Since Dana Shiller coined the term ‘neo-Victorian’ in 1997 to identify a sub-genre of the historical novel that focused its attention on the nineteenth-century past, scholarly interest in this material has gathered force accelerated by the appearance of the journal Neo-Victorian Studies in 2008 and consolidated, since 2010, with an increasing number of monographs devoted to the subject. To date, these studies and articles alike have focused largely on novels by British authors and with a British setting, with a relatively minor number of essays considering neo-Victorian novels about Britain’s former colonial possessions, like India, Canada and Australia. Recently however, the critical focus of neo-Victorianism has shifted to consider the extent to which it is a transnational, global phenomenon. Notably, Elizabeth Ho’s Neo-Victorianism and the Memory of Empire (2012), reads neo-Victorianism as part of a global politics, a mode that allows creative engagement with empire ‘in locations and identities that cannot yet be called postcolonial in the interests of a postcolonial future’ (26).

And yet, there has been little analysis that probes the implications of incorporating these texts into the canon of neo-Victorian fiction. How useful is it to discuss such texts as examples of neo-Victorian fiction, rather than, say, as Australian, ‘postcolonial’ or simply ‘historical’ fiction? What might the growing field of neo-Victorian studies and the theoretical frameworks it generates have to offer discussions about literature produced by countries that were formerly part of the British Empire? Or, conversely one might ask, what do such novels have to offer the field? How might they extend and revitalise it? Did such countries have a ‘Victorian’ period that can now be reworked by neo-Victorianism? Or do such appellations re-enact, rather than simply represent, the colonising force of empire?

My current research examines a series of Australian novels that return to the nineteenth century with these questions in mind. Situating a range of novels by authors such as Peter Carey, David Malouf, Richard Flanagan, Sarah Hay, Gail Jones, Kate Grenville and others within the broader context of the neo-Victorian novel, it investigates their function as vectors of cultural memory ‘in locations and identities that cannot yet be called postcolonial in the interests of a postcolonial future’ (26).

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