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BOOK REVIEW

by A.F.Adams

Victorian Britain - An Encyclopedia

Ed. Sally Mitchell (et al.). Garland Publishing Inc. New York \$125

There is an old adage that if you have a large problem, the best way to tackle it is to break it down into small parts and deal with each in turn. The trouble with this theory is that if your problem is as large as the Victorian era the resultant number of parts is so huge that they resemble the unconnected pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, each individual piece having some value in its own right, but not giving an idea of the complete picture.

The reign of Queen Victoria, the longest in British history, witnessed an unprecedented explosion of progress in all facets of human activity. This enormous fecundity, the number of personalities involved, the ideas expounded and the frontiers pushed back make the task of recording it all such a daunting one that one feels the compilers of this encyclopedia were very brave to contemplate it. Within the limits suggested above, I think they have succeeded.

It is still possible for a specialist in a particular field to find a gap here or there, but as the Editor says in her eminently sensible preface, the book will be a useful starting point for graduate students and scholars to explore fields that are not their own. Apart from that, anyone - for instance members of the George Eliot Fellowship, - who has developed a general interest in the period would have a great time delving into this bran tub and coming up with a prize every time. That is, if the cost of so doing is not prohibitive. But then, for a total of 885 pages of text, some good illustrations, a chronology, index and bibliography all presented in an attractive format on smooth white paper, one must expect an outlay in perspective.

Perhaps the most useful feature of the entries is the bibliography appended beneath each one, leading the user straight into further reading about the subject of his enquiry. Altogether this massive work is a credit to all concerned.