

BOOK REVIEW

A VICTORIAN CULTURAL GUIDE

Dana Percec, Andreea Șerban, Andreea Verteș-Olteanu.
Anglia Victoriana. Ghid De Istorie Culturala. Timisoara:
Editura Universitatii De Vest, 2012.

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After offering the Romanian readership a guide to the cultural history of the Elizabethan Age, Dana Percec, Andreea Șerban, and Andreea Verteș-Olteanu, scholars from the West University of Timișoara, published a similar reference book for another great period in British history. The guide to the cultural history of the Victorian Age brings a new perspective on an age that was widely studied by the Romanian Anglicists after World War II and till the 1960's. It is high time that the Romanian approach to the Victorian Age got rid of certain impositions due to the ideology dominant at that time. From that narrow perspective, the Victorian Age was considered to be the age of Marxism, Chartism, the age of a literature primarily dedicated to the proletariat and the poor. Or the Victorian Age is much more complex stage in the evolution of Britain. Conservatism and liberalism, esoterism and traditional views on Christianity, the cult of family and alternative life styles co-existed.

The reference book compiled by Dana Percec, Andreea Șerban, and Andreea Verteș-Olteanu is organized according to thematic fields: social and professional groups, printed culture, the economy, the family, science, arts, geopolitics, everyday life, leisure. The concise explanatory essays summarize the information which relates primarily to cultural and literary studies. The guide also offers thematic files with texts relevant for the study of Victorian culture.

After *Dicționarul literaturii engleze* [*Dictionary of English Literature*] published in 1970 by a group of scholars from the English Department of the University of Bucharest, under the guidance of Ana Cartianu and Ioan Aurel Preda, it is the school of English of Timișoara that successfully continues the tradition of Romanian reference books on British culture and literature. From the methodological point of view, the *Guide* clearly shows the evolution of literary studies in the UK and worldwide after 1970. The School of Birmingham imposed a

new view on literature. From the close reading of texts, seen as phenomenological entities, the English Departments evolved toward a new strategy, namely the study of literature combined with the characterization of its social and the political background, and with the study of other cultural phenomena. The guide to Victorian England compiled by Dana Percec, Andreea Șerban, and Andreea Verțeș-Olteanu relies on this new perspective.

All the entries are based on a rich and significant bibliography but of particular interest to the reviewer seemed to be the entries discussing the press, women's magazines, personalities, such as Darwin and Disraeli, social types, such as the maid, the seamstress, or the bachelor. The discussion of the Victorian family also involves non-standard family arrangements which were not as rare as one could think during this age of conformity. The high death rate of women at birth or during pregnancy led to a high number of orphans who were raised by their fathers, grandparents, aunts, adoptive parents or they were institutionalized.

The Victorian Age is one of the great ages of the British novel but the *Guide* also mentions the minor novelists Charles Kingsley or Charles Reade who have their own importance in creating trends and influencing the literary taste of the Victorian general public. An undeserved absence in this area is Edward Bulwer-Lytton. The Victorian novel was also cultivated by many women novelists minorized in time by various gatekeepers of literary histories, literary dictionaries, anthologies, or syllabi. Ouida, Dinah Maria Craik, Mary Elizabeth Coleridge could also have been mentioned in the *Guide*. Another suggestion: the discussion of such an important personality as John Stuart Mill should have included the essay *The Subjection of Women*, which the great liberal philosopher co-authored with his wife Harriet Taylor Mill. John Stuart Mill was the father of liberalism and his feminism is a consequence of his political and philosophical stance.

An interesting section of the *Guide* is dedicated to Mary Kingsley one of the Victorian British explorers of Africa. But Kingsley was not a singular female traveller during the Victorian Age. Isabella Lucy Bird Bishop or Marianne North travelled to the Far East. Emilia Hornsby¹ or Emmeline Lott², who visited the Middle East, offered a desexualized perspective of the harem. They presented the harem as a space of domesticity and insisted on the hierarchy of female power and authority within the harem, which was not noticed by the famous Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. The Victorian travellers realized that the way in which Middle Eastern women presented themselves when foreign women visited the harem was a way to control the Western gaze.

Of particular interest to a Romanian interested in the Victorian travellers should be Florence Baker (Florica Maria Sas), born in Aiud, in 1841. It is not clear whether she was of Romanian, Hungarian or German origin as she wrote her name in different ways. Her parents died during her infancy and she was raised by a family of Armenians who intended to sell her as a slave to the Pasha of Vidin. Samuel Baker fell in love with Florence and succeeded in kidnapping her. The

¹ Emilia Hornsby published *In and Around Stamboul*, in 1856.

² For two years, Emmeline Lott was a governess in the household of Egypt's vice-roy. In 1867 she published [*The English Governess in Egypt: Harem Life in Egypt and Constantinople*](#).

Bakers explored Africa and were very active in the abolitionist movement. Florence Baker wrote a travelogue during her 1870-1873 African expedition.

Also from a Romanian perspective, the discussion of Dracula and Bram Stoker should include Emily Gerard (1849-1905) whose articles on Transylvanian folklore published in *Blackwood's Magazine* inspired Bram Stoker to move his horror story from Styria (Austria) to Transylvania. Gerard, a novelist herself, spent two years in Sibiu (1883-1885) accompanying her husband, a high officer in the Austrian-Hungarian Army. Her memoir, entitled *The Land Beyond the Forest* and published in 1888, presents a wild and exotic Transylvania. But Gerard is also a keen observer of the ethnic groups that cohabit in Transylvania. In full Austrian-Hungarian Dualism she foreshadowed that in spite of their marginalized position the Romanians would play a major role in the future of this province.

The suggestions made in the present review are not meant as critiques of a reference book whose value is beyond any doubt. Rather they are an invitation for the authors to prepare a second edition of the *Guide* to Victorian England. Dana Percec, Andreea Șerban, and Andreea Verteș-Olteanu, have amply proved that the Timișoara school of English Studies is a scholarly entity that can bring important contributions to the dialogue between Romanian culture and world culture.