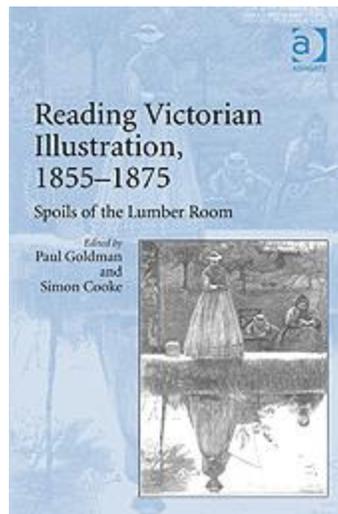ISSUE 11.2 (SUMMER 2015)

Special Issue:

Illustration and Gender: Drawing the Nineteenth Century

Guest Edited by Kate Holterhoff and Nicole Lobdell

Not Just a Pretty Picture

Reading Victorian Illustration, 1855-1875: Spoils of the Lumber Room. Edited by Paul Goldman and Simon Cooke. Farnham, Surrey and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012. 224 pp.

Reviewed by Ellen Bell

<1>The illustrator Raymond Briggs recalled an interview he'd had, aged fifteen, at the Wimbledon School of Art. The principal asked why he wanted to come to his school. To draw, Briggs replied, so that I can become a cartoonist. "He went purple in the face," recounts Briggs, and shouted, "you WHAT? My GOD, boy, is that ALL you want to do?"(1) This somewhat lowly view of cartooning, illustration, or commercial art has always, it seems, dogged the profession.*Reading Victorian Illustration, 1855-1875: Spoils of the Lumber Room,* edited by Paul Goldman and Simon Cooke, with its focus upon what they refer to as the "golden age" (7) of illustration, delivers a sustained and convincing argument for a long overdue elevation of its status.

<2>Pronouncing this collection of essays as "unashamedly ambitious" (3), Goldman and Cooke begin their introduction with the promise that they will interrogate "a series of complicated issues" (3). Three distinct questions are then posed: why has Sixties, that is, the period from 1855 to the mid-1870s,

illustration survived as a topic worthy of study, how should it be interpreted and how does the present approach build upon previous understandings? In one essay, "Spoils of the Lumber-Room: Early Collectors of Wood-Engraved Illustrations from 1860s Periodicals," Robert Meyrick appears to question exactly what it is that has survived of Sixties illustration; he describes the "appropriating (of) the images" (179), severed from the texts to which they belonged, their context and meaning lost, (what Goldman refers to as a "mutilation" [19]). In his essay, "Defining Illustration Studies: Towards a New Academic Discipline," Goldman puts forward an impassioned plea for a full overhauling of how academia responds to illustration history, arguing for a "convention of describing or notating illustrations," the production of "national histories" (21) and indeed a Masters course dedicated to the subject. Over twenty-five years ago in *The Telling Line* (1989), the book designer Douglas Martin was calling for the self-same thing for contemporary illustrators, "a study of individual artists and their work….to map out and define the outlines of this fascinating practice."(2) The reason why this has not yet happened appears to be a consequence of the perpetual ambiguity surrounding not only the status of illustration but its definition.

<3>Quoting Forrest Reid, an early twentieth-century critic of British illustration, who claimed that "illustration has come to be regarded as a dubious mixture of art and something that is not art" (13), Goldman argues that illustration is presently in a hinterland, awaiting a better understanding of what it actually is. So what is it? And what, more specifically, is Sixties illustration? Goldman writes about it in terms of "a confrontation" that "takes on" (28) the text and something that the Sixties illustrators, particularly the Pre-Raphaelites such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Everett Millais, and Ford Madox Brown, saw as "central to their art, which was essentially a literary one" (28). Thus, all of the essays in *Reading Victorian Illustration* are concerned with not only the way in which Sixties illustrations "visualize and interpret" (5) the written word but also, as the title suggests, the effect that they have on the specifically middle-class Victorians' "process of reading" (6).

<4>Our perception of an innocuous pretty image, generally associated with mainstream Victorian illustration (and now to be found endlessly regurgitated as comic fare by the greeting card industry) is continually challenged by the contributors. Simon Cooke, in "A Bitter After-Taste: The Illustrated Gift Book of the1860s," gives a fascinating account of how the artists, writers, and publishers used a veneer of sweetness to communicate something much darker to the buying public. Here image was often at odds with verse or text, creating what Cooke describes as a "curious complexity" (55). Elaborate and expensively bound books, such as *Wayside Posies*(1867) and *Home Thoughts and Home Scenes* (1865), were subverted by the contributors offering "coded messages" (76) about the mores, and indeed the domestic lives, of its subscribers. Childhood images, such as Arthur Boyd Houghton's "Snapdragon" (1865) (71) were particularly hard-hitting, presenting what Cooke describes as a "vertiginous emotional space" (69). In "Reading the Pictures, Visualizing the Text: Illustrations in Dickens from Pickwick to the Household Edition, 1836 to 1870, Phiz to Fred Barnard," an absorbing insight into Charles Dickens's approach to the production of his novels, Philip V. Allingham makes a similar claim for the Sixties illustrators of his work. Far more "rigorously realistic" than his predecessors, John Leech's stunning illustration for *A Christmas Carol* (1843*)* reflects back the disgraces of Victorian society to those living in it, challenging, as Allingham writes, "the complacent, bourgeois buyer of the book to acknowledge his

common humanity with these indigents" (170), an approach that the illustrator Gustave Doré also adopted in *London: A Pilgrimage* (1872).

<5>Rigorous realism is the particular focus of three of the other chapters. In "Science and Art: Vestiges of Corpses in Pre-Raphaelite Illustrations," Lorraine Janzen Kooistra reveals the extremes artists such as Ford Madox Brown and Frederick Sandys would go to, such as purloining cadavers from surgeons, to inform their drawings. She beautifully deconstructs Sandy's exquisite image for Christina Rossetti's *Amor Mundi* (1865), showing how, at a time of burgeoning scientific knowledge, the Pre-Raphaelite illustrators worked to "train" readers to see their images "as a technology of truth" (111). Laura McCulloch, in "Fleshing Out Time: Ford Madox Brown and the *Dalziel's Bible Gallery*," tracks Brown's continuing obsession for accuracy, though this time for historical truth. McCulloch is fascinated with how artists such as Brown sought out the real, tirelessly researching for "accurate" representations of "costume, furniture and physical likenesses" from the past (116). "Changes in historiography coupled with advances in printing technology led to history becoming more visual" (135) argues McCulloch, feeding a craving for a more visual, more accessible depiction of the past that artists such as Brown imbued with a "historical integrity" (135). The realism of John Everett Millais' illustrations for Harriet Martineau's *Historiettes* (1862-63) is less about accuracy and more about depicting the authentic inner life of a character. In their essay "Making History: Text and Image in Harriet Martineau's Historiettes," Mary Elizabeth Leighton and Lisa Sturridge present Millais' depiction of history as a "small canvas" (138) where meanings are in fact, as Julia Thomas explains, "generated"(3) through the images (142). As with the reading public's reception of Dickens's work, Leighton and Sturridge attest that "illustration played a major role" (139) in how Victorian serial fiction was received by its readers. Here illustration is active rather than passive, situating the characters and lending detail and subtleties that the text alone cannot. They write about how the Victorian reader was "implicated" in a "require(d)" (158) act of historical interpretation, deeming it, at the time, a "moral urgency" (158). What is particularly significant is the way in which Leighton and Sturridge reveal Martineau's texts and Millais's illustrations as portraying women as active "agents of history" (150) presenting them at the, albeit domestic, "symbolic thresholds" of political events (151). "*No one is outside history*" (158) argue Leighton and Sturridge, and women, generally regarded as belonging to the "private sphere," are depicted by both writer and artist as "actors on the public stage while they nevertheless embrace their personal obligations as mothers, daughters, sisters and fiancées" (158).

<6>The domestic scale that Millais sought to create is emulated in the illustrated deathbed scenes that Julia Thomas examines in "Happy Endings: Death and Domesticity in Victorian Illustration." The development of a rich iconography of death that Kooistra writes of is hardly surprising when in 1851 there was an average life expectancy of forty years and three out of ten babies died before their first birthday.(4) It had to be endured, and as Thomas argues, images of deathbed scenes acted as both guide and comforter. Deathbed practice and illustration, writes Thomas, became virtually indivisible from each other. The consumers of the images were being shown how to behave and how the darkness and chaos of death could be managed.

<7>The title of William Vaughan's essay, "Facsimile Versus White Line: An Anglo-German Disparity," taken from a quotation by William James Linton -- "Facsimile…is mechanical work… 'white line' alone is

art" (33) -- reveals its disparity from the other chapters. Though an eloquent account of the rival practices of wood cutting versus engraving and the "death" of the artisan due to the onslaught of highly industrialized metal engraving, its focus on the production of illustration, rather than its import, makes it, in this collection at least, rather an anomaly. However, Vaughan's portrayal of the craftsman engraver's distinct, yet soon to be lost role -- what William James Linton's biographer F. B. Smith describes as "collaborator/translator to the artist"([5]) (51) -- is an important one, particularly in light of its resurgence in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, with such notable collaborations as David Hockney and Piet Clement on *Six Fairy Tales from The Brothers Grimm* (1970) and Paula Rego and the Curwen Studio for *Jane Eyre* (2001).

<8>In his essay "Spoils of the Lumber-Room," Meyrick gives an account of the fifteen-year-old Forrest Reid extracting wood-engravings from a collection of old periodicals, describing his mixture of guilt and pleasure at doing so. It is hard to know how Meyrick himself feels about such cutting-out. He quotes Walter Sickert as saying that illustrations are "nothing without letterpress" (193) while also stating that their removal from their original context not only increased their worth but raised them up to "something approaching the sacred" (197). *Reading Victorian Illustration* is an erudite, yet accessible, exploration not only of what Sixties illustration was but a heartfelt appeal that it should now be revisited.

Endnotes

(1)John Walsh, "Drawn Together," *The Independent Magazine* (7 February 2015) 22.([^])

(2)Douglas Martin, *The Telling Line: Essays on Fifteen Contemporary Book Illustrators* (London: Julia MacRae Books, 1989) 30.([^])

(3)Julia Thomas, *Pictorial Victorians: The Inscription of Values in Word and Image* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004) 15.([^])

(4)http://www.census-helper.co.uk/victorian-life/ Accessed 17 February 2015.([^])

(5)F. B. Smith, *Thirty Pictures of Deceased British Artists* (Art Union, 1865) 6.([^])