

Oceans

KELLY P. BUSHNELL

IN these pages in 2015 Jesse Oak Taylor asked “Where is Victorian Ecocriticism?,” remarking that the “striking thing about Victorian ecocriticism is that there is so little of it.”¹ Victorian ecocriticism, sometimes called “green studies,” has risen to the challenge with exciting new titles such as Taylor’s own *A Sky of Our Making: London Fog from Coleridge to Woolf*.² However, Victorian ecocriticism—and literary and eco-studies at large—has only just begun to expand its reach to the sea. Steve Mentz writes that “Pining for the green solidarity of land, ecocriticism has largely failed to develop models for encountering blue oceans.”³ He calls for a “blue ecocriticism” or “blue cultural studies,” writing that “we need a poetic history of the oceans.”⁴ Victorianists are well disposed to answer this call. The turn toward transnational and hemispheric approaches to literary studies is especially well suited to a “blue” Victorian ecocriticism, as the constellations of ports and maritime shipping routes provide nodes along which so many of our narratives are conducted. In a period in which Britannia so thoroughly “rules the waves,” how does literature account for what might be lurking in those waves and for the joys and terrors of life on—or near—the sea?

Of Romantic oceans, Samuel Baker has argued that the Lake Poets “invented the idea of ‘culture’” in the early nineteenth century by “framing their picture of human life as a whole within the horizon of a common experience of the sea,”⁵ and new monographs and collections are finally accounting for their Victorian heirs. Andrew Nash has recently published on the long-neglected Victorian nautical novelist William Clark Russell; Steve Mentz and Martha Elena Rojas’s collection *The Sea and Nineteenth-Century Anglophone Literary Culture* includes an impressive range of perspectives; and Charlotte Mathieson’s edited collection *Sea Narratives: Cultural Responses to the Sea, 1600–present* reflects on the relationship between the sea and literary production.⁶ Other exciting work is forthcoming, such as Matthew Kerr’s *Boundless: The Language of the Sea in the Nineteenth-Century Novel*, which argues that the “vagueness of sea writing offers a useful paradigm for thinking about literary language itself.”⁷ “Blue” Victorian ecocriticism will also feature in Will Abberley’s forthcoming collection *Underwater Worlds: Aquatic Visions in Art and Literature*, based on the conference of the same name at the Oxford Research Centre for the Humanities (TORCH) in 2015.

A “chronotope” (to use Margaret Cohen’s formulation⁸) of the sea that is crucial to Victorian studies is the shore. For an island nation with 11,073 miles of coastline (according to the Ordnance Survey), human interaction in this interstitial space of land and sea is fraught with conflict. Amy M. King ignited my own interest in the tide pool as literary microcosm in her essay “Reorienting the Scientific Frontier: Victorian Tide Pools and Literary Realism” in 2005.⁹ Of tide pool creatures, Jonathan Smith’s *Charles Darwin and Victorian Visual Cultures* argues that Darwin’s visual observations challenged John Ruskin’s ideal aesthetics, and of particular note to the blue humanities are his considerations of “The Scientific and Cultural Life of Darwin’s Barnacles,” which engages depictions of the seaside in the mid-nineteenth century.¹⁰ Ursula Kluwick and Virginia Richter have recently edited *The Beach in Anglophone Literatures and Cultures: Reading Littoral Space*, which includes an excellent introduction theorizing this contact zone, and Brad Beaven, Karl Bell, and Robert James’s 2016 collection *Port Towns and Urban Cultures: International Histories of the Waterfront* contains multiple essays devoted to Victorian coastal industry (as opposed to the recreational or scientific seaside).¹¹

Drawing on the seminal work of Harriet Ritvo and Ann C. Colley, the “animal turn” in Victorian studies has shown that nonhuman animals abound and have considerable agency in the literature of this period. This “turn” has not, however, fully extended to the creatures of sea, though sea animals (as well as terrestrial animals thrust into maritime spaces) occupy an especially unstable narrative space. Of sea creatures, Deborah Denenholz Morse and Martin Danahay’s collection *Victorian Animal Dreams* includes Anca Vlasopoulos’s “Pacific Harvests: Whales and Albatrosses in Nineteenth-Century Markets,”¹² while Richard Maxwell has looked at Tennyson’s Kraken and Genie Babb has considered giant squid in H. G. Wells’ early work.¹³ These studies are gaining momentum, as my essay “Looking at Leviathan: The First Captive Cetaceans in Britain” is forthcoming in Maura Coughlin and Emily Gephart’s collection *Nineteenth-Century Ecocritical Visual Cultures*, and in April 2019 the University of Kent Animal Humanities Network will host a conference on “Maritime Animals: Telling Stories of Animals at Sea” at the National Maritime Museum.

In 2016, I completed the first edition of the “Maritime Literature” entry in the new online *Oxford Bibliography of Victorian Literature*.¹⁴ The bibliography contains over one hundred annotated sources and overviews and will be updated yearly to reflect new directions in the field. I

was pleased that the editors (at Oxford and now at VLC) recognize the importance of maritime literature in our period, signaling a new commitment to looking critically at the sea in this period, and I look forward to seeing this exciting new direction in our field develop.¹⁵ As the *Times* remarked of a captive whale at the Westminster Aquarium in 1878, “There is nothing so fascinating to an English crowd as a sea monster.”¹⁶ Taking that as our rallying cry toward a poetic history of the ocean, let us attend to the Victorian sea and its many monsters—those who swim and those who walk on two legs.

NOTES

1. Jesse Oak Taylor, “Where is Victorian Ecocriticism?” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 43, no. 4 (2015): 877–94, 877.
2. Jesse Oak Taylor, *A Sky of Our Making: London Fog from Coleridge to Woolf* (Charlottesville: University Virginia Press, 2016).
3. Steve Mentz, *At the Bottom of Shakespeare’s Ocean* (London: Continuum, 2009), xi. Mentz coins the term “new thalassology” for “rewriting the cultural history of the sea.”
4. Mentz, *At the Bottom*, ix.
5. Samuel Baker, *Written on the Water: British Romanticism and the Maritime Empire of Culture* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010), ix–3.
6. Andrew Nash, *William Clark Russell and the Victorian Nautical Novel: Gender, Genre, and Marketplace* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2014); Steve Mentz and Martha Elena Rojas, eds., *The Sea and Nineteenth-Century Anglophone Literary Culture* (London: Routledge, 2017); Charlotte Mathieson, ed., *Sea Narratives: Cultural Responses to the Sea, 1600–present* (London: Palgrave, 2016).
7. Kerr’s description, via his website: <http://www.southampton.ac.uk/english/about/staff/mpklgl5.page>.
8. Margaret Cohen’s *The Novel and the Sea* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010) considers maritime novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and in her earlier essay “Chronotopes of the Sea,” in *The Novel: Volume 2, Forms and Themes*, ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006) she develops six “Chronotopes of the Sea” (after Bakhtin) which categorize maritime literary sub-environments as follows: blue water (out of sight of land), brown water (rivers and estuaries), white water (rapids and waves), island, shore, or ship (647–66).

9. Amy M. King, "Reorienting the Scientific Frontier: Victorian Tide Pools and Literary Realism," *Victorian Studies* 47, no. 2 (2005): 153–63.
10. Jonathan Smith. *Charles Darwin and Victorian Visual Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
11. Ursula Kluwick and Virginia Richter, *The Beach in Anglophone Literatures and Cultures* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2015); Brad Beavan, Karl Bell, and Robert James, *Port Towns and Urban Cultures: International Histories of the Waterfront* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).
12. Deborah Denenholz Morse and Martin Danahay, *Victorian Animal Dreams: Representations of Animals in Victorian Literature and Culture* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2007).
13. Richard Maxwell, "Unnumbered Polypi," *Victorian Poetry* 47, no. 1 (2009): 7–23. I cite Maxwell in my forthcoming essay "Tennyson's 'Kraken' Under the Microscope and in the Aquarium," in Will Abberley's *Underwater Worlds: Aquatic Visions in Art and Literature*; Genie Babb, "Inventing the Bug-Eyed Monster: Devil-Fish and Giant Squid in H. G. Wells's Early Fiction," *Wellsian: The Journal of the H. G. Wells Society* 32 (2009): 17–35.
14. Kelly P. Bushnell, "Maritime Literature," *Oxford Bibliography of Victorian Literature* (2016), doi:10.1093/OBO/9780199799558–0143.
15. I am especially grateful to Editor-in-Chief Juliet John, who invited me to write the entry and provided such constructive feedback.
16. *Times*, no. 29278, June 11, 1878, 8.



Organicism

JOHN KUCICH

ORGANICISM pervades nearly every sphere of nineteenth-century literature and culture. Most obviously, it infuses representations of economic and social interdependence in Victorian novels—at local and national levels, and also globally, as when Thomas Hardy invokes “the great web of human doings . . . weaving in both hemispheres from the White Sea to Cape Horn.”¹ But Herbert Spencer also makes