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Forum: Victoria and the Politics of Representation

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Seven contemporary commentators whose experience has been touched by Queen Victoria's history and its legacy address the question: how should we curate Victoria today?

Michael Hatt and Joanna Marschner

In this forum on 'Victoria and the Politics of Representation', a range of thinkers respond to the question: how should we curate Victoria today? Their responses consider the relationship between the particular demands of their institutional, geographic, and disciplinary locations and the broader political and moral concerns that underpin the debate. Their statements, which are both polemical and practical, alert us both to the complexities of the apparently straightforward question faced by many historians, curators, and town planners, and to a wider community charged with the responsibility, or convinced of the imperative, to address new ways of engaging with Victoria's image and its legacy in our own time.

Tristram Hunt, Director, Victoria and Albert Museum, London

The very greatest of treasures at the V&A are the Raphael Cartoons. Drawn by the Renaissance genius as studies for the tapestries commissioned by Pope Leo X to hang in the Sistine Chapel, they were lent by Queen Victoria to the fledgling South Kensington Museum in the 1860s in honour of her beloved Prince Albert, who was a deep admirer of Raphael as a designer and craftsman, as well as an artist. Queen Victoria's relentless role as guardian of Albert's memory, safeguarding the legacy of 'Albertopolis' as a global storehouse of creativity and innovation, permeates much of the V&A. But other components of Victoria's reign now command equal attention.

Above all, the imperial past. As well as sovereign, Victoria was Queen-Empress and she took her global power seriously. After the failure of the 1857 Indian Mutiny/Rebellion, the East India Company was wound up and, with it, its repository of artefacts transferred to South Kensington thereby placing the colonial at the heart of the museum. Alongside wondrous textiles, prints, and metalwork from South Asia, the V&A also inherited loot from various colonial wars of Victoria's reign — such as the storming and burning of the Old Summer Palace in Beijing in 1860; the raid on the Maqdala fortress in Ethiopia in 1868; and the 'punitive expedition' of Garnett Wolseley against the Asante in 1874 (*Fig. 1*). In modern, multicultural Britain, with new audiences interested in provenance and imperial legacies, it is these components of Queen Victoria's reign — and, indeed, her own passionate belief in the moral righteousness and strategic need for an expansive British Empire — which provide most interest.

Today, the public is probably less concerned with Conroy and the Kensington System, or the shifting political relationship between sovereign and prime minister, but they are deeply engaged in the material culture, racial thinking, and often brutal geopolitics which accompanied Queen Victoria's monarchy. Just as she placed Prince Albert in the midst of George Gilbert Scott's Memorial, surrounded by the (highly stereotyped)

Fig. 1: Pendant, gold repoussé, Asante (Ashanti), 1850–74, Ghana, Museum no. 373–1874. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London. This gold pendant from the Asante (Ashanti) Kingdom of Ghana is one of thirteen pieces of gold in the V&A collection that was taken by British troops when they raided the Asante capital, Kumasi, in 1874 in conflicts over gold-trading ports.

images of Africa, Asia, America, and Europe, so today we should curate Victoria at the heart of a global nexus of colonial exchange which is of profound importance to modern Britain.

Jayanta Sengupta, Secretary and Curator, Victoria Memorial Hall, Kolkata

How is Queen Victoria's history entangled with the politics of our present time? Perhaps it is now more than ever before, when we are in the middle of a global pandemic and also witnessing a worldwide debate on empire and its attendant themes like racism and slavery, that Queen Victoria's history seems to be entangled with the present times. As we revisit the histories of empire and the whole gamut of iniquities it generated, and seek to recalibrate our academic and public histories, our museum collections, and perhaps our policy narratives, Queen Victoria's history gets ever more deeply implicated in contemporary culture.

I work in India's largest museum of modern Indian history, which is named after the Queen — the Victoria Memorial Hall — founded right after her death as a museum that would showcase the 'achievements of the Empire' (*Fig.* 2). As we have developed our collection across the 1947 watershed, and as we are trying to 'decolonize' our collection and display, my colleagues and I grapple with the challenge of how we accomplish a display on modern Indian history that is equally sensitive to our cultural-intellectual debt to colonial rule and to the powerful legacy of our anticolonial nationalism. And, more importantly, how to do this without being appropriated in the evolving cultural politics of the nation state. In an India where the politics of nomenclature plays an important role, we continue still to be called the 'Victoria Memorial Hall', and to be the only address on a road still called the 'Queen's Way'. The possibility of renaming — with specific kinds of cultural politics associated with such an act — is ever-present.

In an age marked by the increasing ascendancy of approaches of global history, I think it makes sense to place Queen Victoria and her age outside of the frameworks of both the liberal narratives of an 'Age of Improvement/Progress/Reform' or the critical

Fig. 2: Sir George Frampton, statue of Queen Victoria, 1901, bronze, in front of the Victoria Memorial Hall, Kolkata. Karthiknanda, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 3.0.

post-imperialist narratives of the limitless capacity of those imperial systems for generating immiserating, disempowering processes. Victoria could possibly be curated now from a decentred, global perspective, weaned away from an anglophone view, and sensitive to 'vernacular' perceptions.

Sharon H. Venne, PhD candidate in the History Department of the University of Alberta, Canada

Cree World View of Queen Victoria

niya nôtokêw maskwa manitokan
niya doodem pihêsiw maskwa

My ancestors entered into a peace and friendship treaty with the Crown in right of Great Britain and Ireland in 1876 at pêhonânihk (waiting place) and waskahikansis (little fort) known as Fort Carlton and Fort Pitt (*Fig. 3*). Our ancestors saw a woman asking to enter into treaty for her subjects. Queen Elizabeth as a descendant of Queen Victoria holds a unique position among the Treaty Peoples. The Chiefs of Treaty still communicate on a regular basis with the Crown sending updates on issues related to their relationship with Canada.

It is not a quaint custom to write to the Queen. She is the constitutional head of the Canadian government with her representative — Governor General. The treaties

Fig. 3: Treaty medal, brass. The medal marks Treaty 7, 1877. Exhibited at Glenbow Museum, Calgary, Alberta, Canada, 2013. Daderot, Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0.

made with Queen Victoria (kihci-okimâskwêw) allowed for the peaceful settlement in our territories. We maintain the peace despite everything that was done to our Peoples by the government of Canada. In our Cree minds the government of Canada is a child of the Queen — if that child is misbehaving, then we have to appeal to their mother — in this case — the Queen.

In all the interactions with the various monarchies over the years since the treaty making in 1876, there has been a lot of respect shown by both sides. We honour the request made by Queen Victoria on behalf of her subjects. It is hard but our old people agreed. We have to live by those words for as long as the sun shines, the grass grows, and the waters flow. The waters flowing refers to a woman's water breaking when giving birth — for as long as women are giving birth is the length of time for the relationship with the Queen.

Returning to the kihci-okimâskwêw — she was a woman who had a lot of subjects in need. It would be a violation of our laws if our old people did not want to share and be kind to the Queen's subjects. People are still moving to our territories from all over the world to live in peace and friendship with our Peoples. This is the gift of Queen Victoria and our Nations to extend peace. If you ask people — what do you think of Canada? They will tell you that it is a peaceful place. This is thanks to the Indigenous Peoples who agreed to live in peace with the Crown's subjects.

Our old women accepted that a woman wanted to have her subjects live among our Peoples in peace, and friendship remains the key reason that we write and correspond with Queen Elizabeth who is a direct descendant of Victoria. Queen Victoria's legacy remains as a maker of treaty for her subjects. It must be honoured in good faith by Canada.

Maria Nugent, Senior Research Fellow and Co-director of the Australian Centre for Indigenous History, School of History, The Australian National University

In Australia, the struggle to understand, to acknowledge, and to come to terms with our colonial history is ongoing and ever-present. As a settler-colonial nation, founded in frontier violence, territorial usurpation, exploitation of Indigenous people, and extraction of natural resources, confronting the colonial past lies at the heart of Australian contemporary public culture. In recent years there has been an urgent call issued by Indigenous Australians for a process of treaty making and truth telling to begin (again) to redress historical wrongs. This implicitly speaks to the time of Queen Victoria's reign — when treaties were not made in Australia while elsewhere in the empire they were.

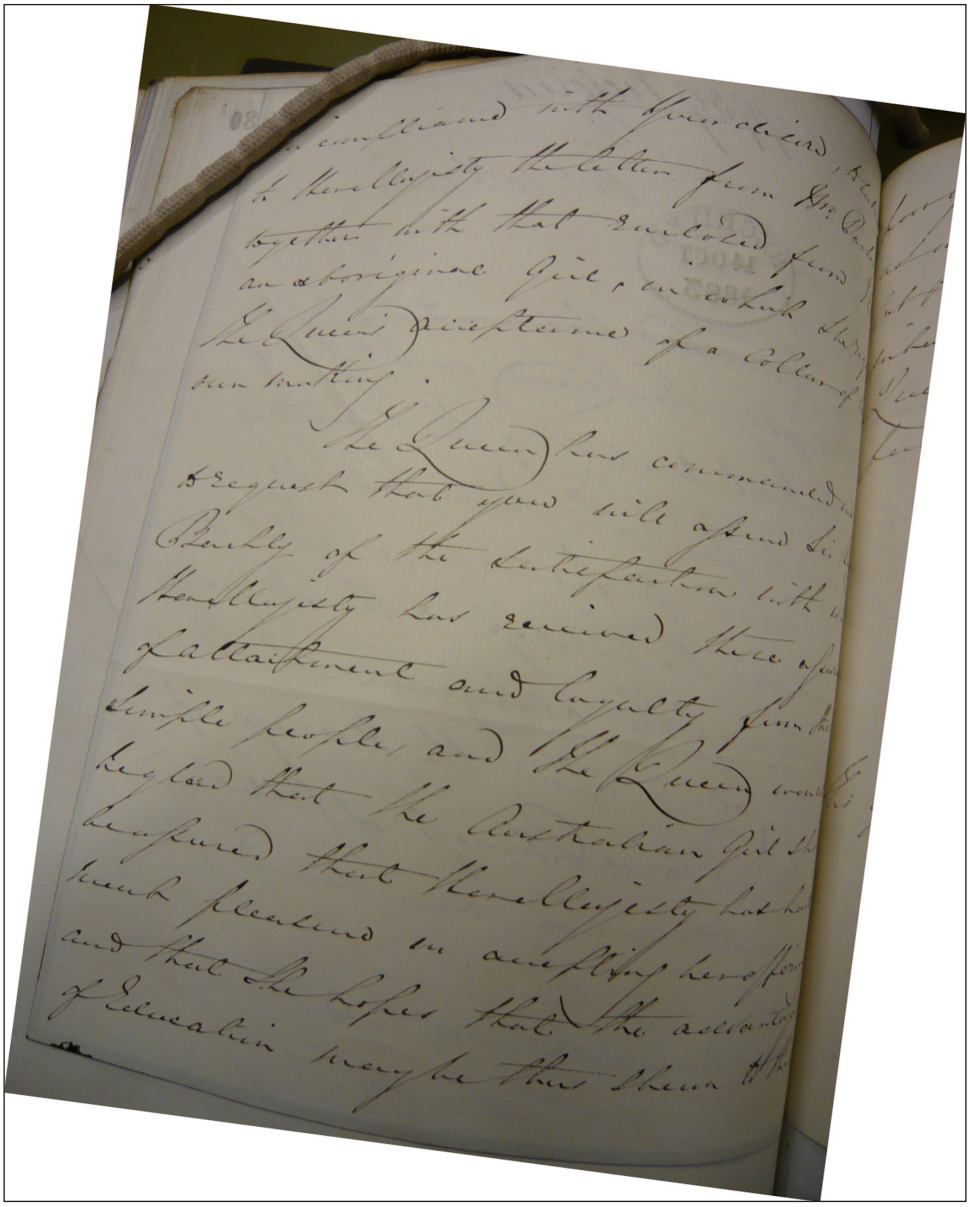


Fig. 4: Mary Jane Cain Letter, donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gift Program by Warwick Keen, 2017, AIATSIS Collection, Canberra, R02250.R02250_010. During her reign, Queen Victoria received letters, petitions, and gifts from Aboriginal people in south-east Australia calling on her to protect their rights and to ensure justice. Copies of these letters, and replies to them, such as this extract from a letter conveying the Queen's sentiments to a young Aboriginal girl who in 1863 had sent her a letter with a gift of a crocheted collar, are held in the National Archives in Kew. 'Epistolary politics' like this has been remembered proudly within families and communities ever since and is celebrated in contemporary artworks like Warwick Keen's 'Mary Jane Cain Letter' (2014) which reproduces a letter defending the author's rights to a piece of Crown land that she believed had been a personal grant made to her and her family by Queen Victoria.

Against this backdrop, we might expect Queen Victoria to be a figure reviled by Indigenous people in Australia. Yet she is not or not much; such revulsion for imperial actors is preserved here for Captain Cook. He is deemed the man most responsible for dispossession of Aboriginal people of their territory, even as historians persistently insist that we need to look to the nineteenth century, including the period of Queen Victoria's reign, to truly understand how, why, and when much of the violent work of conquest and violent dispossession occurred. Paradoxically, Queen Victoria is remembered as a monarch who had the interests of Aboriginal people at heart. Insisting on her goodness and generosity was, though, a way for Aboriginal activists and intellectuals to hold British governments and settler society to account (*Fig. 4*).

In our book *Mistress of Everything: Queen Victoria in Indigenous Worlds* (2016), Sarah Carter and I sought to show how Queen Victoria — as person and as symbol — was a rich resource for understanding the ways in which Indigenous and colonized peoples across Britain's settler colonies during her reign had grappled with and tried to resolve the troubles imposed upon them by imperial expansion and incursion. In many ways we are still living with their legacies, and Queen Victoria remains a resource for the resolution of historical wrongs.

Curating Queen Victoria now must engage both with the multiple histories of the ways in which she was 'performed into being' by Indigenous people in colonial borderlands, such as through the stories they told, the appeals they made, the audiences they had, and the monuments (concrete and ephemeral) they built to her. It must also show the ways in which that political and creative labour continues, by drawing attention to the already expansive artistic output by Indigenous and other artists in former British colonies who, through their art, continue to revisit and rework the meanings of Queen Victoria, both to recast imperial history and to allow us to imagine a future that ultimately transcends it. This is a powerful means of historical truth telling and restitution that also offers new insights into Victoria and her times.

Sarah Carter, Professor and Henry Marshall Tory Chair, Department of History and Classics and the Faculty of Native Studies, University of Alberta, Canada

Queen Victoria is frequently in the news in Canada today. Debates about the future of the monarchy emerge here from time to time and these have gathered momentum in the light of recent accusations of a racist royal family today. Some of Victoria's critics see her as a potent icon of the brutal legacy of the British monarchy who oppressed and marginalized Indigenous people. Her statues have been vandalized in cities including Winnipeg and Montreal as part of a campaign to remove such monuments and as reminders of colonialism (*Fig. 5*). Victoria has long had a fraught relationship

with Quebecois. In 1963 dynamite was used to topple Victoria's head from a Quebec City statue of the monarch. To the organizers of that decapitation, Victoria was seen as a symbol of English-Canadian domination over Quebec.

Fig. 5: View of statue of Queen Victoria on the front lawn of Manitoba Provincial Legislative Building in Winnipeg, Canada, early twentieth century, postcard. Non-Commercial Creative Commons License PC001741, University of Alberta Libraries. This statue by George Frampton, installed in 1904, was taken down and covered with paint by demonstrators in July 2021 as part of a protest over the deaths of Indigenous Canadian children at government-maintained residential schools during the twentieth century.

In my work on settler-colonial history of Western Canada, Victoria looms large. She is of enduring importance to First Nations, as the treaties of the 1870s were made with her. The treaties are sacred agreements to share the land, and they created lasting relationships that were to allow all treaty parties to thrive. From early in the treaty relationship First Nations found that their treaty partner did not live up to promises and obligations, and they have continually and frequently appealed to the monarchy, often invoking Queen Victoria long after she died. They called on the monarch's representatives to act with honour, justice, integrity, and generosity, to protect them from injustice and oppression, and to guard their rights over and above the arbitrary rule of settler governments. Victoria is their treaty partner, but they do not revere her, and do not hesitate to condemn and criticize at the same time. They deployed the symbol of Victoria to draw attention to injustice and to call for justice.

Victoria remains important and is not a neutral figure. Curators should show awareness of the debates about her legacy and the complexities of this legacy. Multiple meanings were assigned to her in the past, and still today, though the particular meanings change over time.

Veerle Poupeye, Belgian-Jamaican Art Historian, Curator and Critic, Kingston, Jamaica

Victoria in Jamaica: Neglect as Decolonial Refusal?

Victoria's memory is present or intimated in the names of locations and institutions throughout the older part of Jamaica's capital Kingston: the Victoria Jubilee Hospital, Victoria Pier, Victoria Craft Market, Victoria Avenue, Jubilee Market, and the Coronation Market among them. There is also a Victoria statue, which was unveiled in 1897, as one of many such statues erected throughout the British Empire around that time — the Kingston statue is a replica of one by Emanuel Edward Geflowski that was made for the Colonial Office in Singapore ten years earlier (*Fig. 6*).

Jamaica has a contentious history with public monuments, but these controversies all pertain to monuments and statues that were erected after Independence in 1962 and involve passionate disagreements about how and by whom certain historical events and personalities that are relevant to independent Jamaica should be represented. In contrast, recent calls by local academics, such as the historian Verene Shepherd, to remove the Columbus and Victoria statues have gained only limited public traction.

Colonial statues, and colonial buildings that have not been conscripted as tourist attractions, are often severely neglected in Jamaica, as is attested by the ruined state of the colonial governor's mansion and courthouse at the old capital Spanish Town's

Fig. 6: Emanuel Geflowski, statue of Queen Victoria, 1897, Kingston, Jamaica. Photograph: Veerle Poupeye.

central square. The Columbus statue, which dates from 1957 and stands in an out-of-the-way location in the town of St Ann's Bay, has trees sprouting from its base. The Victoria statue was removed from its original central position in the St William Grant Park in the early 1970s, in a quiet symbolic demotion, and now stands in a far less prominent location near one of the park's corners. The orb is missing, which I had previously ascribed to weathering, but I was recently told that this was the result of vandalism after a particularly fiery anticolonial speech by Michael Manley around 1975 (I have found no supporting evidence thus far).

This possible exception notwithstanding, I believe that the neglect of colonial monuments and sites in Jamaica is not accidental and amounts to a passive refusal that is ultimately just as eloquent as any iconoclastic fervour. It signals that Victoria's memory — and other representations of colonial power, omnipresent as they still are in the Jamaican environment — has limited symbolic hold over Jamaicans today and, as the post-independence monument controversies suggest, that there is a lot more interest in how history is represented in the modern era, on terms that are consistent with how the Jamaican population perceives itself.

Tim Barringer, Paul Mellon Professor of the History of Art, Yale University

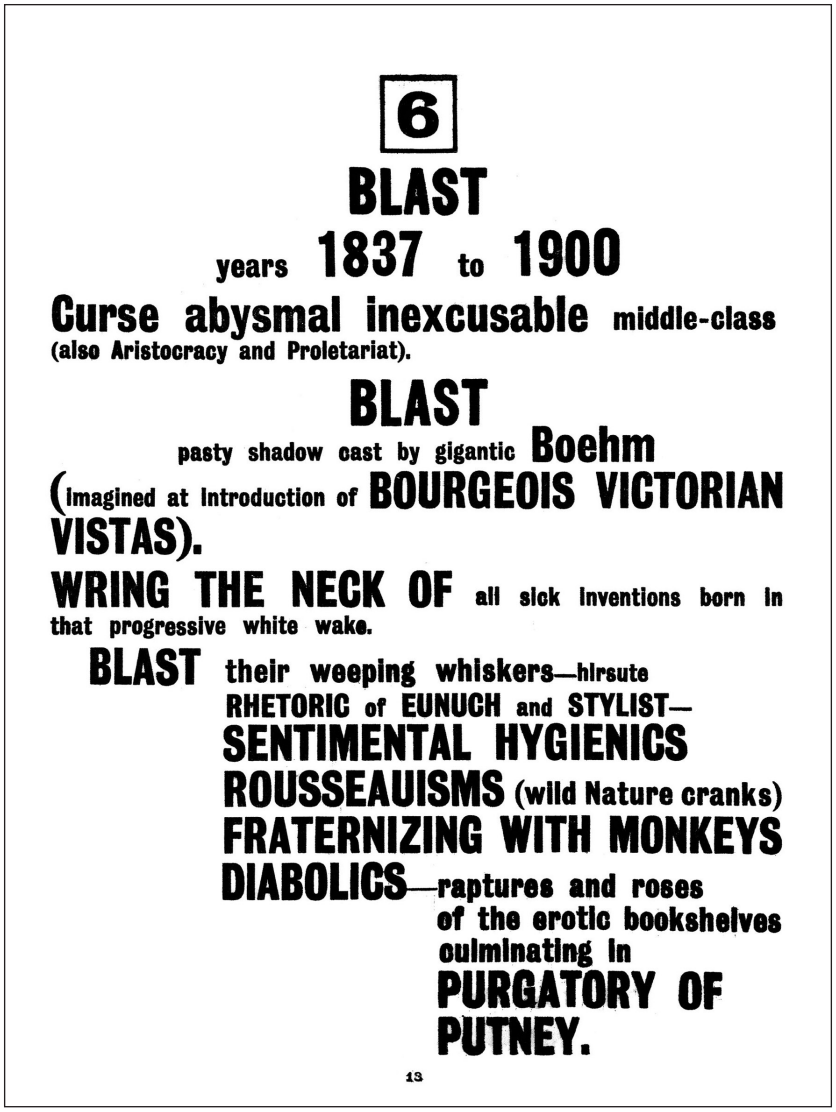
The Victorian Present

Modernism had a firm sense of the Victorian era and the monarch whose long reign gave it a name. The Victorian era figured as the repressive and hypocritical other against which the Modern could be understood. The unsmiling Queen was relentlessly pilloried. Wyndham Lewis wanted to *Blast* the 'pasty shadow cast by gigantic Boehm' — sculptor of the Victoria Monument (*Fig.* 7); while in *Façade* Edith Sitwell imagined 'Queen Victoria sitting shocked upon the rocking horse'.

For those of us who came of age in the 1980s, Victoria bore an ever-harsher visage. Margaret Thatcher's cabinet, nostalgic for the Victorian empire that had disintegrated in their youth, openly advocated of a return to 'Victorian values' as a rejection of the 'permissive society' of the 1960s, a campaign of homophobia, post-imperial racism, and the repressive social policies.

Four decades later, modernism is entirely finished and the catastrophic failings of the Thatcher administration are apparent to all but its current successors in Downing Street. Many of the abiding questions first addressed in the Victorian era remain unsolved in our own, however, and the range and amplitude of Victorian thinking denies easy dismissal. The deleterious impact of industry on the environment, the results of ever-growing inequality of wealth and income, the meaning and interpretation of history, the role of the arts in society — no easy resolution has emerged for these problems that preoccupied Victorian public discourse.

It is surely time to reconsider George Eliot and John Ruskin: but what of Victoria herself, a queen regnant in a world dominated by men? Victoria's hierarchical world view has no place in our present, and nor has her paternalistic embrace of empire (though the current global machinations of extractive capitalism perpetuate exploitation without even feigning social responsibility). We may, however, find much to admire — to take one example — in the Queen's enthusiastic support for the arts through her patronage of 'Albertopolis' after her husband's death.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BLAST

years 1837 to 1900

Curse abysmal inexcusable middle-class
(also Aristocracy and Proletariat).

BLAST

pasty shadow cast by gigantic Boehm
(imagined at introduction of BOURGEOIS VICTORIAN VISTAS).

WRING THE NECK OF all sick inventions born in that progressive white wake.

BLAST their weeping whiskers—hirsute
RHETORIC of EUNUCH and STYLIST—
SENTIMENTAL HYGIENICS
ROUSSEAUISMS (wild Nature cranks)
FRATERNIZING WITH MONKEYS
DIABOLICS—raptures and roses
of the erotic bookshelves
culminating in
PURGATORY OF
PUTNEY.

13

Fig. 7: Wyndham Lewis, 'Manifesto', *Blast: Review of the Great English Vortex*, no. 1, 20 June 1914, p. 13.

Art historians have only begun the task of digging out the ruins of Victorian culture from under the rubble of modernism. It is still hard to focus on Victoria without looking through the distorting lens of Lytton Strachey. Nor should the siren song of nostalgia be heeded as in the 1980s. Bloomsbury's faith in itself and its era was misplaced; Thatcher's loathing of contemporary society was equally corrosive. We might instead acknowledge continuities between the Victorian and the contemporary, engaging seriously with Victorian ideas and figures including the most powerful woman in the nineteenth-century world.