2017

Review of Victorian Narratives of the Recent Past: Memory, History, Fiction

Helen Kingstone

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger

Part of the Comparative Literature Commons, Literature in English, British Isles Commons, and the Women's Studies Commons

http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger/684

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.

The nineteenth century saw a number of ways in which amateurs and professional historians and novelists approached the presentation of history, especially histories of the recent past. Eminent, professional historians at universities, and those aspiring to join them, increasingly avoided commenting on periods within living memory on the grounds that one could quickly lose credibility debating subjects not yet fully digested. Kingstone clearly illustrates the point in chapter 9, Conclusions: writing ‘both before and after the United Kingdom’s 2016 referendum decision to leave the European Union, I am aware that any arc I try to draw, any judgment I try to make about the impact of national peace or upheaval, is likely to have a very short shelf life’ (213).

Another reason for Victorian professional historians to shy away from contemporary histories and instead to focus on periods in the distant past was that existing contemporary histories often blurred their subjects with journalism and literature. Some contemporary history was actually written by journalists, and some prominent writers of fiction – Charles Dickens, W. M. Thackeray, George Eliot, Oscar Wilde – were also prolific in journalistic pursuits, which often dealt with recent events. When in the late nineteenth century journalism came under close scrutiny and gained a reputation for intrusiveness and prurience, there appeared ‘a deep rift between journalism and history [...] exacerbat[ing] the dangerous liminality of contemporary history, leaving it in no man’s land’ (38-9).
A further problem, facing all historians writing about any age, recent or far away, had to do with what to say about the people of the recent past. As Kingstone puts it, ‘... all people as well as all time periods are at least potentially historical...’ (56). The fact is, however, we know next to nothing about the vast majority of people who lived in times beyond our personal or collective memory, and, moreover, all histories involve a process of selecting what is deemed important or significant and, therefore, deselecting the rest. Thus, as Kingstone puts it, the question becomes, can historiography, the study of history, ever provide an adequate representation of society? Thomas Carlyle was associated with this conundrum. In an 1830 article, ‘Thoughts on History’, he mused on the nameless multitudes of people now ‘lost without recovery’ and how that affected the historical record. Interestingly, Kingstone observes that Carlyle’s use of ‘unnoticed’, ‘unrecognised’ and ‘untenanted’, here, brings to mind George Eliot’s ordinary people mentioned in *Middlemarch* as lying in ‘unvisited tombs’ (56), because they were ‘unhistoric’.

Despite such anxieties or misgivings concerning legitimate periods for study and proper subjects for history, Harriet Martineau, John Richard Green and Sir Spencer Walpole were among those who bucked trends and produced accounts of the recent past. Their books are now largely forgotten, or viewed as curiosities, but they were very popular in their day. Kingstone tells us, Green and Walpole boldly saw themselves as radical social historians. Green preferred presenting history in terms of ‘the Hundred Years’ War’ and ‘England Under Foreign Kings’ rather than dwelling on temporal aspects of history, including specific dates of kings and queens. Likewise, Walpole tended to ignore the important players in political events, choosing instead to talk about the ‘impersonal socio-economic trends’. By distinguishing those, he identified so-called lessons of history and the moral progress of the English people. (Delightfully, Kingstone notes Walpole once measured progress by highlighting a slight decrease in alcohol consumption between 1815-1861 but a significant increase in tea drinking). As for Harriet Martineau (1802-76), Kingstone notes, she ‘was also torn whether to let her contemporary history reflect the doings of “charismatic individuals” or the “silent multitude”’ (116-120). She, too, was keen to promote the ‘morals and manners’ of her age, but she knew her book sales would probably be better, if her historical narratives had to do with the heroic, the great and the good.

Martineau, Green and Walpole often invoked their concepts of ‘the nation’ when talking about the recent past, in order to make readers ‘feel not merely invested in, but part of, the story being related’. However, they were not as inclusive as they may have believed. Essentially, what they had in mind was the English nation, not ‘Britain’ or ‘the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland’. Even the concept of ‘the English Nation’ was difficult to pin down, given the population explosion in the nineteenth century, the increased urbanization that took place and the changes in social classes (130-1). What helped address that particular problem, the need for more accuracy when recording histories of the recent past, Kingstone goes on to argue, were those nineteenth-century novels considered historical, which were seen to have historic interests and were sometimes described as ‘novels of the recent past’. Twentieth-century critics, Kingstone notes, have often been content to downplay the time-gaps between the writing of Victorian novels and their settings, but, in doing so, they have disregarded the fact that contemporary readers would have viewed ‘such novels as manifestly retrospective’ (141-2).

The rest of Kingstone’s book involves close readings of some nineteenth-century novels that she argues should be seen as historical novels, since their authors were able to
talk very accurately about a number of years in the recent past, which was also populated with fully realized individuals, not a vague mass known as ‘the nation’. Kingstone starts her analysis with Sir Walter Scott’s *Waverley* (1814), and then looks closely at Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley* (1849), Elizabeth Gaskell’s ‘My Lady Ludlow’ (1858–9) and finally George Eliot’s *Felix Holt* (1866) and *Middlemarch* (1871–72). The latter three novelists are chosen because

[t]hey are constantly aware of their own retrospective mode, and their commentary on the historical trajectory between past and present envisages it at once as one of progress and of decline, in a temporal continuum that goes beyond either timeframe.

(144)

What they had in common, following Scott’s example, was to use a form of writing that focuses on (imaginary) individuals living in specific historical times and in imaginary but nevertheless specific regional locations. That high resolution is what made the unhistorical seem historical to contemporary readers. Belonging to middle classes themselves, when it came to working-class issues, these three women writers had limited success portraying ‘the workers’ accurately, but they succeeded very much in ‘reclaiming the middle-class (domestic) woman for history – both in revealing her exclusion from the historical record, and in valorizing those “feminine” qualities and actions usually disregarded’. Kingstone points out that although the heroines of these novels are largely frustrated in their ambitions, for ‘the brief span of their narratives, at least, these novelists reverse the polarities of historical convention, and bring the unhistoric individual front and centre’ (200).

*Victorian Narratives of the Recent Past* is a fine, detailed study of a fascinating topic. The book is scholarly and ranges with ease between overviews of social and academic attitudes and trends to very specific and nuanced readings of texts. The arguments, carefully developed, are subtle, interesting and original. It is also written in a style perfectly accessible to anyone interested in nineteenth-century history, literary criticism and gender studies. There is a good deal to learn from what is a very welcome addition to nineteenth-century studies.

A. G. van den Broek