Victoria’s Victorians, or how contemporariness strikes
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The year 2019 represents a veritable traffic jam of bicentenaries. Not only are we commemorating the birth of Queen Victoria and her consort Prince Albert, but a range of notabilities, from George Eliot and John Ruskin to Charles Kingsley and Joseph Bazalgette.[[1]](#footnote-1) While we’re used to the upsurge of commemoration, republication and renewed scholarly, institutional, and commercial capital that goes into such anniversaries, we might pause to ponder their meaning *in relation to each other.* Would Queen Victoria have been surprised to find herself lining up in the bicentennial queue with the sewer king Bazalgette, the Chartist Ernest Jones, or the scandalous Mary Ann Cross, née Evans? This paper grapples with some of the ways in which members of a Victorian birth cohort – and for the sake of argument let us say *the* Victorian birth cohort, that of Victoria herself – would have had opportunities to recognize themselves as such: to have a consciousness of contemporaneity. Did biological congruence – the coincidence of inhabiting the same historical moment at roughly the same age – ever crystallize itself as a sense of shared identity, and in what circumstances? Was Victorian contemporaneity an intimate relationship or a distant one, or not a relationship at all? What would ‘my generation’ or ‘my contemporaries’ have meant, if anything?

Martin Hewitt has argued, in his British Association for Victorian Studies keynote lecture of 2015, that ‘there was nothing in Victorian self-conceptions to match the readiness with which they themselves interpreted the contemporary history of the European continent in broad generational patterns.’[[2]](#footnote-2) This absence is a world away from the current situation in which generations are routinely pitted against each other, scapegoated, caricatured, embraced and actively disavowed. This array of socio-cultural reflexes is made possible by the proliferation of technologies of contemporaneity: high school year books, alumnae databases, the algorithms patrolling our medical records and consumption habits, our insurance needs and pensions. In the nineteenth century, by contrast, the legal and bureaucratic infrastructure of age identity was relatively sketchy and uneven. The commonplace variety of contemporariness now widely enforced in Britain by compulsory elementary and secondary education, and often perpetuated by further and higher education, would, in the nineteenth century, have been strongest among a few elite, and mainly all male, schools and colleges and the informal networks they sustained –creating, as Hewitt puts it in his essay in this Roundtable, ‘powerful but intimate affinities […] not obviously generalizable beyond those involved.’ Even if we include, as Hewitt and Helen Rogers do, the unevenly-distributed provision of schooling for working-class girls and boys, and the burgeoning networks of young men’s associations, and mechanics institutes, with their ‘centripetal effect’ on men of a similar age, the place in such clusters of age-peers of women and of many working-class men was at best relatively tenuous.

As the essays by Simon Rennie on Ernest Jones (in Roundtable I, *JVC* 24 3) and by Helen Rogers’ on working-class lives (in Roundtable II below) suggest, other temporalities, and other ways of gauging the significance of one’s age, lingered among the cohort born in 1819. We might take the example of Victoria’s contemporary James Hopkinson, cabinet maker. Born in 1819, Hopkinson defines himself in his autobiography primarily through his trade, his Christian faith and (unusually for the time) his experiences of courtship and marriage. His recollections of age identity mainly concern his progress through the successive rites of apprenticeship: a temporality in which marital status, homosocial hierarchies, and the achievement of moral and financial independence are all implicated.

‘At length the day arrived when I was bound apprentice. I remember amongst other things I was to abstain from Matrimony until I was 21[…].

[…] But being the youngest [apprentice] I had to make the fires and sweep the shop &c which continued for about 8 months when a younger one came at which I was very glad. I was nearly 17 at this time and often caught myself looking at the girls.

[…] As my 21st Birthday drew nearer the lads and men in the shop were very fond of talking about the grand supper I should have to give them as soon as I *became a full blown man*.’[[3]](#footnote-3)

Hopkinson’s sense of embeddedness in a generation thus revolves around his conditions of work, and their implications for his status in the family, the firm and hence the community. This sense of location extends to his representation of historical events: his ‘public’ memories are mainly of riots, Chartist demonstrations and the Preston lock-out, all of which matter to him more acutely for their impact on the conditions of trade rather than for their political meanings. The rivalrous contemporariness of apprenticeship is something to grow out of, into the stable (and implicitly timeless) self-determination of the ‘full blown man.’ His place in Victoria’s generation could scarcely matter less to him: his awareness of it transpires only in proverbial (and generationally skewed) fashion: ‘About that time my young lady and myself decided to have a week holiday […].We were *both very happy* and would not have thanked Queen Victoria to have been our aunt.’[[4]](#footnote-4)

Many working people did not even know their own age or birthdates, while, as Mark Curthoys of the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* has pointed out, women feature disproportionately in the category of worthies ‘born 1819’ for whom a definite date, or even year, of birth is uncertain.[[5]](#footnote-5) Even when individuals were aware of their own ages, other metrics of seniority – place within the family, number of years of apprenticeship served (as in Hopkinson’s case), length of time since conversion or baptism or migration – may have trumped chronological age as a salient identity.

Neither family name nor birthdate survive for navvy ‘Bill’ of the ‘as told to’ narrative *Autobiography of a Working Man,* though he – and his reader – are invited to estimate his age from a combination of working-life and regnal dates: ‘Now, I’ve been working all about the country, ever since the year before the Queen was crownded’.[[6]](#footnote-6) Viewed from this perspective, Victoria’s own generation was perhaps the last to elude the widespread operation of the state apparatus of age identity: the year of her accession was also that in which civil registration of births, marriages and deaths of individuals was instituted in England and Wales (1855 in Scotland, 1864 in Ireland), though it was not until 1874 that the registration of births became compulsory. To put it another way, by the time the 1819 cohort reached adulthood, age was only latterly and gradually becoming a pervasive and serviceable index of one’s relationship to historical time and cultural change. Those born in 1819, one might say, came of age with ‘age’. Between the beginning and end of Victoria’s life, I suggest, there was a gradual embedding of age- and generational- identification into the micropractices and cultural lexicons of her subjects. What enabled ‘Victoria’s Victorians’ to recognize their co-evals, their contemporaries, or a generation? I’d like very tentatively to sketch some of the mechanisms by which contemporariness may have become at least faintly legible: developments in print and manuscript, and the emergence of celebrity culture.

The mid-century, when our cohort was in its thirties, sees the earliest citation in the *Oxford English Dictionary* for phrases such as ‘birthday treat’ (1851), ‘birthday party’(1852) and ‘birthday book’ (1859); it was also the moment when William Powell Frith, one of our 1819 subjects, painted and exhibited his luxuriant celebration of a family birthday tea ‘Many Happy Returns of the Day’ (1856). Frith at this time was inventing himself as a painter of ‘modern life’, and it seems likely that inside securely prosperous circles, elaborate birthday rituals, though newfangled, were becoming more commonplace.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The fashion for anniversaries and jubilees – which reached a crescendo toward the end of the nineteenth century – may itself have provided a focus around which ideas of age and contemporaneity coalesced. Over Victoria’s lifetime, national and civic festivals – indexed to official calendars of various kinds – had gradually and unevenly superseded seasonal and religious cycles of observance, superimposing new modes of time-keeping over older calendars and chronologies. One site in which such dissonant temporalities could be observed was in the waning influence of the traditional almanacs and the emergence of new almanacs of serviceable facts. Where the older form – a body of work monopolized by the Stationer’s Company, which therefore had little incentive to modernize – instructed (implicitly) rural readers and merchants in vital details of tides and fairs and agricultural seasons, as well as perpetuating the more dubious claims of what William St Clair calls the ‘tolerated illegitimate supernatural,’ the new format, wrenched from the control of the Stationers, appealed to a more enlightened, and implicitly a more urban, populace.[[8]](#footnote-8) Though the time-honoured prognostications of Old Moore’s Almanack and its fellows never disappeared, the big hitters in the publishing world – Cassell, Knight, Chambers – disseminated compendia of ‘useful’ knowledge for the modern citizen. Out, gradually, went the picturesque prophecies and horologies, in came facts and tables of significant dates as well as calendars of recent events.

Tables of regnal dates survived the transition from traditional to modern, so that the life of Victoria played a small but consistent role in both old and new formats.[[9]](#footnote-9) Even before her accession, Princess Alexandrina Victoria’s birthday was noted in both *Old Moore’s* and in early editions of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge’s long-running *British Almanac*, as she quietly ascended the line of succession to the Crown. After her accession, her birthday cropped up in a number of sections of the *British*, from the ‘Miscellaneous Register of the Royal Family’ to the public holiday enjoyed by the Custom-House, Excise, Stamps and Taxes Offices, to civic celebrations launching ‘Public Improvements’.[[10]](#footnote-10)

As the category of ‘useful knowledge’ proliferated to include entertaining as well as strictly instrumental modes of knowing, contemporary anniversaries took their place alongside other forms of cultural literacy. Devotees of Robert Chambers’ two volume almanac of ‘popular antiquities,’ the *Book of Days,* were encouraged to imbibe a daily dose of general knowledge as they might a daily chapter of the Bible. Doing so, they would have encountered a range of worthies, dead and alive, who shared their day, and sometimes also their year, of birth. On 24 May readers born in 1819 would have marked – alongside folksy anecdotes about a quack oculist, and superstitions about animals – the death of Pope Gregory VII on that day in 1085, but also the birthdays of their close contemporaries the Queen (b. 1819), the comic writer Albert Smith (1816) and the artist John Henry Foley (1818).[[11]](#footnote-11) Knowledge of Victoria’s age and date of birth thus took its place in the vast daily diet of cultural literacy Chambers offered his middling-class readers, inviting them to measure their own age-identity against hers, and to situate both against a sweeping – if rather miscellaneous – backdrop of contemporary history, folklore and antiquity.

The national commemoration of royal births and regnal dates was not, of course, invented in the nineteenth-century, but Victoria’s life-narrative – including her age and ageing – was, I suggest, more densely implicated in the rituals and routines of cultural life than her predecessors’. If this sketch affords a tendentious impression of age-consciousness, it is worth remembering that the modernization and dissemination of almanacs and of ‘useful’ information were at the forefront of the nineteenth-century campaign not just to liberalize the book market but to democratize knowledge. Cognizance of when Victoria was born was part of a citizen’s cultural capital: part of that knowledge coming to be understood as ‘general’. From 1860 the distribution of Birthday Honours reinforced the visibility of Victoria’s annual cycle, while the institution of the monarch’s birthday – actual or official – as a public holiday harnessed colonial to metropolitan practice in Canada (where Victoria Day is still celebrated) and some other parts of the Empire.

The noting of public anniversaries such as the Queen’s birthday, I would argue, chimed with other technologies of self-improvement and regimes of daily self-accounting. As it happens, the production in the late eighteenth century of printed diaries was in part driven by publishers’ attempts to intervene in the almanac market by interleaving existing memoranda with blank pages for personal notes: useful knowledge and routines of self-inscription thus developed in tandem.[[12]](#footnote-12) By the nineteenth century, printed diaries were themselves a staple of the book trade, and diary-keeping was commonplace wherever literacy and a modicum of leisure coincided. The hybridization of general knowledge with personal accounting persisted, however, in such volumes as *Letts’s Pocket Diary and Personal Almanac for 1862.* As Rebecca Steinitz notes, the proliferation of such products saw the almanac transformed into a text ‘organized around the concept of organization’, and the diary itself emerging as a way of navigating, and harnessing, competing temporalities: yearliness as well as dailiness.[[13]](#footnote-13) Victoria’s contemporaries and successors would make use of a wide range of self-accounting practices, interweaving private events and personal understandings of age identity, with the public festivities and civic commemorations celebrated in print.

Of course diarists had been recording their own birthdays and those of their monarchs since at least Pepys. What becomes more commonplace, I would hazard, is the familiar integration of regnal events with personal self-narration, and the triangulation of age with historical moment via the apparently arbitrary juxtapositions of the diary as a hybrid form. One of the most famous journal entries of the nineteenth century illustrates the point. Anne and Emily Brontë’s co-written ‘diary-paper’ of 1837 begins with an account of the whereabouts of all the household members, before slipping, mid-sentence into the sisters’ imaginary worlds of Gondal and Gaaldine, and hence to Victoria’s succession:

Tabby in the kitchin–the Emprerors and Empresses of Gondal and Gaaldine preparing to depart from Gaaldine to Gondal to prepare for the coronation which will be on the 12th of July Queen Victiora [sic]ascended the throne this month. […A]ll tight and right in which condition it is hoped we shall all be on this day 4 years at which time Charlotte will be 25 and 2 months -- Branwell just 24 it being his birthday–myself 22 and 10 months and a peice Anne 21 and nearly a half I wonder where we shall be and how we shall be and what kind of a day it will be the let us hope for the best[.][[14]](#footnote-14)

The text’s firm anchor in the here and now (‘all tight and right’) enables it to function as a repository for hopes and fantasies for the future: a future parsed mainly in unknowns (‘where we shall be and how…’) but also in the reassuring precision of exact ages. The royal succession, situated grammatically between the fictional world of Gondal and the mundane world of the parsonage offers a glimpse of an intermediate space – a kind of imagined community – and an intermediate temporality linking the ‘now’ of personal time and actuality of historical time.

Though neither were born in 1819, both Anne and Emily were born within a year of Victoria: a coincidence which surely helps to account for their sharpened sense of equivalence here. Another choice instance of the convergence of my themes – age-identity, contemporaneity, useful knowledge and self-accounting – is afforded by Quaker diarist Caroline Fox. Born on May 24 1819, Fox was an exact contemporary of the Queen, and due to her influential family’s prominence in scientific and philanthropic networks, was close enough to court circles to record personal impressions of both Victoria and Albert and to punctuate her diaries with (second-hand) royal sayings and doings. The accounts she receives through hearsay of Victoria’s education, her virtues and her sense of duty offer Fox an implicit gauge against which to calibrate her own maturation, qualities and achievements. Key red-letter episodes (such the young Princess’s 1829 realization of her proximity to the throne, the coronation festivities of 1838, the assassination attempt of 1842) that would soon congeal into the familiar narrative of Victoria’s destiny, come to Fox in her ring-side seat of courtly gossip and are duly recorded in her diaries and letters alongside her own social encounters and spiritual reflections. Witness an entry for 1840:

Feb. 10. – The Queen’s wedding day. Neck ribands arrived, with Victoria and Albert and loves and doves daintily woven in. Falmouth very gay with flags. Mr Sterling called – a very agreeable man, with a most Lamb-liking for town life.[[15]](#footnote-15)

The neck ribands surely represent a particularly unquakerish adornment for the daughter of a Quaker minister (her mother), and especially for the second cousin of Elizabeth Fry, who – it is recorded in the journals – made a point of explaining to Prince Albert why she would not rise for a toast even to the Queen.[[16]](#footnote-16) But this entry also records Fox’s meeting with the (married) John Sterling, who by most accounts was the great love of her life. The entry inscribes a red-letter day on two counts. On the Queen’s wedding day, Victoria’s exact contemporary meets the amiable John Sterling. Loves and doves are in the air. When, I am tempted to ask, is a coincidence not a coincidence? Perhaps when it is overdetermined by the alignment of biological age, cultural expectation and the self-consciousness of diary-writing. Maybe a sense of contemporariness can feed on such tentative alignments.

It is worth considering, then, whether the ubiquity of representations of Victoria, and as the century progressed increasingly of her life – especially at moments of special celebration and national self-congratulation such as the Golden Jubilee of 1887, or the Diamond of 1897, may have disseminated cohort-consciousness among citizens roughly coeval to the Queen. Although nine years younger than Victoria, in her Life writings one can see the biographer Margaret Oliphant co-ordinating aspects of the Queen’s life with her own, and vice versa – their widowhood, their responsibility for fatherless children, their loneliness, their struggles with responsibility. As the *grande dame* of *Blackwood’s Magazine* she was for decades called upon to mark key events in the Royal chronicle, either as reviewer or as poet. Her very last work was a ‘rant’ in verse to celebrate the Diamond Jubilee, and her death in 1897 (her biographer claimed) was timed so as to fulfil a desire to ‘live over the great day [of the 22nd June].’[[17]](#footnote-17) Oliphant punctuated the Royal story with her reviews, eulogies and commemorative biographies; in turn her own life was increasingly marked by her sense of identification with ‘the Lady enshrined with duty and love,/Pacing forth on her way/ In weakness of age […]’[[18]](#footnote-18) Social observer Arthur Munby, also nine years younger than his sovereign, was an assiduous diarist and reader of diaries: as Steinitz notes, his journals find him commenting twice in 1868 on Victoria’s recently published *Leaves from a Journal of our Life in the Highlands* and purchasing Fox’s *Memories* in 1884.[[19]](#footnote-19) Writing and reading diaries afforded a way of locating oneself generationally.

 Virginia Woolf’s meditation on generation, quoted in the Introduction to Roundtable 1 (*JVC* 24 3), was entitled ‘How it strikes a contemporary’, a phrase borrowed – possibly by her editor at the *TLS* – from Robert Browning’s poem of the same name first published in *Men and Women* in 1855. My readings of the autobiography of James Hopkinson, the diary of Caroline Fox, and of the Brontë birthday paper in the context of the age-culture of Victoria’s Victorians, suggest that the subjective experience of contemporaneity would have been much looser, and more tentative, in Browning’s time than in Woolf’s, particularly outside the male elites. That Browning could gesture to the ‘contemporary’ as a significant identity, however, heralds the coalescence of a meaningful relationship and a significant vantage point. The other contributors to this Roundtable make persuasive cases for the value of attending to cohorts of contemporaries and perceptions of contemporariness. Adding age, aging and generational identity to our understanding of nineteenth-century subjectivities, collectivities and movements is an important step, though one, I suggest, to be taken with caution. Becoming attuned to the ways in which subjects located themselves in time in relation to familiar co-ordinates such as national anniversaries, used diaries as technologies of age identity, or measured themselves and their peers against the milestones of working life: such strategies offer a way forward.

1. In some circles, 2019 is already known as ‘the year without a Brontë’ – the hiatus between Charlotte, Branwell and Emily, and Anne in 2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Martin Hewitt, ‘BAVS 2015 Keynote: Victorian Generations,’ Youtube, November 5, 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=FmEXJP1ruK4 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. James Hopkinson, *Victorian Cabinet Maker: The Memoirs of James Hopkinson 1819-1894,* ed. by Jocelyne Baty Goodman (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968), p. 21, 30, 57 (emphasis in original). See also p. 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Hopkinson pp. 83-4. Michael Hargreave Mawson reminds me, via VICTORIA listserv, of the analogy with the phrase ‘Bob’s [Lord Salisbury’s] your uncle’. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Email correspondence with the Roundtable editors, 4 January 2019. The list of uncertain birthdates includes relatively famous figures such as feminist campaigner Emilie Venturi, née Ashurst. Of course there may have been some conscious mystification in records of women’s ages. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. [Anon], *The Autobiography of a Working Man* ed. by Eleanor Eden (London: Bentley, 1862), p. 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Christopher Tolley notes that early nineteenth-century Evangelicals commemorated birthdays as periods of ‘stocktaking and self-analysis’, and were shocked to hear of friends doing otherwise. *Domestic Biography: The Legacy of Evangelicalism in Four Nineteenth-Century Families* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), pp. 58-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. William St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 59, 553.) See also Robin Myers, ‘The Stationers’ Company and the Almanack Trade’ in *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, Vol 5, ed. by Michael F. Suarez and Michael L. Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 723–35 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See for example Francis Moore et al., V*ox Stellarum, or an Almanack for the year 1835* (London: T. Carnan, 1835), p. 29 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *The British Almanac* (London: Stationer’s Company, for the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, 1839), pp. 243. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *The Book of Days : A Miscellany of Popular Antiquities,* ed. by Robert Chambers, 2 vols, (London and Edinburgh: W. and R. Chambers, 1869) I 676. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Myers, Robin. 2009. “The Stationers’ Company and the Almanack Trade,” in *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain, ed. by Michael F. Suarez, SJ and Michael L. Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), v, pp. 723–35, p. 733. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Rebecca Steinitz, *Time, Space and Gender in the Nineteenth-Century British Diary* (New York: Palgrave, 2011), p. 63; on yearliness see p. 25 and Anne and Emily Brontë’s ‘quasi-quadrennial diary papers’ (p. 161). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Transcription as in *Tales of Glass Town, Angria, and Gondal: Selected Early Writings,* ed. by Christine Alexander (Oxford: OUP, 2010), p.487. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Horace Pym ed., *Memories of Old Friends, being Extracts from the Journals and Letters of Caroline Fox* (Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1882) 108 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. 151. On Quakers’ objections to drinking and to toasts see Thomas Clarkson, *A Portraiture of Quakerism* 3 vols (New York: S. Stansbury, 1806), 1, pp. 355-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *Autobiography and Letters of Mrs Margaret Oliphant,* ed. byMrs Harry Coghill, introd. Q. D. Leavis (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1974), pp. 435-7, 439. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Oliphant, 436. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Steinitz, p. 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)