

**MIDWEST VICTORIAN STUDIES ASSOCIATION**  
**“TRUTH, INVESTIGATION, & MYSTERY”**

— Seminar Descriptions —

*Participants in MVSA seminars will write 5-7 page papers that will be pre-circulated to the other participants prior to the conference. During the seminars, the seminar leader and participants will identify important points of intersection and divergence among the papers and identify future areas of inquiry and collaboration. The seminar format allows a larger number of scholars to participate in MVSA and to seek financial support from their respective institutions to attend the conference and discuss a shared area of scholarly interest. Seminars are limited to 12 participants.*

*All seminar proposals should be submitted via e-mail by **January 6, 2020.***

**The Age of Secrecy and Discovery**

*Seminar Leader: Maria K. Bachman, Department of English, Middle Tennessee State*

“Concealment had been the habit of his life.”

—George Eliot, *Middlemarch*

Granting a “secrecy prerogative” to the English monarchy, specifically Queen Victoria, historian Walter Bagehot declared “It’s mystery is its life. We must not let in daylight upon magic” (*The English Constitution*, 1867). Though there may not necessarily have been universal support for the “secret” power and influence of the Queen, secrecy was nevertheless a pervasive cultural value and practice that permeated virtually every aspect of Victorian life.

From the decades-long secret in the scientific community guarding the identity of the author of the controversial bestseller, *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, to the 1844 Post Office espionage scandal, in which it was discovered that the British Government was secretly opening and copying “suspicious” mail in the interests of national security, to the shocking secret that Dr. James Barry, the Inspector General of Hospitals, took to “his” death in 1865 (he was a woman), to the decoding of the “cipher manuscripts” and the subsequent formation of the secret Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in 1888, the concealment and exposure of secret information and activities were constitutive of Victorian culture. Indeed, in his seminal study on the sociology of secrecy, Georg Simmel posited that secrets are an intrinsic and necessary part of any society: “Secrecy is a universal sociological form, . . . a form of commerce, without which in view of our social environment, certain purposes could not be attained.” Those purposes, Simmel explained, are essentially power and control.

This seminar invites papers that explore the concealment, discovery, and exposure of myriad forms of secrets—social, political, scientific, religious, financial, legal, historical, domestic, or literary—in the Victorian age. Some of the guiding questions for seminar participants will be: how and why did secrecy function and flourish across so many cultural practices and institutions in Victorian England? What were the social conditions necessary to keep a secret and what were the social consequences of disclosing secrets? How did secrecy shape and/or regulate behavior, relationships, and interactions in the social world?

Topics may include, but are certainly not limited to: perjurers and purveyors of political secrets; archaeological excavations and uncovering the secrets of human history; the quest for the secrets of nature; sexual secrecy and intrigue; medical secrets; “official secrets” and government cover-ups; cryptologists and codebreakers; the dark secrets of empire; the demands of secrecy and secret societies; forbidden knowledge and the occult; trade secrets and industrial espionage; the mental sciences and unlocking the secrets of the mind; subterfuge and suppression in the Victorian press; literary secrecy and intellectual property; secrets in/of the domestic sphere.

Send a 300-word abstract and 1-page CV (both as MWord documents) by **January 6, 2020**, to Maria K. Bachman at [maria.bachman@mtsu.edu](mailto:maria.bachman@mtsu.edu).

### **Photography and the Archives of Truth, Counter-Memory, & Investigation**

*Seminar Leader: Jennifer Tucker, Department of History, Wesleyan University*

The physician and writer Oliver Wendell Holmes, as he prepared a glass plate for photographic development in 1864, asked “What if there were no picture there?” His question captured the expectation and wonder about photography during the nineteenth century, an era in which photographs provided a variety of new ways to view and investigate the world and the camera itself was a subject of investigation (a “mirror with a memory”).

This seminar seeks participants who are interested in exploring the complex relations of Victorian photography and society. Nineteenth-century talk about truth, mysteries, and detective investigation often made cultural references to photography, but what did it really mean in the nineteenth-century to investigate with a camera? How did Victorians’ practices and values around photographic viewing and truth-finding evolve as the uses of photography multiplied? Why, and with what consequences, did photography and Victorian life become entangled?

This seminar welcomes participants who want to explore new approaches to photography in Victorian studies as well as specialists in history and theory of photography. Seminar participants will explore new methods and approaches to the interdisciplinary study of photographs and photographic archives in Britain and the British Empire. While research about photographic depiction is of ongoing interest, material thinking in studies of photographs and photographic practices in recent years has moved the analysis of photographs beyond that of the visual alone and illuminated the cultural work required of photographs.

Possible topics for this seminar might include: how photography entered the language of science and medicine, detective fiction, art, newspapers, courtrooms, and family history, government policy, religious education, factory work, museums, and/or political movements. We want to explore the stories that are embedded in photographic albums, medical archives, and photography trade journals, and that address the after-lives of Victorian photographs in contemporary popular culture and media.

Topics that address broad questions of archives and ephemera, textual studies, working with images, temporality, intermediality, hybrid media, intersectionality, theory of photography, counter-narratives, viewing ethics *and other themes of your choice* are welcome and encouraged. The seminar will consider, among other things, how standard histories and theories of nineteenth-century society might look different if we attended more to the photographs that circulated through Victorian society and culture.

Send a 300-word abstract and 1-page CV (both as MWord documents) by **January 6, 2020**, to Jennifer Tucker at [jtucker@wesleyan.edu](mailto:jtucker@wesleyan.edu).

## Information Management and the Victorian City

*Seminar Leaders: Barbara Leckie, Department of English and Institute for the Comparative Study of Literature, Art, and Culture, Carleton University;  
Janice Schroeder, Department of English, Carleton University*

Recent years have witnessed a rise in the role that information plays in Victorian England. From Alexander Welsh's pioneering treatment of the Victorian information age in *George Eliot and Blackmail* (1985) through Lisa Gitelman's *Paper Knowledge* (2014) and Maurice S. Lee's *Overwhelmed* (2019), scholars have been interested in the Victorian period's innovations in information management as well as the ways in which they anticipate our own. This seminar focuses specifically on the production and management of information about the Victorian city. We want to explore how new information is established and managed, how "relevance" is enfolded into many information gathering projects, and how some marginal knowledges gain critical purchase in a broader field while others are excluded. The display and formatting of information suggests transparency, but often obscures the concrete processes by which information is collected, discarded, and managed.

We invite contributions that engage with the spoken and unspoken dimensions of Victorian information management about the city. What counts as information in the Victorian period? What gets obscured and what is enhanced in the gathering and display of urban information? What challenges and possibilities does the rise of cities pose for information collection and new information technologies? How is information stored and retrieved? What management systems and networks are developed to address new information economies? How do the "facts" collected in both large- and small-scale knowledge-gathering projects of the past appear in our own, ghosting the present? How do Victorian forms of information collection, negotiation, and management anticipate or resemble our own forms in a digital age? What is the role of the postal service in information management? What can we infer about the quotidian aspects of city life—walking city streets, taking cabs, writing letters, knocking on doors, talking, listening, and observing—that informed methods of information gathering but which are often invisible to us now?

Seminar papers may explore the rise of information management systems about Victorian urban centres in any genre, including, but not limited to:

- Reference works (police records, directories, surveys, tables, dictionaries, lists, maps, guidebooks, etc.)
- Blue Books and other governmental documents
- Reproduced documents (applications forms, receipts, etc.)
- Literary, historical, legal, and journalistic works

Seminar participants might also want to pursue the resonance of information in relation to inform, informer, and, especially, format, etc.

Send a 300-word abstract and 1-page CV (both as MWord documents) by **January 6, 2020**, to both Barbara Leckie at [barbaraleckie@icloud.com](mailto:barbaraleckie@icloud.com) and Janice Schroeder at [JaniceSchroeder@Cunet.Carleton.Ca](mailto:JaniceSchroeder@Cunet.Carleton.Ca).

*The Midwest Victorian Studies Association is an interdisciplinary organization welcoming scholars from all disciplines who share an interest in nineteenth-century British history, literature, and culture.*

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**For more information, please visit [www.midwestvictorian.org](http://www.midwestvictorian.org).**

