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VICTORIAN LITERATURE AND CULTURE

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Notes on Contributors

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Jennifer Wicke is Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Virginia; she has written widely on the relationship between nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature and modern economic and political forms. Her latest book, *Born to Shop: Modernism, Modernity, and the Global Work of Consumption* (Oxford University Press, 2014), follows an economic arc of consumer culture in relation to literature from Wilde to Woolf.
This book aims to meet both short-term and long-range needs. To begin with, it is a reference work for consultation. The reader with a question about, say, the provisions or effects of the Forster Education Act of 1870 will be guided by the index to a number of places where these matters are discussed; then, as the need for punctual answers ripens into ampler curiosity, the context provided by our historical chapter 3 on “1870” or our chapter 14 on “Educational” careers will offer an expanded prospect. To take another example, the student of nineteenth-century poetry who has started to wonder what ideas about literature were in circulation during the Victorian era, and in which venues they ordinarily appeared, will find a conspective discussion in our chapter 28, “Literary Criticism”; then, at the end of this as of each chapter, a list of CROSS-REFERENCES will suggest where else to turn in the book for a further viewpoint or elaboration. Finally, the bibliographies that round off every chapter gesture beyond the covers of this book to hundreds of others recommended for further reading. Here then, in the first instance, is a Companion of somewhat the pocket-tool sort: several devices in one, designed for handy multiple applications.

Still, a companion is more than a consultant; and our book aims to do more than provide quick reference help. The Victorian Literature and Culture embraced by its title identifies a subject of vista so immense, and of crannies so multitudinous, that the student who means to confront that subject whole is likely to want, beyond mere information, the presence of an experienced guide. This long-range need has been anticipated in an overall plan gathering the book’s chapters into discrete parts, which the student may read in order to grasp, respectively, the history of Victorian Britain (part one), the phases in a Victorian life (part two), the leading professions and careers that filled out the phase of mature adulthood (part three), the major Victorian literary genres (part four), and the limits Victorians recognized as defining their persons, their homes, and their national identities (part five). Within parts one, two,
and five the editor has embraced as the organizing principle a linear narrative of development and expansion that is itself unabashedly Victorian; and the discerning reader will see how a like principle sustains the march of parts three and four, as they move from traditional cultural formations toward emergent and increasingly self-organizing ones.

Furthermore, because the individual chapters more often than not thread their information along historical narrative lines, our book gives considerable internal reinforcement to patterns of origin and development, progress and decline, that themselves became intellectual second-nature during the period under study. This past-and-present congruence between nineteenth-century and contemporary structures of understanding has obvious advantages but certain drawbacks too. So the reader is hereby advised that other, less aggressively linear modes of putting Victorian literature and culture into each other are also desirable, and that they are indeed made possible by our schemes of index and cross-reference. Advice on this score admittedly seems less urgent in view of the decentering effect that arises when a book mirrors, as this one does, three dozen different minds freshly at work on topics in which they take strong interest. Stylistic, procedural, and theoretical variety among our contributors will give the Companion an agreeably protean character, it is hoped, for that inner circle of readers who accompany us all the way from start to finish, in quest of a comprehensive yet complex perspective on the Victorian age. And, at the end of the line in this comprehensively revised new edition, a freshly commissioned chapter on the phenomenon of “Neo-Victorianism” will spur reflection about what is at stake, on either side of our slow but sure millennial turn, in the appropriation and repurposing of Victoriana up and down the contemporary cultural gamut.

Given this prefatory reassurance of ours about a marriage of comprehensiveness with convenience, the reader may want to proceed to the chapters right away. For those disposed to linger here, though, the editor offers this introductory perch as a viewing point from which to remark some unplanned benefits that have accrued en route. While contributors have been enjoined against lengthy assessment of the state and trend of scholarship – matters of compelling interest within the guild, but not companionable in the sense that matters here – the chapters below do in effect constitute a veritable cross-section of scholarly Victorianism in the early twenty-first century. A familiar canon of authors is alive and well, to judge from both the quantitative frequency and qualitative respectfulness of their citation here. Dickens and Eliot retain preeminence among the novelists, with strong support from Thackeray and even stronger from Trollope. Carlyle, Mill, and Arnold still lead the way as Victorian sages. Tennyson remains in a poetic class by himself, Robert Browning being a doughty second (unless Elizabeth Barrett Browning now shares that honor), with the Rossettis, Swinburne, and Hopkins receiving honorable if infrequent mention.

It is generally in the middle distance of renown that notable shifts occur. Collins and Gaskell are more often cited as cultural exponents and major fiction artists than they would have been a generation ago, at the expense perhaps of the now less-cited Brontës and Meredith, while in nonfiction prose such paraliterary figures as Bentham
and Mayhew, Darwin and Marx have come to adjoin the aesthetic and social witness long since canonized in Ruskin and Morris, Pater and Wilde. For *Middlemarch* and *In Memoriam* as many uses have been found in our time as half a century ago when Victorian studies was finding its interdisciplinary feet, although the distinct novelty of some of these uses lets one affirm that stability in the canon has no automatic correlation, and by no means a simply inverse correlation, with diversification of critical approaches and findings. At all events the value that literary and cultural theory nowadays accord to difference, heterogeneity, and contestation brings *Vanity Fair* and *The Ring and the Book* to the fore in more than one of the following chapters, among other works sharing their dispersive qualities of irony and masquerade. To some extent these patterns of spontaneous preference may result from our joint mission to coordinate the events of literary history with the prevailing conditions and decisive changes that defined Victorian culture at large. When seeking to demonstrate the reciprocal influence of text and context, it makes sense to turn on one hand to writings that enjoyed wide circulation, and on the other hand to writings that expressly reflected a broad spectrum of contemporary concerns. Writings that did both, like the great social-issue novels of Dickens, accordingly loom large in these pages.

Something of the same kind may be observed about another of the book’s collective determinations, that of periodization. Our annualist historical chapters in part one set the framing limits of the period deliberately far apart. Chapter 1 (“1832”) finds its center half a decade before the young queen’s ascension to the throne and glances back beyond that date into the late 1820s; chapter 4 (“1897”), from its vantage half a decade before the old queen’s death, opens out into numerous issues pertinent to the Edwardian moment that was to follow. Our chronological frame thus claims as “Victorian” roughly the period 1830–1900 – threescore years and ten, and then some – and several contributors offer energetic, fertile speculation about its outer reaches; about the 1830s and 1880s, for example, two turbulent decades whose literary and cultural history remains unsettled. Within this expanded framework, however, contributors with few exceptions (and with the editor’s blessing) have made centripetal choices about what texts, authors, and movements to discuss: none of us implies that Wordsworth or Mary Shelley, Conrad or H. G. Wells should be enlisted on strictly calendrical grounds as a Victorian. Moreover, by the collective choices of its contributors this book unmistakably confirms as High Victorian the core years 1850–75, a quarter-century which repeatedly focuses our chapters and from whose literary, legislative, and social achievements our chief examples are repeatedly drawn. From causes that exceed the capacity of an editor to declare – and that have called for *tours de force* in the composition of chapters 2 and 3 – these were the years when the interactivity between British literature and its ambient culture was most radiantly strong, year after year and right across the genres, from *Aurora Leigh* and Macaulay’s *History of England* to “The Wreck of the Deutschland” and *The Way We Live Now*. No wonder our *Companion* gives special privilege to writings from this core period: they ring still with that textual–contextual synergy which made literature and culture such boon companions for one another at the Victorian noontide.
While certain topics traditionally prominent or recently urgent in Victorian studies do not receive frontal treatment here, their omission is in most cases merely apparent. Neither utilitarianism nor socialism gets a chapter to itself; the evangelical and the aesthete are alike passed over; for essays dedicated to the contest of science with religion, or to the dilemma of the woman writer, the reader will scan our table of contents in vain. But that is because these topics are the very reverse of negligible: so insistently do they require our notice that they appear (witness the index) as ingredient themes throughout the book, rather than in isolation as token or special interests. The reason the Companion lacks a chapter on the working class is that the contributors have been urged to build a working-class perspective into each account they write. On the record, the literary documentation of Victorian experience remains overwhelmingly middle-class; but Victorian writers would never have left the record they did had the middle classes been less acutely aware of the political insistence of those whose “inferior,” or for that matter “superior,” social and economic position defined what ranked as a comfortable bourgeois norm. This feature of cultural history – like others respecting sexuality, ethnicity, denominational faith – is best conveyed by means of saturation. Our reader will therefore find, say, the 1864 Contagious Diseases Act discussed not in quarantine but all over the book, because the institutional and ideological bearings that regulated Victorian sexuality were all over the culture that the book is about.

By now a brace of conspicuously changeful scholarly generations have passed since three independent Guides to Research took survey of the environs and prospects for Victorianist study of fiction (ed. Lionel Stevenson 1964, revised 1980), of poetry (ed. Frederic Faverty 1956, revised 1968), and of prose (ed. David De Laura 1973). Those authoritative volumes address a more advanced scholarly audience than ours does, an audience that has indeed included most of our contributors at one or another stage in their professional development. While this Companion has never been intended to supersede the Guides, the bibliographies it contains acknowledge enough new scholarship – sufficiently various in kind, diversified in scope, and innovative in method – to warrant their revision and probably reconception, along fresh lines that depart from the author-centered programs of study that held sway forty years ago. Until the Guides are superseded, though, it is to them that readers of this book who go on to undertake independent research should turn in the pursuit of detailed information about principal nineteenth- and twentieth-century repositories of information and channels for intellectual exchange. Also recommended here are a trio of more recent literary-historical synopses, to whose steady single-point perspective on intellectual and cultural contexts our omnibus Companion offers a more kaleidoscopic complement: Robin Gilmour’s The Victorian Period (1993), The Victorians by Philip Davis (2002), and our contributor James Eli Adams’s A History of Victorian Literature (2009). To these should be added two very recent group endeavors more like our own: The Cambridge History of Victorian Literature, edited by Kate Flint (2012), and the experiment in pointillist collective historiography that Dino Franco Felluga has conducted as BRANCH: Britain, Representation, and Nineteenth-Century History (http://www.branchcollective
.org). Decades hence the century-straddling efforts of every one of us are likely to be noticed, if at all, for their quaint adherence to narrative explanation, to the expository paragraph, and above all to the medium of print. But it is a safe bet that the hunger to understand our antecedents will survive us, together with the desire to appreciate those literary achievements which remain the Victorians’ most subtly demanding legacy to a posterity no less vexed and inquisitive than they.

The editor thanks Andrew McNeillie for initially envisioning the first edition, and Emma Bennett and Ben Thatcher for patiently fomenting this new one. Thanks again to all our returning contributors, who in many cases have substantially revised their original chapters, and especially to the authors who join us here for the first time: Edward Adams, Julie Codell, Ann Heilmann, and Mark Llewellyn for their work on chapters entirely new; Michael Hunt, James Mussell, and Jan-Melissa Schramm for their tactful incorporation and deft supplementation of existing ones. Between editions our company has sustained only one loss, but it is a signal one: the late Richard Altick’s scholarship abides as an influence, not only on the chapter he initially composed in his eighties, but on many another chapter here as well.
Part One

History in Focus
Finding the Beginning

When did the Victorian age begin? While the senescence of Victorian England has been located anywhere from the Queen’s Golden Jubilee in 1887 to the Battle of the Somme in 1916, its beginning – the “Victorian prelude” (Quinlan) – has been placed at least as far back as the 1780s, which saw the moral reaction in English manners portended by the Wesleyans and the Evangelical revival. Here “Victorianism” is simplistically equated with a social conservatism that both antedates and postdates the queen herself; Mrs Grundy, it seems, was on the throne longer still. A literal reading of the term implies that the Victorian era begins with the accession of Victoria to the throne in 1837 and ends with her own demise in 1901. Yet the first generation of authors we now know as “Victorian” was born at the end of the eighteenth century and in the first two decades of the nineteenth. Carlyle, Mill, Macaulay, Newman were all publishing in the 1820s; Tennyson and Browning in the early 1830s. Strict adherence to the dates of reign ignores these larger continuities.

The Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals has canonized another date: 1824, the year of Byron’s death and of the founding of the Westminster Review as a party organ for the Benthamites, designed to add a Radical voice to the select upper-middle-class reading scene dominated by the Tory Quarterly Review and the Whig Edinburgh Review. More recently, Richard Cronin has chosen the year 1824 to identify a generation of “Romantic Victorians” like George Darley, whose careers fall mostly outside what has generally been taken to be mid- or “high” Victorianism. Byron’s own contemporaries saw his
death in symbolically charged terms. As Edward Bulwer (later the much-maligned Bulwer-Lytton) put it in his study of English society, politics, arts, and manners, *England and the English* (1833), “When Byron passed away, the feeling he had represented craved utterance no more. With a sigh we turned to the actual and practical career of life; we awoke from the morbid, the passionate, the dreaming” (286). For Bulwer, the utilitarian Bentham had succeeded the romantic egoist Byron as the cultural symbol of his day. The very strength of the recoil from Byron was a tribute to the sway his passionate and sometimes morbid nature had exercised over the reading public. Yet even Byron had prepared the way for Bentham, to the extent that the poet’s own assaults on national prejudices had engendered a more skeptical climate receptive to Bentham’s interrogation of national institutions.

Byron and Bentham as twin cultural symbols have a powerful resonance for the student of the period. But between them they do not begin to account either for the multitude of voices counseling different things in the years immediately preceding Victoria, or for a rapidly changing political climate. While it may be more suspicious than auspicious to proclaim the emergence of a distinctive self-awareness at a particular moment in history, most of us do so at the beginning of a new decade; we use the terms “sixties,” “seventies,” “eighties” to encode a cluster of political and cultural assumptions; and if we keep diaries and watch our own biological clock the onset of a new decade is likely to breed still more self-examination than a new year. One can make a case for 1830 as one of those possible Victorian beginnings. Two diarists in January 1830 saw that something was afoot, and they did not like what they saw. One of them was Charles Greville, the diarist of the reigns of George IV, William IV, and Victoria, whose sheltered position as clerk to the Privy Council gave him unparalleled access to politicians of all factions. On January 7 he wrote, “The revenue has fallen off one million and more. The accounts of distress from the country grow worse and more desponding” (Greville I, 224). Ten days later finds him in a more perturbed vein: “The country gentlemen are beginning to arrive, and they all tell the same story as to the universally prevailing distress and the certainty of things becoming much worse; of the failure of rents all over England, and the necessity of some decisive measures or the prospect of general ruin” (226). The other is one of those country gentlemen, General William Dyott, a Staffordshire magnate then 68 years old, writing on New Year’s Day 1830: “I believe a year never opened with less cheering prospects to a country than the present for old England; distress attending all classes of the community . . . Meetings held in various parts of the kingdom to represent the distress of the country” (Darwin I, 248). For such disturbed but insular observers, the question was whether the Duke of Wellington and Robert Peel between them could produce any program capable of alleviating the widespread economic distress of the countryside, and thus a threat to the old order.

More shocks, some of them not altogether unwelcome, like the death of the widely discredited old rake George IV on June 26, followed throughout the year. At home, talk of reform, the antislavery agitation which Greville attributed to the bothersome Methodists, and a new Parliament in his words “full of boys and all sorts of strange
men” all seemed to herald transition. So, abroad, did the overthrow of the French monarchy, in the three days of July, which in England revived radical hopes and fears; for the first time since the 1790s, the tricolor was hoisted in several English cities, and even the cautious Whigs were viewed by some of their more conservative colleagues as contemplating a doctrinaire reform in the French style. It was, again, Bulwer who sensed the impending change and embraced it openly:

Just at the time when with George the Fourth an old era expired, the excitement of a popular election concurred with the three days of July in France, to give a decisive tone to the new. The question of Reform came on, and, to the astonishment of the nation itself, it was hailed at once by the national heart. From that moment, the intellectual spirit hitherto partially directed to, became wholly absorbed in, politics; and whatever lighter works have since obtained a warm and general hearing, have either developed the errors of the social system, or the vices of the legislative. (288–9)

The Reform currents given new life in England by events on the Continent had, by the time England and the English was published, found expression in the First Reform Act of 1832. That date itself is indeed the most convenient point around which to gather the various reforming clusters of the decade preceding Victoria's accession, and to mark an evolution from older paternalist to newer entrepreneurial ideas of the social order. Yet the latter part of Bulwer's statement suggests another aspect of the 1830s which is particularly striking to the student of literature: the displacement of works of the imagination by the all-consuming task of Reform, or their subordination to the political agendas which so preoccupied the larger public.

The paradox of the 1830s has often been described in terms of the striking contrast between the richness of their political history – Reform, the growth of political and labor unions and at the end of the decade the movement for the redress of working-class grievances, Chartism, the first stirrings of the Anti-Corn Law League, the beginning of systematic government intervention in prison conditions, education, welfare, working hours, and public order – and the apparent barrenness of the cultural scene. That prodigiously diligent later Victorian woman of letters, Margaret Oliphant, trying to account for the strange hiatus in poetry and fiction between about 1825 and 1840, wrote that “the period which witnessed Her Majesty’s happy accession was not in itself a very glorious one, at least as far as literature is concerned. It was a season of lull, of silence and emptiness, such as must naturally come after the exhausting brilliance of the days just gone by” (I, 1). But Bulwer’s post-Byronic characterization of a shift in sensibility from the dreaming to the practical suggests a more productive approach. It echoes in the attempt of more recent scholars to isolate a distinctive “public voice” in English literature of the 1830s and 1840s, a voice intended to “transcend the doubt which by 1830 had fatally touched the fundamental Romantic faith, while the self-consciousness of this effort found expression in the ‘private’ voice which qualified the work of the best writers” (Madden 97). But those writers must first of all be seen in the context of an age which itself was coming to greater self-consciousness about its aims and purposes.
Georgian or Victorian? The Political Scene

The man who succeeded George IV as king in 1830 was hardly of the stuff to give his name to an age. The choleric, well-intentioned Duke of Clarence had earlier discarded a mistress in the interests of respectability and in the hope that one of his legitimate children, should there be any, might inherit his throne. Known as Sailor Bill because of his navy career, he was also, on account of his fondness for making intemperate and embarrassing public utterances, referred to by the even less dignified sobriquet of Silly Billy. Harriet Martineau described him as “a sovereign who could not help agreeing with the last speaker, and who was always impetuous on behalf of his latest impression” (III, 42). Or, as one of Greville’s colleagues observed, “What can you expect of a man with a head shaped like a pineapple?” Yet William IV, irresolute and capricious though he sometimes was, warrants some credit for restoring an aura of respectability to the monarchy after the reign of his dissolute brother. He was not, however, the best-equipped of men to preside over an age of Reform.

Reform has its origin in the 1820s, with the repeal of Test and Corporation Acts in 1828 and Catholic Emancipation in 1829, both of them measures aimed at easing the political disabilities that had hemmed in the rights of Protestant dissenters on the one hand and Roman Catholics on the other. These measures deeply divided the governing Tory party, factions of which participated in the overthrow of Wellington’s Tory government in 1830. Tories were disgusted by the duke’s willingness to move in the direction of free trade and by his about-face on Catholic Emancipation, and they paved the way for the Whig government of Earl Grey, whom the king summoned to office at the end of 1830 following Wellington’s refusal to countenance any further change in the British constitution.

The calls for Reform were spurred on by those riots among farm laborers and that manufacturing unrest which echo in the diaries of Dyott and Greville. In March 1831 Lord John Russell introduced a bill in the House of Commons that removed parliamentary representation from many small electoral boroughs and gave such representation to the nation’s growing industrial centers. The bill also attempted to regularize inconsistencies in the relationship between property-holding and the right to the franchise. It passed by a majority of only one at 3:00 a.m. on March 22, but still required a clause-by-clause reading and the approval of a hostile House of Lords. The defeat of one of the clauses led Grey to advise the king to dissolve Parliament and ask for new elections. The result was a referendum on a single issue: “the bill, the whole bill, and nothing but the bill” (Arnstein 12). Many elections in England at this time were uncontested, but in those boroughs where there was a contest, it was the reformers who were returned to power. Russell’s second version of the bill commanded a substantial majority on its second reading in Commons, but ran aground in the House of Lords, where it was defeated after a five-day debate.

The opposition of the Lords seemed to call into question the very viability of the constitution. The cities were outraged; arsonists destroyed Nottingham Castle; Bristol
succumbed for a few days to mob rule. That December, Grey’s government went back to work and produced a third reform bill much like the second. With the bill threatened once again by a hostile House of Lords, Grey called on the king to create 50 new peers to override the opposition. William IV thought 50 a bit much; Grey found the counter-offer of 20 too few, and resigned. The Duke of Wellington, however, whom the king called back to power, was incapable of meeting the rising storm of discontent. At that juncture the king turned to Grey and reluctantly acceded to the demand to create new peers, but the House of Lords, reading the tea leaves, acquiesced in the bill rather than permit itself to be swamped with new appointees. The bill became law on June 7, 1832.

The first Reform Act is itself a transition piece, much like William’s reign; it looks different from different angles. Along with the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835, the 1832 bill may well have saved England from revolution, and it certainly moved the country peacefully and without Continental-style convulsions toward democracy. Those Whigs who orchestrated Reform in the difficult first months of the decade saw the bill quite differently, as an end rather than a beginning. As one historian puts it, “the Bill had been like the legitimate heir of a loveless marriage, the child rather of necessity than of desire” (Kitson Clark 64). Though prodded by Radical colleagues on their left, with whom the Whigs had an uneasy relationship, the drafters of the bill viewed traditional social groups as providing the essential frame of reference. Grey’s charge to the Committee of Four which he appointed to draft the bill is revealing. The legislation, he wrote, should be “of such a scope and description as to satisfy all reasonable demands, and remove at once, and for ever, all rational grounds for complaint from the minds of the intelligent and independent portion of the community.” This in essence was Macaulay’s famous advice to Parliament in his speech of 1831: “Reform, that you may preserve.” Though Peel had opposed Reform, after its passage he accepted it in his Tamworth manifesto to the electors as “a final and irrevocable settlement of a great constitutional question,” and his Whig opponent Lord John Russell earned the nickname “Finality Jack” for the emphasis with which he insisted, both on the floor of the House and in writing, that the authors of the bill were “peculiarly committed to finality” and that to tolerate further Reform measures “would be to confess that [the reformers] had deceived the people or themselves” (Southgate 99).

Viewed in this way, the bill looks more like Georgian farewell than Victorian halloo, just as the England of that year to many of its citizens probably seemed not so very different from the latter years of the eighteenth century. In 1833, writes a leading administrative historian, England “was not orderly, it was not planned, it was not centralized, it was not efficient, and it did little for the well-being of the citizens.” Education, health, and poor relief lay beyond the purview of the national government, and the last was administered erratically by 15,000 parishes also in charge of public order (Roberts 195). Hindsight makes clearer the beginnings of slow, almost glacial changes beneath the surface of daily events. Contemporaries feel the shocks but not the trends; the earthquakes, not the subtle erosions or the drawn-out process of
sedimentation. The England that James Fenimore Cooper visited in the late winter and early spring of 1828 was still the England of the great Whig houses and the breakfasts of the poet Samuel Rogers, one of the last of the Augustans, where Cooper met Coleridge, Sir Walter Scott, Thomas Campbell, John Gibson Lockhart, Thomas Moore, Earl Grey, and Lord John Russell. Cows still grazed in the heart of London. Green Park and St James’s Park were “one open space” separated only by a fence, the first in Cooper’s words “nothing but a large field, cropped down like velvet, irregularly dotted with trees, and without any carriage way” (28). This England survived well into the 1830s. Jeremy Bentham died in 1832 at the age of 84; as an undergraduate he had attended Blackstone’s lectures on law at Oxford in the 1760s. Charles Grey, who shepherded through the first Reform Bill in 1832, was nearly 70 and, like his party, had spent almost half a century in the political wilderness; in the 1790s he had joined the Society of Friends of the People and introduced his first motion on parliamentary reform. John Scott, Lord Chancellor and first Earl Eldon, was 81 when, to his disgust, the Reform Bill became law; as Attorney General he had been identified with various of the repressive acts of the 1790s and at the turn of the century was opposing the abolition of the slave trade. But power was passing to Palmerston, Russell, and Peel, while at the further end of the age spectrum the young Gladstone at 22, listening to the Reform debates in the galleries, was still a few months from his first seat; Disraeli, six years and four defeats from his.

One striking symbol of transition is Grey’s successor as the leader of the Whigs. William Lamb, second Viscount Melbourne, was the last prime minister ever to be dismissed unilaterally by a reigning monarch and the first to become prime minister as the result of a general election, against that monarch’s will. Melbourne was in his mid-50s upon his appointment as prime minister in 1834 and therefore presumably at the height of his powers if he chose to use them. It was an open question whether or not he would. Elegant, languid, debonair, with a political record at best equivocal on the major issues of the day, the jotter of numerous cynical reflections on society in his commonplace book, Melbourne told his secretary, upon being offered the reins of government, that it was “a damned bore” to decide whether or not to accept. It is one of the finer ironies of the decade that this Whig aristocrat, twice cited as an adulterous co-respondent in the Brandon and Norton divorce cases (the second of these during his prime ministership), should be found in 1837 at the ear of the impressionable, rather conventional young queen as avuncular counselor and friend. Perhaps, with the changed moral atmosphere that journalists of the day were already commenting on, the transition from Regency gentleman to Victorian paterfamilias was not so difficult or arduous after all, but then Melbourne was nothing if not flexible. Much of the foregoing description is, of course, caricature; Melbourne was capable of decisive action, abandoning the dilettante’s pose for a complicated mixture of deference, courtly admiration, and firmness in dealing with the 18-year-old queen (Vallone 3, 199).

Meanwhile, the Whig assumption of “finality” in political arrangements was already being battered by changes which the Reform Bill could hardly have been