



The Victorian Eighteenth Century: An Intellectual History

B.W. Young

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The Victorians were preoccupied by the eighteenth century. It was central to many nineteenth-century debates, particularly those concerning the place of history and religion in national life. This book explores the diverse responses of key Victorian writers and thinkers, Thomas Carlyle, John Henry Newman, Leslie Stephen, Vernon Lee, and M.R. James to a period which commanded their interest throughout the Victorian era, from the accession of Queen Victoria to the opening decades of the twentieth century. They were, on the one hand, appalled by the apparent frivolity of the eighteenth century, which was denounced by Carlyle as a dispiriting successor to the culture of Puritan England, and, on the other they were concerned to continue its secularising influence on English culture, as is seen in the pioneering work of Leslie Stephen, who was passionately keen to transform the legacy of eighteenth-century scepticism into Victorian agnosticism.

The Victorian interest in the eighteenth century was never a purely insular matter, and the history of eighteenth-century France, Germany, and Italy played a dominant role in the nineteenth-century historical understanding. A debate between generations was enacted, in which Romanticism melded into Victorianism. The Victorians were haunted by the eighteenth century, both metaphorically and literally, and the book closes with consideration of the culturally resonant eighteenth-century ghosts encountered in the fiction of Vernon Lee and M.R. James.

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