

The New Criterion

Books

May 2008

With all due respect

by [John Gross](#)

On *Great Victorian Lives: An Era in Obituaries*, edited by Ian Brunskill.

The obituaries in the London *Times* have long been one of that paper's most notable features. This wasn't always the case. For the first sixty or so years of its existence, the *Times*'s obituary coverage was skimpy, and it was only during the 1840s, under the editorship of the legendary John Thadeus Delane, that obituaries began to be taken seriously. Delane saw them both as circulation-boosters (in the case of great names, at least) and as a means of enhancing the paper's authority. By 1850, the tradition of the major *Times* obituary was firmly established. Even then, however, editorial decisions often remained erratic, and there were still many gaps and inadequacies. The daily obituary page, with its more or less comprehensive coverage, had to wait until the twentieth century. But from Delane's time onwards the best nineteenth-century obituaries were full and flowing, and the general standard—to judge from an absorbing new anthology—was impressively high.

The first life commemorated in *Great Victorian Lives* is that of Thomas Arnold, the reforming headmaster of Rugby school, who died in 1843. [1] Arnold was a key figure in shaping Victorian attitudes (and the subject of some of Lytton Strachey's most determined sniggers in *Eminent Victorians*), and it is a sign of how far the practice of obituary-writing still had to go at the time that he should have been accorded a single paragraph. His son Matthew was to fare better forty-five years later, with a tribute of 5,000 words.

An even more important figure than Thomas Arnold, the railway engineer George Stephenson, received even less space, a mere eight lines, when he died in 1848. But the times—and *The Times*—were changing, and we can learn more about George Stephenson in the course of the substantial obituary of his son, the engineer Robert Stephenson, who died in 1859. In *Great Victorian Lives*, Robert Stephenson's obituary appears alongside that of his celebrated engineering contemporary Isambard Kingdom Brunel, who had died only a month before. He was less colorful than Brunel, but his career was no less heroic. Among other things, it reminds us that globalization wasn't invented yesterday. His bridges spanned the Nile and the St. Lawrence as well as the Tyne; as a young man he superintended mines in Latin America; he helped to construct railway systems in, among other places, India, Switzerland, Italy, and Norway—although *The Times* was equally at pains to impress upon its readers his sterling character (“his heart was worthy of his head”).

The subjects of the book are predominantly British, but foreigners are reasonably well represented. The obituary which follows that of Thomas Arnold, at the very outset, records “with no ordinary regret” the death of Mendelssohn. The longest of the literary obituaries, running to over 10,000 words, is devoted to Victor Hugo. The final piece in the collection celebrates the achievements and idiosyncrasies of Sarah Bernhardt, who died in 1923—“no temperament more histrionic than Mme

Bernhardt's has, perhaps, ever existed.”

To read these three last obituaries, and some of the others in the book, such as that of Wagner, is to be made aware of what a strong European presence there was in Victorian culture, for all its famed insularity—a stronger one, in some respects, than there is today, the European Union and cheap air flights notwithstanding. It would be hard to imagine a more quintessentially Victorian occasion, for example, than the first performance of Mendelssohn's oratorio *Elijah*, which the composer conducted in Birmingham, the city which had commissioned it, in 1846.

The Mendelssohn obituary in *Great Victorian Lives* is more an appreciation or a general estimate than an obituary in the strict sense. The same is true of many other pieces in the book. Some of them offer very little biographical detail indeed. And at least one of them, the article on Abraham Lincoln, would be better described as a news story, although it is no less interesting for that. Essentially it is an account of the way the news of Lincoln's assassination was received in New York. It conveys an overwhelming sense of shock and dismay, which the readers of *The Times* were plainly meant to share, whatever their individual attitudes to the Civil War may have been. It also makes a great point of the unprecedented speed with which news travelled in America, thanks to “a diffusive penny press and recurrent telegrams.”

A far more conventional obituary is a laudatory account of Robert E. Lee, however, published not long after Lee's death in 1870. The one unusual thing about it is that it had previously appeared in another paper, the *Pall Mall Gazette*: borrowing material from rival publications was a standard dodge in *The Times*'s early days, but it is odd to find it reverting to the practice in what was meant to be its august maturity.

Great Victorian Lives isn't designed to be used as a textbook, still less as a work of reference. It is a book to browse in—and one in which, once you have started, you are liable to go on browsing for longer than you intended. The facts fascinate, the details draw you on. Bismarck, addressing his last words as Chancellor to Wilhelm II, slips into English: “Then am I in your way, Sir?” (The Kaiser's reply, also in English, was “Yes.”) The mid-Victorian actress Helen Faucit plays Ophelia in Paris, and Louis-Philippe presents her with “a costly bracelet”; she plays Antigone in Dublin, and the Royal Hibernian Academy presents her with “a brooch of Irish gold, four inches in diameter, and having at the centre a representation of Antigone at the funeral urn of Polynices.” Arthur Conan Doyle, paying tribute to the prodigious (and prodigiously bearded) cricketer W. G. Grace, is able to describe what it was like to play with the great man from personal experience.

The chronological ordering of subjects also means that there are some quaint juxtapositions. Tolstoy appears alongside W. S. Gilbert. (Neither man, one feels, would have had much of interest to say about the other—but the world needs both). Cardinal Newman appears alongside the militant freethinking Member of Parliament Charles Bradlaugh. Lewis Carroll is sandwiched between Brahms and Gladstone—and his obituarist takes the opportunity to tell the story of how Queen Victoria was so entranced by *Alice in Wonderland* that she commanded the author, unaware that he was also a mathematician, to send his next book to Windsor. (“Her Majesty was almost as bewildered as Alice on finding that it consisted of ‘An Elementary Theory of Determinants.’”)

A book which packs in as much miscellaneous material as this may well sound like a lucky dip. But it adds up to much more than that. Cumulatively, it conveys the strengths of an entire culture. Some of the weaknesses too, no doubt—but it is a sense of the strengths that we are more likely to carry away.

In part this is naturally a tribute to the men and women being described. We are brought into close contact with some extraordinary individuals, many of whom helped to shape or sum up the ideals of the age. We are also allowed to hear them arguing or praising or criticizing in their own

words—compelling words, as often as not. But this wouldn't be enough in itself to justify the book. We can, after all, easily read about such people elsewhere, and at greater length. In *Great Victorian Lives*, presentation counts for as much as content. Powerful personalities are powerfully drawn; the style is as Victorian as the subject-matter.

The Victorian tone manifests itself in many different ways. At one extreme it can lead to an almost impossible degree of elevation. Consider, for example, the opening of the long (and in many respects perfectly down to earth) obituary of the Hungarian patriot Louis Kossuth, who died in 1894:

If few people among the generation that has seen Kossuth die know more of him than his great name, the fault is wholly that of the man, whose ambition was of the kind that Quintilian has called the parent of the virtues. The abdication of a tribune is even rarer than that of a King, but Kossuth found that in his case integrity and self-interest lay far apart.

—after which we glide into a bit of untranslated Latin.

No one could revive such a way of writing today. I can't imagine anyone wanting to. But at a less strenuous level, dignity, formality, and an imposing range of cultural allusions are part of what gives Victorian prose its resonance. So are a readiness, almost an eagerness, to show respect, when circumstances warrant it—and a frank assumption of the right to respect, too. According to her *Times* obituary, George Eliot dispelled the diffidence of anyone approaching her by “her gracious manner, condescending as became her genius, but never either patronising or indifferent.” This is something else which couldn't be written today, but only because the old, favorable sense of “condescending” has been completely lost.

Every quality has its defects. We all know that Victorian respectfulness could lead to absurd excesses of reverence, just as Victorian piety could be a license for some ripe humbug. And it might understandably be supposed that obituaries, written in the immediate shadow of death, would be particularly liable to such faults. *De mortuis*, as the saying goes, *nil nisi bunkum*.

But this would be to reckon without such other Victorian qualities as forthrightness, humor, and good sense. The *Times* obituarists enter many reservations, which are no less firm for being politely expressed. Of Pope Pius IX, “Pio Nono,” we are told that, “not naturally strong in argument, and not provided with a large stock of knowledge, the Pope relied on vehemence for overcoming his adversaries in controversy.” The account of Carlyle accords him heroic stature, but it is far from uniformly worshipful: “some of his pages, with their exultant *vae victis* over fallen causes, are not edifying.”

Cardinal Newman's *Apologia* receives the high praise you would expect, but his obituarist can't refrain from adding that it is a remarkably self-centered work: “It is Newman, and very little more. Even Hamlet, monopolist though he is, leaves more room and more honour to inferior personages.”

It remains true that most Victorians felt an unashamed thrill at the thought that they were sharing the earth with their great contemporaries. The obituary of Tolstoy describes the circumstances of his death as being “as characteristic of the man and his genius as any previous episode in his wonderful career”; and in a sense almost all the obituaries in the collection—the major ones, at least—are meant to be records of “wonderful careers.” Florence Nightingale, Darwin, Tennyson, Pasteur—each life constitutes a kind of epoch in itself.

The effect of grandeur is inevitably exaggerated (if one thinks of Victorian life as a whole) by a concentration on figures of permanent interest. Most nineteenth-century *Times* obituaries were devoted to lesser lights, although they seemed consequential enough at the time—aristocrats, minor politicians, military men, church dignitaries. None of them are represented in *Great Victorian Lives*

(with the exception of Lord Lucan of the Charge of the Light Brigade—he seems a poor substitute for the Duke of Wellington, who received an obituary of no less than 42,000 words when he died in 1852).

There are no plutocrats, either, apart from one or two who were also major philanthropists, such as Sir Moses Montefiore and Sir Titus Salt, the Yorkshireman who made a fortune out of worsted and alpaca and created the pioneer model village of Saltaire. The business career of Sir Henry Tate the sugar king is summed up in a few perfunctory lines (“it was long, and it was very prosperous”); the great bulk of his obituary is devoted to the founding of the art gallery which still—kind of—bears his name. (Poor Sir Henry: the Victorians had a weakness for bad puns, but did they ever perpetrate one quite as vile as “Tate Britain”?)

On the whole it is the major statesmen who are given pride of place. The longest obituary in the book, running to some 25,000 words, is that of Gladstone. It is well-written and full of interest, but the closer it draws near what were then recent times the more it is colored by partisan politics. In its opposition to Gladstone’s support for Irish Home Rule *The Times* spoke for most Englishmen of the governing class, but it also had its own fish to fry: in an effort to discredit the Irish nationalist leader Charles Stewart Parnell it had published letters which proved to be forgeries. It was naturally obliged to disavow them, but it continued to pursue Parnell relentlessly, and it rejoiced, with notable vindictiveness, in his downfall. (One curious observation in its obituary of Parnell himself was a reference to “the cold temper and the taste for political strategy which he seems to have inherited from his American kinfolk.” Parnell’s mother was the daughter of the American admiral Charles Stewart, a hero of the war of 1812.)

In addition to Gladstone, three prime ministers receive full-dress treatment—Robert Peel, Lord Palmerston, and Benjamin Disraeli. The account of Palmerston is the most entertaining. Like all *Times* obituaries it was anonymous, but is known to have been the work of Eneas Sweetland Dallas, who was himself an interesting figure. (He was not only a versatile journalist but the author of a study of poetry called—long before Nietzsche used the title—*The Gay Science*.)

Dallas’s tone is shrewd and worldly—that of a well-informed clubman. He has caught some of the zest of his subject, whom he plainly admires, and he has a sense of comedy which sometimes verges on the heartless. He wastes little sympathy on the parliamentary difficulties in which Palmerston’s colleague William Huskisson found himself, for instance:

Poor Huskisson, with considerable ability and the best possible intentions, was all his life a bungler. He was always in difficulties through his clumsiness, which was physical as well as moral. He was always stumbling over chairs, tripping over ropes as he landed from steamboats, breaking his shins upon stones, until finally he was knocked down and killed outright by the first railway train.

And there is a splendidly florid passage—you feel it might almost be a deliberate parody of Macaulay—in which Dallas pictures the supposed impact of the famous “*Civis Romanus sum*” speech in which Palmerston proclaimed Britain’s readiness to come to the aid of its citizens anywhere:

The Bedouin of the desert recognised in Palmerston Pasha a being whom Allah had endowed with more than mortal power. Brown in the back-woods of America, or the gardens of Siam, felt that he had an infallible safeguard if he had Palmerston’s passport to show. Palmerston, it was imagined, could move the whole force of the British empire in order that this Brown—*Civis Romanus*—might not be defrauded of his Worcester sauce amid the ice of Siberia, or of his pale ale on the Mountains of the Moon.

And more in the same vein.

Dallas's worldliness doesn't extend to Palmerston's private life—far from it. He presents him as a model of conjugal devotion; there is no hint of the Palmerston who had numerous affairs—his nickname was “Lord Cupid”—and who fathered several children out of wedlock. But then “irregularities” of any kind are firmly off-limits in the obituaries (unless you count one or two brief, deliberately vague references to the prosecution and imprisonment of Oscar Wilde). In George Eliot's obituary, for instance, G. H. Lewes is mentioned in passing as one of her literary colleagues, but with nothing to suggest that he had any personal connection with her.

There is one department, however, where we are given fairly regular displays of intimate detail. Many of the obituaries open with an account of the subject's final days or hours. We are told the names of the doctors who were in attendance (they are usually referred to, rather more grandly, as “medical advisers”) and the times at which they were summoned. The progress of the disease to which the patient succumbed is carefully charted; there are close-ups of life in the sickroom.

The most vivid of these dramas is the account of the death of Ruskin, which was supplied by his cousin and companion Mrs. Severn. On Thursday he feels a sudden throat irritation; he is put to bed; Mrs. Severn sings him a favorite song, “Summer Slumber”; he has a temperature of 102, but manages to eat dinner (sole and pheasant and champagne); on Friday he feels better; on Saturday he fades away, with Mrs. Severn holding his hand and the doctor and a manservant “now and then feathering the lips with brandy and spraying the head with eau de cologne.” After it is all over Mrs. Severn is prevailed on to look out at the sunset: “The brilliant, gorgeous light illumined the hills with splendour; and the spectators felt as if Heaven's gate itself had been flung open to receive the teacher into everlasting peace.”

The whole scene is inimitably Victorian. But there are many other moments in the book that are no less Victorian, and no less memorable, but very different—Thomas Huxley reflecting on the Biblical account of creation, for instance (“far be it from me to say that it is untrue because it is impossible”), or the pioneer photographer W. H. Fox Talbot voluntarily giving up his patents when he became convinced of the potential public benefits of photography. (In later life Fox Talbot devoted much of his time to deciphering the cuneiform inscriptions on Assyrian monuments.)

Great Victorian Lives has an excellent introduction by Andrew Sanders, and is very much enhanced by the notes Sanders supplies at the end of each individual obituary. These are exceptionally lively; they don't only fill in gaps and correct errors, but provide a great deal of engrossing incidental information as well. Among other things, they show the nineteenth century putting out tendrils into the twentieth. We learn, for example, that Adelina de Lara, the last surviving pupil of Clara Schumann, lived on long enough to speak at the Robert Schumann centenary concert in London in 1956. (You could have gone to hear her instead of going to listen to Elvis Presley.)

There are so many other Victorians whose obituaries one would like to read. What did *The Times* have to say about Walter Bagehot or Ellen Terry or Aubrey Beardsley—or about Nathaniel Hawthorne or Bakunin or Emile Zola? One's only complaint about the book is that there isn't more of it—but that is a compliment rather than a criticism.

Notes

[Go to the top of the document.](#)

1. *Great Victorian Lives*, edited by Ian Brunskill; 704 pages, Times Books, £20. [Go back to the text.](#)

John Gross's most recent book is *A Double Thread: Growing Up English and Jewish in London* (Ivan R Dee).

[more from this author](#)

This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 26 May 2008, on page 76

Copyright © 2009 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com

<http://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/With-all-due-respect-3847>