

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

The George Eliot Review

English, Department of

1991

Review of The Presence of The Present: Topics of The Day in The Victorian Novel

Richard D. Altick

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Literature in English](#), [British Isles Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Altick, Richard D., "Review of The Presence of The Present: Topics of The Day in The Victorian Novel" (1991). *The George Eliot Review*. 165.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger/165>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The George Eliot Review by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Book Review
by *Linda K. Robertson*

**THE PRESENCE OF THE PRESENT:
TOPICS OF THE DAY IN THE VICTORIAN NOVEL**

by **Richard D. Altick**

Published by Ohio State University Press, \$36.00

Richard D. Altick, Regents' Professor Emeritus of English at The Ohio State University, is well known for such books as *Victorian People and Ideas*. His latest work draws from 150 novels to develop connections between people, objects, events, and issues mentioned in fiction and their real life originals in the Victorian period. The generous selection of sources includes not only the best remembered novelists but also such writers as Susan Ferrier, John Galt, Samuel Warren, and Charlotte Yonge. All of Eliot's novels except, of course, *Romola*, are included.

The material is organized into twenty thematic chapters, ranging from popular entertainments (panoramas, balloon ascents, mechanical exhibitions, animal shows, waxworks) to consumer goods, to names in the news, to current events, to elections and political concerns.

The author does not merely throw out examples of the appearance of a particular topic in the fiction of the time; he also provides commentary on the significance of the topic and the ways it relates to other concerns. For example, several pages are devoted to a discussion of the history of gas lighting, problems with glare and odour, technical improvements, and "its ambiguous role as a status symbol" (342). The

tightly packed examples in this 850 page book make a very concentrated work for cover-to-cover reading. However, even the casual reader with interest in the Victorian age would find it fascinating to dip into searching for topics ranging from advertising, to women as riders of omnibuses, to the Zoological Society.

Generously illustrated, the book includes many examples from the Illustrated London News and Punch. However, other newspapers and plates from various novels also provide visual support for Altick's detailed discussion of specific issues. The volume is well bound and has library-quality paper and clearly reproduced illustrations. The index is extensive, and the bibliographic citations are thorough. Useful supplementary materials include a chronology of novels and a list of sources for illustrative materials, which is organized by author and novel. *The Presence of the Present* would be an excellent addition for an institutional library or for the collection of an individual seriously interested in this time period.