



Book Review

The British Jesus, 1850-1970 Meredith Veldman, London: Routledge 2022.

Veldman has attempted what no-one else has. She has situated 19th century British Christian Art - from one off pieces (supremely, Hunt's *The Light of the World*), through the block buster exhibitions, to the countless reproduced images that filled family bibles and hung framed on domestic walls - within the wider theological context of the Victorian quest for the 'true' Jesus. This is a first. The reviewer's conventional task, comparison with similar works, is impossible.

Professor Veldman is an historian of British culture with a gift for rendering the world of 19th century biblical theology intelligible and exciting. She tells a stunning story. Does it matter? It most certainly does! For Veldman analyses the 'Jesus' that British missionaries took to every corner of the British Empire and far beyond, the 'Jesus' that gazed down on every Sunday School child, Empire-wide. Astonishingly, its faded echo still gazes wearily from the neglected wall of many a British vestry and church hall. Fashioned according to Victorian notions of manliness, this Jesus (in all his forms) faced off his many adversaries: the presumed effeminateness of the Jesuses of Europe, foreignness *per se*, French Catholicism, and German Idealism. In this, Veldman pays careful attention to the role of the distinctively British intellectual pragmatism exemplified in Butler-Payleyism. She attends most to those who were attended to most in their day.

Veldman clarifies how exceptionally religious, informed and articulate Victorian Britain was. Literally millions visited exhibitions of religious art. Ensuing controversies were fought out in the popular press. Veldman notes it all. As she remarks, in an age of few images and little travel, the majority of British people would have been more familiar with the landscape of Palestine than with that of Britain.

Veldman's story ends in 1970, four years after John Lennon claimed that the Beatles were more famous than Jesus. In barely a century, Britain had changed from a society in which most new books were on Christianity, to one in which (arguably) Jesus mattered less than four young Liverpudlians.

This long and demanding book is pleasingly accessible. It's endnotes and exhaustive bibliography reveal the depth and diversity of Veldman's scholarship, yet the reader does not require extensive technical pre-knowledge. She supplies all that is needful. She weighs Jowett (*Essays and Reviews*) against Seeley (*Ecce Homo*), and both against The Cambridge Three (Westcott, Hort and Lightfoot) and The Northern Three (Dodd, Manson and Taylor). She weighs all the above against Continental theologians, from Strauss to Schweitzer. But what makes this book so fascinating and original is that she weighs all these against the popular imagery of the day: Millais, Schnorr, Hunt, Doré, Tissot and (later) the BBC. These artists were *major* theological influencers. They shaped the popular religious culture of a world-wide empire as (arguably) the likes of the two Threes never did. It could well be that beyond academia, it is their Jesus that yet lurks strongest in the popular subconscious. For today's theological educators, this cultural historian implicitly asks sobering questions about the modern project.

If there is a major disappointment it is that in a book crying out for glorious polychrome the reader is palmed off with monochrome reproductions. Surely, Routledge have let us, and Veldman, down badly here. But what they have given us is mightily impressive.

Michael Wilson