

Material Ambitions: Self-Help and Victorian Literature, by Rebecca Richardson (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021), 255pp., £34.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-4214-4197-9

‘Practical industry’, Samuel Smiles wrote in his Victorian bestseller *Self-Help*, ‘wisely and vigorously applied, always produces its due effects. [...] All may not rise equally, yet each, on the whole, very much according to his deserts. “Though all cannot live on the piazza,” as the Tuscan proverb has it, “every one may feel the sun.”’ (Samuel Smiles, *Self-Help* (2nd edition), (London: John Murray, 1876), p. 267). A reader of Victorian fiction today might not recognise such ideas of ‘just deserts’ as being a particular hallmark of the nineteenth-century novel, which rarely gave space to depictions of success by degrees. Rather we are more used to the image of victory via competition, of winners and losers, heroes and villains, the individual’s triumph over adversity, not the gradual but uneven improvement of a cohort’s lot due to a shared sense of ‘how to get on’. Pointing to this quotation as a rare moment in Smiles’s 1859 guidebook to success where he awkwardly ‘addresses the question of how success is allotted among his self-helpers’ (p. 25), Rebecca Richardson identifies the difficulty Smiles and other nineteenth-century writers had in trying to belie the violence implicit in the relationship between the individual and his ‘competitors’, or between the individual and the conditions of his environment. This becomes a central theme throughout *Material Ambitions* as Richardson helps us, the reader, to gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which Victorian literature grappled with the inherent antagonisms contained within ambition and its associated drives.

Material Ambitions begins from the premise that the self-help genre has been understudied and historically peripheral to our understanding of the Victorian period, despite its huge importance to contemporary Victorian discourse. Richardson’s aim is to ‘recentre’ Smiles and others, such as the literary critic George Lillie Craik, to demonstrate their significance to ‘cultural debate about the value and limits of ambition’ (p. 2). She does this

by focusing her study of self-help narratives across genres, including the novel, the self-help book, and biography. Throughout this sophisticated analysis of aspiration and ambition as a preoccupation of much nineteenth-century fiction and non-fiction Richardson elucidates the profound valorisation of individualism in a range of texts including: Smiles's *Self-Help* (1859); Harriet Martineau's *Illustrations of Political Economy* (1832), *Autobiography* (1877) and *Life in the Sick-Room* (1844); Dinah Craik's *John Halifax, Gentleman* (1856); a wide range of William Makepeace Thackeray's publications from *Barry Lyndon* (1844) to *Vanity Fair* (1847-8); Anthony Trollope's *Autobiography* (1883) and *The Three Clerks* (1857); and Miles Franklin's *My Brilliant Career* (1901) and *My Career Goes Bung* (1946).

Existing scholarship on nineteenth-century representations of the individual tends to focus on the novel, argues Richardson. And so, this study sets out to expand recent work by Nicholas Dames, Beth Blum, and others, by bringing the novel into a larger dialogue with biography, autobiography, and self-help texts. A chapter on Trollope, for example, explores the 'competitive logic' (p. 147) that structures his fiction and the regimented work ethic he employed in order to pursue two careers, as detailed in his *Autobiography*.

Material Conditions also develops current research by the likes of Daniel Stout and Emily Steinlight on the relationship between the individual and 'the aggregate, whether the aggregate is understood to be the nation, the corporation, or the population' (p. 8). In the final chapter of the book, Richardson examines Miles Franklin's fiction and the part it played in establishing Australian white nationalism via a narrative centred upon an ambitious New Woman settler.

Another theme explored by Richardson is the ways in which ability—a presumption of many nineteenth-century texts devoted to ambition—is defined against depictions of disability. In this strand of argument Richardson builds on the work of David T. Mitchell, Sharon L. Snyder, Martha Stoddard Holmes, and Karen Bourrier to examine the sometimes-debilitating

effects of monomania, work ethic and ideals of perfectionism. In her discussion of Dinah Craik's *John Halifax, Gentleman*—'the classic novel of self-help' (Robin Gilmour, *The Idea of the Gentleman in the Victorian Novel* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1981), p. 86) although it precedes Smiles's publication by three years—Richardson demonstrates how Craik 'questions the paths for and value of ambition' (p. 93) in her representations of ability and disability.

In a short coda *Material Ambitions* makes an ambitious leap to the present: to Donald Trump's presidency of the United States, to the COVID-19 pandemic, and to the global climate crises. In doing so Richardson leaves the reader with the provocative suggestion that Victorian literature provides a 'space' (p. 207) to reconsider the ramifications of a worldview fixated on attainment of ever-increasing goals, on a planet with finite and diminishing resources.

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