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'Generations' for Keywords issue for *Victorian Literature and Culture* (2018)
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The term "generations" is everywhere. Successive demographic cohorts are construed as being in zero-sum competition over authority, airtime, resources or power.[1] In the British press, for instance, it is commonplace to see the interests of newly pensionable "babyboomers" pitted against those of "millennials," and for such rivalry to be seen as personal, structural, or both. From serious sociological and economic analysis to pop-quiz punditry, it is taken for granted that the idea of a generation is useful. In cultural historiography, too, the term is ascribed explanatory force: first and second generation Romantic poets, "Bloomsbury" defying "Victorian" and so on. In practice, however, such commentaries often rely on ahistorical assumptions about the meanings of age-identity ("child" versus "adult"), Freudian accounts of family structure (child vis-à-vis parent) and dialectical readings of historical change (such as revolution/reaction). So does the term do more than offer a crude signpost to social context and a checklist of remembered ephemera?[2] What is its value as a heuristic?

The term "generations" can point either laterally or vertically: across to an imagined cohort stratum, or up/down to other generations. In literary theory the idea of strife between poets and their precursors, broadly cast as sons and fathers in an Oedipal clinch and theorised from the perspective of the sons, has had critical purchase since Harold Bloom's The Anxiety of Influence (1973).[3] Retrospective accounts of the Victorian period can appear to endorse the Bloomian paradigm: think of the generational confrontations depicted in Samuel Butler's The Way of All Flesh (1903) or Edmund Gosse's Father and Son (1907). Such instances, however, suggest the contingency as well as the force of the model — the likelihood, for example, that Butler's and Gosse's representations of generational conflict were shaped by their shared consciousness of Darwinian thought.

This kind of vertical parent-child face-off may be most salient for those with a collective identity to forge, like the Bloomsbury set, or for only children like Gosse junior. It is perhaps less relevant for daughters, or in large multi-child families, where the older siblings may be raising younger ones, or reaching maturity and having children of their own while the youngest are still at home, or indeed in a working-class dynamic where children join the wage-earning or productive part of the family. If we consider the operative unit to be the household, the association or neighbourhood rather than some imagined version of the nuclear family, the Oedipal model of generational competition comes under pressure.[4]

Since the Victorian period, the theorist arguing most forcibly for the significance of generation as a sociological category was Karl Mannheim, whose seminal essay "The Problem of Generations" (1952) asked his reader to imagine "what the social life of man would be like if one generation lived on forever and none followed to replace it."[5] He used this hypothetical scenario to demonstrate that the continual supersession of one generation by another needed to be factored into analyses. While his model has been criticised for over-simplifying and conflating age and cohort,[6] he acknowledges and challenges these distinctions: "do we put the [Prussian] peasants, scattered as they are in remote districts and almost untouched by current upheavals, in a common actual generation group with the urban youth of the same period? Certainly not! … [But] they are similarly located, in so far as they are potentially capable of being sucked into the vortex of social change."[7] Mannheim's initial exploration thus offers a rallying-point around which later scholars of generation have clustered.[8]

One of the few current Victorianists to take up Mannheim's challenge is Martin Hewitt, who has recently revived attention to this keyword, arguing that Victorianists use "generation" anachronistically. The Victorian period "offers few of the sorts of movements

of generational revolt visible in the subsequent century, and indeed there was nothing in Victorian self-conceptions to match the readiness with which they themselves interpreted the contemporary history of the European continent in broad generational patterns." He suggests that Victorians themselves understood generation as "less a matter of rupture than of modulation." He shows for instance how the history of ideas maps onto the birth dates (and shared historical experiences) of contributors to high-status periodicals, highlighting "generational effects" that can include stagnation as well as change.[9]

Other scholars have followed similar lines of enquiry, though using the idea of generation less explicitly. Art historian Martin Myrone, for instance, has examined the cohorts of artists who enrolled at the Royal Academy Schools between 1760 and 1830 (a total of 1,600). Myrone observes that if we turn away from the striking or canonical figures of nineteenth-century British art — the Turners and Constables — and consider instead the "origins, social trajectory and values" of obscurer but more typical R. A. scholars, different determinations, and different generational rhythms, become audible. Looking at institutional cohorts as a whole throws light on changing cultures of artistic practice and their dynamic relationship to other variables such as professionalization, market oversupply, embourgeoisement.[10] Myrone's project thus queries conventional periodization, and through this some of art history's conventional wisdom. Mark Curthoys' sampling of students matriculating at Oxford in selected years across the nineteenth century likewise enables him to identify moments of shift. He shows the third quarter of the century to be decisive in finally diversifying and secularizing Oxford graduates' career paths. Almost half of those who matriculated in 1818 and 1848 went into the Church, whereas among the 1878 and 1897 year groups it fell to 29% and 18%.[11] By contrast, the landed families only lost their dominance in the student body in the wake of the 1870s agricultural depression.[12]

There has been a realization that the digitization of large data sets, and the "distant readings" of cohorts they allow, empower historians to gain a more granular picture of the links between structural change and biographical profile, and hence perhaps a more objective account of generational patterning.[13] One such large online data set that offers a window into how the late-Victorians saw preceding generations is the <u>Dictionary of National Biography</u> (1885-1900), a key tool in a current project by the authors. The <u>DNB</u> included a disproportionate number of entries on nineteenth-century individuals, suggesting that the urge to commemorate these generations trumped deference to the recently deceased.[14] The peak of this trend was the birth year 1819, with a record-breaking 244 entries. This apparently unusually eminent generation born in 1819 includes Queen Victoria, Prince Albert, George Eliot, John Ruskin, war photographer Roger Fenton, radical Ernest Jones, "sewer king" Joseph Bazalgette and many more.[15] Using this resource as a starting point, and supplementing it with data collected by Helen Rogers from the Burnett Archive of Working Class Autobiographies and other sources, we hope to explore how these figures understood the relationship between contemporaneity, age identity and historical consciousness. While these individuals are often considered separately, they are rarely recognized as exact contemporaries. Nor are they often seen in their Regency context, born in the inauspicious year of Peterloo. Examining these figures as part of a generation, however, can recast our sense of periodization and offer us Victorians before they knew they were Victorian.

Notes

1. Feminism's use of the trope of "waves" has not prevented local scraps predicated on generational competition. See for instance Katha Pollitt, "Feminism's Generation Wars," <u>The Guardian</u>, October 6, 2010, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/cifamerica/2010/oct/06/feminism-gender1.

2. “In internet folklore, xennials are those born between 1977 and 1983.” Guardian staff, “Are You a Xennial? Take the Quiz,” The Guardian, June 26, 2017, www.theguardian.com/culture/2017/jun/27/are-you-a-xennial-take-the-quiz.
3. The sexism implicit in Bloom’s model was famously challenged by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s notion of the “anxiety of authorship.” See Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Imagination (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).
4. Social-historical investigations of the role of hitherto unconsidered ties and obligations in the maintenance of family, class and community; queer accounts of Victorian family structures; alternative readings of the meanings of household, marriage and care: all cast doubt on a straightforwardly rivalrous reading of generational change. See Leonore Davidoff, Thicker than Water: Siblings and their Relations, 1780-1920 and Davidoff et al., The Family Story: Blood, Contract and Intimacy, 1830-1960 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). On the challenges posed by “queer” families and households of choice, see Simon Goldhill, A Very Queer Family Indeed: Sex, Religion and the Bensons in Victorian Britain (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016) and Holly Furneaux, Queer Dickens: Erotics, Families, Masculinities (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). Talia Schaffer’s Romance’s Rival: Familiar Marriage in Victorian Fiction (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016) problematizes conventional wisdom about the dominance of companionate marriage as a Victorian ideal, offering alternative versions of the “familiar” as a driver of plot. On the modulation of biographical plot required – even when father-child antagonism is evident – by a focus on the “household” versus the Oedipal plot, see Helena Michie and Robyn Warhol, Love among the Archives: Writing the Lives of Sir George Scharf, Victorian Bachelor (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 59. On age differences within marriage, see for instance John Tosh, “Domesticity and Manliness in the Victorian Middle Class: The Family of Edward White Benson”, in Michael Roper and John Tosh eds. Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain since 1800 (London: Routledge, 1991), 44-73. On “aunthood” as a complicating and enabling aspect of generational interaction, think of the aunt-niece partnership ‘Michael Field’, and see Virginia Blain, “Thinking Back Through Our Aunts: Harriet Martineau and Tradition in Women’s Writing,” Women: A Cultural Review 1, no. 3 (1990): 223-39.
5. Karl Mannheim, “The Problem of Generations,” in Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge, ed. Paul Kecskemeti (London and New York: Routledge, 1952), 292.
6. David M. McCourt, “Mannheim and the Sociology of Knowledge,” in Theory and Application of the “Generation” in International Relations and Politics, eds. Brent J. Steele and Jonathan M. Acuff, (New York; Palgrave, 2012), 47.
7. Mannheim, “The Problem of Generations,” 303.
8. See William L. Burn, The Age of Equipoise: A Study of the Mid-Victorian Generation, (London: Allen & Unwin, 1964), 74; K. Theodore Hoppen, The Mid-Victorian Generation, 1846-1886 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000). Burn’s work had a revival in Martin Hewitt, ed., An Age of Equipoise? Reassessing Mid-Victorian Britain (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000).
9. See Martin Hewitt, “Victorian Generations,” Victorian Manchester and More (blog), May 31, 2015, https://profmartinhewitt.com/2015/05/31/victorian-generations/. Hewitt confirms our sense that the antagonism between late-Victorian and early twentieth-century cultural formations has retroactively shaped our sense of earlier generational configurations: “If we look at the Edwardian period we can see it being marked by [...] the active adoption of generational identities by protagonists; the development of lateral generational solidarities; and the greater sense of the narrowing and specificity of the generational layers that operated in society.” (Martin Hewitt, “BAVS 2015 Keynote: Victorian Generations,” Youtube, November 5, 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=FmEXJP1ruK4.) Robert Wohl’s classic

study of the "Generation of 1914" likewise posited that early theories of generational change were themselves generational, "influenced, if not inspired, by the example of the generation of 1914." Robert Wohl, The Generation of 1914 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 2. www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674344662. Another version of the Victorian periodization/modernist generation debate is offered by Barbara Caine, who argues that despite being embedded in Victorian cultural formations, the intellectuals of Bloomsbury typically saw the end of the Victorian period as the crucial historiographical punctuation point, and one that signified "the passing of the world of their parents and the coming into being of their own generation." See Barbara Caine, "When Did the Victorian Period End? Questions of Gender and Generation," Journal of Victorian Culture 11, no. 2 (October 16, 2006): 324.
10. See Martin Myrone, "William Etty: 'A Child of the Royal Academy,'" in Living with the Royal Academy : Artistic Ideals and Experiences in England, 1768-1848, ed. John Barrell, Mark Hallett, and Sarah Monks (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 181.
11. Mark C. Curthoys, "The Careers of Oxford Men," in Nineteenth-Century Oxford, Part 1, eds. M. G. Brock and Mark C. Curthoys, vol. 6, The History of the University of Oxford (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 503.
12. Mark C. Curthoys and Janet Howarth, "Origins and Destinations: The Social Mobility of Oxford Men and Women," in Nineteenth-Century Oxford, Part 2, eds. M. G. Brock and Mark C. Curthoys, vol. 7, The History of the University of Oxford (Oxford: Clarendon, 2000), 578. Needless to say, reliance on the surviving records of elite institutions will necessarily yield generations of elites.
13. These datasets include obituaries (see Munk's Roll), collective biographies (DNB and ODNB) and matriculation albums: (see A Cambridge Alumni Database, http://venn.lib.cam.ac.uk/Documents/acad/2016/search-2016.html).
14. See Helen Kingstone, Victorian Narratives of the Recent Past: Memory, History, Fiction (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).
15. This list also includes (among other) writers Charles Kingsley and A. H. Clough, artists William Powell Frith and Lowes Cato Dickinson (both of whom painted portraits of their coevals), the Quaker diarist Caroline Fox and cabinetmaker James Dickinson, who produced a memoir.