

Victorian secrets

By David Futrelle

Until recently, "Victorian" was as reliable a political insult as the old standby, "Puritan." The two terms conjured up similar images: stuffy moralists in uncomfortable clothes imposing the strictures of their narrow minds upon the world, with all the usual, distasteful accouterments: stern lectures on the dangers of sexual excess and chaste Christian homilies meant to combat impure thoughts.

But in recent years—as vague talk of "values" has come close to driving out the last remnants of substance in our political discourse—a few have tried to revive the fortunes of the Victorians, to remove the stain of insult from the term. More than a decade ago, Margaret Thatcher (ahead of the pack by being far behind it), told an interviewer that she jolly well did like the old "Victorian values"—by which she meant a grab-bag of old-fashioned virtues ranging from patriotism to personal hygiene. More recently, and more typically, freelance moralist and *Book of Virtues* compiler William Bennett has argued that "the Victorians provide an admirable counter-example to our current malaise," by which he meant a rebuttal to the excesses of the '60s and beyond.

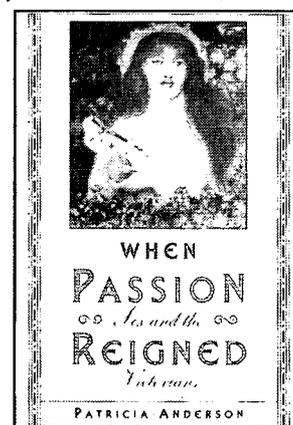
But there is one little facet of the Victorian ideal that doesn't seem to make it into anyone's book of virtues. For Victorians are known not only for their virtues but for their vices—in particular, the vice of hypocrisy. Despite their protestations of extreme morality, the Victorians seem to have been (at least behind closed doors) almost extravagantly naughty. Or at least the men were: Widely known to be patrons of prostitutes and thus the source of the lively "white slave" trade so often denounced in the broadsheets of the day, they were also collectors of pornographic photos and novels—with titles ranging from *Confessions of a Footman* to *The Lustful Turk*—heavy on flagellation, fetishism and incest. Generally, those most interested in reviving Victorianism don't talk much about the sex-obsessed "other Victorians." But in *When Passion Reigned*, historian Patricia Anderson celebrates the Victorians not in spite of, but largely because of, their legendary naughtiness. It's not that Anderson's book—a short, and somewhat glib, revisionist history of Victorian sexuality—celebrates the aggressive, eccentric perversity of the Lustful Turk and his Western colleagues. She prefers the blushing beauty of the proper Victorian lady whose eyes linger a little too long on the tight trousers of her beau, the sublimated sexuality of the bustle and the corset. Her vision of Victorianism sits somewhere between William Bennett and the Victoria's Secret catalog: She finds repression rather titillating.

Anderson much prefers the demure, euphemistic Victorians to those today who, as she puts it, "withdraw, all but disembodied, into the ether of clinical language and immoderate talk." Indeed, she seems to believe that to talk too much of sex is to rob it of meaning; it's better to leave things unspoken—or spoken of indirectly, as seen through a gauze of euphemism. "Knowing little of the graphicness of pornography and the clinic, the Victorians cultivated the nuanced words of romance and the language of gestures, blushes and telling glances," she concludes (having evidently forgotten the lively pornographic trade she described on previous pages). "Cherishing the sensual yet nurturing the intangible, they enjoyed the fullness of passion." Beyond the thesis itself, very little of Anderson's slender book comes as much of a surprise.

She spends most of her time examining popular culture for evidence of sexual undertones; as one might expect, these are not hard to find. She discovers that Victorians thought a great deal about sex; that Victorian men had a certain fetishistic love of corsets and "heaving bosoms"; that men took lustful peeks at whatever parts of the female were deliberately or inadvertently exposed; that women watched men swimming in the buff with more than purely anatomical interest.

Yet Anderson rarely stops to consider what Victorian sexuality might have meant to ordinary Victorians; she is content to project her own assumptions on the people of the age, and to assume that they shared her passionate love of euphemistic innuendo and discreet ardor, that the absence of explicit public talk about sexuality is somehow proof that real passion reigned in the privacy of the bedroom. (Anderson cites Foucault as her source for her discomfort with the modern habit of transforming "sex into talk," but the connection seems forced; she doesn't mind sex talk so long as it is flowery and private.) But very little in the history of sexuality suggests that evasiveness and euphemism is the best way to enhance sexual pleasures.

Indeed, alongside the happy few who derived titillating benefits from Victorian secrecy, there were plenty who found themselves left out of this utopia of discreet passion. Anderson at least mentions them: women who did not find fulfillment, sexual or otherwise, in marriage; repressed spinsters; men "too shy" to get themselves married. But even in examining the worms in the apple, she cannot hide her innate optimism. Those "excluded" from the happy cen-



**When Passion Reigned:
Sex and the Victorians**
By Patricia Anderson
BasicBooks
209 pp., \$23

**Banishing the Beast:
Sexuality and the
Early Feminists**
By Lucy Bland
The New Press
411 pp., \$25

ter of the Victorian “sexual world” could take a certain comfort in the era’s passion for euphemism. “[T]he Victorian sexual mystique offered what a later era’s explicitness would increasingly withhold,” she writes. “For the unhappily married, the jilted and the lonely, there was leeway for the romantic imagination. In an age of discreet sexual expression, there was no little gratification to be taken from an approving glance, a small act of kindness, or a few appreciative words from a member of the opposite sex.”

This is, I think, a remarkable statement—and not only for its assumption that the “unhappily married, the jilted and the lonely” were the only ones excluded or otherwise harmed by the rigidities of the Victorian sexual code. But why should we expect a glance, or even “a few appreciative words,” to suffice for anyone? Anderson seems to feel that it would have been inappropriate, even tacky, for those left out to have made a fuss; they simply should have made do. She does have a point: Had they really craved release, they could have always (if they were men) gone to a prostitute, or snuck to a darkened corner of the house to read about flagellation and engage in some guilt-ridden “self-abuse.”

Lucy Bland’s *Banishing the Beast* is a useful antidote to Anderson’s facile brand of romanticism. At the center of the book—an informative, if sometimes disorderly, examination of the sexual ideologies of Victorian feminists—is something called the “Men and Women’s Club,” a kind of Victorian consciousness-raising group. The group, made up of a dozen or so radical intellectuals of both sexes (the most famous of the bunch being writer Olive Schreiner), met regularly in London in the 1880s to talk, as frankly and openly as possible, about sex.

From the discussions of this group, as well as from a broader examination of the popular press and scholarly works of the day, Bland (who teaches women’s studies at the University of North London) pieces together a complex and nuanced picture of the ways in which Victorian feminists both embodied and challenged the sexual myths of their time. The myths themselves were not without their own contradictions. Most scientific and medical commentators of the day regarded woman as more or less asexual beings; as psychologist Charles Mercier put it, “the impulse towards sexual intercourse is in the great majority of women but slight.” But a few disagreed. Dr. T.L. Nichols, for example, described the healthy woman as being “full of ardour, [with] a great capacity for enjoyment ... seldom satisfied with a single sexual act.”

Feminists disagreed not only as to which was the correct view, but on the political implications of their disagreements. Some feminists argued that women’s very lack of desire gave them the right to engage in politics. “Women’s supposed lack of carnality was the cornerstone of the argument for women’s moral superiority,” Bland writes. “The idea of women as ‘moral protectors of the home,’ while ideologically contributing further to women’s domestic confinement, simultaneously gave women a sense of mission,

spiritual worth, and strong incentive to engage in philanthropic works—to morally protect others’ ... homes.”

The “others” in question were generally, as Bland makes clear, working-class women—particularly prostitutes, who became the frequent target of feminist-led purity campaigns. Of course, the prostitutes themselves often had quite different ideas about the matter, and moral reformers were constantly running across supposed victims of prostitution who “showed no inclination to leave their sinful life,” as one account put it. In the midst of an 1877 anti-prostitution campaign, representatives of the National Vigilance Association burst into a house of ill repute. “[O]ne of the girls was handed over to the rescuers of her own sex, to be entreated, reasoned, coaxed ... into giving up the life that meant her ruin,” Laura Ormiston Chant reported in the *Vigilance Record*. “She ... obstinately reiterated her wish to live the life she’d chosen ‘of my own free will.’ ”

The parallel with contemporary antipornography feminism could not be more clear. The vigilant Victorians had great faith in the power of clean thinking: Through proper education, as one 1895 birth control booklet explained, the “voice of lower passion will be overcome by the higher pleadings of justice.” It was simply a question of willing lust away, much as some antiporn activists in the men’s movement urge men to will away the desire for pornography. According to Kate Mills, a Victorian advocate of chastity for all: “[A]s you think, so you are ... let lustfulness be considered natural and it will soon become prevalent.”

Meanwhile, others among the feminists warned of the dangers of repression. In an 1897 lecture, feminist Josephine Butler cautioned against overzealous vigilance vigilantes. Moral crusades, she suggested, had a tendency to exaggerate regressive notions of female innocence and male vice—and thus undermine the feminist claim for equality. And they were, by necessity, coercive endeavors. “Beware of ‘Purity Societies’ ... ready to accept and endorse any amount of inequality in the laws, any amount of coercive and degrading treatment of their fellow creatures,” Butler warned, “in the fatuous belief that you can oblige human beings to be moral by *force*.” But even the Butlerites couldn’t always heed their own advice, at times falling back on coercive strategies to control the sexual behavior of young girls.

It was not simply an inborn sense of propriety that led Victorian women and men to adopt the genteel modesty Anderson’s book so uncritically celebrates: Bland’s book reveals the crude coercion that underlay much of what Anderson calls the Victorian era’s “sexual mystique.” One can understand Anderson’s desire to step back from the crude sexual cheerleading that conflates erotic exposure and political liberation. But it is dangerous to elevate sexual unease to a kind of virtue. Those who will not (or cannot) talk openly about sex are bound to obsess about it—and some of them, like the Purity Societies in the 19th century and the Catharine MacKinnons of today, are likely to try to impose their own obsessions on the rest of us. ◀

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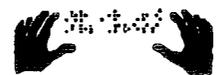
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