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James A Secord, *Victorian Sensation: the Extraordinary Publication, Reception, and Secret Authorship of Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000. xix, 624 p.: ill., maps ; 24 cm. \$35.00 (Cloth).

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James A Secord, *Victorian Sensation: the Extraordinary Publication, Reception, and Secret Authorship of Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000. xix, 624 p. : ill., maps ; 24 cm. \$35.00 (Cloth). ISBN: 0226744108

The anonymous publication of *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* in 1884 caused a “sensation” in the Victorian era. The book chronicled a process of natural development that occurs on cosmological and earthly scales – notably suggesting the transmutation of species. Many readers argued over the consequences, such as humans developing from animals. Printed at a time when the industrial revolution was redefining communication, *Vestiges* provides James Secord with a window, a “cultural tracer”, to view the effects of publishing for readers on a wide scale. Because of this, Secord does not posit *Vestiges* as a static artifact, providing fixed ideas about laws of nature which are either picked up or discarded by a certain audience. Rather, Secord answers larger questions about how reading practices differed by locality, gender, and class; how the book was mobilized in political and religious debates; how and why the interpretations of the book differed; and the list goes on. At the heart of *Victorian Sensation* is a historical process of deeply embedding *Vestiges* into a number of systems: social, political, cultural, religious, philosophical, and economic. The scope of *Victorian Sensation* is broad, even though the nominal subject of a single book (14 editions of it, though) is narrow. Secord’s book itself has created a sensation of its own, at least within the historical community; it has already garnered the 2002 Pfizer Prize from the History of Science Society. In this tour-de-force, Secord relays a new framework for historical studies.

*Victorian Sensation* itself is divided into four parts, each focusing on a different aspect of reading in order to demonstrate the “power” of books. The first part focuses on the network of readers, authors, publishers, and printers which all work in concert to produce a literary work. This network is presented against the backdrop of technologies of publishing and distribution, and showcases the appearance and availability of books as integral to their meaning. The second part focuses on a reader’s locale – concentrating on different receptions of *Vestiges* in London, Edinburgh, Oxford, Cambridge and Liverpool. There is an emphasis on how the aristocracy as well as the working classes

engage with and employ the anonymous book in social settings, political debates, and religious controversies. The third part switches focus from place to person, examining how reading is related to individual identity, including the identity of the author of *Vestiges*, publishing-giant Robert Chambers. The last part explains how various classes negotiated the future role of the scientific practitioners – untangling to Chambers’s contemporaries who were men of science and what was their domain.

As *Vestiges* was considered a literary hybrid – a Frankenstein of its day, combining distinct literary forms – so too is *Victorian Sensation*. Upon embarking on this study, Secord was confronted with choices about narrowly-scoped historical accounts and more global themes. In general, historians with a narrow-scope provide important detail which creates nuances in a thesis; broad histories on the other hand are an attempt to synthesize trends over a large spatial and/or temporal frame, and in the process, “smooth” out these nuances. Secord creates a syncretism of these two scopes, employing a series of narrowly focused chapters as a means to flesh out larger themes.

One prime example of this syncretism is in the story of Thomas Archer Hirst of Halifax. Hirst’s detailed journal provided rich fodder for Secord because it explicitly spells out his reading practices, practices that were implicit in other contemporary journals. Still, the chapter is just a history of one man. Secord overcomes this obstacle by doing to Hirst just what he did with *Vestiges*: embed him into larger themes. Hirst acts as a convincing stand-in for people in his station in life: “Hirst’s experience show the dramatic expansion of the range of books available to young men in the middle class and the highest reachers of the artisan class” (348). He provides an example of how some people read (carefully and comparatively by juxtaposition with other texts), appropriated their own meaning of texts into dynamic belief systems, and were motivated to read books like *Vestiges* in the first place. These themes recur in other chapters also, but for different classes, locales, and time periods. Complex, nuances themes are then created by networking these individual stories.

This is just one part of a new historical framework that Secord is building throughout *Victorian Sensation*, and explicitly delineated in the Prologue and Epilogue. In his own words Secord’s approach “has been an experiment in a different kind of history. It has explored the introduction of an evolutionary account of nature into the public debate in order to see what happens when

a major historical episode is approached from the perspective of reading” (518). To do this, Secord garnered tools from literary critics, cultural historians, and historians of the book. With this toolbox, books appear as open and mutable; their meaning shifts with every reading. Who, what, where, why, how, when, these questions of the reader, the text, and the author all matter to the meaning of a book. Secord studies networks of these relations in the hopes of gaining as complete a contextualization as possible.

The historical framework is not without its drawbacks. Most notably, by focusing on *Vestiges* as pervasive in so many aspects of Victorian life upon publication, the reader is not able to contextualize *Vestiges* in relation to *prior* books. One gets the sense that *Vestiges* was an anomaly in the intellectual environment of the day. We find out where *Vestiges* the book went in publication, but we do not get a sense of where the ideas in *Vestiges* came from. Very little attention is given to the intellectual background of the protagonist in this tale.

Secord does with Darwin’s *Origin of Species* exactly what he should have done with *Vestiges*. He proclaims that *Origin* was not the “start” of a new era in restructuring knowledge, but rather the outcome of a long tradition of restructuring knowledge. In one sense, this comparison is useful because it is a revisionist history – repositioning *Origin* in a larger chain of ideas which had concerned men (and women) of science for years. However, just as *Origin* becomes redefined in relations to *Vestiges*, would it not be just as useful to see *Vestiges* in a similar relation?

Justice cannot be done in a review of this book without pointing to the extensive research done to uncover a wealth of material. Secord’s heavy reliance on primary sources (primarily letters, journal and newspaper articles, and books) provides the extraordinary detail standing solidly behind his grand claims. Moreover, it would be remiss to neglect the myriad pictures and illustrations that enliven *Victorian Sensation*, bringing a visual dimension to an already textured book.

To this reviewer, however, the most significant of Secord’s many contributions to cultural and intellectual history is providing a new way to look at texts. A book like *Vestiges* is no longer merely a physical or intellectual entity. It involves entire networks of people (authors, readers, publishers), machines (printing machines, trains), and institutions (publication houses, libraries, churches, the postal service, journals, newspapers). These networks allow books to have (indirectly) the power to engage in

debates and be employed in controversies. They do this by providing an *experience* for a reader which needs to be situated in relation to other knowledge, ideological beliefs, and self-identity. In this way texts can engender change – cultural and social change. No longer can historians continue to view texts as self-contained, bearing a clear, stable meaning. Instead, texts are in a dialectical relationship with culture a text can effect cultural change, which can then affect how a text is read.

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**Jim Weeks, *Gettysburg: Memory, Market, and an American Shrine*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003. 267 pp. \$29.95 (Hard). ISBN: 0691102716.**

**Thomas A. Desjardin, *These Honored Dead: How the Story of Gettysburg Shaped American Memory*. Cambridge, Mass: Da Capo Press, 2003. 246 pp. \$26.00 (Hard). ISBN:0306812673.**

In 1865, two years after the Battle of Gettysburg, a Philadelphia reporter named George Gross was dispatched to write a series of follow-up stories on the battle. He long searched for something—anything—fresh to write about, and in the first story published he shared his frustrations with his readers, griping that, “It is difficult to say anything new on a theme already hackneyed.” Of course, time would show how wrong Gross was. Gettysburg has become one of the most written about events in American history, the topic of a thousand books, with many more published each year. Two new books on the memory of the battle, by Jim Weeks and Thomas A. Desjardin respectively, make useful contributions to that body of literature.

Weeks’ *Gettysburg: Memory, Market, and an American Shrine* is largely concerned with Gettysburg as a place, and how that place has been used by Americans over time. He divides the 140 years that have passed since the battle into four parts, each typified by a particular use of the battlefield that he feels reflects larger currents in American society. For example, he argues that Gettysburg served for the first 20 years of its post-Civil War life as a “genteel summer resort.” Promoters emphasized both the town’s natural