This book assembles contributions from thirty-three of the most important Victorianists of our time, including Isobel Armstrong, Jerome McGann, Mary Poovey, and Herbert Tucker. Thirty-three hands cannot draw any single through-line or narrative about Victorian literature. But the contemporary idea of history that informs this book, drawn from new historicism and cultural studies, eschews linear history, opting instead for something more like Clifford Geertz’s "thick description." Furthermore, the volume also attempts to jettison what most of the contributors consider an outmoded idea of "literature" as a prestigious, elite class of writing, broadening the category to include all writing, from epic and lyric modes to journalism and even advertising copy. Ultimately, even the categories "Victorian" and "English" become problematic. All in all, therefore, a history of Victorian literature undertaken from the perspective of cultural studies faces formidable difficulties of definition, let alone definitiveness.

Given its broader definition of literature and its new historicist rather than conventionally historical approach, this volume differs sharply from the first volume of the original Cambridge History of Literature, which treated history in the Carlylean sense as the chronologically arranged biographies of "great men" (6) and
charted Victorian literary history as the alphabetically arranged lives and writings of Arnold, Browning, Carlyle, and so on. Instead of re-using this easy but no longer tenable biographical and chronological arrangement, Kate Flint organizes the volume into six sections: "Authors, Readers, and Publishers," "Writing Victoria’s England," "Modes of Writing," "Matters of Debate," "Spaces of Writing," and "Victorian Afterlives." The first two of these sections, each consisting of three chapters, are the most internally coherent, and perhaps best exemplify the volume’s fusion of literary history with cultural studies.

Taken together, the three chapters of Part One explore the technological and cultural changes that enabled and sustained a mass print culture, and the consequent and complicated changes in the relationships among authors, publishers, and readers. In the first of these chapters, David Finkelstein approaches the issues from the supply side, briefly surveying the industrial innovations that enabled publishing on a mass scale and exploring ways in which the rapid growth of the print industry helped to generate and sustain the increasingly literate public’s ever-rising demand for texts and images. While chiefly examining the relations of authors to the newly industrialized print industry, Finkelstein also suggestively notes the changing relations of authors to readers, particularly the radical Hazlitt’s enthusiasm for what he saw as a leveling tendency in the democratization of print culture as it reached an ever wider public. Finkelstein is less attentive to the fears and concerns expressed by Coleridge, Carlyle, Arnold, and others, who warned that democratization meant loss of intellectual authority and even anarchy.
These concerns, however, are deftly explored in Leah Price's exploration of "the Victorian theory and practice of reading. What was read in this period," she asks, "and by whom? What hopes and fears did writers attach to reading (their own and others'), and what vocabulary did they develop to describe--endlessly, ambivalently--these textual encounters?" (35) Probing the "fears and fantasies that Victorian intellectuals attached to literacy" (55), Price argues that "literacy provoked ambivalence. Even staunch Liberals could use ambiguous language, like the double entendre in G.M. Trevelyan's remark that 'Since we have given them the key to the house of knowledge, we must show them the door'" (43). The huge increase in literacy and reading in the Victorian period seemed to many a mixed blessing. While stimulating ever more "high cultural" and now canonical novels and poetry, it also--and far more extensively--helped to breed advertising circulars, bulk mailing, and other ephemera, to the extent that "[t]he Victorians, in short, were discovering information overload" (53).

The ways in which Victorian print culture prefigures the culture of our own time are more fully taken up in Hilary Fraser's discussion of periodicals and reviews, which begins by positing that "[t]he nineteenth century saw the beginnings of the modern mass media" (56). While the Victorian period may seem to us a golden age of letters, Fraser reminds us that the "intellectually heavyweight quarterlies" made up just a handful of the "tens of thousands of... serials published over the course of the nineteenth-century" (56), generating an information overload that was "at once defined by and constitutive of modernity" (58). Late in the century, Fraser suggests, some journalistic writing even showed an awareness of "inhabiting a 'society of the
spectacle' in which, according to Guy Debord, 'all that once was directly lived has become mere representation'" (61). We have long seen the Victorian period as the forerunner of modern thought, but Fraser now finds the Victorian mind anticipating the postmodern mind, even the "mind of the contemporary democratization of knowledge experienced by the Internet generation" (69). Like Finkelstein, Fraser does not appear to share the fears of Arnold or Carlyle. He does not worry that the information overload of the Victorian age, or the exponentially greater overload of the contemporary "blogosphere," may betoken anarchy rather than democratization (though neither Arnold nor Carlyle would have seen much of a distinction).

In Part Two the volume replaces a conventional history of the Victorian period with a historical contextualization of its literature. In three chapters, it mines both literary and historical sources to explore "the theme of literature and national identity" (8) and what Raymond Williams called the "structure of feeling" (Culture and Society [1958])--a phrase quoted often here--in the early, middle, and late Victorian period. While David Amigoni treats roughly the first third of the period as an age of expansion in cities, colonies, commerce, thought, and literature, Janice Carlisle shows how a rapidly expanding and ever more multitudinous modernity led anxious Victorians to the refuge of nostalgia, not only in the autobiographical recovery of their own pasts, but also in "nostalgia without memory" for earlier ages (putatively bound by a unity of being missing in the modern age), and in a "proleptic nostalgia: a temporal inversion that involves imagining a time in the future . . . when the present will have become the past" (111). Finally, Stephen Arata finds the
coherence of late Victorian culture in a widespread quest for forms of beauty that would transcend the mundane actualities of the modern workaday world.

In the two central sections of the volume, which are also the two longest, contributors make their most extended effort to fuse the methods of literary criticism with cultural studies by relating the structure of feeling in Victorian culture to the literary structures that reproduce it. The shift from a now seemingly outmoded version of literary history to cultural studies is programatically represented in Part Three, "Modes of Writing," which Flint calls "the most radically conceived section of this volume" (9). In some respects, the centerpiece of this section turns out to be Jerome McGann’s discussion of "Innovation and Experiment," which highlights not the "timeless" genres of the Victorian age but rather its unique inventions. A strong exponent of new historicism, McGann argues that the literature of the Victorian period shared the innovative spirit of the age in all domains, but especially and necessarily in the technologies and publishing practices that enabled the mass publication of newspapers, journals, and books on a previously unimaginable scale, whereby "the forces of material production utterly transformed the practice of 'literature'" (288). McGann convincingly situates the formal and thematic characteristics of Sartor Resartus within the emergent "'Dog's-meat Bazaar' of contemporary periodical publication" and The Pickwick Papers within the same mass marketing system, which--by means of serial publication-- enabled Dickens to conduct radical experiments in narrative. Likewise, McGann stresses, the publishing innovations that made gift books and annuals the chief outlets of Victorian poetry also enabled the innovative work of such writers as L. E. L. and the
"refiguring of a graphical tradition" that led to the innovative work of "key later figures like D. G. Rossetti and William Morris" (295). Ultimately, however, McGann's chapter owes at least as much to the methods of traditional literary history as to the tenets of new historicism, for McGann shows how Victorian poets responded innovatively to the works of their predecessors and contemporaries (as Tennyson and the Pre-Raphaelites did to the works of L. E. L., for example).

Though McGann explains innovation by synthesizing cultural studies and literary history, this kind of synthesis becomes much more difficult for contributors working on the "high" and "timeless" forms of lyric and epic. Material culture and historicism play little or no part, in fact, in Angela Leighton's beautifully, even lyrically, wrought chapter on "The Lyric and the Lyrical," which presents the lyric as a pure literary form that aspires to the indefinite, to "saying nothing, communicating nothing" so as to release its "power as sound" (168). Though Leighton's superb readings of a wide variety of Victorian lyrics powerfully evoke a decidedly Victorian tension between the claims of reason and representation and the claims of emotion and expression, she does not bind this tension to any "structure of feeling" in the Victorian age. In other words, she makes no very definitive claims about "the capacious form" that includes the rhetorically powerful monologues of Browning, the dying falls of Tennyson and Christina Rossetti, the rhythmic experimentation of Swinburne and Hopkins, and even the nonsense of Lear and Carroll. Perhaps necessarily, the ineffability of the lyrical cannot be clearly expressed in terms of literary history, however the term "history" is understood.
Herbert Tucker, on the other hand, insists that Victorian epic can be defined by a "core narrative" (174). Having recently authored a book on the subject, he organizes his chapter chronologically by decade, but much as Leighton's chapter leaves history out of literature, Tucker's seems almost to leave literature out of history--by the very act of making epic include much that some readers will regard as subliterary or extraliterary, such as George Grote's *History of Greece* (1846-56) and the controversial religious tracts of *Essays and Reviews*. While many readers may accept this capacious version of the epic with no difficulty, the application of the term to histories, essays, scientific tracts or seemingly any long, ambitious piece of writing is a little bewildering. For all of Tucker's brilliance and wit, therefore, his "core narrative" is difficult to follow. Only the historical scaffolding keeps the discussion from spinning off the ringing grooves of change.

Scrutinizing the less prestigious forms of melodrama and sensation respectively, Carolyn Williams and Kate Flint trace each of these modes to an historically specific structure of feeling and also show how they simultaneously create and reflect "the cultural temper of the Victorian age" (241). Largely through their excellent readings of exemplary works, both authors cogently link a Victorian literary form with its historical moment, and even bestow a deserved but generally unacknowledged prestige and cultural influence on forms that by some definitions scarcely rise to the level of the "literary." Similarly, Linda H. Peterson (in "Autobiography"), John Bowen (in "Comic and Satirical"), and Claudia Nelson (in "Writing for Children") all discuss forms and modes so thoroughly aligned with the
spirit of the age--its "structure of feeling"--that they lend themselves to the cultural studies approach.

In deciding to broaden the definition of "literary" and to replace historical narrative with a historicization of modes and genres, Flint editorially shapes not only Part Three but also Part Four, "Matters of Debate." Methodologically, this part is nearly indistinguishable from the one before it, though the emphasis now falls somewhat more on matter than on literary mode. The twelve contributors to this section all seek to show how structures of feeling correspond with structures of expression across a variety of modes. In her chapter on "Cityscapes," for example, Deborah Epstein Nord explains "the structure of feeling--fear, shock, repulsion, sympathy, delight, and bewilderment--that the novels, poems, and commentaries of the period reveal" (511). Still, the decision to segregate the "modes" of Part Three from the "matters" of Part Four cannot be readily reconciled with the refusal to separate "literature" from other forms of writing, for in Mary Poovey's chapter on "Economics and Finance" and Andrew Sanders' chapter on "History," Part Four treats history writing and political economy as "matter" rather than literary "mode." Poovey herself distinguishes "literary writing" about economics and finance from political economic theory and financial journalism (391). On the other hand, Elaine Freedgood's splendid chapter on "Material" blurs the editorial distinction between modes and matters by showing how Gaskell, Dickens, Thackeray and others represent matter in literature. The blurring is deliberate, of course, and in the best of these chapters the idea of the "literary" is not so much contextualized as historicized, most notably in Poovey's demonstration that "what was distinctive
about literary writing" emerged, at least in part, "by challenging the way value was conceptualized and circulated" in the Victorian period (390-391). Similar discussions of a range of issues including spirituality, sexuality, humor, science, and aesthetics all effectively correlate a Victorian structure of feeling with formal structures of writing, genre, and form. These central sections of the book fittingly conclude with Clare Pettitt's discussion of writing and technology, "The Annihilation of Space and Time," which "tracks technology within narrative through three sub-genres of the Victorian novel," the industrial novel, the sensation novel, and the detective novel (557, Pettitt's emphasis).

If the final two sections of the book don't actually annihilate space and time, they do complicate them in interesting ways. As Armstrong indicates by citing Kant, Heidegger, and other philosophers in "Spaces of the Nineteenth-Century Novel," space and time are intrinsically complicated categories that can be represented in structures of writing. Other, less abstract, chapters in these final sections complicate our sense of English space by examining regionalism, British literatures other than English (Scottish, Welsh, Irish), and the extension of Englishness into other lands; still others complicate our sense of the Victorian era by extending it into its "afterlives" in Edwardian, Georgian, modernist, postmodernist and even unknown future times. Jay Clayton, for example, notes the "outline of a twenty-first century structure of feeling" informed by the Victorian age rather than by the twentieth century.

Finally, this volume has the strengths of its weaknesses. The decision to update literary history by accepting the new historicist redefinitions of its central
terms was surely a necessary one, but by leaving those central terms somewhat loosely defined, the book not only declines--rightly-- to represent itself as definitive; it also blurs the major organizational distinction between "matter" and "mode." Is historical writing a "matter of debate" or a literary mode? The multiple perspectives of the many contributors encompass the complexity of Victorian culture, but also leave the book without a single focused, fully coherent point of view. Despite Flint's lucid introduction and careful organization of the chapters into sections, the bulk of the book--the twenty chapters of Parts Three and Four--reads more like a collection of essays than the stages of a coherent, unified argument such as one finds in a single-authored text like James Eli Adams's A History of Victorian Literature (2009), which I have also reviewed on this site. But since the present book is not so much a history to be read from beginning to end as a source of guidance for research on specific topics, the consistently high quality of the thirty-three essays insures reliable information, perceptive commentary, and up-to-the-minute critical perspectives.

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