

# H-Net Reviews

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**W. J. Mander, A. P. F. Sell, eds.** *The Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century British Philosophers*. Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 2002. xxviii + 1280 pp. Â£350.00/\$525.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-85506-955-8.



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"But, of all the nations in the world," wrote Walter Bagehot in 1867, "the English are perhaps the least a nation of pure philosophers." How surprised Bagehot might well have been to find included in this work his capsule biography as one of "approximately 600 philosophers" active during the nineteenth century. As the author of Bagehot's biography concedes, in *The English Constitution* and even in *Physics and Politics* (1872), the long-time editor of *The Economist* preferred "to project himself as a bluff practical Englishman resistant to abstract speculation" (p. 42). Analogously for Frederic Harrison, the durable advocate of Comtean positivism, the phrase "'man of letters' captures the range of Harrison's activities better than the word 'philosopher'" (vol. I, p. 498).

Such comments remind the reader how broadly the editors have defined the specimens for which they have trolled the Regency and Victorian ocean and beyond. Thus they include such predominantly eighteenth-century figures as William Paley and such predominantly twentieth-century figures as H. G. Wells and Bertrand Russell. They also include, it is true, lengthy sketches of persons whom a prospective reader would necessarily expect to encounter—Jeremy Bentham (seven pages), John Stuart Mill (eight pages), and Herbert Spencer (seven pages). Some less well-remembered philosophers are allotted as much or even more space. Thus Alexander

Bain, the first holder of the Chair in Logic at the University of Aberdeen, founder of the journal *Mind*, and pioneer psychologist, is granted seven pages. Fifteen pages are devoted to William Whewell, the prolific Cambridge Professor of Moral Philosophy and Master of Trinity College, and eight to Bernard Bosanquet, the late-Victorian and Edwardian social reformer who wrote extensively on logic and on art.

At the same time the two-volume *Dictionary* makes room for many personalities usually remembered as poets or playwrights or artists. Thus William Wordsworth, who "did not greatly enjoy reading philosophy" (p. 1258), is depicted as a romantic critic of eighteenth-century rationalism. The entry for Oscar Wilde emphasizes the manner in which the latter's essays "pointedly oppose many of the cherished truths of Victorian bourgeois culture" (p. 1242). Although James McNeill Whistler's attitude toward art was "never articulated in philosophical language," he "epitomizes important aspects of the construction of what came to be called 'avant-garde' identity" (p. 1232).

How do the "Victorian sages" fare? Matthew Arnold, the social and literary critic, somewhat surprisingly, is allotted no more than two pages, just a little more space than is granted to his father, Thomas Arnold, the "public school" reformer. Thomas Carlyle, who possesses "an

arguably unshakeable status as one of the nineteenth-century's most important writers" (p. 207), is allotted six pages. George Eliot is allotted four: "Although, as a mature writer she never subscribed to any single philosophical or religious system, her works attest to a higher order which presides over the numerous characters she created" (p. 352). The theologian John Henry Newman is allotted seven pages and the social critic and art historian John Ruskin is granted five, and the life and thought of that late-Victorian "Renaissance man" (p. 827), William Morris, is also elucidated in five pages. The novelist Thomas Hardy is ignored altogether, however, as is that prototypical Victorian, Poet Laureate Alfred Lord Tennyson. The omission of the latter appears truly odd in that Arthur Hallam, Tennyson's university class-mate who inspired *In Memoriam*, is allotted four pages even though he died at the age of twenty-two.

Four prime ministers—William Ewart Gladstone, Benjamin Disraeli, the Third Marquess of Salisbury, and Arthur J. Balfour—make their way into the work as do scientists such as Charles Lyell, Charles Darwin and Thomas Henry Huxley. Lengthy entries are also granted to Victorian freethinkers such as George Jacob Holyoake, Charles Bradlaugh, and the latter's associate Annie Besant (one of twenty-six women who appear in the *Dictionary*). Socialist pioneers such as Robert Owen, F. M. Hyndman, Sidney and Beatrice Webb, and George Bernard Shaw are given much attention, and so, more surprisingly, is Friedrich Engels, on the basis that—although he was never a British subject and wrote mostly in German—he lived in London for many decades. The same may be said of Karl Marx, but there is no entry for the latter.

The prospective reader who understands how broadly the word "philosopher" is being applied may indeed find the *Dictionary* a highly useful compilation in that it calls attention not only to the household names but also to the little-known members of what Noel Anan once dubbed Britain's "intellectual aristocracy"—university dons, economists, historians, scientists, theologians, essayists, artists, and social critics. A multitude of academic contributors has been recruited from Canada, Australia, the United States, Ireland, and continental Europe as well as the United Kingdom in order to provide entries that supply the biographical essentials, helpful summaries that place the subject's major writings and ideas in context, (usually) highly up-to-date bibliographies listing the most recent editions of the subject's major works as well as relevant secondary works in book and article form. In the process, all the major ideological concerns of the century are illuminated through biographical lenses: the established church and its critics; the classical economists and utilitarians and their challengers; the influence of the ideas of Immanuel Kant, George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and Auguste Comte as well as of the rediscovered Greek and Roman classics; the multifold implications of the doctrine of evolution; and much more.

The two-volume *Dictionary*, the third in a chronological series, has been proof-read with exceptional care and produced in an elegant manner. Does the age of the internet require as many new overlapping printed encyclopedias as have appeared in the course of the past decade? Perhaps not, but the admittedly expensive new *Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century British Philosophers* does yet constitute a handsome and valuable addition to their number.

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