Farewell, Victoria!

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When I published *Victoria: An Intimate Biography* in 1987, the centenary year of her Golden Jubilee on the throne, most English reviewers were surprised to discover that the queen was not a Victorian. In reaction to the laxity of upper-class Regency England, remembered now for its prudery and its Sabbatarianism, the evangelical and nonconformist cultural and moral response had preceded her coronation, at eighteen, in 1837. The young Victoria had to live, on the surface, within its limits. She endured lugubrious Anglican sermons on fine points of theology, banned divorced women from royal functions, and cultivated a strict morality at Court not recalled in living memory. As the years passed, she dressed with a dowdiness that the middle classes could identify with, but which actually reflected her discomfort with aristocratic fashion increasingly at variance with a broadening body that had produced nine pregnancies.

Losing her husband, Prince Albert, early, at forty-two in 1861, she mourned extravagantly and was thereafter the Widow of Windsor attired in black weeds, yet when younger she was an accomplished horsewoman, loved drinking beer, wore deep decolletage her handsome spouse admired, had a lock placed on the bedroom door to preclude interruptions to their pleasure beneath the sheets, went to plays, operas and ballets, and read popular novels.

What was labeled Victorianism maintained its sway early in her widowed purdah as she remained aloof from all but the most minimal ceremonial duties, yet the world around her was changing, reflected in literature, theater and the arts, and beyond in the new technologies of transportation and communication. In the later 1870s, Benjamin Disraeli arranged to purchase for Britain a controlling interest in the Suez Canal, to christen Victoria Empress of India, and to restore her neglected public persona. She permitted Alexander Graham Bell to demonstrate for her the telephone, and she recorded, for the new cylinder phonograph, a letter to the illiterate emperor of Abyssinia. The Golden Jubilee of 1887 was a grand occasion, where the queen was visibly a ceremonial monarch, having lost to democratic initiatives and to reform legislation most remaining executive powers in disuse during her seclusion. But to the people she was England, a symbol reinforced at the imperial-focused Diamond Jubilee of 1897. Wheelchair bound and cloud-
ed by cataracts, she nevertheless had performers brought to Court to stage
plays and operas, had her ladies-in-waiting read new novels to her, and pub-
licly bid her troops farewell as they marched off to the docks, and the Boer
War, in the waning months of her century.

Although the Victorian era closed, literally, with the death of the queen in
January 1901, the first month of the new century, the post-Victorian transi-
tion had begun decades earlier. The critiques collected here, published over
many years but now revised and updated, are one scholar’s glance into late-
Victorian writing, primarily but not exclusively its fiction, which looked both
backward to its popular antecedents and forward to the societal and tech-
nological future. The early 1880s saw the close of iconic Victorian literary
careers—Disraeli, Rossetti, George Eliot, Meredith, and Trollope, among
others. It was also the decade of glittering new reputations that would con-
tinue in some cases well into the twentieth century, while the next decade,
the 1890s, witnessed a plethora of experiments in modernity. The Yellow Book
and The Savoy, graphic realism and a relaxation of morals, detective fiction,
futuristic prophecy and exotic fantasy all would expand taste, enlarge the
market for books, and write a finis to leftovers from the mid-Victorian past.
Farewell, Victoria!