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Christmas Books and Victorian Book Reviewing

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Abstract

Book reviewing has a long history, and the mid-nineteenth century saw the addition of book reviews designed to support Christmas book sales. A surge in books published for Christmas entertainment and gift-giving not only affected the labor required to produce these books but also pressured book reviewers to find inventive ways to critique the piles of books that besieged them each December. With the warm feelings of Christmas came a gentler reviewing period, but books that received kindly reviews in late December could easily garner harsher criticism in the new year.

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Where would the critical edition be without its excerpts from book reviews? This ubiquitous genre of contemporary opinion guides scholarship about Victorian books, but scholars may be doing a disservice to this hard-working little genre. Book reviews introduced the Victorian reading public to new forms of print material and educated the reader on how, when, and where texts should be read. They very regularly commented on the materiality of the book under review, but their own material context is often neglected in lieu of extracted tidbits that contribute to a prescribed argument or theme. Within the broad genre of the book review falls the Christmas book review, a subgenre that evolved during the nineteenth century. With the rise of Christmastime book sales, the end of the year became the apogee of the publishing year. A study of the Christmas book review reveals the gentler reviewing period of the Christmas season as well as the ways in which Christmas consumerism motivated a seasonal market fixated on the materiality of a volume rather than on its prose or poetic content.

The book review developed to support consumer needs long before the Christmas review appeared. The evolution of British book reviews prior to the Victorian period shows this genre's long association with manipulation. Book reviews first developed in the British periodical press during the 1640s. These early, politically motivated, often pejorative pieces began the tradition of heavy dependence on summaries and included an "arrogant note of authority."¹ Eighteenth-century reviewers were high priests intent on keeping literature up to their own canonical expectations. According to P. W. Wilson, "A[n early] reviewer, like a surgeon, did not consider that he had earned his fee unless he drew blood."² The mid-eighteenth century also saw a drop in periodical ads for books, perhaps due to the growing review industry and publishers' willingness to let that organ herald their wares.³

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