivor and Prince Charles Edward Stuart alike. Instead it suggests that the individual only becomes 'historic' when they become part of the invisible fabric of everyday life. And these tendencies come into being through the novel's insistently ironic narratorial voice, whose intrusive reflections create dissonances in the text. As I will show, Gaskell, Brontë and Eliot use similarly ironic

narratorial voices, but heighten this narrative instability still further by writing irreducibly polyphonic narratives, giving voice to unprepossessing, unheroic or ‘unhistoric’ characters and defying all definitive characterisation of their ideological stance.

Although *Waverley* became fetishised by the Victorian public as the archetypal historical novel, the recent history – and even the myths – Scott evokes in this text are approached with surprising scepticism and irony. Throughout the nineteenth century, Scott was seen as conservative in outlook: in 1824, Hazlitt described him as someone who ‘shudders at the shadow of innovation.’⁵⁷ Ruskin opened *Praeterita* (1885) with the declaration that he was ‘a violent Tory of the old school; – Walter Scott’s school’.⁵⁸ Mark Twain took this even further when he claimed that Scott’s novels were responsible for the outbreak of the American Civil War. After the liberation enacted by the French Revolution,

comes Sir Walter Scott with his enchantments, and by his single might checks this wave of progress, and even turns it back; sets the world in love ... with the ... sham chivalries of a brainless and worthless long-vanished society.⁵⁹

Here Twain portrays Scott not only as unequivocally nostalgic and medievalist, but as the originator of such a mindset. Even in 1927, the Modernist and Scottish nationalist Christopher Murray Grieve dismissed Scott as a ‘Tory of Tories, and a national liability rather than an asset in most respects.’⁶⁰

More recently, however, critics have tended to highlight the progressive tendencies in Scott’s work. Robert Kiely, George Levine and Daniel Cottom have viewed him as essentially conflicted, torn between the necessity of modernisation and a yearning for the past.⁶¹ Colin Kidd sees him as participating in the Whig historical project to create an ‘Anglo-British’ identity.⁶² Going even further, Murray Pittock views Scott as categorically and deliberately Hanoverian. ‘Scottish patriotism is childish, British patriotism adult: this is the equation offered [by Scott]’, we are

⁵⁷ Hazlitt, p. 96.

⁵⁸ John Ruskin, *Praeterita* (New York: Everyman, 2005), p. 13. See also, with only minimally modified punctuation, John Ruskin, ‘The Baron’s Gate’ [1871], in *Unto This Last and Other Writings*, ed. by Clive Wilmer (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 307.

⁵⁹ Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1883), p. 418.

⁶⁰ C. M. Grieve, *Albyn: Or, Scotland and Its Future* (London: Kegan Paul, 1927), p. 86.

⁶¹ Robert Kiely, *The Romantic Novel in England* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972); George Levine, *The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); Daniel Cottom, *The Civilized Imagination: A Study of Ann Radcliffe, Jane Austen, and Sir Walter Scott* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

⁶² Colin Kidd, *Subverting Scotland’s Past: Scottish Whig Historians and the Creation of an Anglo-British Identity, 1689-c.1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

told.⁶³ Although this usefully flags up the Anglophile elements sidelined by nineteenth-century critics, I would question his depiction of Scott's single-mindedness. As Fiona Robertson argues, highlighting solely either the 1829 *Magnum Opus* dedication to George IV, or the novels' many nostalgic or treasonous plots, as evidence respectively of loyalism or conservatism, 'attempt[s] to single out governing principles in insistently pluralist novels.'⁶⁴

I read Scott's scepticism towards the Jacobite creed not as an indication that Scott is torn between past and present, or anxious to moderate between the two, but rather as a means of casting multiple layers of retrospection in an ironic light. Not only does he ironise the history of 'sixty years since'; he even casts a sceptical eye over the historical precedents and inspirations of that past era. Flora Mac-Ivor's hero, whom she offers to Waverley as a behavioural model, is a civil war Parliamentarian-turned-Royalist called Captain Wogan. Introducing Flora's romantic verses on his fate, Scott gives us a potted history of the Captain, in which he relates how 'after several months of desultory warfare, in which Wogan's skill and courage gained him the highest reputation, he had the misfortune to be wounded in a dangerous manner, and no surgical assistance being within reach, he terminated his short but glorious career.'⁶⁵ The Latinate lexis here of 'terminated' and 'misfortune' suggests that Scott is writing with his tongue in his cheek. The vocabulary offers an uneasy mismatch of sentiments, since after the implications of 'desultory warfare' and 'misfortune', the word 'glorious' cannot help taking on an ironic tinge. In this context, it is difficult to take the myth of this hero figure entirely seriously.

Waverley mirrors the character of Wogan in more than retreating from a 'modernising' political cause to a romantic and backward-looking one. In fact, that word 'desultory' has already been applied to Waverley, who has failed to attain any 'fixed political opinion' as a result of 'the desultory style of his studies' and education (p. 125). Even his accident at the Highland hunt is described in similar terms to Wogan's. 'Early the next morning, the purpose of their meeting being over, and their sports blanked by the untoward accident, in which Fergus and all his friends expressed the greatest sympathy, it became a question how to dispose of the disabled sportsman.' (p. 119) This sentence offers the reader a disconcerting mixture of

⁶³ Murray Pittock, *The Invention of Scotland: The Stuart Myth and the Scottish Identity, 1638 to the Present* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 85.

⁶⁴ Fiona Robertson, *Legitimate Histories: Scott, Gothic, and the Authorities of Fiction* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 11.

⁶⁵ Scott, *Waverley*, p. 147. Subsequent references will, where appropriate, be given within the text.

sympathetic and critical nuances. The phrase ‘untoward accident’ as a description of events is overly generous to both parties, since it is either Waverley’s dim-wittedness, or the Highlanders’ lack of consideration for translation, that is to blame for his injury. The end of the sentence is even more conflicted. This odd juxtaposition places the word ‘dispose’, which envisages Waverley as an inconvenient object to be dealt with, alongside ‘disabled sportsman’, which grants our protagonist too much honour, especially given that, since he took no part in the hunt, ‘sportsman’ is rather a misnomer. Ultimately, Waverley is not deemed quite worthy of poetry. Even though he detects ‘his own name’ in the impassioned bardic chant on the night of his arrival at the Mac-Ivors’ home, Flora’s translation of the song for him is incomplete (p. 98). The poetry is interrupted by her greyhound, and the portion in which he features is turned into prose (p. 109). He is removed from his (potential) position as hero before he ever even becomes one. What is most striking about the relationship between Wogan and Waverley is the power it places in the processes of myth-making and narrativisation. Despite the relatively unprepossessing material of both their stories, they have the power to be transformed into inspirational archetypes. Wogan’s pitiful tale provides Waverley with a model for his ideological volte-face, and even Scott’s rather critical vision of the Jacobite campaign was mythologised by subsequent Victorian generations into the archetypal romantic historical narrative.

Although Waverley is presented with the disparate worldviews of rational Hanoverian England and romantic Jacobite Highland Scotland as mutually exclusive alternatives, the relationship Scott posits between them is not one of straightforward dichotomy. Even Fergus Mac-Ivor is not free from scepticism towards his own traditions. The affective power of the bardic songs, at which Scott invites us to be moved, is undermined by none other than Fergus himself, who describes them as ‘the barbarous ritual of our forefathers’ and declares that Waverley admires the songs ‘because he does not comprehend them’ (p. 102). Dismissive of them as little more than a fallacy, he asks Flora, ‘Will you have the goodness to read or recite to our guest in English, the extraordinary string of names which Mac-Murrough has tacked together in Gaelic?’ (p. 102) Andrew Lincoln suggests that ‘The translation of the Gaelic war song into an object of taste lies at the symbolic heart of *Waverley*. ... [T]he translation of Gaelic culture for appreciation by a polite, metropolitan audience works to confirm the occlusion of that culture.’⁶⁶ I would suggest that even before the Gaelic

⁶⁶ Andrew Lincoln, *Walter Scott and Modernity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 58.

song is appreciated by the ‘polite, metropolitan audience’ that *Waverley* represents, it has already moved far from its original position in Highland culture. Even Fergus Mac-Ivor’s traditionalism is invested far more in Jacobite power politics than in any naïve desire for his culture to continue to function untouched. It is already too late for that.

Although a key part of *Waverley*’s legacy for the post-Romantic generations was its idolisation of the Highland landscape, this is scarce in the novel itself. Fergus is decidedly unWordsworthian in his tastes, declaring of his native glen that ‘A simple and unsublimed taste now, like my own, would prefer the jet d’eau at Versailles to this cascade, with all its accompaniments of rock and roar; but this is Flora’s Parnassus, Captain Waverley, and that fountain her Helicon.’ (p. 109) This use of the word ‘unsublimed’ reverses the standard sense of ‘sublime’, whose core lies in untamed natural phenomena, into a process to be undergone, learnt rather than instinctive. Even the narratorial voice expresses views decidedly at odds with a Romantic sensibility. In the glen, ‘mossy banks of turf were broken and interrupted by huge fragments of rock, and decorated with trees and shrubs, some of which had been planted under the direction of Flora, but so cautiously, that they added to the grace, without diminishing the romantic wildness of the scene.’ (p. 106) In this fusion of landscape gardening and sublimity we can perhaps gain an insight into a moment of transition between predominant eighteenth- and nineteenth-century concepts of value. Fergus refuses to adhere to Flora’s romantic view of the landscape, just as he refuses to let himself or his traditions be romanticised. *Waverley* is most extraordinary, I would suggest, for the way in which its often tongue-in-cheek and at most ambivalent evocation of the world of 1745 could be appropriated in such diverse ways. Ann Rigney has recently demonstrated the voluminous range of ways in which *Waverley* was absorbed and appropriated (including for street names across the globe).⁶⁷ Nothing is more counter-intuitive to my reading of the novel than its popular reception as a clarion cry for the past and the wilds, but Rigney’s analysis acknowledges Scott’s simultaneous ‘mobility’ and ‘monumentality’, able both to act as a supremely flexible signifier, and to ‘provide stable points of reference in calibrating collectively held values’.⁶⁸ *Waverley* certainly facilitated the notion of history as romantic, and this was given further fuel by Scott’s later medieval novels. I

⁶⁷ Ann Rigney, *The Afterlives of Walter Scott: Memory on the Move* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

would argue, however, that the tensions within its Jacobite heartland allowed Scott to question, as mid-Victorian novels were to do later, the difference between ordinary individuals and ‘heroes’, and the process whereby the texture of lived reality was converted into mythic narrative.

Waverley also anticipates my sub-genre of Victorian novels in its concept of the relationship between the historical record and the texture of lived historical experience. Despite his postscript image of history as ‘a deep and smooth river’, I would argue that he actually pre-empts Macaulay’s implicit critique (discussed in the Introduction) that ‘the upper current of society presents no certain criteria by which we can judge of the direction in which the under current flows.’⁶⁹ In fact, earlier on in *Waverley*, after he sees the ruin of the Jacobite army, Edward ‘felt himself entitled to say firmly, though perhaps with a sigh, that the romance of his life was ended, and that its real history had now commenced.’ (p. 283) As Ina Ferris has pointed out, ‘The obvious answer to what has determined these matters is “circumstances”, and that, in turn, is another name for history. But how is withdrawal from the public stage of history an entry into history? What sort of “history” does *Waverley* have in mind?’⁷⁰ My answer to Ferris is that this form of history would seem to be the everyday but unrecorded history of Macaulay’s ‘thousand firesides’.

It is here that the question of ‘historic’ value intersects with that of recent past. The invisible history that Macaulay alerts us to, one constituted by those off the public stage, is one that is almost impossible to recreate for any period *except for that still present in living memory*. Modernity, therefore, is perhaps the realm of a new kind of history. Here, domestic qualities (discreet, behind-the-scenes, dutiful, quiet) can be valorised, despite – or perhaps because of – their feminine gendering. Here, perhaps, the ‘feminine’ multiplicity of the recent past can come into its own. The most obvious way in which Scott differs from my mid-Victorian case-study novelists is his gender, and Ferris has demonstrated how he successfully legitimised the historical novel as a ‘manly’ genre the early decades of the nineteenth century.⁷¹ As I will show, the three women novelists whom I would argue most closely embraced Scott’s self-consciously retrospective style and recent past setting also retained, and amplified, both his ideological ambivalence amounting to a refusal to exercise definitive hindsight, and his embrace of the value of the ‘unhistoric’. What they

⁶⁹ [Macaulay], ‘The Romance of History’, p. 363.

⁷⁰ Ferris, *The Achievement of Literary Authority*, p. 102.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 91–92.

added, however, was a specific focus on not only unheroic and ‘mediocre’ protagonists like Waverley, but the actively silenced women whose ‘unhistoric’ deeds are hidden from the historical record, and thus can perhaps only find expression in fictional representations.

The remainder of this chapter will analyse mid-Victorian retrospective novels by three women writers, with my discussion organised in relation to their position in relation to the issue of ideological ambivalence. As a result, I will first consider Gaskell’s *My Lady Ludlow*. This has commonly been read as nostalgic, but I argue that it offers a surreptitiously subversive narratorial style. I will then go on to examine Brontë’s *Shirley*, which exhibits the opposite conundrum: in contrast to Gaskell, she explicitly denies nostalgia at the novel’s outset, but does not maintain this stance unreservedly throughout. Finally, I will turn to Eliot’s *Felix Holt* and *Middlemarch*, which I suggest manage to use a polyphonic form to keep these two elements in tandem.

Nostalgia undermined: Elizabeth Gaskell’s *My Lady Ludlow*

Elizabeth Gaskell’s *My Lady Ludlow* (1859) is the least well-known of these four novels, and one of several of Gaskell’s fictions set in the recent past. A glance at her wider oeuvre demonstrates the depth and persistence of her engagement with recent history: I could plausibly have chosen *Sylvia’s Lovers* (1863; set in the 1790s), or even *Wives and Daughters* (1866; set ‘Five-and-forty years ago’, in the late 1820s and early 1830s).⁷² The novella *My Lady Ludlow* is, however, particularly relevant to my study for its doubly retrospective structure of embedded narrators, and for the covert but perpetual conflict of historico-political outlook between the eponymous character and our observer-narrator, in which unhistoric and subversive voices eventually emerge triumphant.

Having been serialised in *Household Words* in 1858, the following year it was to form the first, and most substantial, story in a larger volume, *Round the Sofa* (published by Sampson Low), whose individual tales are bracketed by an introductory frame narration. (Without this additional framing, Smith, Elder also published it, and the same set of accompanying shorter stories, in 1859, as *My Lady*

⁷² Elizabeth Gaskell, *Sylvia’s Lovers*, ed. by Shirley Foster (London: Penguin, 1996); Elizabeth Gaskell, *Wives and Daughters*, ed. by Pam Morris (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 6.

Ludlow and Other Tales. It is, however, the framed version that I discuss here.) The prologue's narratorial persona, 'Miss Greatorax', mirrors the childhood experiences of Gaskell herself: she relates how 'Long ago I was placed by my parents under the medical treatment of a certain Mr Dawson, a surgeon in Edinburgh', all verifiable elements of the young Elizabeth Stevenson's experience in 1830.⁷³ In the course of her stay in this otherwise rather dull household, she and her governess are invited to congregate 'round the sofa' of Mr Dawson's 'crippled sister, an old maid' (p. 4), where they are periodically joined by various Edinburgh eminences who recognise the value of this hidden life, whose 'every word was a pearl or a diamond' (p. 6). Margaret Dawson begins a narration of her childhood (when poverty drew her under the benefaction of Lady Ludlow) which then comprises the rest of the novella. Within this text, the elderly Lady Ludlow is herself led into a narrative of her own younger days, 25 years previously, during the French Revolutionary Terror of 1793-4. This Chinese-box narrative structure would have been familiar to readers of Gothic novels such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), as of Scott novels including *Old Mortality* (1816) and *Redgauntlet* (1824).

The tension within this series of embedded narratives arises between the deeply conservative bent of Lady Ludlow's views – on the French Revolution, on hereditary privilege, on religion, and on education and working-class literacy – and those of Margaret Dawson herself. Having developed an unidentified 'pain in my hip' that renders her crippled in her early teens (p. 40), she becomes a static observer to the workings of the estate, and Lady Ludlow's confrontations with her reforming parson, Mr Grey, and steward, Mr Horner. While the narrator faithfully recounts Lady Ludlow's conservative pontifications, we are led almost silently to recognise the flawed and anachronistic quality of her doctrines. This surreptitious contradiction between the explicit and implicit politics of the narrative is what makes it such an interesting source for an assessment of the temporal continuum, and the historical trajectory on which Victorian culture saw itself progressing.

This text is the most *ostensibly* nostalgic of our four case studies, introduced as a reminiscence of a time and a person now irreplaceable. The opening paragraph of the main narrative (that of Margaret Dawson) strikingly prefigures the terms and the imagery of the opening paragraphs of *Felix Holt* eight years later: we see the same

⁷³ Elizabeth Gaskell, *My Lady Ludlow and Other Tales*, A. W. Ward (London: John Murray, 1925), p. 1. Subsequent references will, where appropriate, be given within the text. For biographical context, see Jenny Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), p. 64.

comparison of coach travel with the ‘whizz and a flash’ of the railways, and comparison of the postal service of each period.⁷⁴ The paragraph concludes: ‘Well, well! they may all be improvements – I dare say they are; but you will never meet with a Lady Ludlow in these days.’ (p. 9) The disdainful half-heartedness of ‘I dare say they are’ sets up the audience in expectation of a thoroughly nostalgic and conservative story. However, this means that, unlike in my other three case studies – nominally reformist texts in which nostalgia creeps in around the edges – in this text reformist sentiment becomes the heterodoxy that must hide its light under a bushel, and reveal itself surreptitiously when it does so at all.

The few critics who discuss this text have acknowledged some, but not all, of the distinctive characteristics I draw attention to. Christine Krueger has recognised its polyphonic nature. She suggests that *My Lady Ludlow* undermines ‘totalising accounts of female experience’, and that by making the heroine a ‘female paternalist’, Gaskell highlights the contradictions this reveals in patriarchal ideology.⁷⁵ However, Krueger believes that Gaskell intends the reader to sympathise with Lady Ludlow.⁷⁶ In a brief article of 1996, J. R. Watson suggests that in *Round the Sofa*, ‘Gaskell’s chief weapon of subversion is humour’, though he gives few examples of this, focusing instead on defending *My Lady Ludlow* from the charge of a weak structure.⁷⁷ More recently, Neil McCaw has suggested that in choosing to make Lady Ludlow ‘so much a personification of the class to which she self-confessedly and proudly belongs, rather than a more liberating example of a woman of power’, Gaskell can enact a ‘rebuttal ... not just of her but of her kind and of the social and class landscape that she represents.’⁷⁸ McCaw modifies this statement, however, with the qualification that, ‘she is drawn with warmth, and fleshed out to a degree that cannot help but convince the reader of Gaskell’s sympathy with those who represent the old order.’⁷⁹ In a similar vein to Krueger, McCaw concludes by emphasising the ‘blunted’ edge of both Eliot’s and Gaskell’s critiques.⁸⁰ What none of these critics note, however, is the

⁷⁴ For a recent discussion of the prevalence and significance of this comparison, see Livesey, ‘Communicating with *Jane Eyre*’.

⁷⁵ Christine L. Krueger, ‘The “Female Paternalist” as Historian: Elizabeth Gaskell’s *My Lady Ludlow*’, in *Rewriting the Victorians: Theory, History and the Politics of Gender*, ed. by Linda M. Shires (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 166–83 (pp. 166–7).

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

⁷⁷ J. R. Watson, ‘“Round the Sofa”: Elizabeth Gaskell Tells Stories’, *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 26 (1996), 89–99 (p. 89).

⁷⁸ McCaw, ‘Towards a Literary Historiography in Gaskell and Eliot’, p. 185.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

way in which Margaret Dawson, although full of affection for Lady Ludlow, uses her role as narrator to enact her own critique of the eponymous character.

Lady Ludlow is first introduced in wholly positive terms, as Margaret Dawson's 'true, kind friend and benefactress' (p. 7). And Margaret's own upbringing prefigures the aristocrat's approach to historic value. Margaret's mother claims a measure of social worth from a treasured 'pair of ruffles ... which could not be bought new for love or money'. These 'showed, as she said, that her ancestors had been Somebodies, when the grandfathers of the rich folk, who now looked down upon her, had been Nobodies – if, indeed, they had any grandfathers at all.' (p. 9-10) (Locating her personal value in the past, she shares an approach to genealogy with *Felix Holt's* Mrs Transome. Both characters approach the issue of inheritance so fixated on personal validation that they fail to notice that the possession of forebears is a trait common to all living beings.) Lady Ludlow echoes the epistemology of historicity employed by Margaret's mother, as she repeatedly uses small personal details – inherent aptitudes, domestic choices and acquired skills – to infer a whole wealth of associated moral and social characteristics:

[I]n her youth none but the mobs had gone wigless, and she could not get over the association of wigs with birth and breeding; a man's own hair with that class of people who had formed the rioters in seventeen hundred and eighty ... To be without powder, as some underbred people were talking of being now, was in fact to insult the proprieties of life by being undressed. It was English sans-culottism. (p. 29)

This passage makes a causational leap from hair powder to revolution: this small signifier is ascribed a huge signified. Similarly, later in the novella, Lady Ludlow hears that Mr Gray was 'going to hold a prayer-meeting in a cottage. Now that really makes me unhappy, it is so like what Mr Wesley used to do in my younger days; and since then we have had rebellion in the American colonies and the French Revolution.' (p. 141) She thus transforms a sequence of chronology into one of direct and obvious causation.

Some of these more self-aggrandising comments are, however, surreptitiously undermined in their narration. In a discursive passage about Lady Ludlow's superior sense of smell, she expresses a distaste for musk, because

no scent derived from an animal could ever be of a sufficiently pure nature to give pleasure to any person of good family, where, of course, the delicate perception of the senses had been cultivated for generations. She would instance the way in which sportsmen preserve the breed of dogs who have

shown keen scent; and how such gifts descend for generations among animals, who cannot be supposed to have anything of ancestral pride, or hereditary fancies about them. (p. 46)

Like Mrs Transome in *Felix Holt*, who unconsciously associates herself with animals in her attempts at genealogical pride, Lady Ludlow unwittingly associates herself with hunting dogs to bolster her claim to superior qualities. It seems unlikely that she is really suggesting her ancestors were bred for their sense of smell. This passage culminates with the most outrageous suggestion of them all:

the great hereditary faculty on which my lady piqued herself, and with reason, for I never met with any person who possessed it, was the power she had of perceiving the delicate odour arising from a bed of strawberries in the late autumn, when the leaves were all fading and dying. (p. 47)

This passage (which evokes the use of strawberry leaves as ornamentation on aristocratic coronets) is nominally nothing less than reverential, but our narrator here leaves the reader room for scepticism. The phrase ‘I never met with any person who possessed it’ – not, crucially, ‘any *other* person’ – leaves open the suggestion that even Lady Ludlow’s possession of it is a fallacy. Empowered with this new suspicion, if we read back the previous passage about inheritance, the subversion implicit in the narrator’s comment that hunting dogs ‘cannot be supposed to have anything of ancestral pride, or hereditary fancies’, becomes freshly apparent. Reminding us that dogs are innocent of these traits, Margaret suggests that Lady Ludlow *does* have both ‘ancestral pride’ and ‘hereditary fancies’, the final word in particular suggesting that this superhuman sense of smell may be merely illusory.

In all these examples, Lady Ludlow evokes a distinctive causal relationship between particularity and generality. She infers *from* the local and the personal *to* the national and historical. The most extended example of this practice is her persistent hostility to working class literacy. ‘It was levelling and revolutionary, she said’ (p. 19). Her dogmatic refusal to employ any servant who can write is rooted in a belief that it points a high-road to social collapse. When we reach Lady Ludlow’s own story, at the structural apex of the text, the source of this hatred becomes clear. The romance plot between the French aristocrat Clément de Créquy and his cousin Virginie rests in part on a secret note concealed in a posy of flowers. Their near escape from the guillotine is foiled by the fact that their unscrupulous working-class go-between, Pierre, can read too! (p. 103) Lady Ludlow makes an explicit connection between this example of unwise education and that taking place on her own estate: ‘So Pierre,

instead of being an innocent messenger, as he ought to have been – (as Mr Horner’s little lad Gregson ought to have been this morning) – could read writing as well as either you or I.’ (p. 103) The cross-reference outward to the contemporary situation effectively proposes this as the crux of the story. But this is to cast into shadow the other crucial turning-points of the narrative: Virginie’s original rejection of her cousin for having insufficiently revolutionary principles; her later refusal to save her own life by marrying Clément’s rival; and, given a low profile in the narration, Lady Ludlow’s own instrumental role in the tragedy. Without knowing the back story of his failed courtship, and without conferring with the boy’s own mother, she encourages Clément to travel to revolutionary France to find Virginie because she leaps to assumptions of an ideal romance plot. In this sense, Lady Ludlow’s narrative is too singular and generalising: only by obscuring the story’s particular details can she offer this unitary myth-making version of events.

This French Revolution narrative is presented in the form of a romantic melodrama that shifts ultimately into tragedy. Lady Ludlow does not solve the problem, faced repeatedly by historians (most notably Thomas Carlyle), of how to write this phenomenon of the recent past as history. Instead, she reverts to a highly personalised narrative form. As Krueger describes it, the story ‘locates the origins of the French Revolution in a discrete phenomenon: the newly acquired ability of the lower orders to read their masters’ texts.’⁸¹ It is neither based upon a genuinely detached hindsight, nor inclusive of the unhistoric breadth of the social continuum. This wildly distorted representation of the complex historical phenomenon is instead a self-serving one. It allows her to believe in ‘the tragic coherence of her past and its sacred significance, and [she] strives to author her life, and those of her dependants, accordingly’.⁸²

Although this narrative aids Lady Ludlow in bolstering her inflexible principles, it does not have the same effect on its listener. Margaret Dawson’s critique of Lady Ludlow comes into its own in the second half of the novella, in the aftermath of this embedded French Revolution narrative. Lady Ludlow attempts to use the story as justification to ban her steward, Mr Horner, from educating the poacher’s son Harry Gregson. The narratorial voice, however, disagrees. ‘But this boy had extraordinary capabilities; would, in fact, have taught himself much that was bad, if

⁸¹ Krueger, p. 175.

⁸² Ibid.

he had not been rescued, and another direction given to his powers.’ (p. 127) Never uttering these counter-narratives aloud to Lady Ludlow, but rather speaking directly to her Edinburgh audience – those ‘eminences’ who appear to valorise the unhistorical individual – and the reader – with whom Margaret assumes shared sympathies – she undermines the very basis of Lady Ludlow’s outrage. And this practice of speaking out to the audience, offering us a polyphony of opinion, is repeated several times over the remainder of the story.

Lady Ludlow’s model of historicity, which infers from social standing to historical value, faces its most passionate disavowal in Margaret’s response to the death of her last surviving son, Ughtred Mortimer, Earl Ludlow. This passage opened the ante-penultimate instalment of the story, published in the *Household Words* of 11 September 1858, and was evidently designed to shock. Couched in terms well wadded with disclaimers and apologies, it nonetheless contains a kernel of real anger:

It might arise from my being so far from well at the time, which produced a diseased mind in a diseased body; but I was absolutely jealous for my father’s memory, when I saw how many signs of grief there were for my lord’s death, he having done next to nothing for the village and parish, which now changed, as it were, its daily course of life, because his lordship died in a far-off city. My father had spent the best years of his manhood in labouring hard, body and soul, for the people amongst whom he lived. ... And yet, when he died, though the church-bells tolled, and smote upon our hearts with hard, fresh pain at every beat, the sounds of every-day life still went on, close pressing around us – carts and carriages, street-cries, distant barrel-organs (the kindly neighbours kept them out of our street): life, active, noisy life, pressed on our acute consciousness of Death, and jarred upon it as on a quick nerve. (p. 167–8)

Although their ‘kindly neighbours’ do what they can to prevent further pain for Margaret’s family, what provokes her anger is the fact that broader communal and social perceptions of value are so disproportionate to her judgements of them. The public show of grief for Earl Ludlow might be appropriate to his status, but it is not proportionate to his true relationship to the locality, and neither was her father’s. The lack of memorial for her father allows ‘the people amongst whom he lived’ to forget him, and thus for him to slip out of the historical record. In recalling him in this narrative, however, Margaret goes some small way towards redressing the balance between him and the nominally ‘historic’ personage of Earl Ludlow. She defends the historical value of the unnoticed life, the ‘hundred acorns ... planted silently by some unnoticed breeze’ evoked by Carlyle.⁸³

⁸³ [Carlyle], ‘Thoughts on History’, p. 414.

The socially exclusive model of historicity is most decidedly refuted in the text's final episodes. As Margaret explains, Miss Galindo's reluctance to have her long-lost lover's illegitimate daughter live with her stems in part from the fact that 'Lady Ludlow could not endure any mention of illegitimate children. It was a principle of hers that society ought to ignore them.' (p. 194) But by the novel's end, even the loyal Miss Galindo has reminded her mistress that an accident of birth cannot be read as a marker of moral standing. 'I dare say he would have been born a Hanbury, or a lord if he could; ... It was his misfortune, not his fault, that he was not a person of quality by birth.' (p. 208) And the last scene related to Margaret from afar, in a letter from Miss Galindo, describes a tea-party hosted by Lady Ludlow, 'just like any plebeian among us', that includes among its guests the long-maligned reforming parson Mr Grey, the horrifyingly Baptist baker, Mr Brooke, and the illegitimate Miss Bessy (p. 214). These unhistoric agents are valorised, in the end, both in Lady Ludlow's dominion and in Margaret's narrative.

The independent-minded Miss Galindo offers a rebuttal of conventional ideas about what counts as historic. She is not afraid to demolish Lady Ludlow's carefully cultivated belief that aristocratic blood transmits different characteristics to those of 'unhistoric' individuals. This eccentric spinster also questions the extant criteria of what is worthy to be recorded. She relates how in her youth she planned to be 'an authoress', but then when she 'got paper, and half-a-hundred good pens, a bottle of ink, all ready', 'Oh, it ended in my having nothing to say, when I sat down to write. But sometimes, when I get hold of a book, I wonder why I let such a poor reason stop me. It does not others.' (p. 137–8) The sharp edge of her critique is diverted, however, by her typically 'feminine' valorisation of inconsequential detail: when Lady Ludlow commends her for refraining from authorship, with the logic that 'I am extremely against women usurping men's employments, as they are apt to do', Miss Galindo is distracted by a rare compliment. Her response to being commended for her superbly legible handwriting is the comment: 'I despise z's without tails' (p. 138). This could be offered either as an explanation or a proof: there is no clear sense of the direction of cause and effect. This strange relationship of generality and particularity is characteristic of the whole text, developing in episodes that leap from precise individual examples to sweeping doctrines and back again. Lady Ludlow's method of inference – from particularity to generality – is reclaimed, even though the uses she

puts it to are not. In this novel, Gaskell argues for the significance of the miniscule and otherwise unnoticeable.

In fact, in the final pages of the text, Miss Galindo refutes her own denial of authorship, which she had made on the grounds of insufficient material. In a letter to Margaret that also closes the novel, she rejects the conventional categories of historicity. ‘You ask for news of us all. Don’t you know there is no news in Hanbury? Did you ever hear of an event here? Now, if you have answered “Yes” in your own mind to these questions, you have fallen into my trap, and never were more mistaken in your life. Hanbury is full of news; and we have more events on our hands than we know what to do with.’ (p. 212–3) Here the qualifying status of the category ‘events’ uses a Carlylean rather than a conventionally historical scheme of criteria. Newsworthiness is denied according to the conventional schema, but then re-asserted in unhistoric terms. Gaskell thus finds a way to include unhistoric individuals both as subjects and as chroniclers of the recent past. This text may be named for an aristocratic widow who, as a ‘female paternalist’, both does and does not undermine the status quo.⁸⁴ In its tone and texture, however, it has a decidedly democratising tendency.

‘Not more happy’: Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley*

In all four case study texts, the historical setting is the locus of conflicting emotions. Unlike *My Lady Ludlow*, *Shirley* (1849) refuses nostalgia at the outset, asserting itself as decidedly ‘unromantic’.⁸⁵ However, this stance cannot be consistently maintained throughout the novel. When Charlotte Brontë began work on the novel, she was part of a family community of writers, but the nine months between completion of the first volume in September 1848 and the rest of the novel saw the deaths of all three of her surviving siblings. In *Shirley*, Brontë focuses in particular on the plight of the unhistoric woman, whom she associates with loneliness and isolation. Like Gaskell, and like Scott, she insists on a temporal continuum between past, present, and future. She remains ambivalent about the relative merits of these timeframes and refuses to idealise the past, instead envisaging quite varied historical trajectories for the future

⁸⁴ Krueger, p. 167.

⁸⁵ Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley*, ed. by Herbert Rosengarten and Margaret Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 5. Subsequent references will, where appropriate, be given within the text.

of its fictional (and by implication, historical) world. Despite the tart tones of the novel's opening, however, and though they reassert themselves at intervals, these are interspersed with passages of intense longing, both for lost times, and for a world unreachable by anything more tangible than the imagination.

Brontë's opening paragraphs employ deliberately distancing techniques, in part to refute any charges of the melodrama that was attributed by critics to *Jane Eyre* (1847),⁸⁶ but also, I would suggest, to refute any potential charges of nostalgia. It begins apparently as a discussion about contemporary ecclesiastical provision, but almost immediately undermines itself:

Of late years, an abundant shower of curates has fallen upon the north of England ... But not of late years are we about to speak; we are going back to the beginning of this century; late years – present years are dusty, sun-burnt, hot, arid; we will evade the noon, forget it in siesta, pass the mid-day in slumber, and dream of dawn. (p. 5)

This is a deeply contradictory set of statements. First, 'late years' are depicted as well watered, but before we know it they have also been described as 'arid'. The latter sentence instead locates the thirst-quenching dew of morning in the past, and suggests that the coming novel will be a yearning dream of escapism. But as soon as these visions are offered, they are retracted:

If you think, from this prelude, that something like a romance is preparing for you, reader, you never were more mistaken. ... Something real, cool, and solid, lies before you; something unromantic as Monday morning, when all who have work wake with the consciousness that they must rise and betake themselves thereto. (p. 5)

Brontë denies us escape as soon as she offers it: we cannot, after all, avoid the tasks and trials of everyday life. The language of this passage, however, oscillates between different discourses. 'Monday morning' puts us on a plane both mundane and decidedly earthly. By the end of the sentence, however, Brontë's acerbic and deliberately formal, 'unromantic' rhetoric has slipped into the quasi-Biblical language that will inform much of her novel. The tone of 'betake themselves thereunto' evokes a religious duty to work that transports us momentarily onto a more spiritual plane.

Brontë heightens this sense of dissonance between her fictional world (barely yet evoked) and the narratorial world by emphasising the historical cast of her novel. The subsequent paragraphs are peppered with allusions that remind us of the

⁸⁶ See [Elizabeth Rigby], 'Jane Eyre; an Autobiography', *The Quarterly Review*, 84 (1848), 153–85.

retrospective character of the narration. These references would have been incomprehensible to her characters of 1811, but instead gesture outward to her reading public, keeping the fictional world at arm's length:

there was no Pastoral Aid – no Additional Curates' Society to stretch a helping hand to worn-out old rectors and incumbents ... The present successors of the apostles, disciples of Dr Pusey and tools of the Propaganda, were at that time being hatched under cradle-blankets, or undergoing regeneration by nursery-baptism in wash-hand-basins. (p. 5)

As with these sly swipes at the 1830s and 1840s internal political tussles of the Evangelical and Tractarian wings of the Anglican Church, Brontë never allows us to forget that we are observing a scene which is distant not only from twenty-first century experience, but even from that of her first readers. Herbert Rosengarten and Margaret Smith point out that between writing the original draft and the final manuscript, Brontë transformed an approximate historical setting into a particular one. The second chapter begins a paragraph with the temporal marker, 'The period of which I write' (p. 26). She then deleted the words '(you may fix it, reader, in what year you will between the commencement of the present century, and the close of the French War)'. Instead, the published version dates the novel to 1811, when 'War was then at its height' and the 'Orders in Council' had been passed. (p. 27) Rosengarten and Smith use this to show 'that Charlotte wished her story to be dated with some precision'.⁸⁷ Brontë seeks to present, in her words, something 'real, cool, and solid': a precisely historical novel set at the very beginning of the industrialisation of her local landscape, brought into a temporal continuum, however rapidly changing, with her present.

Brontë refuses to draw any obvious trajectory of progress or decline, however, between the time of the novel's setting in 1811–12, and its writing in 1849. An influential tradition of criticism views Charlotte Brontë's engagement with Luddism as merely a foil for a discussion about the equivalent working-class movement of her own time, the Chartists. This was initiated by Terry Eagleton (although he drew on E. P. Thompson's work on the Luddites), who declared that 'Chartism is the unspoken subject of *Shirley*'.⁸⁸ Rosemarie Bodenheimer has developed this pervasive reading,

⁸⁷ Herbert Rosengarten and Margaret Smith, 'Note on the Text', Brontë, *Shirley*, p. xxiii.

⁸⁸ Terry Eagleton, *Myths of Power: A Marxist Study of the Brontës* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1975), p. 45. Astrid Hansen has enriched the discussion with an account of a visit by Brontë to the Chartist Francis Butterfield (in the summer of 1847 or 1848), to discuss a projected novel about the movement. Since the first volume of *Shirley* was completed in September 1848, and the full three volumes in summer 1849, this projected novel is presumably the one that became *Shirley*. This

to draw out its implications for the novel's conception of its society's wider historical trajectory. She suggests that the mirroring of the Chartist and Luddite movements is offered not merely 'as a distanced substitution for contemporary politics', but rather 'as an instance of cycle and repetition'.⁸⁹ As the numerous Biblical types invoked in the novel to mirror contemporary events suggest, *Shirley* offers a 'cyclical view of human history'. This is demonstrated in Shirley's juvenile French composition, which her ex-tutor and unacknowledged lover, Louis, repeats by heart on her provocation. It describes a 'certain tribe' in 'the dawn of time':

Are they savage? – doubtless. They live by the crook and the bow: half-shepherds, half-hunters, their flocks wander wild as their prey. Are they happy? – no: not more happy than we are at this day. Are they good? – no: not better than ourselves: their nature is our nature, – human both. (p. 405–6)

The opening of this passage facilitates a vision of a Rousseau-esque 'noble savage', but Shirley refuses to offer us any such narrative of a fall from initial grace. They are 'not more happy', nor 'better than ourselves'. At the same time, she refuses to condone any narrative of progress: the first people and those of today are of equal moral stature: 'human both'.

It is undeniable that *Shirley* often expresses a fear of the future and a longing for times past or currently passing away. Shirley tells Louis, now her betrothed, not to be so hasty for marriage, because 'you don't know how happy you are! – any change will be for the worse!' (p. 529) Caroline gazes forward at her projected future with despair, lamenting the passing even of what she is already losing in her present. However, such counter-commentaries as Shirley's French composition, quoted above, undermine readings of the novel that place the site of its nostalgic desire in any particular historical time period, even the pre-industrial (or at least only proto-industrial) time of its setting. The novel's attitude to the impact of industrialism is, rather, deeply ambivalent. At the end of the novel, Robert Moore offers his vision of a prosperous industrialised community, which is neither unmixedly idyllic nor dystopian. In the first conversation between him and Caroline Helstone after their eventual mutual confession of love, he declares,

evidence suggests that the Luddites of *Shirley* might consciously have been substitutes for intended Chartists, deliberately distancing this live contemporary problem to an artificial historical distance. See Astrid Hansen, 'The Book She Never Wrote: Charlotte and the Chartists', *Brontë Studies*, 31 (2006), 157–58.

⁸⁹ Rosemarie Bodenheimer, *The Politics of Story in Victorian Social Fiction* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 40.

‘I can double the value of their mill-property: I can line yonder barren Hollow with lines of cottages, and rows of cottage-gardens –’

‘Robert! And root up the copse?’

‘The copse shall be firewood ere five years elapse: the beautiful wild ravine shall be a smooth descent; the green natural terrace shall be a paved street: there shall be cottages in the dark ravine, and cottages on the lonely slopes: the rough pebbled track shall be an even, firm, broad, black, sooty road, bedded with the cinders from my mill: and my mill, Caroline – my mill shall fill its present yard.’

‘Horrible! You will change our blue hill-country air into the Stilbro’ smoke atmosphere.’ (p. 540)

The Carlylean and Ruskinian view of industrialism as a destructive force is not absent here – it is given voice in Caroline’s responses – but what is most striking about Robert’s vision is its tangled mixture of positives and negatives, even within the same phrases. While ‘beautiful wild ravine’ appeals to a sublime aesthetic, and ‘green natural terrace’ to a picturesque one, ‘dark’ and ‘lonely’ do not. The image of the industrialised landscape is similarly divided. The descriptors ‘Even, firm, broad’ have appeal, but the object’s other two adjectives, ‘black, sooty’, do not. Industrialisation, this passage suggests, is a mixed blessing.

One of the damaging effects of the Industrial Revolution was its appropriation (or, as some saw it, usurpation) of the roles of skilled workers. In *Shirley*, this problem is coupled with the reliance of the cloth trade on a global market crippled by the Napoleonic Wars and a government policy of commercial blockade. For many workers in the novel, industrialisation is equated with unemployment. Penny Boumelha, like Bodenheimer, notes that *Shirley* ‘sets up a number of parallels between working-class men and middle-class women’, with both groups linked by their similar dependence upon, and unemployment at the hands of, the ruling patriarchy.⁹⁰ The character of Caroline is given the task of voicing the plight of the ‘unhistoric’ masses. A substantial part of the heart of the novel is devoted to Caroline’s lamenting analysis of the oppressive waiting game that is the life of the unoccupied – and particularly unmarried, and thus effectively unemployed – gentlewoman. But simultaneously, she forces Robert Moore to consider the individuality of the workers under his command. She quotes to him her uncle’s belief that he will not ‘truckle to the mob’, to which he responds, ‘And would you have me truckle to them?’ She qualifies her position:

⁹⁰ See Bodenheimer, pp. 18, 42; Penny Boumelha, *Charlotte Brontë* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), p. 94.

‘No, not for the world: I never wish you to lower yourself; but somehow, I cannot help thinking it unjust to include all poor working people under the general and insulting name of “the mob”, and continually to think of them and treat them haughtily.’

‘You are a little democrat, Caroline’,

replies Robert (p. 80). He tries to laugh off her accusation by labelling it as extremist, but he does not manage to refute it. Caroline also refuses to accept a one-way relationship between the general and particular. Not only does she try to individuate ‘the mob’ as ‘poor working people’, but when her uncle pronounces marriage ‘a piece of pure folly’, she attempts to probe him about how he reconciles this doctrine with his own earlier marriage (p. 86). In response to her questions about his short-lived wife, he responds,

‘Caroline,’ said Mr Helstone, bringing his hand slowly down to within an inch or two of the table, and then smiting it suddenly on the mahogany, ‘understand this: it is vulgar and puerile to confound generals with particulars: in every case, there is the rule, and there are the exceptions. Your questions are stupid and babyish. Ring the bell, if you have done breakfast.’ (p. 87)

This assertion (in contradiction of the entire causal framework of *My Lady Ludlow*) of irrefutable difference between general and particular cases is merely a defence mechanism, an attempt to avoid being judged by wider moral criteria. Caroline refuses to be satisfied with the bare testimony of general laws; she understands that the individual case can invalidate the hypothetical law. Like *Lady Ludlow*’s Miss Galindo, she realises that society is a continuum, and even an ‘unhistoric’ individual can be significant.

However, the full force of the critique Brontë could have made through Caroline of the parallels between the oppression of unoccupied women and unemployed working-class men and women is, as many have argued, ultimately less than whole-hearted.⁹¹ Brontë’s sympathy with those ignored by history is certainly ambivalent, and often draws away on the brink of radicalism:

As to the sufferers, whose sole inheritance was labour, and who had lost that inheritance – who could not get work, and consequently could not get wages, and consequently could not get bread – they were left to suffer on, perhaps inevitably left; it would not do to stop the progress of invention, to damage science by discouraging its improvements; the war could not be terminated, efficient relief could not be raised; there was no help then, so the unemployed underwent their destiny – ate the bread, and drank the waters of affliction. (p. 27)

⁹¹ See Boumelha; Janet Gezari, ‘Introduction’, in *Shirley*, by Charlotte Brontë (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. xiv.

Taking this passage at face value would certainly suggest that Brontë's sympathy with the women marginalised by history does not extend to that other 'unhistoric' group, the working classes. As Helen Taylor has pointed out, however, class and gender mirror one another in the novel. In the scene of the attack on the mill, not only are the working class 'invisible' (as Eagleton argues), but 'the two women ... are also invisible ... to the working class men, whose impotence and vulnerability mirror their own'.⁹² This analogous status refutes the binary of historic and unhistoric evoked in the passage above, insisting instead that society is a continuum. It also challenges the arguments of critics such as Susan Zlotnik, who suggest that because Brontë is not overtly nostalgic for the 1810s, she must be pro-capitalist.⁹³ The chilling phrases 'perhaps inevitably left' and 'underwent their destiny', in tandem with the Biblical allusion of the final phrase (I Kings 22:27), suggest a process set in motion that (like Spencer Walpole's evocation of the French Revolution) can no longer be halted, but it is certainly no process of a liberating capitalism.⁹⁴ This narration of the sufferings of recent history uses repeated passive and conditional verbs – 'were left', 'could not be terminated' and 'could not be raised' – to attain the detached mode of hindsight, but it does not evoke this to claim historiographical authority: on the contrary, ultimate interpretation is left to God. It can also be read as a scathing parody of the denial of agency by those (such as the British government, but also including Robert Moore) who refuse to use their power to assuage or even prevent this suffering.

When Brontë does imagine solutions to this apparently 'inevitabl[e]' situation, they tend to be found on a mythical plane. After the Whitsuntide parade, Shirley evades further involvement in the rites of the established Church, to escape to communion with her chosen idol – and *alter ego* – 'Nature'. Blurring Greek and Christian mythology, viewing Eve as the mother of the Romantic poets' favourite rebel, Prometheus, she offers us a vision of a 'woman-Titan' (p. 270), who can speak 'face to face ... with God' (p. 271). This mythology finds its most extended delineation in her French composition, a visionary refutation of the mockery inherent

⁹² Helen Taylor, 'Class and Gender in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*', *Feminist Review*, 1 (1979), 83–93 (p. 86).

⁹³ Susan Zlotnick, 'Luddism, Medievalism and Women's History in *Shirley*: Charlotte Brontë's Revisionist Tactics', *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 24 (1991), 282–95.

⁹⁴ As Heather Glen has noted, this passage has been read by many critics as, in her words, 'straightforwardly expressive of its author's point of view' (Glen, p. 155.) See Eagleton, *Myths of Power: A Marxist Study of the Brontës*, pp. 49–50; Patrick Brantlinger, *The Spirit of Reform: British Literature and Politics, 1832–1867* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977), p. 125; Bodenheimer, pp. 42–43; Patricia Ingham, *The Language of Gender and Class: Transformation in the Victorian Novel* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 34–5.

in its Molière-inspired title, 'La Première Femme Savante'. In this tale, set in that prehistoric period 'not more happy than we are at this day', our solitary heroine echoes Caroline's (silent) lament at a futile life, seeing herself as 'a small, forgotten atom of life, a spark of soul ... burning unmarked to waste in the heart of a black hollow (p. 407), where 'unmarked' has similar resonance to Eliot's 'unhistoric'. Her recognition eventually comes from an at once highly abstracted and insistently embodied 'Lord', also apostrophised as 'Night' (p. 408). This vision brings together the yearning of Saint John for the Christian God – she calls, in the words of the Book of Revelation, used by St. John Rivers to close *Jane Eyre*, 'Lord, come quickly!' – with the deeply sensual embrace partly implicit in that communion: her 'Lord' 'pant[s]' and holds out his 'arms' (p. 408). Shirley ultimately identifies this rhapsody as 'the bridal-hour of Genius and Humanity' (p. 409). Her composition – written for, and read out by, a man who similarly seeks to 'claim' her, though we cannot be sure whether for such a harmonious union – ends with the challenge, 'Who shall, of these things, write the chronicle?' (p. 409) Whatever *Shirley* is, it is not, unfortunately for its eponymous heroine, quite the fulfilment of this call. Brontë suggests that only in an ahistorical realm can women gain this empowerment. Their dreams and desires are unrepresentable in realist forms, and in the relatively 'unromantic' (p. 5) plane of the recent past narrative, such a tale cannot fully come to fruition.

Despite moments of radical imagining – or perhaps *because* these are only expressed in the form of myth – the novel leaves itself open to a charge, first expressed by Charlotte Brontë's friend Mary Taylor, of ambivalence and half-heartedness in its critique of the position of women, and thus also of other marginalised groups.⁹⁵ Brontë's final statement about her heroines can reinforce this reading. The reader has come to know both Shirley and Caroline intimately through the course of the novel, and both have been, in their different ways, impassioned and vocal heroines. In the final roll-call, however, these two women are reduced to appendages to their male relatives:

Louis Gérard Moore, Esq. late of Antwerp, to Shirley, daughter of the late Charles Cave Keeldar, Esq. of Fieldhead: Robert Gérard Moore, Esq. of Hollow's Mill, to Caroline, niece of the Rev. Matthewson Helstone, M. A., Rector of Briarfield. (p. 541)

⁹⁵ See Mary Taylor to Charlotte Brontë, 25 April 1850, in Margaret Smith, ed., *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), II, p. 392.

On the one hand, this reminds us of the inadequacy of the historical record: the formal documentation of a key event in these individuals' lives bears little resemblance to our understanding of it. We can read this passage as a wry wink to our intimacy with the narrator and characters. It demonstrates how outsiders view the case; we, however, know the inside story. On the other hand, it is difficult to feel comfortable about these women's reduction to possessions of dominating men, and not to worry whether these marriages will offer them the fulfilment they both so yearn for. Ultimately, the novel defies any easy characterisation as either conservative or progressive, radical or reactionary. Brontë plays up to this ambiguity in the final lines:

I think I now see the judicious reader putting on his spectacles to look for the moral. It would be an insult to his sagacity to offer directions. I only say, God speed him in the quest! (p. 542)

This seems a veiled suggestion that it would be a futile endeavour, since there is no such thing.

In *Shirley*, Charlotte Brontë puts herself in the difficult position of claiming to eschew romance. An ironic narratorial voice bridges recent past and present in a temporal continuum, explicitly refusing to idealise either of them. There is a visible tension, however, between it and what Janet Gezari calls 'magical thinking': this voice gives way at times variously to nostalgia for the past, and a desire for a prehistoric mythical unity.⁹⁶ As Heather Glen has recently noted, a sense of 'untranscendable determinism' runs through Brontë's text, and is visible in passages like that quoted above on the 'sufferers', with its chilling repetition of passive verbs.⁹⁷ Brontë uses this stance, however, to undermine the very responsibilities, and capabilities, of her narrative. Her narratorial voice partly takes on the mantle of an authoritative historian, and partly – as I have suggested in relation to her depiction of the wedding – parodies the historian's claim to omniscience.

A similarly conflicted desire for, and scepticism towards, singular universality is also apparent in Brontë's approach to the social continuum. While unoccupied middle-class women are used to vocalise the plight of powerless working-class characters, this channels our attention from the latter to the former, making Brontë's depiction of the 'unhistoric' a partial one. Glen suggests that *Shirley* denies agency

⁹⁶ Gezari, 'Introduction', p. xxii.

⁹⁷ Glen, *Charlotte Brontë: The Imagination in History*, p. 159.

not only to her working-class characters but to all her characters: ‘the world her novel delineates is ... one even which those who act most decisively are impotent to change.’⁹⁸ This lies in sharp contrast with Gaskell’s less jaundiced faith in the power of even the ‘unhistoric’ individual to enact change. On the other hand, although she gives *credence* to notions of futility and lack of agency, Brontë also gives impassioned voice to desires for change. Her text is full of the strange contradictory musings of its varied – but almost unanimously yearning – characters. The more complacent a character is, the less we are encouraged to sympathise with them. Although at times she takes on the detached tones of a historian, this is not where her sympathies lie. Alongside the severe narratorial voice of the opening paragraphs and the wedding announcements, Brontë allows dissent into the interstices of the narrative. She recognises the inadequacy of singular narratives, acknowledging what gets left out.

Balancing two worlds: George Eliot’s *Felix Holt* and *Middlemarch*

In a review of *Middlemarch* in the *Fortnightly Review* of 19 January 1873, Sidney Colvin described George Eliot thus:

She has walked between two epochs, upon the confines of two worlds, and has described the old in terms of the new.⁹⁹

In this final case study, I will show how George Eliot’s two ‘Reform Act’ novels, *Felix Holt, The Radical* (1866; set 1831-2) and *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life* (1871-2; set 1829-32) ‘walk between two epochs’, both in their setting on the threshold of the Victorian era, and between the two worlds of setting and writing. In a schematic configuration, *Felix Holt* might be usefully aligned with *My Lady Ludlow* as a text that gives voice to nostalgic sentiment, while ironising it all the while; in *Middlemarch*, meanwhile, the dominant voice is one of progressivism, whose nostalgic undertone seeps through, as in *Shirley*, almost unintentionally. More consistently than either of the two earlier texts, however, Eliot’s novels seem to find a balance between these conflicting voices, enabling them to exist in a polyphonic, rather than an undermining, relationship. The following discussion of these two

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Sidney Colvin, ‘Middlemarch. A Study of English Provincial Life.’, *Fortnightly Review*, 13 (1873), 142–47 (p. 142).

novels will first consider the issue of the social continuum: what are the significances, and limitations, of Eliot's characterisation of Dorothea Brooke as 'unhistoric'? It will then consider Eliot's approach to the temporal continuum in these novels, assessing whether her presentation of the historical trajectory between the epochs of setting and writing is nostalgic or progressive, and what place irony holds in this relationship.

The proportion of Eliot's oeuvre to be deemed 'historical novels' has long been a point of contention. Many critics view *Romola* (1862-3) as her one historical novel, and this was deemed a failure by reviewers and subsequent critics alike for its overzealous attention to precise historical detail. *Felix Holt* was excluded from the historical novel category by Fred C. Thomson in 1959, who viewed it as an unsuccessful attempt to amalgamate tragedy and political plots. He saw its greatest value in acting as a 'practice' text: 'The experience of *Felix Holt*, however, proved fruitful. By the time she came to write *Middlemarch*, she had learned how to interweave a complex historical background without allowing it to unbalance her story.'¹⁰⁰ While Thomson excludes *Felix Holt* from the category of historical novel on grounds of quality control, reserving that place for *Middlemarch*, Eagleton will not accept even the latter as a historical novel. He accuses Eliot of failing to confront the issues she claims to address:

Middlemarch, one might say, is a historical novel in form with little substantive historical content. The Reform Bill, the railways, cholera, machine-breaking: these 'real' historical forces do no more than impinge on the novel's margins. ... There is, then, a discrepancy between what the novel claims and what it shows.¹⁰¹

This reveals, however, as much about Eagleton's restrictive definition of history as it does about *Middlemarch*, and excludes those conventionally 'unhistoric' elements I have focused on in this chapter. While I acknowledge that Eliot does not always engage fully with the class conflict resulting from the 'historic' developments Eagleton lists, it is nonetheless counter-productive, as I explained at the beginning of this chapter, to view *Felix Holt* and *Middlemarch* as anything other than historical novels.

The social continuum, and specifically the model of indirect historical agency whose valorisation in the nineteenth century has been traced by Maitzen, becomes a particular subject of discussion in *Middlemarch*. The impact of Dorothea Brooke on

¹⁰⁰ Fred C. Thomson, 'The Genesis of *Felix Holt*', *PMLA*, 74 (1959), 576-84 (p. 584).

¹⁰¹ Terry Eagleton, *Criticism And Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory* (London: Verso, 1978), pp. 120-21.

the Middlemarch community epitomises Maitzen's model of 'influence'. In fact, Eliot revives the dead metaphor inherent in the word (drawing on its etymology from the Latin verb *influere*, 'to flow in') in the famous description of Dorothea's 'full nature ... spen[ding] itself in channels', 'like [a] river', and having an 'incalculably diffusive' effect on those around her.¹⁰² Alison Booth, Sophia Andres and Maitzen have all argued that *Middlemarch* offers a positive alternative to standard Victorian approaches to female historicity, and this stance is one I take up in my analysis of the novel.¹⁰³

The radical extent of Eliot's approach to the nature of the 'historic' individual can be illuminated by a comparison with what at first glance might seem a similar manifesto by her fellow novelist Charles Reade. Reade echoes those declarations of Macaulay and Carlyle in a pronouncement at the outset of his *The Cloister and the Hearth* (1861):

Not a day passes over the earth, but men and women of no note do great deeds, speak great words, and suffer noble sorrows. Of these obscure heroes, philosophers and martyrs, the greater part will never be known till that hour, when many that are great shall be small, and the small great; but of others the world's knowledge may be said to sleep: their lives and characters lie hidden from nations in the annals that record them.¹⁰⁴

Andrew Sanders likens Reade's approach to that of Eliot's later novel, suggesting that 'like George Eliot in the finale to *Middlemarch* he is proclaiming his faith in "unhistoric acts".'¹⁰⁵ However, there are striking and important differences in their two approaches. Reade's religious teleology compares the work of the historical novelist to that of the divine judge on the day of Revelation, in a mode utterly alien to Eliot's humanist philosophy. More importantly, the absence of Reade's figures from national history is merely due to their lying 'sleeping' in annals, whereas Eliot's, as fictional characters, are unhistoric in a double sense, in being both inconspicuous and fictional. In this context, placing Dorothea anywhere on the axis of historicity is disingenuous in itself: she is both doubly and fallaciously 'unhistoric'.

Eliot's decision to term the acts of Dorothea's life 'unhistoric' is rendered ironic, however, in *Middlemarch*'s finale, which exalts the value of 'incalculably

¹⁰² Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 896. Subsequent references will, where appropriate, be given within the text.

¹⁰³ Alison Booth, 'Little Dorrit and Dorothea Brooke: Interpreting the Heroines of History', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 41 (1986), 190–216; Sophia Andres, 'The Unhistoric in History', *Clio*, 26 (1996), 79–95; Maitzen, *Gender, Genre, and Victorian Historical Writing*.

¹⁰⁴ Charles Reade, *The Cloister and the Hearth* (London: Ward, Lock & Tyler, 1882), p. 1.

¹⁰⁵ Andrew Sanders, *The Victorian Historical Novel*, p. 23.

diffusive' acts. It proposes that 'the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts' (p. 896), in a clause whose two halves effectively undermine each other: for what is meant by 'the growing good of the world' if not historical progress? In fact, this finale undermines itself yet one stage further. Eliot's criteria here for an event to qualify as 'historical' is that it be remembered, recorded and have an effect. By writing *Middlemarch* – which though diversified by the fusion of the original 'Miss Brooke' story with that of Lydgate and the Middlemarch community, is the book of Dorothea above anyone else – one might argue that Eliot *is* remembering, recording and memorialising Dorothea, spreading the impact of her life across her thousands of readers. In this act, the borderline between fictional narrative and history becomes both crucial and totally irrelevant. In one sense, by invoking the criteria of history Eliot undermines her entire project because Dorothea's actions *are* 'unhistoric', since they never happened: they are figments of our writerly imaginations. On the other hand, Eliot *makes* Dorothea historic by talking of her in the discourse of real events, and making her part of our collective memory by publishing her story.

A significant element of any reader's judgement about the radicalism, optimism or otherwise of *Middlemarch* hinges on their reading of the scene of Dorothea's epiphany on the morning after she comes to realise, with agonised lament, that she loves Will Ladislaw.

She opened her curtains, and looked out towards the bit of road that lay in view, with fields beyond, outside the entrance-gates. On the road there was a man with a bundle on his back and a woman carrying her baby; in the field she could see figures moving – perhaps the shepherd with his dog. Far off in the bending sky was the pearly light; and she felt the largeness of the world and the manifold wakings of men to labour and endurance. She was a part of that involuntary, palpitating life, and could neither look out on it from her luxurious shelter as a mere spectator, nor hide her eyes in selfish complaining. (p. 846)

This passage has been read sceptically: Hao Li, for example, sees it as an 'impersonal' 'blockage of the past, trading the personal relevance of humanity for the objectified figures in the fields'.¹⁰⁶ However, Dorothea's epiphany specifically stems from realising that she is 'part' of this life, not detached from it. In embracing a socially and temporally broad span of human life, she is embracing 'History'.

¹⁰⁶ Hao Li, *Memory and History in George Eliot: Transfiguring the Past* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), p. 133.

What is not commonly noted in readings of this passage is how Eliot's choice of adjectives mirrors the equally famous earlier image of a heightened sympathetic awareness, which 'would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat' (p. 226). Few actions are more 'involuntary' than the growing of the grass; and what better illustrates the term 'palpitating' than the beating of a squirrel's heart? Dorothea has achieved what the narrator had earlier claimed to be impossible: to be conscious of the 'roar which lies on the other side of silence' (p. 226), but to withstand it and use it for good. Of course, Dorothea's is a revelation very much circumscribed by time and place: she does not run after the nameless 'figures' and call for revolution, or burn down her fine Lowick manor, though she does suggest the setting up of a utopian commune. But this is nonetheless a historical revelation. In this way, Eliot negates her own characterisation of Dorothea's acts as 'unhistoric'. This entry into history shares something with *Waverley*'s: you become 'historical', both writers suggest, by becoming 'unhistoric', part of the invisible fabric of social history.

Eliot's writing offers ample fodder for critics keen to portray her as nostalgic towards the past. In *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), she makes a statement that appears to begin by endorsing a progressivist Whig thesis, but ends by retracting this position. 'Is not the striving after something better and better in our surroundings, the grand characteristic that distinguishes man from the brute ...?', she asks rhetorically. 'But', she continues, 'heaven knows where that striving might lead us, if our affections had not a trick of twining round those old inferior things, if the loves and sanctities of our life had no deep immovable roots in memory.'¹⁰⁷ In this metaphor, the individual is made up of organic matter, and effectively becomes part of their home landscape, 'twining round' and striking 'deep immovable roots' like an embracing plant. Partly as a result of such writing, Eliot has often been accused of a deep-seated conservatism that mars the extent to which she can be embraced as a sage by the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: through this insufficiency, it is implied, she is shown to have something of the 'short-sighted' quality confessed to by Dorothea.¹⁰⁸ Critics including Catherine Gallagher (1985), Daniel Cottom (1987) and Deirdre David (1987) have cited *Felix Holt*, her most explicitly political novel, as the one which – aided by its later appendage 'Address to Working Men, by Felix Holt' – crystallises a

¹⁰⁷ George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, ed. by Walter Allen (London: Pan Books, 1973), p. 142.

¹⁰⁸ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 52.

conservative ideology.¹⁰⁹ The authority of this hostile reading, however, is complicated by Eliot's own ambivalence to her historical setting in both *Felix Holt* and *Middlemarch*. It renders the temporal continuum in complex ways, shifting constantly between nostalgia for the past and an ironic distance from it, a eulogising of a lost world and a consciousness of its deficiencies.

Although Eliot appears at times in *Felix Holt* and *Middlemarch* to assert the superiority of the society of the 1860s and 1870s over its 1830s counterpart, these claims tend to be ironic. This strategy echoes that used by Scott in *Waverley*. For example, Scott explains that *Waverley*'s earnest and naïve tutor, Mr Pembroke, 'only wrote to our hero one letter, but it was of the bulk of six epistles of these degenerate days' (p. 122). In this comment, is 'degenerate' meant to be read seriously or not? Given the interminable length and dullness of Mr Pembroke's writing, this apparent suggestion of historical decline over the course of the second half of the eighteenth century is surely ironic. Similarly (though in reverse movement), in *Middlemarch*, the narrator asserts that levels of morality are now vastly superior to those of pre-1832: 'As to any provincial history in which the agents are all of high moral rank, that must be of a date long posterior to the first Reform Bill, and Peter Featherstone, you perceive, was dead and buried some months before Lord Grey came into office.' (p. 375) However, such statements are balanced out by satirical comments such as the declaration that any putative son of Dorothea would inherit £3000 a year, 'a rental which seemed wealth to provincial families, still discussing Mr Peel's late conduct on the Catholic question, innocent of future gold-fields, and of that gorgeous plutocracy which has so nobly exalted the necessities of genteel life' (p. 31). The word 'nobly' here is very much tongue-in-cheek.

Felix Holt offers the opposite apparent trajectory – one of decline – but also subjects it to as much ironic interrogation. As Eliot raises the curtain on the intensely visual and auditory depiction of 'the old coach-roads' that opens the novel, she evokes a fantastical, almost Dickensian scene so buzzing with vitality that even

¹⁰⁹ Catherine Gallagher, *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction: Social Discourse and Narrative Form, 1832–1867* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); Daniel Cottom, *Social Figures: George Eliot, Social History and Literary Representation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987); David, *Intellectual Women and Victorian Patriarchy*. While these critics approach Eliot through different lenses – Cottom's approach is an explicitly Marxist one, while David critiques Eliot on feminist grounds and Gallagher on aesthetic ones – all end up viewing her as in some way a conserver of the status quo. For further discussion of the political stance of these two texts, see Helen Kingstone, 'The Two Felixes: Narratorial Irony and the Question of Radicalism in *Felix Holt* and "Address to Working Men, by Felix Holt"', *The George Eliot Review*, 44 (2013), 42–49.

inanimate objects have sprung to life. The opening lines describe a world, ‘five-and-thirty years ago’, where

the glory had not yet departed from the old coach-roads. The great roadside inns were still brilliant with well-polished tankards, the smiling glances of pretty barmaids, and the repartees of jocose ostlers; the mail still announced itself by the merry notes of the horn.¹¹⁰

Here the sparkling vibrancy of the scene is enhanced by multiple anthropomorphisation: it is the ‘glances’ that are ‘smiling’ as well as the pretty barmaid herself, the mail which ‘announced itself’ as well as its carrier. The ‘Author’s Introduction’ is utterly torn between a nostalgic and a progressive view of historical change, never allowing the reader to reach a definitive conclusion about the relative merits of the eras of setting and writing. The opening pages, like those of *Shirley*, bristle with allusions emphasising the writerly and readerly hindsight of the period between 1831 and 1866, from pocket boroughs to the penny post to the fossil discoveries of geology. Indeed, the text’s very first words mark it as directed at a context-specific readership: for us, of course, the ‘five-and-thirty years ago’ no longer applies. Eliot is not speaking to us, at least not directly: from the opening phrase, this novel is signposted as a tract for the times, a text with contemporary relevance. In the statement that ‘Five-and-thirty years ago the glory *had not yet* departed’ (my italics), the thoroughly past quality of the pluperfect is exacerbated further by the retrospective ‘yet’, implying that this erstwhile glory (however hyperbolic) is now no more. This passage is one that bolsters the notion of George Eliot as ultimately conservative: here, the loss of the vibrant coach-road culture puts the nineteenth century on a downward trajectory.

This downward trajectory is not just one of gradual deterioration, but of potentially ‘apocalyptic terms’.¹¹¹ In *Felix Holt*’s ‘Author’s Introduction’, the coachman views ‘the recent initiation of railways’ as a millenarian sign. He ‘looked before him with the blank gaze of one who had driven his coach to the outermost edge of the universe, and saw his leaders plunging into the abyss’ (p. 81). Evan Horowitz has argued that in this passage, the ‘leaders’ who plummet to oblivion are a ‘parable of modernity’. ‘With Huskisson’s death, steering itself has become a thing of the past. Now there is only one direction – the way of the railroad tracks – and it

¹¹⁰ Eliot, *Felix Holt*, p. 75.

¹¹¹ David Carroll, *George Eliot and the Conflict of Interpretations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 36.

plunges us toward an abyss.’¹¹² In this reading, railway travel not only signals an attempt to transgress the boundaries of human capability, but the end of history itself.

This image of the forward motion of history driving modernity into an ‘abyss’ is not exclusive to *Felix Holt*. In *The Spirit of the Age* (1825), Hazlitt had poured scorn on Scott for what he saw as his fear of modernity, ‘mechanically shrink[ing] back as from the edge of a precipice.’¹¹³ The image of the ‘abyss’ seems to be particularly pervasive around the time of the Second Reform Act. In *Essays on Reform* (1867), George C. Brodrick characterises MP Robert Lowe’s anti-reform argument as grounded in a fear that

Once quit the safe level of a 10*l.* franchise, ... we are launched, according to him, on an inclined plane, whose ever-steepening gradients will hurry us forward helplessly with increasing velocity, till we plunge into the Democratic abyss. On that treacherous slope he assures us that no courage or skill will avail to stop us, for ‘the thing is fated,’ and the power of resistance, on which he now relies, will have passed away for ever.¹¹⁴

In using this image for *Essays on Reform* (1867), Brodrick might have been denigrating Lowe’s stance by eliding it with an uneducated provincial coachman’s from a novel of the previous year. Even if Brodrick was not alluding deliberately to *Felix Holt*, this image of plunging over a precipice was certainly prevalent in rhetoric of the moment, as evidenced by Carlyle’s article in *Macmillan’s Magazine* of April 1867, the famous ‘Shooting Niagara – And After?’, and John Tenniel’s *Punch* cartoon of 3 August 1867, ‘A Leap in the Dark’. In the catastrophic rhetoric of all these texts, time is represented spatially, figuring it not as continuous and linear but as a damaged landscape, disrupted and dangerous. In the terms of Chapter 2, these writers are attempting the spatially elevated perspective of overview, while being obviously immersed in events, lacking the hindsight to feel anything but terror at the potential outcomes of contemporary history.

While Eliot’s use of the ‘abyss’ in *Felix Holt* gives voice to apocalyptic sentiments, but distances them from herself by attributing them to an elderly provincial coachman, she approaches the imminent arrival of the railway in

¹¹² Evan Horowitz, ‘George Eliot: The Conservative’, *Victorian Studies*, 49 (2006), 7–32 (p. 8).

¹¹³ Hazlitt, p. 96.

¹¹⁴ G. C. Brodrick, ‘The Utilitarian Argument Against Reform, as Stated by Mr Lowe’, in *Essays on Reform*, ed. by A. O. Rutson (London: Macmillan, 1867), pp. 1–26 (p. 19). In this hyperbolic satire of the anti-reform position, the only words actually traceable to Lowe are ‘the thing is fated’, which appears in a speech given in the Commons on 3 May 1865, but he does use similarly linear imagery of historical time in his evocation of ‘the road to universal suffrage’. Robert Lowe, *Speeches and Letters on Reform* (London: Robert John Bush, 1867), p. 52.

Middlemarch from the opposite perspective. The borough of Middlemarch (implicitly liminal, as is most obvious in modern English in the Anglo-Welsh border area known as the ‘marches’) represents the paradigmatic every-place or no-place. This novel thus represents the quintessential local and provincial community, the antithesis as well as the microcosm of the nation. The narrator initially laughs off the unfounded concerns of those hostile to the coming railway, but embedded inconspicuously in the unfolding narrative is a brief acknowledgement of the economic disaster it presaged for some. This is, however, little more than fleeting. Any nostalgia for a slower pace of life pre-steam engines, given such vivid expression in *Felix Holt*, is never more than implicit in *Middlemarch*.

When it is first observed in *Middlemarch*, with the hindsight of forty years of successful rail travel, opposition to the railway is presented as backward-looking. Although in its 1830s context it is ‘as exciting a topic as the Reform Bill or the imminent horrors of Cholera’, this is depicted as a superseded fear. Eliot generalises ‘women’ as viewing ‘travelling by steam as presumptuous and dangerous’, (p. 597) a characterisation that claims a masculine authority for her own narratorial voice (see Chapter 1 for discussion of Eliot’s use of this trope in ‘Silly Novels’), and allows her female readers of the 1870s to feel smugly superior to their benighted predecessors. The locals of the land through which the railway is to pass, residents of ‘a hamlet called Frick’ (p. 598), are initially depicted as narrow-mindedly conservative:

[T]he human mind in that grassy corner had not the proverbial tendency to admire the unknown, holding rather that it was likely to be against the poor man, and that suspicion was the only wise attitude with regard to it. Even the rumour of Reform had not yet excited any millennial expectations in Frick, there being no definite promise in it, as of gratuitous grains to fatten Hiram Ford’s pig, or of a publican at the ‘Weights and Scales’ who would brew beer for nothing, or of an offer on the part of the three neighbouring farmers to raise wages during winter. (p. 598–9)

The narrator looks scathingly on their exclusive concern with their own lives, and thus their inability to assess significant political transformations in anything other than the wholly inappropriate terms of personal material gain.

However, when Caleb Garth – one of the novel’s most unwaveringly sympathetic characters, from whom the narrator never wavers in her support and respect – comes to address the labourers on their violence to the railway agents, the arguments she gives him are less than persuasive, relying primarily on the virtues of resignation to the inevitable:

‘Now, my lads, you can’t hinder the railroad: it will be made whether you like it or not. And if you go fighting against it, you’ll get yourselves into trouble. The law gives those men leave to come here on the land. The owner has nothing to say against it, and if you meddle with them you’ll have to do with the constable.’ (p. 604)

He goes on to pacify them with:

‘But come, you didn’t mean any harm. Somebody told you the railroad was a bad thing. That was a lie. It may do a bit of harm here and there, to this and to that; and so does the sun in heaven. But the railway’s a good thing.’ (p. 604)

The paltry inadequacy of this defence – which depicts the damaging effects of the railway, ‘here and there, to this and to that’, with a lack of specificity only outdone by his depiction of any advantages – is all too evident to his listeners. And Caleb himself is aware of this. Eliot describes him as being

in a difficulty known to any person attempting in dark times and unassisted by miracle to reason with rustics who are in possession of an undeniable truth which they know through a hard process of feeling, and can let it fall like a giant’s club on your neatly-carved arguments for a social benefit which they do not feel. (p. 605)

The use of ‘truth’ here is striking, especially coupled with its emphatic qualifier ‘undeniable’. After all the mocking comment of the chapter’s opening, Eliot reaches an impasse with this word ‘truth’. Although Caleb extracts ‘pledges’ of obedience from the labourers, the problem is left insoluble. All the narrator’s superior mockery counts for little in the face of the ‘undeniable truth’ that technological progress was leaving the rural labourers behind, and widening the distance between them and those who could seize the benefits of these changes. Eliot rarely sides explicitly with the labouring poor against her middle-class characters. In Raymond Williams’ famous analysis of her narratorial voice, it is ‘defensive and self-conscious’, ‘uneasily placating and appealing to what seems a dominant image of a particular kind of reader.’¹¹⁵ This example is significant for its rarity, though even here it happens only for a moment. The conundrum of Eliot’s narrator here echoes that visible in Brontë’s *Shirley*. Both novelists go some way towards recognising the plight of the working class, but both only do so fleetingly and sporadically, since any concerted attempt to overthrow the extant balance of power would conflict with the personal happiness and peace of mind of their most favoured (middle-class) characters. They are both

¹¹⁵ Williams, p. 172.

more comfortable in highlighting female exclusion from the historical record than the parallel exclusion of the working classes, both men and women.

Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth has voiced the kind of perpetual ambivalence towards the question of historical progress that I have drawn attention to in all four of my case studies, but which is particularly prevalent in *Felix Holt* and *Middlemarch*. She highlights ‘a particular narrative quality in *Middlemarch*, present at all levels of magnitude: the frustrating reversibility of almost every generalisation it sponsors.’¹¹⁶ She proposes elsewhere that Eliot’s insistence on ‘the inseparability of ideas and things within the cultural realm means that no systematic approach to culture is adequate. Its law is irreducibly diverse instead of single. ... No aerial perspective exists from which to resolve these laws once and for all into a single set ... Control is dispersed among members of the human community’.¹¹⁷ This reading of Eliot’s work shows the extent to which it counters the history-writing orthodoxies of Victorian England. In the constant dialectic between singularity and multiplicity, Eliot’s novels embraced the latter in a way both structurally and ideologically impossible for a historian of the period. Although the dominant narratorial voice of her novels led to her being pigeonholed by Modernism as the archetypal controlling – and moralising – Victorian sage, her narrator actually expresses, as we have seen, strikingly contradictory sentiments. Eliot might employ the motif of the ‘aerial perspective’ so beloved of Victorian historians, but she never remains with any one ‘perspective’ for long. Her self-consciously retrospective narratives offer no final conclusions and no decisive hindsight.

Conclusion

As we saw in Chapter 2, Victorian historians often shrank from the challenge of including the period of living memory in their national histories. Those who did were faced with the problem of how to reconcile the unwieldy and amorphous multiplicity of a living population with their desire for a singular narrative. They reverted to the trope of ‘nation’ to bring an artificial unity to their subject-matter. In this chapter, we have seen how realist novelists took up this same subject-matter, but found

¹¹⁶ Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, ‘Negotiating *Middlemarch*’, in *Middlemarch in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Karen Chase (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 107–31 (p. 109).

¹¹⁷ Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, *Realism and Consensus in the English Novel: Time, Space and Narrative* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 227.

themselves much more able to write about it. Writing in a form, pioneered by Scott, that prioritised the individual – and specifically the individual *in* history – Gaskell, Brontë and Eliot were able to succeed, in a way their historian peers could not, in narrating their recent past, and the full spectrum of its social continuum. They did this by confining their narratives to the local community, and, as Plotz has recently argued, using Franco Moretti's terms, the 'diagrammable' though unmappable imaginary provincial sphere.¹¹⁸ Rather than trying to bring the 'unhistoric' masses in to the margins of their text, as historians of the recent past did, or ascribing them an amorphous kind of agency by personifying them as the 'nation', they created heroines who are decidedly 'unhistoric' in their distance from or exclusion from the national and political sphere, and thus brought the unhistoric individual front and centre.

These novelists were also able to join the recent past more comfortably into a temporal continuum. Unlike the writers of national histories of the recent past, who both shrank from making premature judgements, and felt obliged to tie their particular observations into a generalising narrative of upward progress, Gaskell, Brontë and Eliot employed a polyphonic narrative technique – along with a narrator whose statements are not always to be taken literally – which allowed them to include dissident voices without granting them monolithic or hegemonic authority, allowing them to offer an immersed as well as an overview perspective. They achieved varying degrees of success in holding these divergent perspectives in tandem. Gaskell's *My Lady Ludlow*, with its succession of diverse narrators, is perhaps the most radical. Its title character's conservative pronouncements and hierarchical ideal of historicity are effectively, though surreptitiously, subverted and undermined throughout the text. Brontë's *Shirley* sets out on the opposite trajectory, with an authoritative narrator insisting on a refusal of nostalgia, but over the course of the narrative, lamenting voices creep in increasingly strongly, and allow decreasing space – and less than is allowed by Gaskell – for the working-class end of the social continuum. Eliot's *Felix Holt* has often been accused of conservatism, but as I have briefly shown, although its electoral 'radicalism' may be a Tory radicalism, its nostalgia is certainly infused with irony. *Middlemarch* represents perhaps the finest balancing act here: it perpetually oscillates between different ambivalent perspectives on the recent past period between setting and writing, without ever resolving that ambivalence into a singular

¹¹⁸ Plotz, 'The Semi-Detached Provincial Novel', p. 410; Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 54.

interpretative position. What is distinctive about all these novels is that they disavow any claim to make authoritative national or historical judgements, while doing exactly that, by using ironic narratorial voices that hold their own critique and challenge within them.

Where this mid-nineteenth-century genre revealed its limitations, however, was in its attempts to reclaim the unhistoric individual for history. Although strikingly successful in doing so for the middle-class woman – both in revealing her exclusion from the historical record, and in valorising those ‘feminine’ qualities and actions usually disregarded – these novelists struggled to do the same for the working classes. The final chapter, therefore, will demonstrate how in the closing decades of the century, utopian fictions set in the future sought not only to overthrow the constraints of hindsight, but also to envisage a society in which all members of the community can be equally ‘historic’ – or, in corollary, therefore, equally ‘unhistoric’.

Chapter 4

Utopian imaginings: the contemporary history of the future

This chapter will argue that in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, utopian fiction set in the future came to be used as an alternative to more conventional modes of writing contemporary history. This genre offered writers a means of reaching hypothetical conclusions about the Victorian era, enabling them to write their present as history. In the terms used throughout this thesis, the challenge of writing contemporary history is made up of two main problems, which we can characterise as temporal and social: how to write a history without hindsight, and how to represent lives whose value came from their ‘representative’ status rather than by having proved themselves as ‘historic’. These challenges were particularly off-putting in the Victorian period for historians, for reasons detailed in the first and second chapters, and a focus of pre-occupation for novelists, as detailed in the third chapter, but both of these could be reconceived, even solved, by being relocated into an imagined future.

Earlier in the century, as has been demonstrated, writers of a historicist bent attributed transcendent value to a unified, unifying ‘History’. For *fin-de-siècle* writers of utopian fiction, however, although the imaginary hindsight gained from setting their narratives in the future enabled them to embrace the notion of a temporal continuum that could include the recent past, this greater temporal flexibility became less important than the *social* continuum. The Socialist writers Edward Bellamy, William Morris and H. G. Wells, whose utopias are the focus of this chapter, did not place value in tradition and continuity in either the Whig mode, as had our historians, or the conservative mode, as had our novelists to lesser or greater extents. They were willing, even zealous, to see a break in the temporal continuum, represented by revolution and radical breaks with the past. Although they still prioritised unity and singularity, these were now conceived of in social rather than temporal terms. These writers bypassed the problems of ‘national’ or ‘individual’ historicity with which historians and novelists had struggled, by placing emphasis instead on a community at once localised and trans-national, at once individualised and universal. Prioritising equality and inclusivity, they refused to be satisfied with any kind of hierarchy or even meritocracy of agency in the mode of Hazlitt and Horne. Their ideal was

enshrined in a model of collective agency that was as elusive as it was attractive, and could only be attained through a quasi-religious leap of faith.

The *fin de siècle* and utopia

Imaginary history of the future was not new at the *fin de siècle*. Kelly Mays has done some important preliminary work on this topic, demonstrating

just how frequently nineteenth-century Britons imagined their own present one day becoming the object of the same sort of scrutiny, fascination, and misinterpretation to which they subjected the past, and, more importantly, just how habitually they sought to make the present present, as it were, by imaginatively looking back at it from the future.¹

An anonymous *Imaginary History of the Next Thirty Years*, for example, was published in 1857, although this was effectively a manifesto in concretised form.² Even utopian imaginary history of the future was not unheard of: Winwood Reade's militantly agnostic romantic world history, *The Martyrdom of Man* (1872), extends into a utopian future, prophesying that 'Earth, which is now a purgatory, will be made a paradise ... by the efforts of man himself.'³ What was new in the closing decades of the century, however, was a wave of writing that conjoined this genre of imaginary future history with that of fictional utopia. While George Chesney's broadly dystopian *The Battle of Dorking* (1872) is often seen as the point of origin for what would become science fiction,⁴ my study begins in 1888 with Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward 2000–1887*. This is widely recognised as the first to conjoin these extant forms – fiction and future history – with utopia.

The tradition of utopia, prior to the late nineteenth century, was fundamentally ahistorical. Utopia defied history by going beyond it, into a timeless realm of static perfection. Writers from Thomas More (1516), Tommaso Campanella (1623) and Francis Bacon (1627) to Samuel Butler (1872) envisaged utopias that were inherently

¹ Kelly J. Mays, 'Looking Backward, Looking Forward: The Victorians in the Rearview Mirror of Future History', *Victorian Studies*, 53 (2011), 445–56 (p. 447).

² Anonymous, *Imaginary History of the Next Thirty Years* (London: Sampson Low, Son & Co., 1857). Mays also gives the examples of Anonymous, 'The Book of Oatiati', *Gentleman's Magazine*, October 1871, 550–55; [Andrew Lang], 'The Great Gladstone Myth', *Macmillan's Magazine*, February 1886, 241–45; William M. Sutherland, 'Will Queen Victoria Be a Historical Personage?', *The New Century Review*, January 1899, 66–73.

³ Winwood Reade, *The Martyrdom of Man* (London: Watts & Co., 1924), p. 413.

⁴ I. F. Clarke, 'The Battle of Dorking, 1871–1914', *Victorian Studies*, 8 (1965), 309–28; Darko Suvin, *Victorian Science Fiction in the UK: The Discourses of Knowledge and Power* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1983).

self-perpetuating and self-contained, hidden in an undiscovered part of the globe. This format was less tenable by the end of the nineteenth century, in a world whose every corner had been explored and largely colonised. As a result, in the *fin-de-siècle* surge in utopian writing, the genre became global in scale, and was relocated into the future. Moreover, after Darwin had given weight to Lyell's uniformitarian theories of perpetually continuing geological and evolutionary forces, no one could seriously argue for a society where everything remained static. Later visions of the perfect society (whether explicitly fictional or asserted as political manifestos) were forced to be historical – that is, subject to change. Sidney Webb voiced this sense in his contribution to *Fabian Essays* in 1889.

Down to the present generation, the aspirant after social regeneration naturally vindicated the practicality of his ideas by offering an elaborate plan with specifications of a new social order from which all contemporary evils were eliminated. ... Owing mainly to the efforts of Comte, Darwin, and Herbert Spencer, we can no longer think of the ideal society as an unchanging State. The social ideal from being static has become dynamic. The necessity of the constant growth and development of the social organism has become axiomatic. No philosopher now looks for anything but the gradual evolution of the new order from the old, without breach of continuity or abrupt change of the entire social tissue at any point during the process.⁵

Over a century later, Krishan Kumar has voiced a similar sentiment, arguing that nineteenth-century utopia is different from previous utopian fiction in being dynamic rather than static, fitting itself into history rather than merely existing in a parallel temporal universe (although, unlike the Fabian Webb, he does not refute the possibility of revolutionary as well as evolutionary change). Kumar explains,

To Saint-Simon, Fourier, Owen, Comte, Spencer, Marx and the other great system-builders of the century, it seemed self-evident that utopia was now on the point of realisation. ... What were needed were not wishful visions of perfection but scientific accounts of historical development, together with some precise indication of what needed to be done to usher in the new order as effectively and painlessly as possible.⁶

By contrast with John L. Thomas's characterisation of the 'Platonic ideal' offered by classical utopias, late nineteenth-century writers proposed their utopia as a model to strive towards, and to bring to fruition in the future.⁷

⁵ Sidney Webb, 'Historic', in *Fabian Essays in Socialism*, by George Bernard Shaw, Sidney Webb et al (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1920), pp. 30–61 (p. 31).

⁶ Krishan Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), p. 48.

⁷ John L. Thomas, 'Introduction' to Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward, 2000–1887* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass., 1967), p. 41.

In the historicist framework that I have previously shown to be prevalent in Victorian intellectual culture, the future is as much part of history as is the past or present. This is evident, for instance, as early as Carlyle's 1830 article 'On History', in which he declares:

History, as it lies at the root of all science, is also the first distinct product of man's spiritual nature; his earliest expression of what can be called Thought. It is a looking both before and after; as, indeed, the coming Time already waits, unseen, yet definitely shaped, predetermined and inevitable, in the Time come; and only by the combination of both is the meaning of either completed.⁸

According to this framework, past, present and future are all part of a capitalised, transcendent History. At the opposite end of the period, this remained key to Victorian notions of their society's place in history, although now wedded more closely to a concern with the social continuum. In a 1897 novella, 'A Story of the Days to Come', H. G. Wells mocks those who shy away from Carlyle's dictum that 'History' consists of 'both before and after'.⁹ The initial hero of this narrative, Mr Morris, who 'lived in the days of Queen Victoria the Good', lasts barely five paragraphs before he passes into dust. All the proprieties of his age – which he is proud to conform to – are derided as futile and empty. He 'never failed to have his hair cut to exactly the proper length', for example, but the double negative of 'never failed' subverts this apparently approbatory comment into one of ridicule.¹⁰ In short, 'he was one of those worthy people who take no interest in the future of mankind at all. He had grave doubts, indeed, if there was any future for mankind after he was dead.'¹¹ Unlike William Morris, this Mr Morris refuses to accept his role in either temporal or social continuum. His lack of interest in posterity originates from his lack of interest in anyone but himself and an abstracted standard of normality. Wells makes it clear that this blinkered outlook is both all too common and utterly fallacious. Because Mr Morris refuses to identify with collective historical agency, his memory does not last among future generations. His mortal remains are soon 'decayed and forgotten'.¹² Writers at both ends of the Victorian period are insistent that history is a social and a temporal continuum, including the future just as much as

⁸ [Carlyle], 'Thoughts on History', p. 413.

⁹ The story was serialised, in June to October 1897, in *Pall Mall Magazine*; it was then included in H. G. Wells, *Tales of Space and Time* (London: Doubleday & McClure, 1899).

¹⁰ H. G. Wells, *The Complete Short Stories of H. G. Wells* (London: Ernest Benn Limited, 1927), p. 715.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 716.

¹² *Ibid.*

the past. Thus, as well as the histories and novels of their recent past discussed in previous chapters, writers' attempts to imagine their society's future form an integral part of this project.

In conceiving of their utopias as models to strive towards, Bellamy, Morris and Wells proposed a temporal continuum between past, present and future. In this chapter, therefore, the term 'contemporary history' takes on a more expansive reference than when previously discussing the work of historians and novelists. There, the term referred primarily to histories of the recent past. In the texts of this chapter, by contrast, the contemporary-history-writing largely focuses on the present and immediate future. The historicity it envisages, therefore, is one that, in Matthew Beaumont's words, 'attempt[s] to grasp the contemporaneous as part of a historical process.'¹³ Fredric Jameson has defined historicity as

neither a representation of the past nor a representation of the future (although its various forms use such representations): it can first and foremost be defined as a perception of the present as history; that is, as a relationship to the present which somehow defamiliarises it and allows that distance from immediacy which is at length characterized as a historical perspective.¹⁴

This movement of self-conscious distancing and defamiliarisation from one's present is exactly the task undertaken in this chapter's utopian case-studies, which leap forwards in order to look back. They sometimes engage directly with the issues involved in writing the recent past as history, but I will also draw on more metaphorical connections, based in shared conceptual frameworks as much as in explicit statements. This chapter will stretch the definition of 'contemporary history' from one of recent past to one predominantly of present and future, but will do so because that is precisely what my case studies were doing.

The focus of this chapter, therefore, is *fin-de-siècle* utopian fiction set in the future. It will turn when appropriate to supporting texts that fulfil only some of these criteria, including Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race* (1871), Edwin A. Abbott's *Flatland* (1884), Richard Jefferies's *After London* (1885) and H. G. Wells's 'A Story of the Days to Come' (1897). My key texts, however, will be Edward Bellamy's ground-breaking utopian novel, *Looking Backward, 2000–1887* (1888), William Morris's defiant response to its statist vision, *News from Nowhere* (1890),

¹³ Matthew Beaumont, *Utopia Ltd: Ideologies of Social Dreaming in England, 1870–1900* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), p. 33.

¹⁴ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 284.

and H. G. Wells's *A Modern Utopia* (1905), which draws on both of these earlier texts to attempt a perfect synthesis of centralisation and individuality.

Categorising this last text with the other two late-Victorian future-based utopias is a misnomer in two senses. Firstly, it is, strictly speaking, not set in the future, but at an extreme geographical remove. As Wells declares, 'No less than a planet will serve the purpose of a modern Utopia', and so his ideal society is set 'out beyond Sirius, far in the deeps of space'.¹⁵ It is for this reason that I supplement my analysis of this utopia with comparisons to his earlier future-fiction, 'A Story of the Days to Come'. On the other hand, although its distantiation is nominally geographical rather than temporal, *A Modern Utopia* is demonstrably futuristic, building on the innovations of the turn of the twentieth century. As Stephen Kern has recognised, the 'Culture of Time and Space' is inextricably bound together, and both aspects were transformed between 1880 and 1914 by new technologies and their implications.¹⁶ This technique of using spatial distance to stand for temporal distance (previously discussed in the Introduction and Chapter 2) became perhaps particularly necessary at the *fin de siècle*, when, as Kern has delineated, technologies powered by electricity, including telegraphy, telephones, and emergent air travel, were collapsing the conventional relationships between space and time. Wells' decision to place his effectively futuristic utopia at a nominally spatial remove, therefore, is a means of representing detachment from his vision. Posited, like Bellamy's and Morris's utopias, as a potential goal for us to aim at, in many respects Wells's *Modern Utopia* is designed to be read as a vision of the future. The two devices are perhaps not so different: at one point, William Morris's time-travelling protagonist suggests he be spoken to 'As if I were a being from another planet'.¹⁷

Secondly, Wells's text evidently falls outside the strictly 'Victorian' period that is the focus of my study. It is, however, caught up in the same conceptual and historiographical concerns as this chapter's other key texts. In addition, it points towards some of the developments that would take place in the opening decades of the twentieth century. This final chapter of my thesis turns forward to the future, looking beyond the remit of my study to the post-Victorian period. It examines how writers sought to escape the dichotomy of history versus novel, the dichotomy of

¹⁵ H. G. Wells, *A Modern Utopia* (London: Everyman, 1994), pp. 8–9.

¹⁶ Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880–1918* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983).

¹⁷ William Morris, *News from Nowhere and Other Writings*, ed. by Clive Wilmer (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 89.

eschewing versus wallowing in their recent past. It asks: what next? As such, it offers a useful illumination of the conditions under which the Edwardian histories discussed in Chapter 2 were written. Kipling, Fletcher, Arnold-Forster and Stopford Green *do* include the recent past in their volumes, however awkwardly. Maybe the practice, developed in the utopian genre, of linking present with future via a historical trajectory, gave them the precedent they needed.

Although these utopian writers all managed to express their recent past, present and imagined future in words, bringing their ideals to fruition in practice was a different matter. In recent decades, the extent to which this kind of *fin-de-siècle* utopian thought was really of cultural centrality has come under scrutiny. Gareth Stedman Jones has influentially argued that the Socialist movement had far less impact on most people's lives than Marxist historians have suggested. He proffers the celebratory response to the Boer War victory at Mafeking in 1900, and the popularity of conservative music hall culture, as evidence of a working class whose 'impermeability to the classes above it was no longer threatening or subversive, but conservative and defensive.'¹⁸ On the other hand, within Stedman Jones's own methodology, which prioritises the instrumental power of language to create, for example, class consciousness, it is not insignificant that William Morris, for one, *believed* that he was part of a far-reaching trend. He admitted in 'Where are We Now?' (an article published in *Commonweal* soon after *News from Nowhere* had finished serialisation), that the seven-year Socialist movement had not so far benefited 'those who set out "to make the revolution"', but he insisted that 'the movement has at least accomplished this, that no one who thinks is otherwise than discontented with things as they are.'¹⁹ The problem, however, was transferring that 'discontent' into practical action, and that practical action towards a single, collective, concerted end that transformed multifarious individuals into a united historical force.

The relationship of utopian writing to practical action has long been a subject of debate.²⁰ As Darko Suvin, in common with Lee Cullen Khanna, has pointed out, the field of utopian studies encompasses two rather disparate groupings. Including both social scientists whose focus is utopian communities, and literary scholars

¹⁸ Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History 1832-1982* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 215.

¹⁹ William Morris, 'Where Are We Now?', in *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist*, ed. by May Morris, 2 vols. (New York: Russell and Russell, 1966), II, pp. 513, 514.

²⁰ Marx and Engels disavowed utopia because they saw it as impractical. See Friedrich Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, ed. by John Rees [1880; first English translation 1892] (London: Bookmarks, 1993).

interested in utopia as text, the field sometimes seems, in his words, ‘a two-headed monster’.²¹ I confess that I attempt to include both monstrous heads in this chapter. My examination of the effect of these texts’ future setting on their ability to depict contemporary history leads me to straddle the divide that Suvin delineates. As in previous chapters, the analysis will proceed in two dimensions: the temporal and then the social. The first half of this chapter examines how these writers create and use artificial hindsight, and entails a focus on the textual aspects of utopia. Considering how they deal with the problem of agency and historicity, in the second half of the chapter, moves us towards the practical (or not so practical) pole, bringing them into alignment with contemporaneous *fin-de-siècle* social reforming projects that struggled with similar questions of collective agency. For these writers, revalorising the ‘unhistoric’ individual is no longer just a matter of representing them in text, but also of making them aspire to and exercise historical agency in the real world. This study views its case studies very much as fictions – with all the open-endedness celebrated, for example, by the Marxist philosopher of utopia Ernst Bloch and those inspired by him, including Darko Suvin, Ruth Levitas and R. T. Widdicombe – but also recognises them as texts which, to varying extents, sought to lead the world of their readership towards real social transformation.²² The final section of this chapter will consider these writers’ – rather surprising – strategies for *how* their society might take the leap to utopia, showing that the kind of transcendent, even quasi-religious quality that earlier in the century had been attributed to ‘History’ was now transferred to the ‘collective’.

Solving the problem of hindsight

As we have seen, one of the two fundamental problems faced by nineteenth-century historians who sought to write contemporary history was lack of hindsight. Without this requisite temporal distance from their material, how could they judge what was

²¹ Lee Cullen Khanna, ‘The Text as Tactic: Looking Backward and the Power of the Word’, in *Looking Backward, 1888–1888: Essays on Edward Bellamy*, ed. by Daphne Patai (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), pp. 37–50; Darko Suvin, ‘Locus, Horizon, and Orientation: The Concept of Possible Worlds as a Key to Utopian Studies’, in *Not Yet: Reconsidering Ernst Bloch*, ed. by Jamie Owen Daniel and Tom Moylan (London: Verso, 1997), pp. 122–137 (p. 125).

²² See Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, trans. by Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1986), I; Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1990); Richard Toby Widdicombe, ‘Eutopia, Dystopia, Aporia: The Obstruction of Meaning in Fin-de-Siècle Utopian Texts’, *Utopian Studies*, 1 (1990), 93–102.

significant about their own era? Writers from the socialist tradition, as well as their liberal or conservative counterparts, acknowledged this issue. The utopian Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch asks, in ‘On the Present in Literature’ (1956), whether it is possible to write objectively about something you are simultaneously experiencing subjectively. He comments that ‘all nearness makes matters difficult, and if it is too close, then one is blinded, at least made mute.’²³ The slippage between ‘blind’ and ‘mute’ demonstrates the two-stage nature of the issue. In the midst of events it is difficult to see clearly; even if you can, seeing is not commensurate with expression. And ‘close’ is used here in both spatial and temporal senses, demonstrating the need for distance, of whatever type, to enable representation.

Writers of *fin-de-siècle* utopian fiction, however, found a potential solution to this problem. By projecting their narratives into the future, they could put themselves at an imaginary distance from their present, and look back on it with artificial hindsight. Matthew Beaumont explains this genre’s late-nineteenth-century flourishing as a response to a ‘crisis of representation’, since modernity ‘rendered the present inaccessible or even (in phenomenological terms) absent’.²⁴ As Beaumont suggests, the utopian genre was

used by social reformists to arrive at an historical understanding of their own times from the critical perspective of a redemptive or retributive future. In its ideal-typical form, it is probably most easily grasped as a subspecies of the historical novel, grappling with the problem of apprehending the present in all its opacity.²⁵

Preceding chapters have amply demonstrated the ‘opacity’ of a present unavailable to hindsight. This section examines the way in which the utopian novel could become a ‘subspecies of the historical novel’, and the particular challenges associated with creating an imaginary future.

My discussion of the temporal dimension of utopian contemporary-history-writing will first delineate the evident advantages gained by Bellamy, Morris and Wells from setting their narratives in the future. This enables them to see their present with an otherwise unattainable retrospective clarity, in a continuum from which all uncertainty has evaporated. This also puts the nineteenth century into perspective in a broader context, in which its petty disputes and fears often pale into insignificance.

²³ Ernst Bloch, ‘On the Present in Literature’, in *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, trans. by Jack Zipes (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989), pp. 207–8.

²⁴ Beaumont, *Utopia Ltd.*, p. 7.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

Where it is remembered, it is generally only as the low point that gave the necessary impetus to the creation of a new utopian society. I will then show how the distancing effect of this future setting is exacerbated in some of these texts by a kind of double hindsight. Drawing on the precedent of Chesney's *Battle of Dorking*, Bellamy claims that *Looking Backward* not only took place, but was even written, in the future, for a twenty-first-century readership. This powerfully defamiliarising trope could potentially alienate nineteenth-century readers. In all three of my texts, this sense of the future's alien nature is both heightened and softened by employing a visitor figure, who mediates between the worlds of reader and utopia. As previous nascent science-fiction texts had shown, one of the future's defining characteristics is its very unrepresentability. It can only be described in the inevitably inadequate terms of the past and present. These *fin-de-siècle* utopists were self-conscious about this problem, and used their mediators to translate the future world into the terms of the past.

This necessarily influences the presentation of the recent past in these texts, and I will look in particular at Morris's uncomfortable narration of Bloody Sunday, to demonstrate the problems of creating a ready-made future out of the materials of the past. As the final part of this discussion will show, these utopists recognised the limitations of their imaginary hindsight. While hindsight seems the holy grail of nineteenth-century historians, in the genre of utopia it cannot act as such a universal indicator. These writers' belief in a temporal continuum effectively denies any binary relationship between present and future, and detracts from the longevity of their predictions. By trying to join up their present to an imagined future, they leave themselves open to almost immediate criticism and contradiction. Their utopian worlds, therefore, as I will go on to show in the second half of this chapter, are just as important for the alternatives they inspire, as for the particular systems they delineate.

The advantages of hindsight

By setting their utopias in the future, the writers discussed in this chapter gained the notional ability to look back on the nineteenth century with an imaginary hindsight. The heroes of Bellamy's *Looking Backward 2000–1887*, Morris's *News from Nowhere* and Wells's *A Modern Utopia* claim an exclusive first-hand experience of the future, which allows them to narrate the history of their nineteenth-century present with a unique authority. Drawing on the precedent of Washington Irving's

eponymous Rip Van Winkle (1819), Bellamy's hero, Julian West, falls into a mesmeric sleep for over a century. Near the end of the book, he appears to have re-awoken in 1887, but this eventually turns out to have been itself a dream, and his new existence in twenty-first-century utopia is allowed to continue. In Morris's text, which was written in part as a defiant attempt to offer an alternative to Bellamy's technological and statist vision, William Guest similarly falls asleep in 1890, and wakes up in the twenty-first century. At the end of the book, however, he awakes in 1890 again, and his excursion to Nowhere is revealed as a dream. From their more or less somnambulant forays into the future, these narrators learn which of the events in their contemporary era will prove of lasting significance, and which will become its key turning-points.

Hindsight enables Bellamy, Morris and Wells to look back at the past (their readers' present) as a train of events whose causation and outcomes are now blindingly obvious. In 'A Story of the Days to Come' (1897), Wells observes how the revolutions in transportation that began with the railway 'became, after the event, a thing so obvious that it is a matter of astonishment it was not more clearly anticipated.'²⁶ He blames the short-sightedness and complacency of the nineteenth century (epitomised in the afore-mentioned Mr Morris) for the later spiralling into dystopia. Although the changes wrought by the industrial revolution were evidently transformative,

That any steps should be taken to anticipate the miseries such a revolution might entail ... never seems to have entered the nineteenth-century mind. ... [T]hat in fact, a revision and enlargement of the duties and rights of man had become urgently necessary, were things it could not entertain, nourished as it was on an archaic system of education and profoundly retrospective and legal in all its habits of thought.²⁷

In the framework this evokes, pre-empting later problems was both 'urgently necessary' and impossible: dystopia, it suggests, was therefore inevitable.

William Morris's *News from Nowhere* offers a narrative of the history between its writing and setting with a different outcome, but whose chain of causation seems retrospectively to be equally pre-determined. When our narrator, William Guest (as he hesitantly calls himself, in a fusion of Morris's own name with that of an archetypal visitor) is given a description by the elderly Richard Hammond

²⁶ Wells, 'A Story of the Days to Come', p. 752.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 752–3.

of the transition from ‘commercial slavery to freedom’, via an unsuccessful system of ‘State Socialism’, Guest comments:

‘You were getting perilously near to the late Roman poor-rates,’ said I, smiling, ‘and the doling out of bread to the proletariat.’

‘So many said at the time,’ said the old man drily, ‘and it has long been a commonplace that that slough awaits State Socialism in the end, if it gets to the end, which as you know it did not with us. ... But of course to the privileged classes it seemed as if the end of the world were come when such laws were enacted.’²⁸

As this exchange demonstrates, Morris’s future-utopia asserts its authority by claiming the superior wisdom of hindsight, unavailable to his readers and to those in the middle of the revolution. His utopians rest secure in the knowledge of which phenomena turned out to be temporary and which have lasted. What seemed catastrophic and apocalyptic at the time – ‘the end of the world’ – turned out to be, perhaps, the end of history, but certainly not the end of life.

The advantages of hindsight are sometimes not even those you might expect. In *News from Nowhere*, even the placid Dick becomes ‘roused and angry’ when Guest tries to defend the nineteenth-century prison system with the excuse that ‘perhaps ... they did not know what the prisons were like’. ‘More shame for them’, he replies, ‘when you and I know it all these years afterwards.’²⁹ In his view, lack of hindsight is no excuse. Moreover, not everything is rendered clear by the passing of time: some details have become obscured. Dick’s ‘antiquarian’ great-grandfather, Hammond, authoritatively explains to our narrator how ‘one Gladstone, or Gladstein (probably, judging by this name, of Scandinavian descent), a notable politician of the nineteenth century, was especially singled out for reprobation’.³⁰ This ‘probably’ is a false judgement, demonstrating that hindsight blurs and erodes just as much as it clarifies.³¹ However, what it does show is how little the intricacies of nineteenth-century politics *matter* by this time. Hindsight has put it into perspective, and proved its insignificance in terms of human development. Although Dick nominally cares little for history, he is full of Shakespearean allusions and knowledge about the medieval City of London. Our narrator ‘smiled faintly to think how the nineteenth century, of which such big words have been said, counted for nothing in the memory

²⁸ Morris, *News from Nowhere*, p. 138.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

³¹ The question of how Gladstone will be remembered by posterity is a recurrent one in writing of the late nineteenth century – and normally they get it completely wrong! See Lang, ‘The Great Gladstone Myth’; Anonymous, ‘The Book of Oatiati’.

of this man, who read Shakespeare and had not forgotten the Middle Ages.³² In the extended temporal framework in which the inhabitants of Nowhere view their lives, the nineteenth century has paled into obscurity, significant only as the nadir from which they have thankfully emerged.

Alienation and mediation

This sense of distance from the reader's nineteenth-century present is exacerbated, in several of these texts, by situating not only the protagonist, but the narrator and even the implied author, in the position of hindsight. While the frame narratives of *News from Nowhere* and *A Modern Utopia* are situated in their readers' present, with the narrator then taking an imaginative leap into utopia, several of this period's future-histories claim to have been *written* in the future. This is not merely an extension of the eighteenth-century convention of the 'found manuscript', whereby the author claims additional verity for his text by presenting it as (to use Lennard Davis's phrase) a 'factual fiction': it reverses the convention.³³ Far from placing the text in the real world of the reader, it makes it impossible to reconcile with any historical trajectory that does not, in a literalisation of Carlyle's dictum, view the 'coming Time' as 'already wait[ing]'. The first to do this was probably George Chesney's *The Battle of Dorking* (1871). The first instalment of this, opening the May issue of *Blackwood's*, relates,

You ask me to tell you, my grandchildren, something about my own share in the great events that happened fifty years ago. 'Tis sad work turning back to that bitter page in our history.³⁴

Once we are told that it is relating events of the 1870s – when 'free-trade had been working for more than a quarter of a century', since the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 – the narrative is set up as one told from the future and to the future.³⁵ This impression is heightened by later laments:

Happy those whose bones whitened in the fields of Surrey; they at least were spared the disgrace we lived to endure. Even you, who have never known what it is to love otherwise than on suffrance, even your cheeks burn when we talk

³² Morris, *News from Nowhere*, p. 84.

³³ Lennard J. Davis, *Factual Fictions: The Origins of the English Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

³⁴ George Tomkyns Chesney, 'The Battle of Dorking', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, CIX (May 1871), p. 539.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

of those days; think, then, what those endured who like your grandfather had been citizens of the proudest nation on earth, which had never known disgrace or defeat, and whose boast it used to be that they bore a flag on which the sun never set!³⁶

The ‘you’ addressed here is explicitly *not* the magazine reader of 1871, who has long since been massacred by the imminent German invasion. Chesney, therefore, forcibly shocks his Victorian readers into a position of self-alienation.

This tactic was to prove popular with later writers of ‘future histories’. As the title of Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward 2000–1887* makes clear, it is nominally written for a twenty-first century audience. This perspective is established in the Preface, which opens with the line, ‘Living as we do in the closing year of the twentieth century...’³⁷ The entire narrative is situated in this artificial position, even including asides, directed at twenty-first-century readers, that are utterly inappropriate for Bellamy’s own first readers. In this passage, ‘modern’ refers to the society of the year 2000.

The reader, to whom modern social institutions and their underlying principles are matters of course, may at times find Dr Leete’s explanations of them rather trite – but it must be remembered that to Dr Leete’s guest they were not matters of course, and that this book is written for the express purpose of inducing the reader to forget for the nonce that they are so to him.³⁸

This kind of comment is disingenuous about Bellamy’s writing position and his readership, since the book’s ‘express purpose’ is not its true purpose at all.³⁹ Wells’s ‘A Story of the Days to Come’ uses the tags of reported speech to create a similar illusion. Readers opening the second instalment of his serialised novella were met by the statement: ‘The world, they say, changed more between the year 1800 and the year 1900 than it had done in the previous five hundred years. That century, the nineteenth century, was the dawn of a new epoch in the history of mankind’.⁴⁰ The tiny aside, ‘they say’, indicates that this is information reported by others, rather than gained at first hand. It sets the reader apart from the temporally distant narrator, and

³⁶ Ibid., p. 570.

³⁷ Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward 2000–1887*, ed. by Matthew Beaumont (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 3.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ This kind of defamiliarisation technique was not new to Bellamy in *Looking Backward*: in his 1886 story ‘The Blindman’s World’, first published in the November issue of *The Atlantic Monthly* magazine, what distinguishes Martians from inhabitants of Earth is that they can see the future. In response, they characterise Earth as the ‘blindman’s world’. As in *Looking Backward*, Bellamy defamiliarises our world by describing it from the viewpoint of those more enlightened.

⁴⁰ Wells, *The Complete Short Stories of H. G. Wells*, p. 733.

places the nineteenth century into a distant era. (In fact, in its initial publication in the *Pall Mall Magazine*, 'A Story of the Days to Come' was merely a subtitle for the five instalments, whose individual titles set the narrative between the years 2090 and 2097.⁴¹) This serves a similar purpose to the stage-managing rhetoric used by Spencer Walpole in his *History of England* (1878), discussed in Chapter 2: both turn the present into history by placing their narratorial voice at a remove from the events of the nineteenth century. Wells's, however, has a more destabilising effect, since he suggests that his readers' view of their own present is not only blinkered, but in some ways downright deluded. This distancing is a risky strategy, since it could have the effect of alienating the reader from the events of the future story; at the same time, however, it forces the reader, momentarily at least, to view the events of their own lifetime from this removed perspective, and recognise that they are 'now' of minimal significance.

In this framework, the figure of the visitor is of crucial importance in mediating between utopian world and non-utopian reader. The visitor figure can both heighten the reader's sense of alienation, and provide a bridge between utopia and reader. They approach the utopian world with astonishment, and can transmit their discomfort on to the reader, but they then facilitate the narrative process by translating this alien world into familiar terms.

Because the future does not yet exist, it can only ever really be represented via imported material and motifs from the present and past. Previous nascent science-fiction texts had struggled with this problem of how to describe what does not exist. The incomparability of the nineteenth-century present with the utopian (or dystopian) world meant that these writers often had to work through analogy and simile rather than direct comparison. Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race* (1871) (direct contemporary, as Suvin has pointed out, of both Chesney's *The Battle of Dorking* and Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (1872), to the extent that none of the three writers could have read or drawn upon the other's work), illustrates this problem of representability.⁴² In his narrative, in which a miner discovers an advanced civilization beneath the surface of the earth, Bulwer-Lytton repeatedly resorts to comparatives in an attempt to align the mysterious phenomena of the subterranean

⁴¹ See Robert M. Philmus, 'A Story of the Days To Come and News from Nowhere: H. G. Wells as a Writer of Anti-Utopian Fiction', *English Literature in Transition (1880–1920)*, 30 (1987), 450–55 (p. 454).

⁴² Darko Suvin, 'Victorian Science Fiction, 1871–85: The Rise of the Alternative History Sub-Genre', *Science Fiction Studies*, 10 (1983), 148–69 (p. 148).

world with its equivalents on the surface. This has the awkward effect of a constant double vision, as everything becomes a parallel, but a qualified and modified parallel, of something within our own experience. He writes, for example, of ‘a *sort of matlike carpeting*’, or ‘a sound *like* a laugh, *but* with a hilarity *more* subdued *than* the mirth of our laughter’.⁴³ This technique reaches its apotheosis when Bulwer-Lytton tries to offer a racial definition of the superhuman Vril-ya.

My eyes opened upon a group of silent forms, seated around me in the gravity and quietude of Orientals – all more or less like the first stranger; the same mantling wings, the same fashion of garment, the same sphinx-like faces, with the deep dark eyes and red man’s colour; above all, the same type of race – race akin to man’s, but infinitely stronger of form and grander of aspect.⁴⁴

In this passage, this system of analogy reaches a frenetic pitch of racial stereotyping, as Bulwer struggles to homogenise the Vril-ya by aligning them in turn with ‘Orientals’, sphinxes, native Americans, and finally something irreducible to any human race.

Bellamy, Morris and Wells appear to have learnt from such prior examples, and instead of relentlessly trying to reconcile two diverse worlds into one discourse, they emphasise the extent of the social transformation their utopia has undergone by highlighting the resultant miscommunications. Wells gets around the problem by having a companion for his hero, the beleaguered ‘botanist’, while Bellamy’s and Morris’s utopias are expounded largely through dialogue. Julian West’s questions about the new economic system in *Looking Backward* are often met with puzzlement. When he asks how the new society ‘regulate[s] wages’,

Dr Leete did not reply till after several moments of meditative silence. ‘I know, of course,’ he finally said, ‘enough of the old order of things to understand just what you mean by that question; and yet the present order is so utterly different at this point that I am a little at loss how to answer you best.’⁴⁵

In *News from Nowhere*, William Guest and his guide, Dick, can never become truly close, because they never really understand each other. Guest is constantly using words and concepts that mean nothing to the native of Nowhere. Of the beautiful hand-crafted pipe which has confusingly been bought from a market for nothing, Guest comments that it is

⁴³ Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *The Coming Race*, ed. by Peter W. Sinnema (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2008), pp. 26–27. My italics.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁴⁵ Bellamy, *Looking Backward*, p. 54.

‘Too valuable for its use, perhaps,’ said I.
‘What’s that?’ said he; ‘I don’t understand.’⁴⁶

In both examples, the two men are products of such different environments – the transformation between their two lifetimes has been so spectacular – that even the fundamentals of language have changed. The temporal – or rather cultural – distance is so great that even hindsight is not enough to easily bridge the gap.

The limitations of hindsight

Although these texts would be inconceivable without imaginary hindsight, as we have seen, it is not the be all and end all. What is more, these writers do sometimes have to face the problem that despite their affectation of hindsight, they still exist in close and tangled proximity to the events of their present and recent past. As a result, they do not always even attempt the elevated perspective.

Even though Morris depicts a world full of utopians possessed of hindsight on the nineteenth century, much of the narration of this past in *News from Nowhere* is actually offered by the blinkered visitor-figure, William Guest himself. It is the short-sighted native of 1890, not an inhabitant of the all-knowing future, who relates the events of 1887’s Bloody Sunday. As this demonstrates, even Morris found himself unable to rewrite the immediate consequences of that day – a side-lining of the revolutionary movement by the middle classes – into anything more productive. He models the fictional ‘great battle’ of 1952 on Bloody Sunday, this time transforming it into a catalyst for further rallies.⁴⁷ However, he is unable to write any direct causation between the extant events of his own recent past and the story of ‘how the change came’. Morris is deliberately hazy about the sequence and causation of the revolution, which he describes as being initiated when ‘a hope of realising a communal condition of life for all men arose quite late in the nineteenth century’. John Goode judges the avoidance tactic of ‘that “quite”’ as ‘inexcusable: has it happened already or is it to be even later than the present?’⁴⁸ Between the first publication of *News from Nowhere*, in *Commonweal* in 1890, and its publication in book form the following year, it underwent several revisions. The most fundamental

⁴⁶ Morris, *News from Nowhere*, p. 81.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁴⁸ John Goode, ‘William Morris and the Dream of Revolution’, in *Literature and Politics in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by John Lucas (London: Methuen, 1971), pp. 221–80 (p. 276).

of these was to delay the coming of the revolution. In 1890, Morris had imagined it getting underway in approximately 1910. Only a year later, the Socialist movement had split irrevocably, and the ascendant anarchist faction had expelled him from the position of *Commonweal* editor even while *News from Nowhere* was being serialised. Now he saw the revolution as unlikely to happen within his lifetime, and delayed it accordingly to 1952.⁴⁹ For the most part, Morris feels unable to write with confidence – even in the form of a dream – of how the events of the recent past might point towards a utopian future. As a result, the contemporary history he writes is predominantly one of present and future.

In all these visions of an unimaginable utopian world, however, the future is made out of historical materials. Morris's *Nowhere* is the paradigmatic example of this. His utopia is so medievalist in its styles, inspirations and associations that it has been examined as much for its place in the Victorian medievalist tradition as for its utopian one.⁵⁰ Even Wells, the grand master of futurist fiction if ever there was one, recognised that any writer faces the constant limitation of being rooted in – and having to cater for – their own society's expectations. In an interview of 1938, he offered the hypothetical example:

Suppose one of us or all of us had a real prophetic vision – exact and full of detail – of the buildings, rooms, garments of a hundred years hence – and suppose we had actually put that on the screen, would it have been even as convincing as the stuff we contrived?⁵¹

News from Nowhere is symptomatic of this. Although it is set in the future, it is patently medievalist. These utopian writers' faith in the philosophical idea of the historical continuum also has practical implications. It means that the future – however shuffled about to create something new – is necessarily imagined and represented through the materials of past and present. As well as looking forward into the future in order to look backwards with the advantage of hindsight, these utopists necessarily have to look further backwards, into their past, in order to construct their imagined futures.

These utopian writers were all too aware that even the hypothetical hindsight they drew upon for their future-based histories was liable to be superseded at any

⁴⁹ See Michael Liberman, 'Major Textual Changes in William Morris's *News from Nowhere*', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 41 (1986), 349–56.

⁵⁰ See Florence S. Boos, ed., *History and Community: Essays in Victorian Medievalism* (London: Garland, 1992); Marcus Waithe, *William Morris's Utopia of Strangers: Victorian Medievalism and The Ideal Of Hospitality* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2006).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 250.

moment. As Sidney Webb recognised in 1889, the Fabian reading of the future may prove to be utterly erroneous.

It is, of course, possible, as Sir Henry Maine and others have suggested, that the whole experience of the century is a mistake, and that political power will once more swing back into the hands of a monarch or an aristocratic oligarchy.⁵²

Wells highlighted the inherent weakness of future-based fiction – and thus one reason why he wrote so many successive versions – in that 1938 interview. He explained the challenge of his chosen craft as one in which

all the while events are overtaking you. You may cast your tale a century or so ahead, and even then something may happen next week that will knock your most plausible reasoning crooked.⁵³

As we saw in Chapter 2, nineteenth-century historians believed (as many do today) that the greater the hindsight with which a history is written, the more definitive and permanent its judgements are likely to be. The same paradigm, however, does not function for utopia: we can never know for certain whether it was a foolish ideal or not. Krishan Kumar, for example, writing in 1987, draws comparisons between *News from Nowhere* and the existing Soviet State; the contributors to Colman and O’Sullivan’s edited collection published only three years later, subtitled ‘A Vision for Our Time’, write under the lifted weight of the end of the Cold War, and the collapse of the Soviet Communist plan.⁵⁴

What we can know as time passes, however, is how valid a prediction might be for a particular point in time. The fundamental problem is not that the future is inherently unrepresentable – as we have seen, writers deal with this via analogy or translation – but that for later readers, it is no longer the future. To an even greater extent than historiography, utopia is a genre that potentially rings completely differently when read at different points in time. With history-writing (so the logic goes), more hindsight equates to improved judgement. With utopia, it doesn’t work like that. There is no such gradient of progress. Of course, if you set your story in a distant future, it cannot easily be gainsaid any time soon. But if you strive to connect it in a continuum with past and present, almost no time needs to have passed before it

⁵² Sidney Webb, ‘Historic’, p. 61.

⁵³ H. G. Wells, ‘Fictions of the Future’, Robert M. Philmus and Patrick Parrinder, eds., *H. G. Wells’s Literary Criticism* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980), p. 246.

⁵⁴ Stephen Coleman and Paddy O’Sullivan, eds., *William Morris & News from Nowhere: A Vision for Our Time* (Bideford, Devon: Green, 1990).

becomes out of date. Bellamy, Morris and Wells saw their texts as expanding the definition of contemporary-history-writing. For us, these texts, set in a twenty-first century that is notably unlike our own, have become alternative histories. They have stopped being prediction, and instead become counter-factual.

Agency and the individual

As we have seen in previous chapters, in writing contemporary history, the companion problem to this lack of hindsight is the conundrum of the social continuum: the (in)ability either to know which individuals are worthy of inclusion in the historical record, or, then, to represent the ‘representative’ unhistoric mass. Like the historians and novelists we have examined in previous chapters, Bellamy, Morris and Wells all want to rewrite the distribution of historical value across society, but simultaneously to unite the individuals of their utopian world in a common project. These writers deal with the problem by making their utopias universal and global in scale, but all three exhibit discomfort at the implications of this. At the end of *A Modern Utopia*, Wells locates the limitations of his vision in the dichotomy between individuality and totality. ‘[I]n that incongruity between great and individual inheres the incompatibility I could not resolve’, he apologises.⁵⁵ This is the perennial problem of any utopian project: how all-encompassing can a community grow while retaining a unity of part and whole?

The same tension between individual and mass imbued – and fuelled – the work of social reformers during this period. In Beatrice Webb’s autobiography of her life before marriage to Sidney Webb, *My Apprenticeship*, she describes how she was chastised by the progressive journalist H. W. Nevinson for her sociological approach. He lamented that ‘I’m afraid there is something a little hard about it all. Unhappily, man has bowels of compassion, and the individual case appeals so much more to compassion than an undefined and unimaginable “class”’.⁵⁶ To this charge, she responds:

To me ‘a million sick’ have always seemed more worthy of self-sacrificing devotion than the ‘child sick in a fever’ preferred by Mrs Browning’s Aurora Leigh. And why not? The medical officer of health, who, made aware by statistical investigation of the presence of malaria in his district, spends

⁵⁵ Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, p. 222.

⁵⁶ Qtd. Beatrice Webb, *My Apprenticeship* (London: Longmans, Green, 1926), p. 258.

toilsome days and troubled nights in devising schemes for draining stagnant pools and providing for the wholesale distribution of quinine, has a compassion for human misery as deep-rooted as, and certainly more effective than, that of the devoted nurse who soothes the fever-stricken patient in the last hours of life.⁵⁷

This was the dilemma of the social reformer: which is the focus, the individual or the mass? Webb characterises herself as unusual (and unfeminine, in the prevalent dualistic terms outlined in Chapter 1) for being more moved by the latter than the former. She insists, nonetheless, on the validity of the large-scale approach, focusing on the impersonal problem rather than the suffering individual.

One of the largest social reforming projects undertaken in Britain at the *fin de siècle* was Charles Booth's mammoth study of poverty in London, written up with the eventual title of *Life and Labour of the People in London* (1889–1902), which Beatrice Webb was involved with as an assistant. Booth has been viewed by Gertrude Himmelfarb as the first to re-evaluate poverty not as a perpetual given but as a social problem in itself, and one that should – and could – be eradicated.⁵⁸ In this sense, we might see his project as utopian in scope and aim. In common with the more conventionally utopian writing of the *fin de siècle*, it raises that perennial question about whether centralisation can be a means to individual expression. At the conclusion to his study, Booth drew up a series of proposals to deal with the extent of poverty he had discovered. He suggested that the best way to deal with the 'very poor', Class B, would be to remove them from the capitalist system, and take them under state supervision. In making this proposal, he admitted that he was working predominantly for the sake of the 'respectable' working poor, Classes C and D. He explains: 'Class B ... is *du trop* [sic]. The competition of B drags down C and D ... industrially we gain nothing from B.'⁵⁹ Flying in the face of his liberal instincts as a successful businessman, Booth famously concluded – in an echo of Oscar Wilde's 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism' (1891) – that 'Our Individualism fails because our Socialism is incomplete.'⁶⁰ He advocated a highly centralised solution as a means to a contrary end. By granting agency to the State, and placing Class B under its control, therefore, Booth sought to protect the rest of society from the threat of

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Gertrude Himmelfarb, *Poverty and Compassion: The Moral Imagination of the Late Victorians* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1992), p. 102.

⁵⁹ Charles Booth, *Life and Labour of the People in London*, 17 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1902), I, 162–63.

⁶⁰ Ibid., I, 167.

uncontrollable Socialism. This tension – even contradiction – between means and ends also permeates the intellectual culture of the period. Regenia Gagnier has recently drawn attention to the prevalence, in these *fin-de-siècle* decades, of avowals of Socialism in paradoxical tandem with avowals of extreme individualism.⁶¹ As I will show, however, my utopian writers repeatedly reject the kind of two-tier system advocated by Booth, and instead of apportioning centralisation and individualism to separate groups, divided by social class, they seek to draw a line of causation from the former to the latter.

This section of the discussion will proceed by first outlining what unites all my case studies – a determination to challenge conventional notions of the ‘historic’ and ‘unhistoric’ individual. This was at issue in all the representations of the recent past we have previously examined, and these utopian writers go further than either those earlier historians or novelists in overturning expectations. It will then take each text in turn, to delineate the specific response of each to the challenge of reconciling centralisation and individualism, the general and the particular. It will show Wells’s *A Modern Utopia* as a text self-conscious about its own internal contradictions, as expressed in the disputes between narrator and ‘botanist’. It will then demonstrate the greater radicalism of Morris’s *News from Nowhere*, through comparison both with *A Modern Utopia* and with Richard Jeffries’s *After London* (1885). I will close by using *Looking Backward* to highlight a problem that dogs all our utopists: the question of how to reconcile a depersonalised, collective agency with the need for *someone* to start, lead, and carry out the process of revolutionary transformation. How do you reconcile collectivity and inertia?

Historic and unhistoric reversed

Bellamy, Morris and Wells all work quite explicitly in their utopian writing to shift the conventional attribution of historical value. In this sense, they are continuing the project we have already traced through the work of historians and novelists in earlier chapters, validating unremarkable people as nonetheless ‘historic’. These writers were conscious of this heritage, even as they sought to go beyond it. Edward Bellamy was a devoted fan of J. R. Green’s *Short History of the English People* (1874). In a review of the book for the *Springfield Daily Union*, he praised it for moving away

⁶¹ Regenia Gagnier, *Individualism, Decadence and Globalization: On the Relationship of Part to Whole, 1859–1920* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 1.

from kings and politics towards a new focus on ‘constitutional, intellectual and social advance in which we read the history of the nation itself.’⁶² When, much later, he put together a reading list for his young son, Bellamy headed the list with none other than Green’s *Short History*.⁶³ Bellamy, Morris and Wells all go further than Green ever managed to in revalorising the conventionally ‘unhistoric’ individual. As I will go on to demonstrate, however, their focus on a more egalitarian system of historicity raised as many problems of agency as it solved. The final section of this chapter will show that only through recourse to entirely non-logical, even quasi-religious means were these writers able to explain their utopias’ collective harmony of individual and mass, part and whole.

These writers all suggest that the relative ‘historic’ and ‘unhistoric’ status of individuals in our world is only the result of worldly circumstances, and would be entirely different in a utopian setting. They all take the philosophical position that circumstances can determine character as well as experience. In this logic, they owe a great deal to the social theories of the utopian socialist Robert Owen (1771–1858), who declared in his first published work, an ‘Essay on the Principle of the Formation of Character’ (1813), that judges and criminals only find themselves in this relationship as a result of their respective circumstances. If the former had had their upbringing ‘among the poor and profligate of St Giles’, they would doubtless ‘have already suffered imprisonment, transportation, or death’, and vice versa.⁶⁴ Wells develops this type of hypothetical scenario in *A Modern Utopia*. Historicity is still a subject of concern, but historic status in our world does not match up with its utopian equivalent. Wells’s narrator asks rhetorically,

What, for example, will Utopia do with Mr Roosevelt? ... But, indeed, it is doubtful if we shall meet any of these doubles during our Utopian journey, or know them when we meet them. I doubt if anyone will be making the best of both these worlds. The great men in our still unexplored Utopia may be but village Hampdens in our own, and earthly goatherds and obscure illiterates sit here in the seats of the mighty.⁶⁵

The most obvious allusion here is to Thomas Gray’s *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (1751), which imagines the graves holding men such as ‘some village-Hampden’, who might, had circumstances been different, become historic figures.

⁶² Edward Bellamy, ‘A Short History of the English People’, *Springfield Daily Union*, 22 May 1875, p. 6.

⁶³ Joseph Schiffman, ‘Editor’s Introduction’, in *The Duke of Stockbridge: A Romance of Shays’ Rebellion*, by Edward Bellamy (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962), p. xvi.

⁶⁴ Robert Owen, *A New View of Society and Other Writings* (London: Everyman, 1927), p. 16.

⁶⁵ Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, p. 18.

But this passage also contains echoes of the final sentences of *Middlemarch*, and these are further heightened in the text's finale, in an equivalent position to George Eliot's concluding statements about the value of 'unhistoric acts'. Here, the narrator, having glimpsed a girl with 'eyes that dream' of high ideals, reflects that

After all, after all, dispersed, hidden, disorganised, undiscovered, unsuspected even by themselves, the *samurai* of Utopia are in this world, the motives that are developed and organised there stir dumbly here and stifle in ten thousand futile hearts...⁶⁶

Just as Eliot uses the term 'unhistoric' to undermine its very meaning (see Chapter 3), these repeated adjectives of negation offer hope by implying their opposites. They evoke an entire mysterious world, whose 'undiscovered' status does not prevent it being real. For Wells, as his narrator's encounter with his own 'better self' demonstrates, a utopian character lies immanent within many of us, merely repressed by circumstances.⁶⁷

William Morris and Edward Bellamy take similar positions in their utopias, proposing that circumstances determine character and even morality. In *News from Nowhere*, Hammond is outraged at Guest's suggestion that 'political strife' is inherent and inevitable, and ridicules the essentialist definition of 'human nature' it entails.⁶⁸ Expanding upon this paradigm, in *Looking Backward*, the minister Mr Barton comments, in his Sunday morning sermon,

My friends, if you would see men again the beasts of prey they seemed in the nineteenth century, all you have to do is to restore the old social and industrial system, which taught them to view their natural prey in their fellow-men, and find their gain in the loss of others.⁶⁹

Rewriting Christian doctrine, he laments the struggles of poor misguided 'ministers of religion': 'Looking on the inhuman spectacle of society, these worthy men bitterly bemoaned the depravity of human nature; as if angelic nature would not have been debauched in such a devil's school!'⁷⁰ The message is clear: their efforts are utterly in vain given society's present form; but it would only require a change of medium for human nature to be revealed in its true radiance.

When Julian West returns (in a dream, as it turns out) to the Boston of 1887, he experiences a hallucination at once horrible and hopeful.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 215.

⁶⁷ Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, p. 147.

⁶⁸ Morris, *News from Nowhere*, p. 118.

⁶⁹ Bellamy, *Looking Backward*, p. 162.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 163.

[A]s I observed the wretched beings about me more closely, I perceived that they were all quite dead. Their bodies were so many living sepulchres. On each brutal brow was plainly written the *hic jacet* of a soul dead within.

As I looked, horror struck, from one death's head to another, I was affected by a singular hallucination. Like a wavering translucent spirit face superimposed upon each of these brutish masks I saw the ideal, the possible face that would have been the actual if mind and soul had lived.⁷¹

This passage works through a series of successive reversals. Having taken the reader from utopia to reality, Bellamy now takes us from reality to horror and back, and again to utopia, in the space of a few lines. Returned to his readers' own world, we expect to find ourselves somewhere familiar, but we are faced with a sudden revelation: we are in a charnel house. 'They were all quite dead'. From this lowest point of horror, we are then returned to reality, although one changed by utopian experience: it is 'only' their souls which are dead. From there, we are again offered a fleeting glimpse of utopia, in 'a wavering translucent spirit face', the one they would have possessed had they lived in a transformed world. Of course, this pitiful vision does not last long within *Looking Backward*: at the nadir of despair, West awakes to find with relief that his return to the nineteenth century was merely a dream, and he is still in utopia. For us, however, there is one more reversal. We have to awake from the fiction of the novel, for his first readers to remember that they still live in the nineteenth century, and for us to remember that our civilisation still has not reached Bellamy's state of harmony. It is in this final double reversal – for West, from horror to utopia, and for us, from horror to utopia and out again – that Bellamy situates his final impetus for concrete action. Individuals who barely fulfil the definition – as 'so many living sepulchres', they are utterly undifferentiated – could in utopia become people with a place in history.

Internally conflicted texts

Although these utopias all press for a wider diffusion of historical agency across society, they all struggle to reconcile this with a concomitant desire to retain opportunities for individual freedom and diversity. Each of these writers struggles in their respective utopia to reconcile the drive to diffuse historical agency more widely across society, and the concomitant desire to retain opportunities for individual freedom and diversity. While, as we have just seen, in *Looking Backward* the binary

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 189.

contrast pivots between imagination and reality, reality and utopia, the binary division in Wells's *A Modern Utopia* does not fall neatly between one world and the other. Instead, it exhibits a more persistent internal struggle over whether agency is to be located in the general or the particular.

Wells was well aware that the form of his utopian collective might be viewed as suppressing individuality and individual agency. In the bracketing prologue and epilogue to *A Modern Utopia*, in which the implied author speaks most directly to the 'audience' of his illustrated lecture, he insists that his utopia prioritises the fragmentary and individual. To bolster this position, he even adds, as an appendix, the revised text of a paper he had given to the Oxford Philosophical Society in November 1903, which emphasises the inherent particularity and 'uniqueness in all individuals' and indeed all entities.⁷² In the main body of his text, the narrator laments that

[In our society,] To be dressed 'odd', to behave 'oddly', to eat in a different manner or of different food, to commit, indeed, any breach of the established convention is to give offence and to incur hostility among unsophisticated men.⁷³

But in his utopia, there will be no discrimination against eccentricity. Indeed, the first utopian inhabitant we meet is a dissident, who is nonetheless free to express and even agitate for an alternative way of life. Our narrator declares that 'The State is for Individuals, the law is for freedoms, the world is for experiment, experience, and change: these are the fundamental beliefs upon which a modern Utopia must go.'⁷⁴ In this list of pairs, there is an echo of Wilde's – and Booth's – notion of Socialism *for* Individualism: it is only a means to a contrary end. We must all work together for a common goal, so that eventually we can all express our individuality. Even Wells's order of the Samurai will eventually render itself meaningless. As Kumar characterises it, as Utopia develops and works its magic, 'more and more people are fitted to join the samurai order. All citizens eventually will share in rule – or, to put the same point differently, there will no longer be a ruling class or elite.'⁷⁵ In this framework, any hierarchy of historicity is eventually destined to disappear. There will ultimately be no 'great men', because there will be no downtrodden ones.

In the content of his utopia, however, Wells's vision comes across as incredibly ordered and regulated, more concerned often with categories and rules than

⁷² Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, p. 228.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 53–4.

⁷⁵ Kumar, p. 218.

with individuals. Every individual is monitored by a central bureaucracy, expected to carry identification papers with them everywhere, but *in extremis* identifiable through the ‘central registers’ of thumb-prints.⁷⁶ Indeed, from the beginning, Wells insists that ‘no less than a planet will serve the purpose of a modern Utopia’: his state is insistently global, all-pervasive and all-encompassing.⁷⁷ Our narrator’s companion, the ‘botanist’, is the only persistent exception to this totality. Critics have generally viewed him as a useful sounding-board for the narrator, a spokesman for everything that the new utopia will reject and dismiss. I. F. Clarke suggests that

to complete the general strategy he made the botanist, the narrator’s companion, exhibit the most deplorable human characteristics – petulant, prejudiced, exclaiming that he could not live in utopia if there were not to be any dogs, protesting that he would not like his daughter to marry a Chinaman or a negro.⁷⁸

I would argue, however, that this misreads the significance of the botanist’s protest and his resistance to utopian assimilation. We need to view him rather as a foil for the narrator, highlighting the flaws in the narrator’s schematic plan. As the botanist explains, responding to the narrator’s persistent lack of sympathy with his romantic dilemma, ‘You mustn’t mind my saying it, but there’s something of the Gradgrind –’.⁷⁹ Wells pre-empts his readers’ potential objections by interpolating his own self-criticisms.

If Wells’ philosophical point of departure really is the fundamental individuality of every life, then it surely follows that the individual loves and losses of the people who make up this society should remain important. Why shouldn’t people still like dogs, or care about the people they love? Wells’s declared philosophy does not match up with the content of his text *unless* his apparent contempt for the botanist is merely apparent; unless there is an ironic distance between author and narrator. Krishan Kumar comments that while the book provides ammunition for Wells’s critics, it

is also the most significant refutation of conventional notions of the Wellsian utopia. It is impossible to see it as propagating an ideal of rampant consumerism and technocratic power. It is here that Wells insists most clearly

⁷⁶ Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, p. 94.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁷⁸ I. F. Clarke, *The Pattern of Expectation, 1644–2001* (London: Cape, 1979), p. 209.

⁷⁹ Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, p. 149.

that the scientifically planned and ordered world-state is an empty shell without a personal and individual life that matches it.⁸⁰

This is, however, difficult to put into practice. The utopia eventually collapses in a dispute between the narrator and botanist, in which our narrator pronounces against the botanist's valorisation of personal relations. The botanist 'waves an unteachable destructive arm', and 'my Utopia rocks about me'.⁸¹ Whether this is a failing in the botanist or in the utopia, however, is debateable.

William Morris takes a more radical stance on the question of historicity than does Wells, and in *Nowhere*, the question of the individual's place in the historical record is largely no longer relevant. In one sense, of course, his utopia is deeply historical and historicist. This is nonetheless tied to a sense of communalism rather than individualism. In tracing Socialist debates over individuality of the 1880s and 1890s, Ruth Livesey contrasts Wilde's belief that 'Socialism would liberate the artist from a concern with popular tradition into states of intense creative individualism', and allow more 'autonomous art', with Morris's insistence that art 'originates in the somatic inheritance of tradition rather than the momentary inspiration of individual genius'.⁸² As this demonstrates, for Morris, 'tradition' is a collective and a bodily inheritance rather than an individuated one.

His utopian vision has to balance the dual priorities of historicist inheritance and ahistorical future. Although *News from Nowhere* fits Sidney Webb's 'dynamic' definition in drawing a continuum between past and future, that does not extend to the utopian world itself. Those classical utopian societies were defined in part by the fact that they have reached a state of equilibrium. They have no crises; they do not even have transformation. Thus they have no need of history. In Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race*, our narrator's host in the underground world explains, 'You see our serene mode of life now; such it has been for ages. We have no events to chronicle. What more of us can be said than that "they were born, they were happy, they died?"'⁸³ Similarly, in *News from Nowhere*, history is of low cultural priority. Although Dick is full of affection and admiration for medieval traditions and Shakespearean drama, this affection is crucially directed at a timeless cultural inheritance, perhaps better described as 'tradition' rather than any form of narrative

⁸⁰ Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times*, p. 207.

⁸¹ Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, p. 212.

⁸² Ruth Livesey, 'Morris, Carpenter, Wilde, and the Political Aesthetics of Labour', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 32 (2004), 601–16 (pp. 607, 606).

⁸³ Bulwer-Lytton, p. 118.

history. At one point, the placid utopian muses ‘I have heard my great-grandfather say that it is mostly in periods of turmoil and strife that people care much about history.’⁸⁴ Although Kumar is right to stress that these late-nineteenth-century utopias are situated in a historical continuum, this only applies until they have reached their utopian state, after which they defy his characterisation. Their aim is still to seek a state outside history, a lasting perfection: ‘an epoch of rest’.

Does a static state outside history inevitably imply a state outside any agency? Morris is careful not to make this rejection of history hegemonic, including deliberately dissenting voices on this issue. Ellen’s grouchy grandfather longs for the nineteenth century, when, as he views it, real dramas happened. His repetition of the same hackneyed phrases make him seem deliberately contrary and churlish, and undermines his critique. After such comments as ‘Heaven? ... you like heaven, do you?’, it is hard to take him seriously.⁸⁵ But this is a genuine problem. Even Clara complains that ‘I wish we were interesting enough to be written or painted about’.⁸⁶ The ‘heaven’ Ellen’s grandfather refers to is one beyond the end of history, beyond the Book of Revelation, from whence there can be no trajectory of progress except by change. In an article of 1975, Patrick Brantlinger argued that what he calls ‘Morris’s Socialist Anti-Novel’ deliberately sets out to define itself against the novel genre. He commented that ‘plot is what happens when the characters of a novel are set in conflict with each other’.⁸⁷ In Utopia, there is no conflict, no plot, and thus no history. What Brantlinger does not acknowledge, however, is that allowing for certain ‘obstinate refusers’, Morris’s characters have made a conscious choice of their state of ‘second childhood’, and deliberately embrace it.⁸⁸ Even ‘Mr Boffin’, the ‘golden dustman’ of *Nowhere*, who is attracted to ‘reactionary novels’ and to the mysterious William Guest because he seems ‘unhappy, and consequently interesting to a storyteller’, is himself clearly happy.⁸⁹ He is idiosyncratic, to some extent a dissenter, but nonetheless incorporable into the body politic: his companions’ affection for him is due to, as well as despite, his eccentricity. The other old man of the story knows far more about nineteenth-century history than either Boffin or Clara’s grandfather, and comes to quite a different conclusion to either of these. Richard Hammond is content

⁸⁴ Morris, *News from Nowhere*, p. 67.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

⁸⁷ Patrick Brantlinger, “‘News from Nowhere’: Morris’s Socialist Anti-Novel”, *Victorian Studies*, 19 (1975), 35–49 (p. 42).

⁸⁸ Morris, *News from Nowhere*, p. 132.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

to envisage a static future for Nowhere, perpetuating its current state of Edenic contentment. Concluding his narrative of ‘how the change came’, he declares that ‘at last and by slow degrees ... we were happy. So may it be for ages and ages!’⁹⁰

While Wells’s Utopia shifts the locus of historical significance from power based on wealth, family or force to the intellectual elite of the ‘Samurai’, Morris takes a more radical stance in *News from Nowhere*, eschewing the notion of an elite completely. The month after his utopia finished serialisation in *Commonweal*, the Socialist League paper of 15 November 1890 also published an article, ‘Where are We Now?’, in which he related how, when he had first joined the Socialist movement,

I hoped that some working-man leader, or rather leaders, would turn up, who would push aside all middle-class help, and become great historical figures. I might still hope for that, if it seemed likely to happen, for indeed I long for it enough; but to speak plainly it does not seem so at present.⁹¹

As this demonstrates, by the time he wrote *News from Nowhere*, his early desire for a hero-figure had been superseded. Or to put it differently, he ‘might still hope for that’, but he knew better than to rely on it. John Crump agrees that ‘revolution is portrayed by Morris as a process whereby workers learn to organise themselves and develop the ability to administer their own affairs in their own collective interest. Leaders are not entirely absent from the process, but their role is largely symbolic.’⁹² As Crump reminds us, Morris’s view of ‘collective’ action follows that ‘encapsulated in the maxim of the International Working Men’s Association’, that, in Marx’s words, ‘the emancipation of the working class must be the act of the working class itself.’⁹³ Change imposed from above can never by itself be sufficient. What is more, although Morris represents the transformation as enacted by working men, his narrative of events includes no named individuals: all the actions are those of massed groups of people. In fact, the only named individual in the entire chapter is ‘one Gladstone, or Gladstein’, whose misidentification, as discussed earlier in the chapter, demonstrates just how unimportant individuated historicity is to this new civilisation. As John Plotz has emphasised in a recent article, ‘Morris ... recoils against the notion that an

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 160.

⁹¹ Morris, ‘Where are We Now?’, p. 515.

⁹² John Crump, ‘How the Change Came: News from Nowhere and Revolution’, in *William Morris & News from Nowhere: a Vision for our Time*, ed. by Stephen Coleman and Paddy O’Sullivan (Bideford, Devon: Green, 1990), pp. 57–73 (p. 64).

⁹³ Karl Marx, *Selected Works* ed. by I. B. Lasker (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1947), I.107.

investment in poignant particulars is the best avenue towards the universal.⁹⁴ Morris effectively challenges the notion, recently proposed by Alex Woloch, of comparing characters in terms of their ‘relative position vis-à-vis other characters’: the primary role of Dick, Clara and Boffin is as ‘representative’ utopians. They may have individual stories, but there is no tension between them, since their agency is entirely invested in the collective.⁹⁵

The radicalism of this refusal to base his utopia on the agency of any individual hero-figure can be illuminated by a comparison with the other ‘rustic’ utopia with which Morris’s is often compared, Richard Jefferies’s *After London* (1885). In common with Morris (and unlike Wells and Bellamy), the natural-history writer Jefferies draws on pre-industrial – indeed, pre-capitalist – models for his work, turning away from both the machine and the city. And initially, his vision does seem to hold a mysterious potency. His narrative is set in the aftermath of some mysterious apocalypse, the nature of which is never revealed. It opens:

The old men say their fathers told them that soon after the fields were left to themselves a change began to be visible. It became green everywhere in the first spring, after London ended, so that all the country looked alike.⁹⁶

Although the events took place just on the verge of living memory, this passage raises more questions than it ever answers. ‘The first spring’ suggests the beginning of a saga, but removes it far into the past, evoking a society without dates. The verb ‘ended’ is yet more mysterious: was this an active or a passive process, the work of humans or of nature? This strangely quiescent word must conceal a dramatic history. What is most evident, however, is the speed and ease with which the natural world subsumes all human things. Jefferies only allows us a few brief paragraphs of idyllic-sounding description, before the darker side of this transformation is revealed:

Next summer the prostrate straw of the preceding year was concealed by the young green wheat and barley This matted mass grew up through the bleached straw. Charlock, too, hid the rotting roots in the fields The young spring meadow-grass could scarcely push its way up through the long dead grass⁹⁷

⁹⁴ John Plotz, ‘Nowhere and Everywhere: The End of Portability in William Morris’s Romances’, *ELH*, 74 (2007), 931–56 (p. 931).

⁹⁵ Woloch, p. 18.

⁹⁶ Richard Jefferies, *After London, or Wild England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 1.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 1–2.

Even though London has ‘ended’, the process of decay and suffocation continues. Waste matter may now be ‘concealed’, but there is no real escape from it. London’s legacy cannot be completely overcome: instead, it has become

a vast stagnant swamp, which no man dare enter, since death would be his inevitable fate. There exhales from this oozy mass so fatal a vapour that no animal can endure it. ... There are no fishes, neither can eels exist in the mud, nor even newts. It is dead.⁹⁸

What initially might have been described as a utopia turns out to be more of a dystopia.

As Anna Vaninskaya has characterised it, Jefferies ‘envisions a literal rolling back, a rewinding of history, as a tape running in reverse: nature swallows pernicious civilisation, animals and people revert to savagery, and the Celts creep back in from the margins like the forests that reclaim England.’⁹⁹ In a series of letters to Georgiana Burne-Jones, Morris suggested that this image held some fascination for him. He commented in a letter of 28 April 1885 that on the train back from Scotland, he had read ‘a queer book called “After London” coming down: I rather like it: absurd hopes curled round my heart as I read it. I rather wish I were thirty years younger: I want to see the game played out.’¹⁰⁰ Two weeks later, he wrote:

I am in low spirits about the prospects of our ‘party’ ... I have [no] more faith than a grain of mustard seed in the future history of “civilization”, which I know now is doomed to destruction, and probably before very long: what a joy it is to think of! and how often it consoles me to think of barbarism once more flooding the world, and real feelings and passions, however rudimentary, taking the place of our wretched hypocrisies.¹⁰¹

Although this second letter makes no direct reference to *After London*, it is reasonable to suppose that the image of ‘barbarism once more flooding the world’ owes something to the ‘lake’ in which Jefferies’s London has been drowned.

Jefferies’s ‘abortive picture of a tribal community’, however, can have provided, as Vaninskaya recognises, ‘at most a pointer for Morris’s socialist romances.’¹⁰² While *News from Nowhere* is a heavily medievalist image of the future – to the extent that it could almost be set in the past – it does not imply the ‘literal

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 37.

⁹⁹ Anna Vaninskaya, *William Morris and the Idea of Community: Romance, History and Propaganda, 1880–1914* (Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p. 57.

¹⁰⁰ William Morris, *The Collected Letters of William Morris*, ed. by Norman Kelvin (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987), 2[B], p. 426.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 435–6.

¹⁰² Vaninskaya, p. 58.

rolling back' of Jefferies's vision. Unlike the inhabitants of *After London*, who have forgotten what their world was like 'before' and even how the transformation came to pass, Morris's society is a consciously retrospective one, aware both of its parallels with the medieval world and of its rejection of nineteenth-century forms. What is more, Morris turns away from the model of agency depicted in *After London*. Jefferies's hero, a quasi-Roman Felix Aquila, 'is not content with being the first among equals, and as the curtain closes on the story he is setting off alone once more. He does not "melt into the society of the tribes" like Thiodolf, but remains a solitary individual like the heroes of Haggard's and George MacDonald's romances.'¹⁰³ *After London* is insistent on the primacy of individual freedom. By contrast, when Morris's narrator raises the possibility of a method of government whereby 'every man should be quite independent of every other, and that thus the tyranny of society should be abolished', Hammond responds by 'look[ing] hard at me for a second or two, and then burst out laughing very heartily; and I confess that I joined him.'¹⁰⁴

As this demonstrates, for Morris, individual agency is meaningless outside its collective context. It does, however, raise the question of how the transformation to utopia can be enacted. This is a repeated problem in these future-based utopias. They all stumble at the question of *how* the change came; or rather, *by whom* did it come? In *Looking Backward*, the locus of historical agency is even less clear. As Jonathan Auerbach has highlighted, in Bellamy's description of the process whereby society was transformed into its twenty-first-century state, agency has not only been dislocated, but even evaporated.

A struggle, resulting in a still greater consolidation, ensued. ... the tendency toward monopolies, which had been so desperately and vainly resisted, was recognised at last, as a process which only needed to complete its logical evolution to open a golden future. ... The industry and commerce of the country ... were entrusted to a single syndicate representing the people. ... The nation, that is to say, organized as the one great business corporation in which all other corporations were absorbed.¹⁰⁵

Auerbach draws attention to the 'passive voice constructions' and 'noun abstractions' in this passage, which, in his words, 'seek to dispense with historical agency altogether'.¹⁰⁶ Here we can see repeated the problem that dogged our historians of

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Morris, *News from Nowhere*, p. 120.

¹⁰⁵ Bellamy, *Looking Backward*, pp. 32–3.

¹⁰⁶ Jonathan Auerbach, "The Nation Organized": Utopian Impotence in Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, *American Literary History*, 6 (1994), 24–47 (p. 30).

Chapter 2. Bellamy wants to credit power to the everyday, the unhistoric individual, but only knows how to do so by characterising it as the ‘nation’. Like Hazlitt and Martineau, Bellamy finds himself unable to explain in *human* terms how historical change is enacted. Like his historian predecessors, he effectively ends up attributing agency to the ‘Time’ or ‘Age’ itself.

This repeated problem illuminates the eternal conundrum of utopian writing. Wells never even attempts to describe *how* his utopia might have come about. By setting it on another planet, he absconds himself from the challenge of having to explain how our world might morph into that world; only at the close of his text does the interrelationship of the two even become an object for discussion. Morris, writing in an avowedly Marxist Socialist journal, is insistent on the necessity of revolution. Bellamy attempts to turn transformation into evolution, making the change not only necessary (as Morris does) but even inevitable. Matthew Beaumont characterises ‘utopian fiction’ as ‘dream[ing] that the diffusion of its ideas in the present will create the conditions necessary for instituting its ideal society in the future. In this way, it can conceive a revolutionary transformation by evolutionary means.’¹⁰⁷ In this sense, utopian writing aims to facilitate a change that might otherwise seem impossible, by creating a bridge – both in terms of a practical model, and in inspiring new critiques – over the divide between existing and utopian society. In all three texts, the writers deliberately disperse agency in an attempt to make utopia fulfilling for everyone. Change only comes about when the time is right, they suggest, through a mass consciousness and collective desire, all pulling in the same direction. How can we reconcile this dispersion of agency, however, with its corollary: inertia?

Collectivity and how to find it

At the beginning of this thesis, we saw how early- and mid-nineteenth-century desires for a transcendent narrative to bolster, supplement or even substitute religious faith were transferred to ‘History’, which in historicist philosophies took on a quasi-religious significance. In these utopias, this quality of religiosity re-emerges again, but now it is attributed to the ‘collective’. These writers are, therefore, faced with the difficult question of how to attain it. This is where that second function of utopia

¹⁰⁷ Beaumont, *Utopia Ltd.*, p. 194.

comes into play: utopia as a practical agent of change. Socialist utopian writers need to explain how their imaginary societies came into being, in such a way that they can offer a template – or at least an inspiration – for action on the part of their readers. In order to narrate the necessary transition from multifarious individual desires to a collective desire, and from that to an achievement of this desire in utopia, all these writers end up reaching for a perhaps surprising motif: the leap of faith.

Incongruous though this might seem – especially, in the case of Morris and Wells, in utopias written by avowed atheists – it was a surprisingly common trope in *fin-de-siècle* idealist and quasi-utopian social thinking. Beatrice Webb’s famous characterisation of the Victorian ‘transference of the emotion of self-sacrificing service from God to man’ was applicable in a heightened sense, I would argue, in the closing decades of the century, when much social action came to be imbued with a sense of mission.¹⁰⁸ This was not just undertaken *in the service of* religion, but as a religion in itself. Stephen Yeo has detailed the extent to which ‘conversions’ to socialism were often seen as quasi-religious experiences, and reminds us that in the peroration to the Socialist League’s 1885 manifesto, William Morris described his cause as the ‘religion of Socialism’.¹⁰⁹ More recently, Thomas M. Dixon has demonstrated how pervasive was the discourse of ‘altruism’, on the borderline between established religion and anti-religious feeling, appropriable by both and claimed by both.¹¹⁰ This finds its epitome in Arnold Toynbee’s last lecture, given in 1883 in St Andrew’s Hall, Newman Street, London, and addressed in its final section to ‘the workmen’ present:

You have to forgive us, for we have wronged you; we have sinned against you grievously – not knowing always; but still we have sinned, and let us confess it; but if you will forgive us – nay, whether you will forgive us or not – we will serve you, we will devote our lives to your service, and we cannot do more.¹¹¹

In this lecture, social work becomes more than a Christian religious mission: the locus of devotion is transferred from God to the working class itself. The rhetoric of remorse and forgiveness is directed at the poor, and the poor themselves are invested with the power to forgive and purify. In return, however, Toynbee calls for a

¹⁰⁸ Beatrice Webb, p. 112.

¹⁰⁹ Stephen Yeo, ‘A NEW LIFE: The Religion of Socialism in Britain, 1883–1896’, *History Workshop Journal*, 4 (1977), 5–56 (p. 6).

¹¹⁰ Thomas M. Dixon, *The Invention of Altruism: Making Moral Meanings in Victorian Britain* (Published for the British Academy by Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 348.

¹¹¹ Arnold Toynbee, ‘*Progress and Poverty*’: *A Criticism of Mr Henry George* (London, 1883), p. 54.

reciprocal moral elevation: both classes are to find utopia together, in an ongoing spiral of ascendance.

In this way, we can see that the transcendent quality of religiosity we identified in early- and mid-nineteenth-century ideas of ‘History’ has, by the end of the century, been transmuted again into a more socially rather than temporally inflected abstraction, the collective. Like Carlyle’s Hegelian ‘History’ that can only find expression in ‘the combination of both ... the coming Time [and] ... the Time come’, collectivity can only be achieved by a shift from dispersed, diffuse and contradictory desires, via a leap of faith into a singular and united vision. The notion of a ‘leap of faith’ is undoubtedly problematic. It retreats from any logical step-by-step or evolutionary process towards utopia, calling instead upon our non-rational faculties. It can therefore be seen as an evasion of the problem. On the other hand, as envisaged by the utopian writers of the *fin de siècle*, it is also the most difficult thing to initiate.¹¹²

As demonstrated above, all these utopists reject (or at least recognise the impracticality of relying on) a hero-figure. Allowing people to rely on the imminent appearance of a messiah is, in their view, a likely way to stymie any potential change. What is needed instead, they suggest, is a mass change of heart. This is where Edwin Abbott’s 1884 ‘Romance of Many Dimensions’, *Flatland*, can illuminate our discussion. This utopia, by the headmaster of the City of London School, shares a great deal with those already examined in this chapter. Its narratorial set-up is different, however, in one crucial way. It does not claim to be written by one of us, who has made an unexpected visit to utopia (as do *Looking Backward*, *News from Nowhere* and *A Modern Utopia*). Nor does it claim to be written in the future (as do *Looking Backward* and ‘A Story of the Days to Come’). Instead of using temporal hindsight or geographical distance to distance us from the narrative, it removes us from the narrative plane – quite literally – by situating *us* in the utopian dimension. *Flatland* is crucial for my study because it flips the paradigm. In this text, our world is, at least in relative terms, a utopia. As a result, it forms a dramatic attempt to get us to believe in the possibility of utopia. Since we are already in it without realising,

¹¹² Thomas Kuhn’s theory of the paradigm shift can be illuminating here. His influential 1962 thesis assumes that at any given point, our inferences are constrained by the rules and expectations of the current version of ‘normal science’. Until the point of crisis, and the ensuing paradigm shift, we cannot conceive of any serious challenges to the current paradigm. This model demonstrates one of the most serious obstacles to the enactment of a utopian system: our persistent inability even to envisage the things that have not yet been discovered.

there is no logical reason why we cannot push back our own illusory boundaries. If we look with pity and condescension on inhabitants of two dimensions, we should be able to make the leap to 4D. The fact that, despite its arguments, we do not make this leap, tells us something important about the difficulty of changing fundamental assumptions. In this text, the challenge of representing the temporal and social continua, which we have seen in abundance, is presented analogously in what we might characterise as a spatial continuum.

One of the most useful functions of *Flatland* for my analysis lies in its demonstration of the challenge involved in initiating wholesale social change. While *Looking Backward* and *News from Nowhere* depict a successful leap of faith, *Flatland* is the story of its repeated failure. It reminds us, in a way that Morris and Wells only touch on via occasional dissident voices, of the painful extent of the overhaul necessary for a utopian transformation. Although the Circles of the High Council are repeatedly shown evidence of the third dimension on each ‘millennial commencement’, they deliberately ignore the evidence the Sphere places before their eyes. Enough of the structures and conventions of Flatland civilization would be lost, in such an overhaul, that fear as to its consequences repeatedly outweighs anticipation of its potential benefits.

Flatland is in part a satire of contemporary Victorian society, and one which allows no space for individual agency or historicity, thus forestalling change. In this society, your social position is utterly determined by geometry: the more sides you have (and the more regular they are), the higher your status. Geometrical shape, however, is passed down through heredity, and an absolute correlation is assumed between geometrical shape and moral character. Giving brief voice to the Owenite position championed by Bellamy, Morris and Wells, the Square admits that some

maintain that there is no necessary connection between geometrical and moral Irregularity. ‘The Irregular,’ they say, ‘is from his birth scouted by his own parents, derided by his brothers and sisters, and excluded from all posts of responsibility, trust, and useful activity. ... what wonder that human nature, even in the best and purest, is embittered and perverted by such surroundings!’¹¹³

¹¹³ Edwin A. Abbott, *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*, ed. by Alan Lightman (London: Penguin, 1998), p. 37.

Our narrator and hero, the Square, responds to these dissensions with a po-faced reinforcement of the status quo, this time grounded on a doctrine surely derived from Benthamite utilitarianism:

Doubtless, the life of an Irregular is hard; but the interests of the Greater Number require that it shall be hard. If a man with a triangular front and a polygonal back were allowed to exist and to propagate a still more Irregular posterity, what would become of the arts of life?¹¹⁴

However, Abbott reveals these ‘arts of life’, so revered in Flatland, to be no more than an elaborate series of conventions and contrivances, primarily focused on establishing an individual’s number of sides via the most obscure, elaborate and difficult means possible, in a world which has wilfully refused either colour or height. If they opened their eyes to the third dimension, all the elaborate exclusivist paraphernalia of their society would be rendered meaningless. And this is precisely why they refuse to countenance it. Flatland demonstrates why a society might resist utopian transformation. Its elite, and even its aspiring lower classes, value the status quo too highly to risk overthrowing it.

What *Flatland* highlights, in a way that also applies to our other utopian texts, is the very religious quality of the faith needed to turn utopian vision into reality. It thus makes a mockery of the evolutionary trajectory Bellamy claims for the transition to utopia in *Looking Backward*, and expands upon the struggles Morris depicts as necessary in *News from Nowhere*. The revelation *Flatland* offers us is one which, although understandably ludicrous and mind-boggling to its inhabitants, we know to be undeniably true. Nonetheless, the revelation by the miraculous ‘Sphere’ is presented as the millenarian gospel of a messiah figure. When faced with the Square’s initial closed-minded suspicion, the Sphere laments, ‘I had hoped to find in you ... a fit apostle for the Gospel of the Three Dimensions, which I am allowed to preach once only in a thousand years: but now I know not how to convince you.’¹¹⁵ As Rosemary Jann has demonstrated, Abbott (like Henry Sidgwick, Frederick Myers and, at times, John Tyndall) sought to reconcile scientific discovery and religious faith.¹¹⁶ Situating the Sphere’s message in the discourse of religion, Abbott begs the question: if this, which seems to defy sense, is evidently truth, why should the same not be the case with other such gospels (including those of Matthew, Mark, Luke and

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 90.

¹¹⁶ Rosemary Jann, ‘Abbott’s “Flatland”’: Scientific Imagination and “Natural Christianity”’, *Victorian Studies*, 28 (1985), 473–90.

John)? Once the Square has been converted, he becomes a fundamentalist. He pushes the doctrine of Three Dimensions to its logical conclusion, which we are afraid to countenance, but which this zealous convert eagerly anticipates. When the Sphere dismisses ‘the land of Four Dimensions’ as ‘inconceivable’, the faithful Square replies: ‘Not inconceivable, my Lord, to me, and therefore still less inconceivable to my Master.’ He concludes, ‘And that it must exist my Lord himself has taught me. Or can he have forgotten what he himself imparted to his servant?’¹¹⁷ This passage forces Abbott’s readers – living in an insistent three-dimensional world – into precisely the position the Square had previously held. Unlike him, however, we fall at the crucial hurdle. When it comes to pushing the boundaries of the status quo, we revert to blind creatures, fearful of what we do not know and cannot conceptualise.

The implication of Abbott’s text, therefore, is that just because something is inconceivable to us, that does not inevitably make it false. As Jann has delineated, Abbott ‘sought to demonstrate that scientific “reality” rested no less upon a leap of faith’ than did Christianity: as Jann characterises the problem, science as well as religion obliges us to adjust our rationality to ‘the illusoriness of the seen and the reality of the unseen.’¹¹⁸ Similarly, just because we can barely envisage the consequence of a social transformation, that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t take that leap of faith and make it happen. Abbott mocks the complacent reader, who thinks the world can only ever consist of the things he can hold within his limited mind, by transporting the Square in a dream to ‘Pointland, the Abyss of No dimensions.’ Its solitary inhabitant, as the Sphere explains, has no ‘thought of Plurality; for he is himself his One and All, being really Nothing. Yet mark his perfect self-contentment, and hence learn this lesson, that to be self-contented is to be vile and ignorant, and that to aspire is better than to be blindly and impotently happy.’¹¹⁹ Abbott thus reveals, more specifically than my three main case studies, but with similar intention, the proximate and tangled relationship between attaining collective action and attaining religious faith. Both rely on a trust in something that cannot be proved, merely desired.

As Abbott highlights, the problem of attachment to the status quo, even when this is patently in need of overhaul, is something that all these utopists have to face. Even Bellamy, the one writer who asserts a smooth evolutionary trajectory between

¹¹⁷ Abbott, p. 103.

¹¹⁸ Jann, ‘Abbott’s “Flatland”’, pp. 474, 486.

¹¹⁹ Abbott, p. 108.

contemporary and utopian society, occasionally confronts this problem. At the opening of his sequel to *Looking Backward, Equality* (1897), Julian West's new fiancée Edith muses,

Suppose you had gone forth just as you did in your dream, and had passed up and down telling men of the terrible folly and wickedness of their way of life and how much nobler and happier a way there was. Just think what good you might have done, how you might have helped people in those days when they needed help so much.¹²⁰

What Edith fails to recognise, however, with the naivety of the native of utopia, is that they would have dismissed him as mad. Indeed, that is precisely what happens when West does return to the Boston of the nineteenth century (in a dream, as it turns out) and attempts to open the eyes of his peers to the fatal flaws of their society.

When I had expected now surely the faces around me to light up with emotions akin to mine, they grew ever more dark, angry, and scornful. ... 'Madman!' 'Pestilent fellow!' 'Fanatic!' 'Enemy of society!' were some of their cries¹²¹

As Jean Pfaelzer has delineated, even though 'ostensibly the book ends happily' (West wakes up in the year 2000 and discovers that his return to 1887 was only a dream), 'within the text, the experiment has failed', and 'Julian is powerless', unable to convince those who hold the reins of power in late-nineteenth-century Boston that anything could ever be otherwise.¹²² In these texts, the prophets of utopia – the Square, Julian West, William Guest, Wells's narrator – are actually relatively powerless once they return to their present.

Bellamy's text is weakened by his failure to credit these voices with anything other than selfishness. In Wells's *A Modern Utopia*, the fear factor involved in preventing the necessary leap of faith is more effectively incorporated. Unlike Bellamy, he both calls for a leap of faith, and recognises its near impossibility. In the passage already quoted earlier in this chapter, he declares that

After all, after all, dispersed, hidden, disorganised, undiscovered, unsuspected even by themselves, the *samurai* of Utopia are in this world, the motives that

¹²⁰ Edward Bellamy, *Equality* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1897), p. 1.

¹²¹ Bellamy, *Looking Backward*, p. 192.

¹²² Jean Pfaelzer, 'Immanence, Indeterminance, and the Utopian Pun in *Looking Backward*', in *Looking Backward, 1888–1888: Essays on Edward Bellamy*, ed. by Daphne Patai (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), pp. 51–90 (p. 65).

are developed and organised there stir dumbly here and stifle in ten thousand futile hearts¹²³

While earlier I focused on the echoes here of George Eliot's term 'unhistoric', offering hope of the Samurai's existence, it is also important to draw attention to the repression all-too present in this statement. Not only are the utopian impulses 'dumb', but they are immediately 'stifled' by the very people who possess them, eventually proving 'futile'. Most tellingly of all, Wells presents his narrator as subject to the same selfish and world-weary habits that contribute to the prevention of Utopia. A 'pinched and dirty little girl' tries 'pitifully' to sell him a penny bunch of violets, but "“No!” I say curtly, hardening my heart."¹²⁴ He thus falls into his own trap, preventing Utopia from coming to fruition just as much as anybody else. As he comes to recognise, 'the Strand, and Charing Cross corner, and Whitehall, and the great multitude of people ... is apt to look a world altogether too formidable. It has a glare, it has a tumult and vigour that shouts one down.'¹²⁵ On the other hand, so did Utopia. Once he and the botanist were immersed in that world, they could not resist becoming part of it. The narrator comments that although 'I had always imagined myself as standing outside the general machinery of the State – in the distinguished visitors' gallery, as it were', Utopia 'is swallowing me up'.¹²⁶ Towards the end of the book, he declares:

Indeed Will is stronger than Fact, it can mould and overcome Fact. But this world has still to discover its will, it is a world that slumbers inertly, and all this roar and pulsation of life is no more than its heavy breathing. ... My mind runs on to the thought of an awakening.¹²⁷

Despite all the inertia acting to the contrary, he refuses to lose hope of harnessing this 'will' and using it as a force for transformation.

Action beyond reading

This leap of faith does not, however, have to be taken blind, or cut off from creative agency. Darko Suvin has argued that there are two branches of utopian thought: 'closed' and 'open'. The latter is most valuable to the reader, because it

¹²³ Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, p. 215.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

acknowledges its own provisionality, and recognises its own subsequent supersession. He suggests that ‘if utopia is, philosophically, a method rather than a state it cannot be realized or not realized – it can only be applied.’¹²⁸ And, returning to this issue almost two decades later, he concludes that utopia is perhaps best characterised as ‘a method camouflaging as a state: the state of affairs is a signifier revealing the presence of a semiotic process of signification which induces in the reader’s imagination the signified of a possible world, *not necessarily identical with the signifier*.’¹²⁹ The utopian worlds discussed in this chapter – from nationalised Boston to Nowhere, from a planet beyond Sirius to an immanent fourth dimension – are all self-confessedly personal visions. They may have an instrumental value, but they present themselves as exemplars rather than blueprints: they are the specific ideal only of their creator. Wells epitomises this most explicitly, voicing the hope that ‘surely, in the end’, Utopia will come to fruition.

First here, then there, single men and then groups of men will fall into line – not indeed with my poor faulty hesitating suggestions – but with a great and comprehensive plan wrought out by many minds and in many tongues. It is just because my plan is faulty, because it mis-states so much, and omits so much, that they do not now fall in. It will not be like *my dream*, the world that is coming. My dream is just my own poor dream, the thing sufficient for me.¹³⁰

He suggests that the fundamental reason why his ‘modern utopia’ has not come into being is ‘because my plan is faulty’: because it is ‘just my own poor dream’. Calling on the kind of collective leap of faith we have charted through this chapter, he suggests that transition from solitary utopian visions to a joint vision is the vital step required to bring it to fruition.

News from Nowhere has often been viewed as deeply personal, including by Morris himself. E. P. Thompson declared that ‘*News from Nowhere* must not be, and was never intended to be, read as a literal picture of Communist society.’¹³¹ John Goode has even suggested that in *Nowhere*, ‘all the figures in the land of perfection are aspects of the dreamer himself: all must voice his attitudes and responses.’¹³² Michael Holzman, tracing both Dick Hammond and his great-grandfather, William Hammond, to versions of Morris himself, comments that ‘there are moments when it

¹²⁸ Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 52.

¹²⁹ Suvin, ‘Locus, Horizon, and Orientation’, p. 128. Italics in original.

¹³⁰ Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, p. 220.

¹³¹ E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1955), p. 806.

¹³² John Goode, p. 274.

appears that in this story there are only projections of William Morris to serve as characters.¹³³ Marcus Waithe has recently put forward a case to ‘insist on the limited nature of Nowhere’s openness’, since Morris excludes ‘what displeases him’.¹³⁴ Morris’s experience of factionalist struggles within the Socialist League – eventually tearing it apart – made him all the more reliant on a leap of faith to escape these petty disagreements and reach a collective goal. In his earlier attempt at a quasi-utopian dream-vision, *A Dream of John Ball* (serialised in *Commonweal* between November 1886 and January 1887), the narrator encourages John Ball to see beyond the imminent failure of the Peasants’ Revolt with a promise of ‘the change beyond the change’.¹³⁵ The nature of its arrival, however, is not specified in any detail. Transformation appears a process with a force of its own. This impression is only heightened in *News from Nowhere*. The chapter describing the transformation from capitalism to socialism is entitled simply ‘How the Change Came’, suggesting that the change itself is an impersonal or at least an automatic one. The Socialist League’s factional disputes, however, made Morris all the more aware of the variety of individuals’ ‘dreams’. His utopia is designed to inspire its readers with ‘visions’ of their own, as much as to persuade them of the validity of his precise ‘dream’.¹³⁶

Only Bellamy’s utopia does not fit this paradigm. By ‘awaking’ in the nineteenth century, only to be followed by a ‘re-awakening’ in the twenty-first, Bellamy refuses us the right to view his vision in the personal framework that Morris’s ‘dream’ mode offers us. His utopia is the least ‘open’, in Suvin’s terms. One outcome of this is that of all the utopias under examination here, it had the most instantaneous and direct political impact. Partly inspired by his book, members of the Populist movement founded the People’s Party in 1891, which wielded some substantial influence before partially merging with the Democrats in 1896, and thereafter losing steam. On the other hand, this makes Bellamy’s vision the least long-lasting, and offers us now the least utopian inspiration.

In reading a utopia, I wonder if perhaps our desire for its enactment is generated in proportion to its unavailability. Wells’s *Modern Utopia* would doubtless have been more attractive to its first readers than it is now to us, especially in the

¹³³ Michael Holzman, ‘Anarchism and Utopia: William Morris’s *News from Nowhere*’, *ELH*, 51 (1984), 589–603 (p. 593).

¹³⁴ Waithe, p. 144.

¹³⁵ William Morris, *A Dream of John Ball and A King’s Lesson* (Hammersmith: Kelmscott Press, 1892), p. 95.

¹³⁶ Morris, *News from Nowhere*, p. 228.

aftermath of cataclysmic wars enabled and facilitated by the very technology he so zealously imagines. Perhaps part of the reason why, for us now, Morris's utopia is so much more evocative than Wells's, is the power of the 'not yet', in Ernst Bloch's terms: it *has not yet* happened.¹³⁷ It thus retains an element of mystique, whereas many of the technological, practical and bureaucratic elements of Wells's utopia have since come into being. With these details – the fruits of the overall system – now largely in existence, the overall structure that enables these to come about holds less attraction. By contrast, Morris's world still seems out of reach (arguably even more so than it must have done in 1890), so it retains its power to bewitch.

Conclusion

As this chapter has demonstrated, these writers of *fin-de-siècle* utopian fictions to some extent solve the problems faced by those historians and novelists of the recent past who felt constrained by a lack of temporal distance from their material. They employ imaginary hindsight to enable the authoritative judgements about their present that historians and novelists felt unequipped to make. This stance, however, does not solve everything. In fact, I would suggest that in these utopian texts, the fetishisation of hindsight we have seen in Victorian historiography is replaced by one of collectivity, a unity of part and whole that appeared sorely lacking in their own society of the *fin de siècle*. At the opening of this thesis, I proposed that anxieties about contemporary-history-writing in the nineteenth century resulted in part from the loss of a secure teleological religious narrative. As a result, a historicist notion of a transcendent 'History' had come to prominence, one which united past, present and future within it (and thus included the recent past), but which therefore problematised historiography of the recent past by prioritising a singular, unified, transcendent narrative. By the end of the century, social unity had replaced temporal unity as the quasi-religious, ever-present (and unattainable) goal, which could only be reached via a leap of faith. Writers had become more comfortable playing around with temporality, and less straitjacketed by the demands of hindsight. They had become even more concerned, however, to acknowledge and represent the entire population as part of the historical process.

¹³⁷ Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, I, p. 119.

In previous chapters, we have witnessed the struggle undergone by historians and novelists to represent the ‘unhistoric’ majority of society. Chapter 2 demonstrated how, in their desire to include the unhistoric masses in their histories of the recent past, and to disperse agency more widely than among ‘heroic’ political figures, historians reverted to the unifying trope of ‘nation’. This had the effect of imposing a blanket characterisation on an otherwise multifarious array of individuals, as well as defining the whole through the hegemonic dominance of the middle class. In Chapter 3, we saw how a group of novelists retreated from this ‘national’ stage to address instead the localised provincial community. Instead of eliding the agencies of individual and nation, they chose to celebrate the lives of selected unhistoric characters in their narratives of the recent past. The limitations of this strategy, however, lay in the fact that they could never represent everyone. As Woloch has demonstrated, the protagonists of nineteenth-century novels are still delineated against a cast of ‘minor’ characters, and against a wider anonymous mass of society. In the utopias discussed in this chapter, however, the distinction between individual and mass has largely been eradicated. There is no ‘unhistoric’ protagonist like Dorothea Brooke in these texts: instead, the individual is merged in the collective. Instead of seeking to represent the individuality of someone below the radar of the conventional historical record, the figures in these utopias are representative. Whereas Eliot described Dorothea as a personality whose force, like a diffused river, ultimately ‘spent itself in channels’; the inhabitants of these utopias are less agents in themselves than conduits for a greater force.¹³⁸

The importance of the idea of collectivity, therefore, is that it renders this lack of agency harmonious rather than repressive. The problem remains of how to attain it, and these writers really have no reliable solution for this. They rely on a quasi-religious conversion of hearts and minds that will enable a collective leap of faith, one effected in part, they hope, by their visions of a historically located, future utopia. But collectivity certainly seems worth reaching, if they can get there. If society is motivated by a collective *desire*, collective action and collective agency are fulfilling both at the general and the particular level. Or, to put it another way, that distinction no longer exists.

¹³⁸ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 896.

Conclusion

There is no period so remote as the recent past.

Alan Bennett, *The History Boys* (2004)

This thesis set out to discover why the recent past was an object of such polarised attention in Victorian writing. It asked how Victorian writers reconciled the grand linear theories of historical development prevalent in the period with the messy proximity of their own recent past. It took the view that contemporary history is always and inevitably an area of representational difficulty, but nonetheless argued that philosophical trends (the prominence of historicism through the first half of the nineteenth century) and practical developments (the establishment of history as a professional discipline during the latter half of the century) both led to it becoming a focus of particular preoccupation and anxiety in the Victorian period.

This thesis has shown that discussion of contemporary-history-writing cannot merely be subsumed into general studies of historiography. Writing the recent past as history offers distinctive challenges and opportunities. I located the problematic nature of the recent past in its multiplicity and particularity, which made it a topic of particular discomfort and fixation for Victorian writers. The recent past is a time period still present in the living memories of a multifarious population in teeming detail, and so its material is not easily amenable to distillation for inclusion in a grand unified narrative of 'History'. Because of this multiplicity and particularity, Victorian writers often effectively gendered it as feminine. Its cultural status, therefore, was low, and instead of being a valued topic in canonical historiography, discussions were diffused into other genres.

One of the resultant foci of this thesis was a divergence of approaches to the recent past in different genres: it seemed to be avoided in historiography and a site of pre-occupation in novels. I therefore aimed to find out what underlying causes and presuppositions contributed to this phenomenon. I also examined the effects of different genres' conventions and expectations on the way writers dealt with the challenges of writing contemporary history. Did writers use the novel genre to do what they could not do in historiography? Or were they trying to do something slightly different? This study did not seek to represent the genre debate as an

exclusively binary matter, however, but recognised both that there was a range of approaches within these genres, and that the recent past was also written in other forms. Accordingly, it also examined the late-Victorian burgeoning of a new sub-genre: the fictional utopia set in the future. These utopias approached the recent past from a quite different angle, one in which the present became not only the recent but even the relatively distant past. Running through all three genres, however, were concerns about the representability of the recent past, which lay in two broad areas, the problems of the temporal and social continua.

This study has found that different genres allow strikingly different ways of writing about the recent past as history. A writer's choice of genre, which is itself culturally constrained, has a profound effect on the expectations made of their approach to the recent past, and thus of which aspects they choose to prioritise. As the individual conclusions of each chapter make clear, each of the genres examined in this thesis enabled its writers to address in different ways the problems of writing the recent past as history, but also had its reciprocal limitations.

National historiography was, in this period, the genre of the three with the most entrenched expectations, and was most restrictive of any attempt to include the recent past. The prevailing philosophy of historicism prioritised history-writing that could bolster a sense of a transcendent, unified 'History', something to which the intrinsically multifarious recent past was unsuited. On the other hand, this also meant that for those rare historians with the means and desire to do so, historiography could offer wide scope for revisionist and radical reformulation. Victorian historical output included long-range national histories (such as J. R. Green's on England, and Alice Stopford Green's on Ireland) that challenged conventional narratives and priorities, and specifically contemporary histories (such as Harriet Martineau's and Spencer Walpole's) that challenged conventional orthodoxy about what was possible and appropriate without hindsight, and viewed the recent past as part of a temporal continuum. For all the historians examined in Chapter 2, however, some of the expectations of nineteenth-century historiography were too strong to break away from completely. The urge to generalise could not be entirely overcome: they aspired to a grand overview as well as their inevitably immersed perspective. As a result, although they all sought to encompass the full breadth of the social continuum, none of them lived up to their promised revisionist focus on 'unhistoric' individuals. They

all reverted to the trope of 'nation', effectively sidestepping individual agency, in order to bring unity to their multifarious subject matter.

The novel, as a newer and, in this period, less revered genre, gave its practitioners more freedom to incorporate both unfinished eras of history, and unhistoric individuals, into their texts. Writing in a decidedly individualised form, novelists were free to write more openly subjective and less definitive histories, drawing upon their own memories, and thus the recent past unsurprisingly became an object of attention. They often chose to focus on smaller and more localised, provincial communities than that of national historiography. Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot all drew upon the model of the ironic narrator employed by Walter Scott, but amplified still further the ambivalence and ambiguity this created by incorporating polyphonic voices into their texts. This allowed them to evade the problems posed by the figure of the authoritative, detached historian, which the writers in Chapter 2 had felt obliged to invoke and live up to. Refusing to privilege either past or present in a hegemonic trajectory of progress or decline, these novelists insisted on a temporal continuum that included the recent past in an on-going dialogue.

Setting their novels in provincial communities also allowed Brontë, Gaskell and Eliot to trace the individual lives and influences of conventionally 'unhistoric' figures, rather than the anonymised mass invoked by historians. On the other hand, in doing so, these novelists revealed their limitations. Their attention to the unhistoric sections of society was distributed rather unevenly. The mid-nineteenth-century realist novel was essentially a middle-class genre, and although the women novelists discussed in Chapter 3 were compelling in revalorising their silenced female characters, the parallels they acknowledged between these women's exclusion from the historical record and that of working-class men and women were less effectively carried through.

Both the challenges of the temporal continuum, which left historians feeling handicapped by their lack of hindsight, and the social continuum, which novelists were only unevenly successful at representing, could potentially be solved in the genre that proliferated at the *fin de siècle*: utopian fiction set in the future. This enabled these writers to claim an imaginary hindsight on their late-nineteenth-century recent past, and write their present as history. For historians and novelists, ideas of a temporal continuum had proved an obstacle to viewing their material as a

self-contained entity, and had forced them instead into the immersive mode. But utopian writers such as Edward Bellamy, William Morris and H. G. Wells found that by situating their narratorial perspective in the future, they were able to examine their contemporary history from an apparent distance.

The religious impulse that had fuelled and shaped the philosophy of historicism, and credited 'History' with a transcendent unifying significance, was not lost (or overcome, depending on your stance) by the end of the century. The 'locus of the divine', in Rosenberg's phrase, had merely been 'transmuted'.¹ While the Socialist utopian writers discussed in Chapter 4 were comfortable playing around with and revolutionising the temporal continuum, they merely transferred their reverence to the social continuum, and their object of sacred unity became the 'collective', which could only be reached by a quasi-religious leap of faith. In this way, therefore, for all the radicalism and innovative strategies of these three genres in negotiating the problems of contemporary-history-writing, in one sense, it was a circular set of transitions. At the end of the thesis, we return to a similar place from whence it began, albeit one where priorities had been shifted by disciplinary institutionalisation and emergent democratisation. Although *fin-de-siècle* utopian writers embraced the notion of 'collective' to resolve the contradictions inherent in reaching an individualised ideal through socialist means, this raised as many questions as it attempted to answer.

In its analyses of these three genres through one lens, this thesis has made a notable and innovative contribution to Victorian Studies. While there has previously been substantial scholarly work in each of its three areas, no previous study has brought them all together in this way. Previous discussions of nineteenth-century historiography, and the establishment of the historical discipline, have largely focused on those historians who gained academic posts, and has generally been carried out, often in fruitfully self-reflexive mode, from within the discipline. Similarly, the historical novel form has received critical attention, and all the authors of novels discussed in Chapter 3 are the subjects of huge amounts of literary critical study, but rarely has this taken the form of direct engagement with their approach to writing the recent past as history. And while there is, again, notable work on *fin-de-siècle* utopias in the field of utopian studies, my innovation lies in viewing them alongside historiography and novels, as a form of contemporary-history-writing.

¹ Rosenberg, *Carlyle and the Burden of History*, p. 9.

Many of the most important issues of this thesis, such as pre-occupation with, or exclusion of, the recent past, only come into full relief in cross-genre comparisons.

Although my study has deliberately not been an author-driven one, I have nonetheless contributed to the specialist fields of research concerned with the particular writers I discuss. Chapter 2 has counteracted the prevailing tendencies of intra-disciplinary historiographical research by examining non-canonical historians working outside the academy, by focusing on the conceptual issues involved in writing contemporary history, and by using a comparative technique. In the process, I have also furthered the burgeoning area of Harriet Martineau studies, as well as rejuvenating research on those historians less prominent in literary analyses, J. R. Green, Spencer Walpole, and Alice Stopford Green. The same is true of Chapters 3 and 4. My reading of Elizabeth Gaskell's relatively little-studied novella *My Lady Ludlow* has shown how it joins and even surpasses the more canonical *Shirley*, *Felix Holt* and *Middlemarch*, in resisting the lure of nostalgia to insist on a fundamental continuity between recent past and present, and struggling to represent the 'unhistoric' end of the social continuum. And in my analyses of the utopian writings of Edward Bellamy, William Morris and H. G. Wells, I have tied utopian studies into the questions of the temporal and social continua, and brought *fin-de-siècle* texts into comparison with mid-century ones in a way otherwise rarely undertaken.

This thesis also offers valuable insights into a debate that is of longstanding and perennial concern to both social history and women's studies: the ability of historiography and/or fiction-writing to depict, narrativise and bring to prominence those past individuals who leave little trace in the historical record. I have demonstrated the different capabilities of my three genres to represent these 'unhistoric' figures, and shown how in striving to maintain a balance between individual and society, the particular and the general, they have all employed strategies whose solution also intrinsically throws up the next problem. I have thus added to the growing field of genre-based analysis of what Juliette Atkinson's recent study of Victorian biography has characterised as 'hidden lives'.²

My thesis has also contributed to scholarship in ways that extend even further beyond Victorian Studies. By looking at nineteenth-century culture through the

² Atkinson, *Victorian Biography Reconsidered*. See also, on the debates surrounding the publication of the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* in 2004, Alison Booth, 'Fighting for Lives in the ODNB, or Taking Prosopography Personally', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 10 (2005), 267–79; David Amigoni, 'Distinctively Queer Little Morsels: Imagining Distinction, Groups, and Difference in the DNB and the ODNB', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 10 (2005), 279–88.

conceptual lenses of multiplicity and singularity, particularity and generality, I have drawn on discourses used more prominently in gender studies, genre studies, and studies of disciplinary formation and practice, and have thus pointed towards further possible linkages between these areas. I have also brought a useful framework to bear on discussions of our concepts of history. The concepts of the temporal and social continua could be fruitful for scholars thinking about the implications of historicism, in the nineteenth-century context and beyond.

In drawing an extended comparison between three genres, this project has inevitably not been able to address every potential line of enquiry. The most notable absence is those other genres in which recent past is written: journalism and life-writing. As discussed in the Introduction, these were deliberately excluded on the grounds of their consciously impermanent, and individualised rather than national focus, largely cutting across the problems of respectively the temporal and social continua. The place of journalism in building ideas of contemporaneity is receiving substantial attention in forthcoming work by Clare Pettitt.³ The genre of life-writing could have direct implications for my work in one particular arena, which does attempt to engage with the problem of the social continuum: collective biography. This project could be fruitfully extended, for example, through further research into the *Dictionary of National Biography* and its contribution to these debates, which might complicate the binary contrast drawn in this thesis between historiography and fiction-writing.

More work could also be done on further case studies which would deepen and broaden the analyses of historiography and novel-writing respectively. Examination of those other Victorian historians who either wrote histories of periods within living memory (albeit political and/or economic), or who included the recent past within national histories of England (such as Charles Knight, Harriet Martineau's publisher, the subject of a recent study by Valerie Grey), would deepen this analysis.⁴ My examination of novelistic depictions of the provincial recent past chose to focus on a small sub-group, comprising texts written by women novelists within 25 years of each other. Future work could develop this analysis by widening the net to include novels by male novelists such as Anthony Trollope, and later novels by Margaret Oliphant and Charlotte Yonge.

³ Pettitt, *Distant Contemporaries*.

⁴ Grey, *Charles Knight*.

This study set out intending to refuse to judge the texts it analysed in terms of success or failure. While I have hopefully avoided suggesting that some texts are more objectively ‘successful’ than others, I have ultimately measured them against the expectations and aims they raised for themselves. These ‘successes’ and ‘failures’, however, are only the results of varying strategies to deal with the fundamentally irreconcilable incongruity between the multiple and particular recent past, and the singularity and unity required for narrative form. This is an issue exacerbated still further in historiography by its expectations of generalisation. In securing ‘success’ in one area, any writer inevitably ‘fails’ in another. The recent past refuses to be distilled, and ultimately escapes their grasp.

In the twenty-first century, we are more comfortable (at least in the elite intellectual circles influenced by the ideas of the postmodern), with the notion of irreducible multiplicity. Or perhaps, wedded to and reliant on that most multiple of knowledge systems, the internet, we are just obliged to be. As a result, however, the recent past no longer holds such overweening and prohibitive symbolic power over our imaginations, and is instead a topic of both widespread scholarly investigation and popular media. Particularly in Britain, relatively free from violent upheaval since the end of the Second World War, the recent past within living memory is neither an era so completely different as to defy imagination, nor so idyllic as to be lamented. Around the world, however, in places which have experienced dramatic changes in their state or status – the ex-Soviet bloc countries, for example, the new states of East Timor or South Sudan, those suffering ongoing conflict – contemporary history remains a highly politicised, and highly contentious, issue.

The findings of this study teach us just how significant, and highly divergent, historical narratives of the recent past can be. They can be used to fuel and inspire nationalist ideals or political change, or even to prevent change, as lack of hindsight halts potential conclusions in their tracks. What emerges most clearly is that no single narrative of the recent past can suffice: if it solves one problem, and offers comprehensiveness in one area, it disables itself from doing so in another. We need the competing voices and diverse genres that result from this, in order to give evolving expression to the continually shifting period that is the recent past.

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