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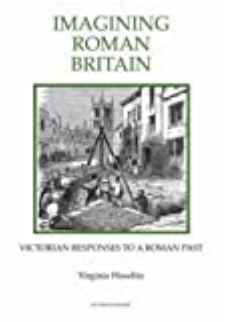

Virginia Hoselitz. *Imagining Roman Britain: Victorian Responses to a Roman Past.* Boydell Press, 2007. x + 208 pp. $85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-86193-293-1.

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Digging Up a Roman Province

As numerous scholars have reminded us, many Victorians were fascinated by efforts to place their own era into historical context. Cases in point include J. W. Burrow, *A Liberal Descent: Victorian Historians and the English Past* (1981), Timothy Lang, *The Victorians and the Stuart Heritage* (1995), Frank M. Turner, *The Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain* (1981), and Norman Vance, *The Persistence of Rome: The Victorians and Ancient Rome* (1997). Virginia Hoselitzâs purpose is to pay special heed to the manner in which, during the 1840s and the 1850s, Victorians rediscovered Britain as a one-time province of the Roman Empire. University graduates were long accustomed to reading Latin texts by Julius Caesar and by Cicero. New during the early Victorian years, however, were both the beginnings of archeology as a distinct scholarly discipline and the foundation of archeological societies in towns and cities all over Great Britain. They reminded their members that once upon a time Roman soldiers and Romanized Britons had lived in their very communities or at least just around the corner.

About half of the book, which comprises a brief introduction and a conclusion as well as nine topical chapters, concentrates on four case studies about which much is known about the leaders of such societies, their lives, their writings, and their excavations.

Thus chapter 4 is devoted to Caerleon, a declining market town in Monmouthshire. It was there that Geoffrey of Monmouth, the twelfth-century chronicler, had located King Arthurâs court. More recent authors had situated that semi-mythical monarch elsewhere, however, and John Edward Lee, an amateur geologist and a recent immigrant from Hull, concentrated on a different aspect of the communityâs past. His book, *Delineations of Roman Antiquities Found at Caerleon and Neighbourhood* (1845), placed a town known more recently for its tinplate manufacture on the map as the ancient headquarters of a Roman legion where building remnants, scattered artifacts, coins, and inscriptions might yet be found. The result was that the local squire, two Anglican ministers, and a number of well-to-do property owners founded the Caerleon Archeological Association with Lee serving as secretary. The organization embarked on

the presentation of papers and regular dinner meetings; it also sponsored an excavation that uncovered an ancient tombstone and a Roman villa with a mosaic floor. The squire provided the site, and members of the association the funds that made it possible to erect in 1850 a small Doric-style building as a museum devoted to Roman antiquities. Twice during the next decade representatives of the new British Archeological Association and the London-based Society of Antiquaries met in Caerleon. In the words of the chairman of the local organization, the new museum had happily provided âthe first step in restoring the town to its ancient importanceâ (p. 94).

Chapter 5 provides an analogous account of ancient Cirencester, where excavations intended to construct a Victorian sewage system uncovered two large and intricately patterned Roman mosaics. It was the local aristocrat, the fourth Earl Bathurst, who sponsored a new museum after a local enthusiast, W. K. Beecham, had first celebrated *The History and Antiquities of the Town of Cirencester* (1842). John Buckman, a self-made geologist and botanist at the new Cirencester Agricultural College, followed as co-author of *The Remains of Roman Art in Ancient Corinium* (1850), the original Roman name of the town. Buckman took pride in the thought that the recently discovered mosaics compared favorably with those that adorned Hadrianâs Villa in Rome. Thus âunder Roman rule, this colonial settlement possessed temples and dwellings of like magnificence, and evidencing the same principles of design as those which characterised the mother countryâ (p. 102). For several years the local Archeological Institute remained active, but it is clear that most members were fascinated less by the recovery of mundane ancient local artifacts than by their imaginative association with the opulence and beauty of classical Rome. When members of the annual meeting of the British Archeological Association met in Cirencester in 1868, Lord Bathurst reminded them that their activities should be placed in proper context: âAlthough archeology cannot vie with the cheery excitement of the chase, nor possess the absorbing interest of the turf, yet it tends not to extravagance and ruin. Surely the student who pores over the ancient remains of Greece and Rome ... cannot be said to have passed a flat, unprofitable dayâ (pp. 103-104). During the decades that followed, local members continued to support the preservation and the cataloging of the scattered Roman ruins that had been uncovered and of yet others newly found.

In comparable fashion, Hoselitz devotes distinct chapters to Colchester and Chester. Thus the new Essex Archeological Society and its associated museum gave revived importance to the town of Colchester, the one-time site of Shakespeareâs *Cymbeline*, the birthplace of the mother of the Roman emperor Constantine, and a location of Queen Boudicaâs rebellion against Rome in 61 CE. One Victorian enthusiast therefore took enormous pride in the survival of a portion of the Roman wall, âthe quietest corner in old Colchester, replete with antiquarian interest ... and alive with the memories of the pastâ (p.123). Inhabitants of Chester, most of whose medieval wall had survived, took comparable satisfaction in the Roman remains and artifacts there–even though Charles Roach Smith, the leading British archeologist of the day, conceded âthat it has been questioned whether any vestiges of the original Roman wall are yet extantâ (p. 128). The Chester Architectural, Archeological and Historical Society was exceptionally active during the 1850s, but, as the author notes in passing, âtheir conclusions often tell us more about the antiquarians than they do about the remainsâ (p. 130).

The remaining chapters are devoted to early-Victorian archeological research in general. One chapter places the Victorian researchers in their medieval and early modern context. Yet another focuses on the manner in which archeology was in the process of becoming a distinct profession. Yet a third discusses the manner in which the members of local archeological societies turned out to be societal leaders in their communities–a carefully documented if unsurprising conclusion. Victorians also took an understandable interest in the origins of their personal ancestry and identity as Romans, as Celts, as Saxons, or as a combination of all three and more.

One weakness of Hoselitzâs book is that she is so preoccupied with her emphasis on Roman relics that she exaggerates their centrality in the Victorian worldview. She mentions but unduly minimizes the fact that during the early and mid-Victorian years, âmost of Englandâs leading historians were committed to an ethnic and racial interpretation of English history, and with loving care they traced the organic growth and development of these ancient Saxon or Gothic liberties from the fifth century down to modern times.â[1] Oxford and Cambridge students were admittedly familiar with Latin and with Roman texts and Roman art, but at least in England proper (unlike Wales and parts of Ireland and Scotland) they did not identify the Romans (or the Romanized Britons) as their biological, political, and linguistic ancestors. For some Victorians, the fascination with Rome was admittedly real, but they found frustrating the

fact that no chronicle or document (other than an occasional inscription) could ever be traced directly to Roman Britain. It remains doubtful also that most Victorians saw the *Pax Romana* as a model for the nineteenth-century *Pax Britannica*. It was Thomas Thornycroftâs giant statue of Boudica that overlooked Westminster Bridge and not statues of Julius Caesar or of the emperor Claudius.

Whatever questions the book may evoke, it is a carefully researched and well-crafted monograph on an aspect of Victorian life ignored by most general surveys. We are more likely to think of nineteenth-century England as the age of the railway, the telegraph, and the construction of city water systems–a preeminent era of technological and cultural progress–and not as a land in which newly founded voluntary organizations sought to recover, preserve, and celebrate scattered remnants of a Britain that lay a millennium and a half in the past.

Note

[1]. L. P. Curtis, Jr., *Anglo-Saxons and Celts* (New York: New York University Press, 1968), 9.