

The New Criterion

Books

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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— ...

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

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