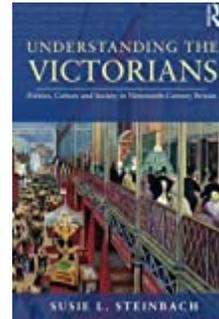


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Susie Steinbach.** *Understanding the Victorians: Politics, Culture and Society in Nineteenth-Century Britain.* New York: Routledge, 2012. 312 pp. \$125.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-77408-6; \$37.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-77409-3.



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**Commissioned by** Thomas Hajkowski (Misericordia University)

What is there left to be said about the Victorian Age that has not been stated already? Susie Steinbach's *Understanding the Victorians: Politics, Culture and Society in Nineteenth-Century Britain* shows that there is still much to be revealed and synthesized about this dynamic period. Steinbach's work is an overview of the economic, political, social, and cultural trends of Britain during the Victorian Age. This book is geared to the undergraduate looking to obtain a general grasp of the era. Indeed, Steinbach's goal is to focus on the social and the cultural and on the interplay between received ideas and lived experience. In addition it strives to give student readers some insight into the current historiographical climate (p. 4).

Steinbach, a professor of British history at Hamline University, breaks the mold of traditional histories by dating the Victorian period back to the 1820s and ending a decade after the death of Queen Victoria. This arrangement allows for a more continuous flow and broader view of Britain. Thirteen chapters, covering 246 pages, focus on the following themes: space, imperialism, economics, class, monarchy, law, and culture. Included in this tome is a twenty-page index and an eleven-page section of notes. At the end of each chapter, the author lists three to four fiction (and a few nonfiction) recommendations

for further reading.

Steinbach threads several themes throughout her book. One of the most salient topics is the political world of the 1800s. The Queen Caroline affair of 1820 that divided the country begins the study and is coupled with brief overviews of the Reform Acts (1832, 1867, 1884), the Irish Question, and the clash of such leaders as William Gladstone and Benjamin Disraeli. Legally, the renewed emphasis on criminal law and civil law created a new order. Capital punishment was reconsidered and a new police force was established to implement structure and propriety. Steinbach devotes a chapter to Queen Victoria, considering both the image of the monarch as well as her real influence. She finds that despite views to the contrary, the queen exerted considerable political power, "command[ing] much patronage and retain[ing] the power to create peers ... [and above all remaining] an immensely popular figure" (p. 153). Steinbach also investigates the intersections between the metropole and colony, giving focus to the role of the British Empire. Such historians as P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins and literary theorist Edward Said are referenced to educate the student on some of the most significant historiographical debates in this field.

Socially, the Victorian age was one of transformation, much of it stemming from the effects of the Industrial Revolution. For that reason, Steinbach points out that until recently, history has been about time, not space (p. 11). The book considers the spaces that the Victorians inhabited, examining, for example, the interplay of life in the cities and in the countryside. As in the sections on politics, Steinbach notes the work of both historians, such as Judith Walkowitz on urban London, and historical individuals, such as the social reformer Edwin Chadwick. In addition, she devotes a chapter to the men and women living within those spaces. Central ideologies of this period, she argues, were the doctrine of separate spheres and the sexual double standard. The Victorian Age was rife with contradictions as men and women defied sexual constraints.

A third major theme that she covers is related to the economy, particularly the fiscal military state as postulated by historian John Brewer. Politicians tightened up spending and taxed with prudence. Moreover, it was an age of prosperity, and significant advancements were made in banking and consumption (most notably, the development of shopping centers). However, the author points out that not all Britons, especially the poor, enjoyed these changes. Above all, the Victorian Age was a deeply classed society, which saw stark contrasts between the upper class and lower classes in terms of housing, income, and lifestyle (p. 114). Likewise, this period saw the emergence of the middle class and working class, which appealed to different identities and ways of living. A missing piece of this analysis is E. P. Thompson and his seminal book *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), an essential part of the historiographical analysis of working-class culture. Given the emphasis on class identity and the author's intent to include major historiographical trends, this omission stands out.

A final motif of this book is a glance at British culture. In focusing on the role of theater and music (through the music halls), Steinbach finds that this era was immersed in melodrama, spectacle, and morality (p. 177). Likewise, it was not only scandal but also nostalgia and drama that defined the Victorian, as readers scrambled to obtain copies of books by Charles Dickens, George Eliot, and

Mrs. Margaret Oliphant.

So what are some potential weaknesses of the book? First, one oversight is the lack of a conclusion. The book ends abruptly after a final chapter on science, specifically on Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859). A short concluding section could have pulled all of the themes together to bring out a final snapshot of the period. Second, while the recommended readings after each section are a wonderful addition, some discussion of why she chose these specific books would have been helpful. Likewise, Steinbach cites authors and their books over several chapters, such as Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, Charles Dickens, and Anthony Trollope. It would have been useful to list them only once and recommend other novels beyond the most popular readings. However, despite this minor quibble, the novels she lists will certainly appeal to the intended readers.

The potential weaknesses of this text are overshadowed by its many accomplishments. Steinbach succeeds in writing a concise and thematic overview of the period, no easy task. The author includes a snippet of almost every political, social, cultural, and economic development in the Victorian Age, and at the same time reveals historiographical trends. She also gives particular attention not only to England but also to Ireland, Wales, and Scotland. What is unique about her book is her attention to recall specific themes/people/objects throughout, such as the Queen Caroline affair (covered in a section on monarchy and one on politics); Edwin Chadwick (covered in chapters on cities/slums and the economy); and the piano. The piano serves as a symbol of change in the book; she traces its relevance from the 1850s to the early 1900s, as it started as a middle-class object to one that came within the reach of the working class by the early twentieth century (pp. 7, 9). Tying several moments, people, objects, or themes throughout enhances the significance of this book.

Overall, Steinbach deserves to be commended for undertaking such a crucial episode in British history in such a concise way. She offers a comprehensive and thought-provoking analysis of the Victorian period that deserves the attention and the readership of undergraduates everywhere.

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