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Roundtable: Victoria's Victorians and the idea of generation

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Introduction

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Raymond Williams opened his introduction to *Keywords* (1976, 1983) with an anecdote about finding himself back at Cambridge in 1945 and bumping into a fellow member of the 'war' generation. As he recalls it, musing on the disjunction between their outlook and that of the 'new' generation of university students straight out of school, they simultaneously came out with: 'the fact is, they just don't speak the same language'.¹ This Roundtable examines the cohort born in 1819, exact contemporaries of Queen Victoria, at their bicentenaries this year. We suggest that a shared vocabulary – through which shared priorities, though not necessarily shared views, can be communicated – is emblematic of a 'generation'. We therefore examine how individuals born in 1819 perceived generation and their place in generational frameworks.

Our Roundtable also asks to what extent the 1819 cohort formed part of a broader generation. Sociologist Judith Burnett valuably outlines the relationship between cohorts (groups imposed by institutional time such as school year groups, or our arbitrary marker of birth year) and generations, which have 'elastic boundaries and uncertain edges' and 'may develop shared cultures and systems of identification'.² As Queen Victoria's contemporaries, they could reasonably be seen as the first fully Victorian generation, though Martin Hewitt (in his contribution to the second of this pair of Roundtables) writes of them as a 'mid-Victorian generation' having greatest sway in the period's middle decades; meanwhile, Kathryn Hughes'

¹ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Rev. and expanded ed (London: Fontana, 1983), p. 1.

² Judith Burnett, *Generations: The Time Machine in Theory and Practice* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), p. 48.

biography of George Eliot (one of this cohort) calls her *The Last Victorian*.³ This gives a foretaste of the challenges of generational typologies.

Sociological orthodoxy sees generational identities as a phenomenon of the twentieth century onwards, the product of the First World War and modernist self-consciousness. A *locus classicus* is Virginia Woolf's essay 'How it strikes a contemporary':

Nor has any generation more need than ours to cherish its contemporaries. We are sharply cut off from our predecessors. A shift in the scale – the war, the sudden slip of masses held in position for ages – has shaken the fabric from top to bottom, alienated us from the past and made us to[sic] perhaps too vividly conscious of the present. Every day we find ourselves doing, saying, or thinking things that would have been impossible to our fathers.⁴

Along with the self-consciousness of the post-War subjectivity – the ability to see oneself as part of a distinct generation – comes the more abstract idea of generational consciousness itself: the inclination to see the past and present in generational terms. The interwar years are the site of the *OED*'s first findings for the term 'generation-conscious', and saw the rise of epithets such as 'the War generation' and even 'the automobile generation'. Notions of strata of young people defined by their shared experiences, culture, outlook or the technological changes they encountered were becoming normative, as was an assumption that succeeding generations were in rivalry with each other. Current work in sociology traces how today, '[baby-]boomers are being constructed as a "problem generation"'.⁵ As Jennie Bristow puts it, 'fears about the impact of an ageing population have been *moralized*' through critique of baby-boomers' behaviour and lifestyle, although of course only 'a select few' of the group had access to the era's home-ownership opportunities and free university education.⁶ Meanwhile,

³ Kathryn Hughes, *George Eliot: The Last Victorian* (London: Fourth Estate, 1999) <<https://www.harpercollins.com/9780007381609/george-eliot-the-last-victorian-text-only>> [accessed 4 December 2018].

⁴ Virginia Woolf, 'How it strikes a contemporary', *Times Literary Supplement*, 1107 (April 5 1923): 221.

⁵ Chris Phillipson and others, 'Social and Cultural Constructions of Ageing: The Case of the Baby Boomers', *Sociological Research Online*, 13.3 (2008), 1–14 (para. 5.2) <<https://doi.org/10.5153/sro.1695>>.

⁶ Jennie Bristow, 'The Making of "Boomergeddon": The Construction of the Baby Boomer Generation as a Social Problem in Britain', *British Journal of Sociology*, 67.4 (2016), 575–91 (p. 588) <<https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12206>>; Jonathan White, 'Thinking Generations', *British Journal of Sociology*, 64.2 (2013), 216–47 (p. 237) <<https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12015>>. See also Jennie Bristow, *Baby Boomers and Generational Conflict* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

their claimed opponents in the zero-sum fight for resources, ‘Millennials’, are by turns berated and defended in the press.⁷

So did the mid-twentieth century invent generations? Or did the instinct towards ‘generationalization’ have roots in our period? The foremost sociologist of generations, Karl Mannheim, positing that lateral generational identities are the product of distinctive and powerful shared experiences, drew examples from the Napoleonic Wars onwards. Williams himself noted that Sainte-Beuve used the term in relation to the ‘romantic generation’, suggesting that the term came into being around the same time as our 1819 cohort.⁸ Frances Ferguson (from whom we borrow the term ‘generationalizing’) argues – drawing on Philippe Ariès – that the development of the ‘school class’ model in the Romantic period helped to strengthen cohort identities. Such observations seem to suggest a nineteenth-century genealogy for generation as a tool of explanation or interpretation.⁹

This is the first of two Roundtables exploring the relationship between ideas of generation, contemporaneity, age identity and historical consciousness in the Victorian period. The first is concerned with the cohort of eminent individuals born in 1819, from the particular vantage point of their shared bicentenaries this year. In what follows our contributors discuss novelists George Eliot and Charles Kingsley, art historian John Ruskin, poets Arthur Hugh Clough and Ernest Jones (best known for his Chartist radicalism), historian Montagu Burrows and essayist Julia Clara Byrne.. The contributors investigate the extent to which, and the limits within which, the 1819 cohort can be seen as part of an identifiable generation. The essays on Jones, Burrows and Byrne – examining figures who are in some way ‘adjacent’ to, different from, and even at odds with the political, professional and literary developments of their time – focus particularly on this question. The contributors also ask how, in their lives and work, their subjects grappled with questions of generational identity and generational consciousness.

⁷ “‘Snowflake Generation’ Is Threatening the Future of the NHS by Refusing to Work Nights or Weekends, Health Chief Warns”, *Mail Online*, 2018 <<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-6189347/Snowflake-generation-threatening-future-NHS-refusing-work-nights-weekends.html>> [accessed 4 December 2018]; Anna Isaac, ‘The Housing Timebomb: A Third of All Millennials Will Still Be Renting When They Collect Their Pensions’, *Telegraph*, 17 April 2018 <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/business/2018/04/17/mass-pensioner-renters-will-hurt-government-finances-think-tank/>> [accessed 4 December 2018]; ‘Millennials: The Trials of Generation Y’, *Guardian*, 2016 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/series/millennials-the-trials-of-generation-y>> [accessed 4 December 2018].

⁸ Williams, p. 141.

⁹ Frances Ferguson, ‘Generationalizing: Romantic Social Forms and the Case of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*’, *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas*, 8.1 (2010), 97–118 (p. 102). See Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, trans. by Robert Baldick (London: Jonathan Cape, 1962).

While there is a great deal of scholarship on some of these individual figures, they are rarely recognized as exact contemporaries. Johannes Fabian warns against ‘denial of coevalness’, and though his aim is to alert anthropologists to the dangers of distancing themselves in conceptual time from their subjects of study, we can also heed his warning when we are tempted to distance our favoured nineteenth-century individuals from others of the time. In studies of any members of this cohort, we need to acknowledge the experiences and attitudes of their sometimes quite different contemporaries too.¹⁰ Commemorative anniversary events alone do not encourage us to think about the significance of coeval coincidence, to explore how individuals situated themselves within emerging ideas of contemporaneity or modernity, nor even to ask to what extent they recognized themselves as ‘of an age’. Our contributors engage with precisely such questions.

These seven short essays, each by an expert on a particular individual born in 1819, trace the ways in which that individual understood him or herself as generational or contemporary. Many of them knew one another, in close-knit webs of intellectual influence. However, the essays go beyond any Noel Annan-esque ‘Intellectual Aristocracy’ by examining *how* they expressed that consciousness of contemporaneity, and the tensions and complexities involved in doing so. Contributors’ essays are weighted towards individuals known for their writings rather than for practical achievements (we do not have contributions on ‘sewer king’ Joseph Bazalgette, for instance, pioneer war photographer Roger Fenton, or painters William Powell Frith or Lowes Cato Dickinson, though Valerie Sanders notes the importance of chemist Charles Blachford Mansfield [1819-55] to Charles Kingsley). That most were ‘men [and women] of letters’ is a clear horizon of our data here, though they represent divergent backgrounds, political outlooks and life experiences, and their work outruns any singular disciplinary or occupational label. The writings of Ruskin, for instance, addressed art, history, politics, economics and education to name but a few of his fields of interest, while Kingsley wrote on science and religion as well as in the novel form. Readers interested in any one of these individuals will gain a closely comparative view of how that individual’s understanding of generational belonging chimed or clashed with that of their contemporaries.

Thinking of our subjects here as part of a generation involves at least two perspectives: the hindsight – ours but not necessarily theirs – that recognizes them as contemporaries of each other, and the discourses, technologies and modes of self-consciousness whereby they locate

¹⁰ Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York, N.Y. ; Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 31.

themselves within generational patterns. Ruth Livesey traces how George Eliot perceived her synchronic generation as lacking the diachronic continuity ‘from generation to generation’ that she and Ruskin felt was still prevalent in unindustrialized continental Europe. At the same time, however, as Livesey puts it, Eliot had ‘her own story of exceptionalism’, enacted by flight from the provincial Midlands. Rachel Dickinson shows how Ruskin also dealt in exceptionalism, declaring that only ‘a very few persons born in each generation’ were of lasting ‘worth’, but suggests that he would – or at least should – have recognised his own cohort as containing such individuals.

Often, individuals discussed in this Roundtable had shared networks of coeval acquaintance, but did not necessarily extrapolate from these groups to identify with any more capacious ‘generational’ identity that stretched across the social spectrum. In her contribution, Sanders quotes Mannheim: ‘Mere contemporaneity becomes sociologically significant only when it also involves participation in the same historical and social circumstances’.¹¹ So while, as Rachel Dickinson shows, a figure like John Ruskin might appear as the centre of a web of connections between contemporaries, these studies tend not to suggest that individuals born in 1819 necessarily saw themselves as co-evals embarked on a common project or identifying with a common predicament. Sanders maps Mannheim’s terms onto Kingsley’s work, where his multiple prefaces to *Yeast* (1848; 1851) describe his era as comprised of ‘generational units [...] deeply fissured by class interests.’

Hence some of the Roundtable’s subjects seem to have seen themselves as out of joint in temporal as well as ideological terms. Chartist leader Ernest Jones, as Simon Rennie observes, lived a life ‘adjacent to [his] generation’s familiar pathways’, and seems, like Elise Garritzen’s subject Montagu Burrows, to be dogged by perpetual belatedness. Belatedness and adjacency, however, imply modes of temporal and spatial (or vertical and lateral) locatedness, even if that locatedness emerges negatively or through misrecognitions. As Garritzen observes, for a figure like Burrows, for whom the apparatus of class, educational and professional identity was visible but just out of reach, generation could function as an important category of inclusion *and* exclusion: of validation *and* unbelonging.

As an historian Burrows provides a fascinating instance of the way the experiential trappings of generational identity (in his case professional neglect and marginalization by the ‘rising generation’ of academic historians), seem to have been in mutually constitutive

¹¹ Karl Mannheim, ‘The Problem of Generations,’ in *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge* (1927); rpt. ed. by Paul Kecskemeti (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951), p. 298.

relationship with his theories of historical change and agency: his history and his historicism emerge from one another. A number of our contributors observe their subjects – Ruskin, Kingsley, Clough, Eliot – thinking deeply about the imbrication of questions of historical consciousness with ideas and experiences of generation, though these subjects arrive at different understandings of the equation. As Sanders shows, Kingsley both ‘sensed he was living through significant times’ that called for his active campaigning engagement, and saw the poet’s role as being to articulate ‘the collective history of that generation.’ By contrast, Gregory Tate argues that the poet Arthur Hugh Clough was perfectly cognizant of his place in a generation both laterally and vertically, but came to rather different conclusions about it. Suspicious of the way the ‘appetite for order’ urged one into ‘precarious theories of mental affiliation’, he developed a notion of ‘juxtaposition’ to describe ‘an interaction between people or things based not on any intrinsic similarity but on chance.’ Tate takes his lead from Clough to argue that

a study of the 1819 cohort can help to focus and clarify our understanding of Victorian historicism. Using Clough’s notion of ‘juxtaposition’ to examine his fluctuating views on history, and their relation to the views of his contemporaries, I want to suggest that this or any cohort can be studied as a cross-section of Victorian debate, highlighting through contrast the diversity of opinions held by people who happened to be born in the same year. The historicism of Clough and his coevals, in short, can help scholars and readers in the twenty-first century to historicize the Victorians more discriminatingly.

John Ruskin conceptualized generation more optimistically. Despite his evident sense of embattled isolation, and his tendency to think of generations in long Biblical sweeps marked by occasional outbursts of genius, Dickinson shows that he saw the concept of generation as an opportunity for moral intervention and improvement, and as a node of connection between the individual and the social. His confident grasp of what counts as ‘worth’ and ‘genius’ – and hence his facility with generational thinking – contrasts starkly with that of Julia Clara Byrne, whose commentaries on her narratorial ‘self’ and her contemporaries, as Rosemary Mitchell illustrates, are characterized by the kinds of self-decentring and circuitous thinking we recognize more readily as modernist.

Through bringing together analyses of the generational thinking of canonical and lesser-known figures, individuals and cohorts, this pair of Roundtables hopes to challenge and recast notions about generational conflict, and reflect on the shared experiences or concerns that

shaped generations 200 years ago. In his chapter on ‘Generation’ in *Realms of Memory*, Pierre Nora asks: ‘Is generation a conscious or unconscious phenomenon? Is it something imposed from without or freely chosen? Is it a statistical or a psychological phenomenon?’¹² In this Roundtable on individuals born in 1819 we hope to contribute to answering some of these questions, while a second Roundtable in *JVC* 24.3 will consider issues of generation and contemporaneity from the perspectives of different disciplinary methodologies, considering how Queen Victoria’s coeval subjects envisaged their relationships to their most prominent contemporary, and showcasing broader cohort studies of those born in 1819.

¹² Pierre Nora, ‘Generation’, in *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, ed. by Pierre Nora and Lawrence D. Kritzman, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer, 3 vols (New York ; Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1996), I, p. 505.