

Laurel Brake

Master, Distinguished Governors, Pro-Vice-Masters, Graduates and Graduands, Guests, and Colleagues,

Today, we honour Professor Laurel Brake, renowned intellectual, fervent scholar, campaigner for a more equitable world, and one of the world's leading authorities on journalism and print media.

Given her passion for the great and the small periodicals of the nineteenth century, I decided to follow her lead and throw myself into the delightful stew of nineteenth-century serials. Many of their names are familiar to us: Household Words, a household name for Dickens' lovers; Blackwood's Magazine, a "must" for those who enjoy George Eliot; Punch, which took its name and masthead from the glove puppet of Punch and Judy and which published the first, serialized version of 1066 and All That. Or those less well known serials today: the homosocial musings in The Artist and the Yellow Book, and the preachy exhortations of The People's Magazine, published by the Society for the Propaganda of Christian Knowledge. Or even (my favourite) Judy: The Conservative Comic, which mocked W. T. Stead, one of the great men of the new investigative journalism of the Victorian period. Judy claimed that Stead relied upon the help of fellow-journalists called Jamieson, Hennessy, and Martell, the eternal companions of the hack.

These are the wondrous serials that Brake brought not only to my attention, but to an entire world of scholarship. Here at Birkbeck, we can rightly claim her as "one of us", having completed a doctorate at Birkbeck in 1971 and, after a sojourn in Wales, returned in 1988 to head the Literature in English programme in Continuing

Education. Since then, her rise has been stellar. Brake has spent most of her illustrious career at Birkbeck.

The reason we place a “crown of laurels” on the head of our Laurel Brake is simple: her research has transformed the way we think about Victorian Britain. Her books alone are foundational texts. That naughty, and brilliant, journalist W. T. Stead was the subject of one of her volumes, W. T. Stead: Newspaper Revolutionary, edited by her and Ed King, Roger Luckhurst, and James Mussell, and published in 2012. Her major works Subjugated Knowledges: Journalism, Gender and Literature, 1837-1907 and Walter Pater were both published in 1994. Print in Transition came out in 2001 and co-edited collections Nineteenth-Century Media and the Construction of Identities, Encounters in the Victorian Press, and The Lure of Illustration: Picture and Press in the Nineteenth Century also came out in quick succession. Her journal articles and book chapters – too numerous to list – have been exceptionally influential.

Brake’s energy and enthusiasm are infectious. Determined that others should read Victorian serials, she led an AHRC-funded research project entitled “Nineteenth Century Serials Editions”, a free online edition of six nineteenth-century journals. It was a project that pioneered digital research. Brake is “hands on”: she understands how HTML really works; she has struggled through the intricacies of OCR’ing. She launches formidable challenges to digital experts and software developers, spurring them into realizing her vision.

Lest I should be accused of “puffing” (a Victorian pastime, Brake tells me, in which authors would routinely and anonymously “puff” their friends’ works), allow me to also note that even the technologically savvy Brake can falter. At her inaugural lecture, upside-down slides forced us to tilt our heads to put Simeon Solomon (the

pre-Raphaelite painter) the right way up. I am also reliably informed that she has neglected her Twitter account recently.

Minor slip-ups notwithstanding, her projects are larger-than-life, occasionally prompting colleagues to mutter: “this is impossible; it’s crazy”. But not for Brake. The mammoth task of co-editing (with Marysa Demoor) the Dictionary of Nineteenth Century Journalism (involving 13 associate editors and almost 300 contributors) was finished with deceptive calm and has come to define the ways in which nineteenth-century print culture is studied. As one colleague said, “it is because of her pioneering work... that ‘periodical studies’ is no longer at the edges of Nineteenth Century Studies but absolutely central to it”. Crucially, she has been able to show that the book in the nineteenth century was not a stand-alone commodity. Serialisation meant that many came out in instalments – weekly numbers, monthly parts, and bi-annual volumes.

Her dedication to her students is also legendary. For twenty-five years she has worked for them, founding the Certificate and then MA in Creative Writing, co-founding and, for a long time, co-directing the interdisciplinary MA/MSc in Gender, Society, Culture, and inaugurating the first MA in the History of the Book at the University of London.

Brake has a reputation for being a demanding yet stimulating and inspiring supervisor of postgraduate students. Admittedly, her typically blunt response to poorly argued chapters – “that’s rubbish!” – may have dampened some spirits, but only temporarily. Very quickly, her students realized that Brake was a supervisor who was passionate about ideas – and about them. Supervisions never last less than 90 minutes; every sentence is interrogated; and when Brake closes her eyes, students hold their breath, knowing that they are about to be told something extraordinarily helpful. As one of her former PhD students told me, “Laurel made my

project clear before me. It was amazing. No-one else had ever been able to do that". The people I have spoken to about Brake inevitably start with statements such as "Laurel changed my life" or "without Laurel, I should not be the person I am today and, as a result, neither would my students past, present, and future". In other words, Brake exemplifies the Birkbeck mission.

The fact that she is in great demand as a lecturer also tells us a lot about her. She is vivid, original, and stimulating. And getting her to stop talking after an hour has taxed the sternest chairmen and women. Around Bloomsbury, she is a familiar presence. As Michael Slater (the great Dickens' scholar who worked at Birkbeck for 36 years) told me, she paces the streets, her "famous rucksack absolutely stuffed with books and papers", resembling "illustrations of Christian at the beginning of Bunyan's Pilgrim Progress, with his formidable burden on his back".

As is obvious to all who know her, Brake gives back to the community. Issues of equity and social justice have been at the forefront of her labours, noticeably when she served as a staff Governor but also as a long-serving equal opportunities officer for the AUT. She champions gender equality with tireless devotion. She has been chair of the Friends of Senate House Library, lobbying top officials and involving students in the battle to save the library. She is President of the International Walter Pater Society and an active member of the Centre for Nineteenth-Century Studies, as well as the Advisory Boards of the Society for Research in European Periodicals and Nineteenth-Century Scholarship Online. Editorial boards such as the Victorian Periodical Review, the Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies, and the Journal of Victorian Culture rely on her advice.

But what about Brake as a person? She is a traveler, enjoying long-standing collaborations in New York, Venice, or Ghent. She never lets anything stand in the way of new experiences – whether it is knee surgery or getting around the Moscow

subway with its signs in Cyrillic. She is a natural storyteller and a sympathetic listener, a devoted theatre-goer, enthusiastic gardener and patron of the Columbia Road flower market, a brilliant cook (her soup “is to die for”). She loves opera (in fact, used to sing in her younger days) and is mad about dance. She is a remarkable hostess: not only opening her home to friends, but also to colleagues, children of colleagues, friends of friends of friends. Her leading characteristics: intellectual originality, generosity, commitment, curiosity, enthusiasm, and a talent for friendship. She has the “coolest” of brains; the warmest of hearts.

But the real reason we honour her today is for what everyone knows: Brake is an academic star who has transformed the lives of those around her. And that is why we place a crown of laurels on the head of our Laurel Brake, Fellow of Birkbeck.