

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE VICTORIAN THREE-VOLUME NOVEL

Troy J. Bassett

One of the most fascinating elements about the publishing industry during the Victorian Age is the publication format “three-decker”. Despite being contested by many people and outrageously expensive, novels produced (and sold) in three volumes vitally influenced the British book market for decades. There is no shortage of articles that discuss the relevance of Britain’s commercial lending libraries for the success of this publication format. (See, for example, Nina Kroesing’s article “Mudie’s Select Library and the Three-Decker Novel – A Mutual Failure?” in *Satura* 2.) Only a few articles, however, analyse the three-volume novel itself. Troy J. Bassett’s *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Three-Volume Novel* wants to fill that gap. Published in 2020 by Palgrave Macmillan within their series “New Directions in Book History,” it is indeed the first monograph that has the “three-volume novel” at its centre. The overarching incentive for the creation of the book is summarised on the first page:

Yet, the publication format itself remains curiously underexamined. Even relatively basic questions are still unanswered, such as: how many three-volume novels were published, who wrote and published them, what were the economics of the format for both publishers and circulating libraries, why did the format last so long, and why did it end when it did? (Bassett, 1)

To be clear: most of these questions have been asked for a long time, and hypotheses

were formulated and educated guesses offered. But most articles, though offering convincing arguments, often lacked empirical data to back their claims and some conclusions might be labelled circumstantial. *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Three-Volume Novel* consequently offers a quantitative approach with manifold figures and statistics that closes some of the gaps in research, confirms several hypotheses and even contradicts some.

Troy J. Bassett is of course no newcomer to the topic. He specialised in nineteenth-century British literature during his MA and PhD studies (University of Kansas, 1996 and 2002 respectively). Since 2007 he has been teaching at Purdue University Fort Wayne, Indiana, first as an Assistant and Associate Professor, and since 2019 as a full professor. He has published widely on Victorian literature, and he was recently elected as a board member for the Research Society for Victorian Periodicals. Researchers of the Victorian Age may know Bassett, at least indirectly, because of his website “At the Circulating Library: A Database of Victorian Fiction, 1837–1901” (<http://www.victorianresearch.org/atcl>). Started in 2007, this extremely helpful database offers biographical data about Victorian authors as well as bibliographical information about novels, authors, genres, illustrations and serialisations. In fact, this database was of vital importance for his recent publication.

Bassett is clear in his Acknowledgements that he is not the first researcher

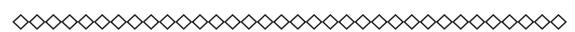
focussing on three-volume novels but is rather, quoting Isaac Newton, “standing on the shoulders of giants” (vii). Indeed, he offers a helpful contribution by recapping the previous work done on the topic in the Introduction. Important contributions (mainly in chronological order) from scholars like Simon Eliot, David Finkelstein, Guinevere Griest or John Sutherland are briefly summarised along with their main arguments as well as possible gaps and flaws. This alone is a vital read for anyone interested in this topic as it offers a succinct overview of research done on the triple-decker format. Chapter 2 is arguably the most valuable part of the whole publication. Using data that has been collected via the “At the Circulating Library” database, Bassett offers a quantitative approach to answer the most pressing (and basic) questions (backed by empirical data) regarding who wrote and published the format, and how production figures developed over the decades. One major finding is the rather surprising coordination between periodical serialisation and book publication. The chapter itself presents manifold insights, but it also functions as the foundation for the next chapters: Chapter 3 looks closely at the publishing accounts of Richard Bentley between 1865 and 1890. Bentley was the second largest producer of multi-volume novels and his business records reveal much about the financial incentives for focussing on this format. Chapter 4 offers a financial history of W. H. Smith and Son’s Subscription Library as a representative to provide the perspective of the triple-decker’s strongest ally: the circulating library. Bassett is especially interested in the correlation, and possible causality, of the demise of the triple-decker and cheap reprints. He suggests “other motivating factors at play in calling for the end of the three-volume novel” (Bassett, 14). Chapter 5 finally looks at several challengers to the multi-volume format in

the closing years of the nineteenth century. It elaborates on the upcoming genre of “New Romance” that was allegedly used “to attack the domestic realism of library fiction” (Bassett, 14). Bassett further elaborates on George Moore’s infamous feud with Charles Edward Mudie and his Select Library that ultimately led to a short-lived attempt to establish cheap one-volume fiction. Finally, the chapter sheds light on the pioneering work of publishers J. W. Arrowsmith and T. Fisher Unwin who both produced book series that proved readers were willing to buy cheap books from unknown writers.

There are a few criticisms to be made. The cover design of *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Three-Volume Novel* uses an illustration labelled “A Visit to Mudie’s” depicting a (predominantly female) crowd carrying books in front of Mudie’s Select Library. Bassett’s monograph, however, mostly avoids Britain’s biggest subscription library of the Victorian Age. When Mudie is mentioned, he is mainly compared to W. H. Smith and Son’s or addressed in his role in the case study of George Bentley’s case against Mudie’s alleged censorship. But Bassett has good reasons not to focus on Mudie’s circulating library: 1) the monograph by Guinevere Griest is still a good account of Mudie’s Select Library, albeit somewhat outdated by now, and, more importantly, 2) the fact that business records of Mudie’s library do not exist. And this is precisely the flaw of previous three-decker research that Bassett wants to rectify. However, the choice of the cover illustration is somewhat misleading and proves the adage “do not judge a book by its cover.”

A less superficial criticism is the fact that Bassett’s monograph does not offer a concluding chapter. And this is directly connected to the major point of this review:

Strictly speaking, this is not a full-fledged monograph with a specific research question and concluding arguments. Rather, it is a compilation of Bassett's fifteen-year research on the topic encompassing previously published articles and chapters (one dating back to 2004). All parts, however, have been revised to differing degrees for this publication. Even though the overarching topic for all chapters is the triple-decker publication format, one cannot ignore the somewhat eclectic quality of the overall work. Readers familiar with Bassett's work who are looking forward to new arguments and conclusions should be aware of that. This is, overall, a rather minor complaint, especially juxtaposed to the overall content that *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Three-Volume Novel* offers. Bassett is very clear about this in his Acknowledgements. (Unfortunately though, references to the specific chapters in the Acknowledgements within the book are all incorrect, most probably because the Introduction is counted as a chapter, too, something the author or editors did not take into account.) The book offers a coherent structure as it starts with empirical data offering groundwork for further arguments from the perspectives of publishers, circulating libraries and, finally, challengers of the publication format. Bringing together all discoveries of the chapters in a concluding chapter would have been a great added value for this publication. The impressive research and the results that Bassett has offered over the years are still valid and important. His writing style is excellent: precise and easy to follow. Researchers working in the field of Victorian Studies owe him a great debt for establishing his "At the Circulating Library" database. At the very least, it is very handy to have his major discoveries backed and updated by growing empirical data together in one volume.



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