



Epic: Britain's Heroic Muse 1790-1910

By Herbert F. Tucker

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This book is the first to provide a connected history of epic poetry in Britain between the French Revolution and the First World War. Although epic is widely held to have been shouldered aside by the novel, if not invalidated in advance by modernity, in fact the genre was practised without interruption across the long nineteenth century by nearly every prominent Romantic and Victorian poet, and shoals of ambitious poetasters into the bargain. Poets kept the epic alive by revising its conventions to meet an overlapping series of changing realities: insurgent democracy, Napoleonic war, the rise of class consciousness and repeated reform of the franchise, challenges posed by scientific advance to religious belief and cherished notions of the human, the evolution of a postnationalist and eventually imperialist identity for Britain as the world's superpower. Each of these developments called on nineteenth-century epic to do what the genre had always done: affirm the unity of its sponsoring culture through a large utterance that both acknowledged the distinctive flowering of the modern and affirmed its rootedness in tradition. The best writers answered this call by figuring Britain's self-renewal and the genre's as versions of one another. In passing Herbert Tucker notices scores of mediocre congeners (and worse), so as to show where the challenge of a given decade fell and suggest what lay at stake. The background these lesser works provide throws into relief what the book stresses in extended discussions of several dozen major works: an unbroken history of daring experimentation in which circumspect, inventive, worried epioists engaged because the genre and the age alike demanded it.

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Editorial Review

Review

Review from previous edition: "Epic recovers a continuous, prodigious, overshadowed tradition of writing...and this recovery is stunning... Epic reveals the concurrent histories of other 19th-century genres, particularly the novel...Tucker's positively relentless blend of erudition, colloquialism, and cheek makes descriptions of even the most hackneyed epics tough to put down."

--Jonathan Farina, The Wordsworth Circle 15/04/2009

"Professor Herbert Tucker argues a coherent case in this, his own epic tome...Tucker's deft exposition is so refreshing that one cries for more."

--Robert Giddings, Tribune 30/03/2009

"Tucker's frequently punning, alliterative prose, while it requires close attention, never bogs down in forbidding jargon, and even comes ornamented with - dare one say it? - a sense of humor. Readers will find much to ponder."

--The Little Professor 28/10/2008

"Tucker's study is an immensely learned and comprehensively researched book that is a valuable source for both the average reader and the specialist"

--Torsten Caeners, Anglistik

"astonishing scholarship"

--Simon Dentish, The Journal of William Morris Studies 2009

About the Author

Herbert Tucker grew up in New England and was educated at Moses Brown School, Amherst College, and Yale University. He has served on the faculty at Northwestern University, the University of Michigan and, since 1986, the University of Virginia, where in 2003 he was named to the John C. Coleman Chair in English. At Virginia he is an associate editor for the journal *New Literary History* and a series editor of *Victorian Literature and Culture* for the University Press.

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