

## CDA-6-Victoria

### Queen Victoria's Library: The Place of Reading and Writing in Victoria's Political Education, Self-Improvement, and Self-Curation

How to apply and further details: <https://www.sww-ahdtp.ac.uk/prospective-students/apply/collaborative-doctoral-award-projects-2021/>

#### Supervisors

- Prof. John Plunkett (University of Exeter, [J.Plunkett@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:J.Plunkett@exeter.ac.uk))
- Prof. Kate Williams (University of Reading, [k.r.williams@reading.ac.uk](mailto:k.r.williams@reading.ac.uk))
- Dr Joanna Marschner (Historic Royal Palaces, [joannamarschner@gmail.com](mailto:joannamarschner@gmail.com))

Prof. John Plunkett has published widely on 19th-century popular print media and book history. His work includes the influential *Queen Victoria – First Media Monarch* (Oxford University Press, 2003), and well as recent chapters on the imperial politics of Victoria's funeral and commemoration. He was part of the AHRC network, *Fashioning Victoria* (2017-18). Other publications include *Popular Science, Exhibitions and Showmanship* (2014), ed. Joe Kember and Jill Sullivan, and, with Joe Kember, the forthcoming *Picture Going: Popular Shows 1820-1914* (2021).

Prof. Kate Williams is Professor of Public Engagement with History at the University of Reading. A historian and broadcaster, she is a specialist in modern history, royal and constitutional affairs. She has written a biography of Queen Victoria and 18th-century life and has presented and contributed to many historical shows on TV, including her BBC Two Young Victoria. She is also the in-house historical analyst for CNN. Her particular research emphasis is women's reading and public history and how history is presented in the public sphere.

Dr Joanna Marschner is Senior Curator at Historic Royal Palaces. She has long experience of research, exhibition making, writing and lecturing on royal and elite histories, women's history, social and political history as it relates to monarchical power structures. She co-led the AHRC research network 'Victoria's Self-fashioning: curating the royal image for dynasty, nation and empire', and is working with Prof. Margaret Homans on a critical edition of Victoria's *Leaves from the Journal of our Life in the Highlands* for OUP. Other publications include *Queen Caroline: Cultural Politics at the Early Eighteenth Century Court* (2014) and *Enlightened Princesses: Caroline, Augusta, Charlotte and the Shaping of the Modern World*. ed. with David Bindman (2017).

In addition, Professor Margaret Homans (Yale), has agreed to be a project supporter and occasional research advisor. Prof. Homans is Bird White Housum Professor of English, and Professor of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies.

#### Subject

'Queen Victoria's Library' will illuminate an unexplored aspect of the Queen's life and experience, aiming to overthrow traditional histories that cast her as a grey, disempowered pawn in the political life of Britain and its empire in the 19th century. It will research the Queen's extensive reading and her engagement with the literary world, detailing the ways this which shaped her character and her relationships, as well as her view of dynastic, national and imperial politics. At a time when the increasing number of women readers was a key part of the expansion of the book market, the project will explore both what Victoria read and the sociability of her reading practices, such as her frequent reading with Prince Albert, Ladies in Waiting, or her children. Through the partnership with Historic Royal Palaces, this CDA will be able to disseminate its research directly through the programmes of this major heritage organisation, which manages Kensington Palace.

### **Research questions**

General research questions will include:

- How does a study of Queen Victoria's library and reading change our understanding of her agency and intellectual development?
- How did her reading shape her views on women's rights, poverty, colonialism and race, dress reform, as well as dynastic and constitutional issues?
- What, when, and how did Queen Victoria read? How representative was this of women readers and what do her reading practises this tell us about 19th-century reading as a social activity?
- How can a reappraisal of Queen Victoria's agency generate more nuanced public programmes at Kensington Palace, thereby contributing to HRP's organisational development, including its ambition to decolonise the organisation's curation of national heritage.

The CDA will draw heavily on the archival material described below. Letters and diaries from other writers record their meetings with Victoria and her views on their work (for example Tennyson, Dickens). The research specialisms of the supervisory team, covering royal history and biography, 19th-century reading practices, women's writing and self-fashioning, will provide the conceptual framework.

### **Research context**

Public, media and heritage interest in Queen Victoria remains high; however, while there is a regular procession of new biographies and documentaries, these often reiterate outdated narratives and anecdotes regarding her political interests, intellectual development and literary tastes. Drawing on a wealth of new and unpublished material, this CDA will contribute to a greater understanding of Victoria's own self-fashioning, and explore her engagement and understanding of contemporary social and political issues. In so doing, it will also be an important study that will contribute to our critical understanding of 19th-century women's reading tastes and habits, as well as how these evolved over the course of her long life.

### **Main resources/collections in this area**

Within the Royal Library at Windsor Castle there are five unpublished catalogues of Queen Victoria's books. They chronicle a book collection initiated in childhood which continued to build over her long life. They are important unexplored records of a library compiled by a woman, and of a monarch. Some of the texts survive in the Royal Library, and are self-annotated to reveal the Queen's taste and views. These catalogues are given context by the many references to reading in Victoria's diary, recently digitized and made publicly accessible, and in her letters, both those published following her death, and others held within the Royal Archives. These serve to witness how these books, and other texts, supported a political education, the Queen's efforts at self-improvement and her self-curation. They reflect her encounters with contemporary writers, and her desire to keep abreast of literary fashions, as well as her evolving personal reading tastes. The diaries and letters, covering from Victoria's girlhood to old age, probably provide the fullest and longest history of reading of any 19th-century individual.

### **Skills developed by student and employability enhancement**

At HRP the student will have number of professional development opportunities, available through the joint HRP/Queen Mary University London MA in Heritage Management. Depending on their career and research objectives they will be invited to attend workshops on subjects including: Collections Management, Conservation Philosophy, Exhibition Planning, Historic Site Management. There will be placement opportunities across the organisation dependent on the student's future career goals. The student will be able to contribute to the HRP website, as well as blog posts, podcasts, and videos for HRP's social media channels. They will join a lively research community, attending and contributing to the monthly Curator Research Lunch talk series, and the public HRP Members Lunchtime Lectures.

When necessary and possible, given the present public health crisis, the student will be able to work from the HRP palace sites. They will be supported by the palaces' HR team, and the IT teams will ensure that there is the appropriate support and equipment. The student will have access to the entirety of the HRP collections, and the expertise of curatorial specialists. This will include objects not accessible to the public or non-affiliated researchers.