

Reinventing King Arthur: The Arthurian Legends in Victorian Culture by Inga Bryden. Aldershot, Hants, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005. x, 171 pp. ISBN 1-84014-6192-6. \$99.95; £50.00.

Beyond Arthurian Romances: The Reach of Victorian Medievalism, edited by Jennifer A. Palmgren and Lorretta M. Holloway. London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. xiv, 252 pp. + 10 b/w illus. ISBN 1-4039-6735-0. \$75.00; £50.00.

The question that must be asked of a myth, it is said, is not “what does it mean?” but rather “what is it supposed to do?” Both of these books address themselves to this second question regarding the nature and uses of Victorian medievalism, and they complement each other admirably. As her title suggests, Inga Bryden’s *Reinventing King Arthur* concentrates on the Arthurian Revival. In her Introduction, she declares:

The notion of the Victorians constructing their version of an Arthurian past, recreating it in their own image(s), in essence mythmaking, is at the heart of this work.... A decision does not have to be reached as to whether King Arthur actually existed, or whether the Victorians thought that he did, for Arthur is protean. What is significant is how various forms of knowledge about Arthur are being remodelled or reinvented.

He would become, then, not an object of mere nostalgia but the central figure in the creation of a new national identity, the “myth of Englishness,” to serve as a nexus of unity in an increasingly complex and fragmented society.

Bryden’s book is organized into seven compact chapters, the first two dealing with the dilemma historians faced in determining Arthur’s identity. Then, as now, the paucity of historical evidence about Arthur made it easier to create in his person, and in the society that formed around him, a legendary cultural hero from England’s mythic past. On the other hand, more sophisticated investigative techniques made nineteenth-century historians’ quest for a verifiably historical Arthur compelling, even at the risk of de-mythicizing him. If Arthur was indeed a historical king, he could not therefore be the Arthur of Romances. “The reinvention of Arthur through literature,” Bryden argues, “is – in the context of the Victorian Arthurian Revival’s awareness of its own historicism and ability to ‘remodel models’ – more significant than the assumed historical Arthur.” The less feasible Arthur became as an historical person, paradoxically, the more enhanced was his standing as a national icon.

In her chapter on the making of the Arthurian icon, Bryden elects to concentrate on Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s poem, *King Arthur* (1848-49), which at first seems a curious decision. For many of us, Bulwer-Lytton is synonymous with bad or at least pretentious writing, while his long verse epic bears