Introduction: Writing the Victorians

‘The history of the Victorian age will never be written. We know too much about it’, or so Lytton Strachey declared in the preface to his book *Eminent Victorians* in 1918 (p. 10). Yet since the death of Queen Victoria more than 100 years ago, the history of the Victorian era has been continuously rewritten. Indeed, Strachey’s *Eminent Victorians* was itself part of a Modernist rewriting that reflected an oedipal desire to emphasize the distance between the Victorians and the Modernists. As J. B. Bullen writes, ‘For [Strachey], and for many of [his] contemporaries, “Victorian” was a way of distinguishing [his] own attitudes from those of [his] parents’ (p. 2). Bullen recognizes that ‘Victorian’ here is a connotative, rather than merely denotative, term; what the Modernists sought to distance themselves from were the systems of ‘repression, realism, materialism, and laissez-faire capitalism’ that they felt characterized the Victorian period (p. 2). Confirming the oedipal nature of this relationship, Bullen suggests that the Modernist drive to assert difference from the Victorian generation was ‘so strident that it now seems [...] like the nursery tantrums of children rebelling against the despotic regime of their parents’ (p. 2). Although the contemporary relationship to the Victorians continues to be conceptualized in such familial terms, the Victorians, as we shall see, seem to have moved from the position of oppressive parent-figures to benign grandparents. It is not only the nature of the engagement with the Victorians that has altered over the last 100 years; both the frequency and popularity of rewritings and re-imaginings of the Victorians have increased in the second half of the twentieth, and on into the twenty-first, century. The contemporary fascination with the Victorians seems to be particularly marked within the realm of fiction, where it has spawned the genre of...
neo-Victorian fiction. While Mark Llewellyn questions whether ‘any text published after 1901 which is set in the Victorian period’ should be called a neo-Victorian text (p. 175), most critics date the genre to the 1960s, which saw the publication of Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), a post-colonial rewriting of *Jane Eyre* (1847); and John Fowles’s postmodernist experiment with the Victorians, *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969).²

Working against the desire to establish an originary narrative, Marie-Luise Kohlke, the founding editor of the online journal *Neo-Victorian Studies*, proposes that accounts of neo-Victorianism should be concerned ‘not so much to locate chronological boundary markers or points of origin as crucial nodal points in neo-Victorian output and dissemination’ (p. 3). The publication of A. S. Byatt’s *Possession: A Romance* in 1990, and the subsequent surge in neo-Victorian fictions suggests that the period between the late 1980s and the early 2000s should be understood as one such ‘crucial nodal point’ in the history of Victorian re-writings. Winning both prestigious literary prizes, such as the Man Booker Prize and the *Irish Times–Aer Lingus* International Fiction Prize, and a place on the bestsellers’ lists, *Possession* catapulted neo-Victorian fiction into the mainstream. A brief survey of recent Man Booker Prize shortlists reveals the continued critical success of the genre: Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace* (1996); Matthew Kneale’s *English Passengers* (2000); Sarah Waters’s *Fingersmith* (2002); and Julian Barnes’s *Arthur & George* (2005). Of the six books which made it to the shortlist for the 2009 Man Booker Prize, five are historical fictions: two of which are set in the Victorian or Edwardian period (A. S. Byatt’s *The Children’s Book*, 2009 and Adam Fould’s *The Quickening Maze*, 2009), with a third, set in the 1940s, written by Sarah Waters who, Dennis suggests, is ‘arguably the best-known and most widely read of the various contemporary purveyors of literary neo-Victorianism’ (p. 41).³ The Hollywood film adaptation of *Possession* in 2002 both confirmed and extended the popular appeal of Byatt’s novel, and neo-Victorian fiction more generally. While television and film adaptations of Victorian fiction continue to be popular, there is an increasing market for adaptations of neo-Victorian fictions. For instance, all three of Sarah Waters’s neo-Victorian novels have been adapted for television: *Tipping the Velvet* (BBC, 2002), *Fingersmith* (BBC, 2005), and *Affinity* (ITV, 2008).

In her essay ‘Introduction: Speculations in and on the Neo-Victorian Encounter,’ Kohlke concludes that ‘[m]uch as we read Victorian texts as highly revealing cultural products of their age, neo-Victorian texts will one day be read for the insights they afford into twentieth- and