Victorian Fiction

Writers, Publishers, Readers

Also by John Sutherland

Thackeray at Work
Victorian Novelists and Publishers
Fiction and the Fiction Industry
Bestsellers: Popular Fiction of the 1970s
Offensive Literature
The Longman Companion to Victorian Fiction
Mrs Humphry Ward
The Life of Walter Scott

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John Sutherland

palgrave

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For my son
Jack Sutherland
with love and admiration

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I am grateful to the Huntington Library for permission to reproduce the above illustrated covers. The illustrations in Chapter One ('Thackeray's Errors') are from the first editions of *Vanity Fair* (page 11) and *Pendennis* (pages 12, 13, 14, 15).

Preface and Acknowledgements

This book is devoted to the undogmatic belief that the more we know about the local conditions of Victorian Fiction, the better we shall understand it. Although undogmatic, the contention may seem somewhat cross-grained. The last thirty years have seen an explosion in techniques of explication of text—loosely subsumed under the term ‘Theory’. There is no doubt that critics of literature—and the students they instruct—are infinitely more sophisticated than they used to be. But as a teacher in the two major English-speaking countries, I am consistently impressed with the fact that although students and colleagues read Victorian novels more intelligently than their predecessors, they often seem, in some ways, to *know* them less well.

My point may be put as a conundrum: if you had one trip on a time machine and—by some absurd whim—wanted to use it to find out more about Victorian fiction, would you go intrepidly forward (like Wells’s traveller) to that far distant future point when the last PhD thesis is defended, the last MLA special panel sponsored, the last Dickens World conference at Santa Cruz held? Or would you go back to 1851?

I confess that I would put the machine in reverse. In the discussions that follow, I have attempted to recapture something of what these works of literature meant to their contemporaries—examining them for echoes of what, for want of a better word, might be called their ‘Victorianness’. There is some investigation into the social, biographical, and historical context. But the circumstances that interest me most have to do with the composition, publication, distribution, and consumption of novels.

About half of the critical material in the following chapters is new, the other half draws (with some adaptation) on reprinted pieces. A section of chapter 1 appeared in *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 1971. Part of chapter 2 was published in the same journal, 1977. Another part of chapter 2 (relating to the manuscript of *The Woman in White*) first came out in *Dickens Studies Annual*, 1991. The opening section

of chapter 3 first appeared in *The Dickensian*, 1985. Chapter 4 was published first in *Dickens and other Victorians* (ed. Joanne Shattock), 1990. Chapter 5 was published in different form in *Bibliotek*, 1975. Chapter 6 first appeared in *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 1982, and chapter 8 in *Critical Quarterly*, 1988.

For readers who wish to refresh their memories, I have appended plot summaries of the less familiar novels substantially discussed in the text. Some of these synopses are adapted from my *Longman Companion to Victorian Fiction* (1988), and I am grateful to the publisher for permission to use them.

I have a number of debts: to the Huntington Library and its staff; to Mac Pigman, who helped me with the typesetting of this book, and to Guiland Sutherland, who helped with illustrations; to my former supervisor, K. J. Fielding, who was particularly helpful with chapter 3; to Alison Winter (who helped with the same chapter); to Rosemary Ashton, who helped with chapter 5; to N. John Hall, who helped with chapter 6; to Philip Horne, who helped with chapter 7; to Simon Eliot and Uzi Segal, who helped with chapter 8.