

1-1-2010

Review of Valerie Gray's *Charles Knight: Educator,
Publisher, Writer*

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Valerie Gray, *Charles Knight: Educator, Publisher, Writer*. The Nineteenth Century Series. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006). 233p. ISBN: 0-7546-5219-X. £55

The historical image of Charles Knight, best remembered as the superintendent of publications for the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, has suffered as a result of his ties to this benevolent nineteenth-century organization. Various distorted and misunderstood as a cold theoretician on the one hand or a naïve idealist on the other, Knight has been unfortunately diminished by historians who have focused too narrowly on this single dimension of the man's career. In *Charles Knight: Educator, Publisher, Writer* Valerie Gray addresses this deficiency. Her accomplished study seeks both to differentiate Knight as a thinker from the SDUK and its sponsors and to demonstrate the breadth and reach of his professional interests, reform efforts, and technical innovations beyond the scope of the organization to which his fate has been securely yoked. Working extensively with archival materials, Knight's own editorials and other publications, and unpublished theses and dissertations, Gray's book fills a significant void in its multifaceted approach to this important man of letters.

As indicated by the subtitle, Gray takes stock of the many areas to which Knight contributed professionally. This is no all-encompassing biography: readers will discover little of Knight's private life, personal foibles, and quotidian routines. Rather, Gray reveals, methodically and persistently, the unfolding of Knight's public life, with each chapter devoted to one facet of his professional contributions: journalism, education and literacy, political economy, publishing, and, of course, the SDUK. Despite the topical arrangement of chapters, Gray admirably demonstrates the ways in which Knight integrated all of these pursuits, maintaining a relatively consistent mission and philosophy over time and across a range of commercial, charitable, and artistic endeavors. At the same time, she demonstrates how Knight's overall thinking continued to evolve along a fairly constant arc, independently with respect to political parties and charitable organizations.

Although, as Gray points out, the materials for a full-fledged biography of Knight do not exist, this book manages to humanize its subject. In so doing, Gray rescues Knight from persistent tendencies on the part of earlier scholars to view him either as a Dickensian caricature of misguided reformist zeal or a somewhat sinister advocate of social control masquerading as benevolence. In putting him forward as 'a prime force in a great movement.... one of the major social reformers of the nineteenth century' (p. 1), she also rebuffs those who would reduce him to a mere mouthpiece or puppet of the SDUK, a one-trick pony with a single accomplishment, whether it be *The British Almanac*, *The Penny Magazine*, *The Penny Cyclopaedia*, or *Knowledge is Power*. Instead, she reveals him to be very much his own man, and, indeed, something of a Renaissance man who valued art and literature no less than science and technology, and who promoted a great number of efforts to improve the material conditions of the working classes. Along with the lofty (and apparently, for some, dubious) aim of diffusing useful knowledge, Knight used his influence to advocate improved public health policies, tax reform, and a shorter working day for labourers. In fleshing out these and other aspects of Knight's public life, Gray also situates her subject within a broad network of writers and reformers, including Henry Brougham, Harriet Martineau, and Dickens.

Gray's appraisal of Knight is, on the whole, even-handed and judicious. Where gaps exist - as in the case of Knight's innovations in the field of illustration - she acknowledges that the topic is beyond her scope. The book draws on earlier studies of Knight's contributions to visual culture and includes a number of handsomely reproduced specimens of his illustrated texts. Yet Gray focuses chiefly on his writings and their impact, both politically and commercially, as products in the newly emerging mass market. It is unfortunate, therefore, that so little of Knight's own voice comes through in this publication. Gray effectively conveys the message and import of Knight's editorials, histories, biographies, and journalistic features but preserves little of their original flavor and occasional flair. The effect is to obscure further the personality, if not the personage, at the center of the story. Nevertheless, Gray has unquestionably

done both Knight and those who seek to understand his contribution a valuable service in retrieving him from the bleak abyss of scholarly neglect.

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