

Book Review

Hewitt, Martin (ed.), *The Victorian World*. Routledge Worlds Series, Routledge, London, 2012, pp. xviii + 756, ISBN 9780415491877 (Hbk).

Those working in the history of religions will likely already be familiar with the Routledge Worlds series, which has produced some outstanding reference works, and with *The Victorian World* Martin Hewitt has produced another text which will surely become a standard resource for those dealing with the nineteenth century. Based around six parts, the book covers 'The World Order', 'Economy and Society', 'Politics', 'Knowledge and Belief', 'Culture', and 'Varieties of Victorianism' over 40 chapters. Naturally there will be areas which some think should have been covered or given greater prominence; however, the range and variety of topics is illuminating and nobody will find something which does not open up new vistas of knowledge and insight to them.

It is worth mentioning one particular debate which the editor takes up in his introduction, which is whether it is meaningful to speak of the Victorian as a period. Here, Hewitt argues with some cogency that while trying to generalise the whole period as homogenous is clearly inaccurate, nevertheless we see enough markers to speak of periods of the Victorian worldview and experience. However, it is clear this does not mark a sharp break from what came before or after. Many of the contributors also clearly share some such sense that 'Victorian' provides a useful marker, but not, it seems, all. Nevertheless, whether the debate over whether 'Victorian' means something is settled does not matter, in one sense at least, because the term, loosely conceived, provides a marker for an extended and significant period in British and colonial history. In this sense 'Victorian' merely stands as a loose and useful marker as long as it is not reified, which Hewitt and his contributors do not.

Given the interest readers of this journal will have in religious history, we should note that only one chapter is given over to religion explicitly, 'Worlds of Victorian Religion' by Jeffrey Cox. Clearly we are in good hands here, and while unable to cover the whole range of Victorian religiosities this chapter does fine work in covering the major contours of mainstream religious belief in Britain. Of course, religion naturally pops up elsewhere, and many chapters contain reference to mission or other areas of religious life. Especially the wide coverage of issues relating to empire, mission and related themes will be of great benefit to many students and scholars, and given the range of topics where it comes up, from imperialism to race there will surely be new insights even to those familiar with the territory. Nevertheless, I would have liked to have found more coverage of some religious themes, and the rise of alternative forms of religiosity like Theosophy and interest in the esoteric, or the emergence of the science of religion, and the growing knowledge and debate about 'world religions' would have been worthy of chapters in themselves.

However, as a reference text on this period, it is not primarily for its coverage of religiosity per se that this text is likely to be of benefit to scholars; rather, it is the coverage of areas that provide the cultural and social background that will often prove the most fascinating. Here, we are provided with a range of comprehensive and illuminating

surveys of many aspects of Victorian life. Without wishing to pick out any chapters as exemplary, as there are so many good examples, some I found particularly fascinating were those on 'Disease and the Body', 'Discipline', 'Learning: Education, Class and Culture' and 'The Empire of Art'. All were areas in which I found my partial knowledge extended and informed, and in ways which helped me to see how things fitted into a surrounding context.

It is hard to draw any general conclusion from such a wide ranging set of individual essays; however, overall the quality of the writing and content is of a high standard, and it is quite exceptional to get a text where one sees this consistently. As such, the editor is to be congratulated on his choice of contributors. It is a text which should sit in every library, and will surely be an indispensable companion as a reference work, and source of further reading and inspiration for all students and scholars of religion in the Victorian period.

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