

**‘THE SINGER’S WORK IS A PICTURE PAINTED ON AIR’:
OPERATIC AUTOBIOGRAPHIES OF THE
NINETEENTH CENTURY**

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In his autobiography, the British opera singer Charles Santley wrote:

The singer has a difficulty to contend with which does not affect any other artist.... The singer’s work is a picture painted on air. No sooner is it depicted than it is gone; while the poet’s, painter’s, sculptor’s and architect’s works remain. (SS 19)

As a performative act, singing, like acting, leaves no concrete legacy aside from newspaper reviews, perhaps a few portraits, and the comments of contemporaries; none of which a singer has any substantial control over. This was especially true in the nineteenth century, before the advent of recording technology. It is therefore not surprising that a number of Victorian opera singers attempted to take charge of their own legacies by writing their autobiographies. These works became a site where critics could be answered, rivals could be discredited and legends could be cultivated. But for those opera singers who were both male and British, the autobiography performed an additional role: it was able to shape their public identity.

In George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda* (1876), the eponymous protagonist is ‘stung to the quick’ by the suggestion that he could become like the great Italian tenors Mario and Tamberlik, believing that opera singing ‘was not thought of among possible destinations for the sons of English gentleman’ (140). These views were widely held in Victorian Britain, where opera singing was not considered to be a respectable profession for a British man. There were two main reasons for this. Firstly, opera attracted prejudice as a foreign art form, thus compromising the perceived Britishness of its singers. Secondly, music was widely believed to be a feminine pursuit, compromising the masculinity of British singers in an age when manliness was the most important trait for a respectable gentleman.

Evidence of this perceived femininity can be found in a range of Victorian fiction.¹ Just one example is Catherine Maria Grey’s novel *Aline* (1848), in which the opera singer Angelo is repeatedly described as

feminine. He has ‘effeminate grace’ (13), for example, and a heart as ‘tender as a woman’s’ (94). As his name would suggest, Angelo is also Italian. The vast majority of male opera singers on the Victorian stage were indeed Italian, and these men were repeatedly characterised as dangerously foreign, both in fiction and in other contemporary discourse. In another operatic novel written by Grey, *The Young Prima Donna* (1840), the opera singer Signor Gabrielli, who preys on an innocent young English girl, is described as a ‘dark-looking, odious foreigner’ (1:71) and an ‘avaricious Italian’ (1:113). These literary examples demonstrate the ways in which male opera singers were imagined in Victorian Britain. Across the nineteenth century, Italian singers dominated the operatic stage; British singers were in a small minority. Their status, then, was problematic, as they were left open to the same accusations and prejudices as their Italian colleagues. It therefore became imperative for British, male opera singers to find ways in which to negotiate these prejudices and forge reputations as respectable, masculine and British men. Writing autobiographies offered them an ideal means by which to construct such identities.

The nineteenth-century female opera singer, or *prima donna*, has been the focus of much academic attention. Recent work has included examinations of female operatic autobiography, and has highlighted how *prima donnas* used this medium. Alexandra Wilson, for example, has argued that singers such as the Czech soprano Maria Jeritza (1887–1982) used autobiography in order to construct charitable, domestic personae for themselves, which stood in favourable contrast to the *femme fatales* they depicted on stage (6). Joy H. Calico has also discussed how the Austrian mezzo-soprano Ernestine Schumann-Heink (1861–1936) used memoir to create a ‘gregarious, homespun, patriotic persona’ (72). The male opera singer, however, has been almost entirely neglected by scholars, despite the fact that many male singers also wrote autobiographies. These fascinating and often unusual works are ripe for examination.

The works of two British male singers are particularly interesting from the perspective of identity construction. The tenor Sims Reeves (1821–1900) was a star of the Victorian stage, as was his younger friend, the baritone Charles Santley (1834–1922). Both of these men wrote two autobiographies, but these works do not conform to the conventions of the standard theatrical memoir. Theatrical autobiographies typically recount the early life of a performer and trace the development of their career, with a particular emphasis on professional highlights and plaudits. Whilst Reeves and Santley did cover these topics to an extent, they each drew heavily upon an altogether different style of writing.

While Reeves turned his hand to fiction, Santley adopted travel writing. The four volumes written by these men contain much that is worthy of deeper examination, offering an insight into the construction and negotiation of public image in Victorian Britain. They also paint a vivid picture of the cultural landscape of the period. This article, however, will focus solely on Reeves' and Santley's creative approach to life writing, arguing that each man blended his adopted literary format with autobiography in order to construct a very particular public image for himself.

Sims Reeves was the most famous English tenor of the Victorian era. His career lasted over fifty years, from around 1839 through to 1891. He made his debut in Italian opera at no less a venue than Milan's La Scala, the most prestigious opera house in Italy and, arguably, the world. It was rare indeed for an English singer to claim such an achievement in opera's native land. Towards the end of his career Reeves wrote two autobiographies. The first, *Sims Reeves: His Life and Recollections*, was published in 1888. The following year he published a second volume, *My Jubilee*, which was released to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of his first appearance on stage. The first volume is a particularly unusual example of autobiography: the majority of its chapters take the form of fictional short stories, most of which are gothic or sensational in tone. However, despite it being clear that these stories are fictitious, Reeves curiously presents them as events that he has actually experienced. Moreover, he takes a starring role in many of these short stories. These tales are full of tropes from gothic literature: the tyrant, the deranged woman, ruined abbeys and castles, and the supernatural. Though it may at first appear counterintuitive that this subject matter could be used to create a respectable persona for their author, these stories frequently feature Reeves himself as an honourable hero. Furthermore, several of these tales can be read as a coded defence of his profession and social status as an opera singer.

The chapters of this autobiography switch between fiction and more conventional memoir. The first chapter recounts a grisly tale of murder, whilst the second launches into a more conventional autobiographical style, relating the date and circumstances of his birth. This is the pattern that the rest of the work follows, switching back and forth between fiction and autobiography. Reeves described this form early in *Recollections*, stating that he would share 'the practical details of my life: occasionally pausing to draw aside the curtain which shrouds some strange experiences I have encountered' (SR 15). Through this unique and unusual blend of autobiography and fiction, Reeves attempted to negotiate his public identity.

One of Reeves' stories entitled 'The Bishop's Daughter' (*SR* 36–50) concerns a promising and respectable young British tenor called Harry Sherstone. This protagonist is a thinly disguised version of his author as, like Reeves, he is from Kent and received his early musical education in a local church choir. Sherstone falls in love with the beloved daughter of the local bishop, who is presented as an 'obstinate and aggressive' man (*SR* 37). The bishop prevents his daughter from seeing Sherstone, who he feels is 'drifting into evil courses' as his singing career progresses (*SR* 44). The bishop's distaste for Sherstone's career is presented as unfair and hypocritical; the singer tells him: 'I am a gentleman's son' (*SR* 49). The story continues in a second chapter entitled 'La Scala' (*SR* 51–59). Reeves himself appears in this chapter, where he comes across the bishop's daughter in Milan. Due to her heartbreak she is suffering from melancholia, which her father fears will prove fatal. Reeves is able to reunite her with Sherstone, who is coincidentally performing at La Scala under the Italianised name of Signor Certoni. This makes Sherstone an even closer parallel to Reeves himself, as both men are in the highly unusual position of being Englishmen singing Italian opera at La Scala. The bishop repents and allows the young couple to marry. Through this story, Reeves demonstrates that it is unjust and hypocritical to exclude singers from polite society. By using a thinly disguised version of himself as the wronged protagonist of this story, Reeves is effectively defending his own social standing, but also launching an attack on those who feel that opera singing is not a respectable profession.

Through another fictional story, entitled "'Mephisto" Behind the Scenes' (*SR* 101–109), Reeves makes an additional attempt to paint himself as a respectable professional. This chapter tells the tale of a wicked theatre manager who allows an immoral lord to take advantage of young female performers backstage. One evening Reeves sees the lord attempting to seduce a promising young singer, before discovering that he has been seen leaving with her. Reeves chases after the lord's carriage, liberating the frightened young girl. On freeing her from the predator's clutches, Reeves tells the lord dramatically: 'I do not fear you or any man, and if you have any grievance in the matter, bring it into a court of law' (*SR* 109).² Through this story Reeves is acknowledging the weak morals that were popularly understood to be part of theatrical life backstage (Baker 44–61). However, by casting himself as the hero of this story, actively fighting against such immorality, Reeves was able to distance himself from the negative connotations that came with a theatrical career. Furthermore, in making a lord the villain of his tale, Reeves highlights the hypocrisy that would exclude a respectable opera singer from polite society whilst accepting an immoral lord. Through this

story Reeves is again attempting to defend his profession and advocate its respectability.

While stories such as ‘The Bishop’s Daughter’ and ‘Behind the Scenes’ are clearly attempts to defend his own profession, other tales see Reeves defend himself against more specific accusations. He had a reputation for failing to appear at his own performances: this happened so often that rumours of a drinking problem soon gained wide currency. An article in *The Hornet* (1871) is typical of this speculation, lampooning the tenor’s drinking habits in an unsubtle fashion and claiming that he drinks ‘more wine than a respectable artist had any right to drink’ (364). While Reeves addresses and denies these accusations directly in the more conventional sections of his autobiography, he also uses his fiction to defend himself against these claims. We are told that Harry Sherstone of ‘The Bishop’s Daughter’, for example, often turns down invitations to sing. While the villagers assume this is due to his vanity and arrogance, Reeves tells us that this was due to his ‘bashfulness’ (SR 39). We are told that

instead of being vain he was retiring and shy, possessing little confidence in himself, and it required a great effort on his part to screw up his moral courage to the point of appearing in society. (SR 39)

Through Sherstone, then, Reeves was attempting to justify his own failures to appear in public.

Several of Reeves’ stories are also moral tales, warning against the dangers of alcohol. Most notable is the opening chapter of *Recollections*, entitled ‘A Dark Record’ (SR 1–13). This chapter relates the tale of a mass murder. The central figure is Sarah Webb, a violent woman with a drinking habit, who is in service at a great house. One evening she begins to drink whiskey excessively, becoming progressively more deranged and demonic as she continues to drink, eventually attempting to rob her sleeping master. The master awakens as she is stealing his watch, causing Webb to grab a dagger and ‘remorselessly bur[y] it in her master’s throat’ (SR 11). She then smothers her master’s wife with a pillow before also killing their two young sons. Reeves’ story is shocking on many levels: it is a graphic narrative of a woman murdering a family, including a baby. More shocking, though, is the fact that this chapter opens the autobiography. A reader, expecting a theatrical memoir, is likely to be puzzled as to why they are instead plunged into a gruesome tale of murder. However, by introducing his volume with a vivid warning about the dangers of alcohol, Reeves is signalling to his

readers that he does not approve of excessive drinking. Through this shocking subject matter, then, he is attempting to defend himself against accusations of alcoholism.

The stories of Sims Reeves also had additional role. By writing fiction, he was trying on a new public identity; one not of an opera singer, but of an author. Thomas Carlyle's influential work, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and The Heroic in History* (1841), argues that 'the man of letters', or the writer, is the great heroic figure of the Victorian age. Florian Schweizer has noted that Carlyle painted the author as a 'quasi-religious' figure (121). He goes on to explain that Carlyle's work influenced Charles Dickens, who was himself the 'leader and champion' (117) of a campaign to raise the social status of writers. It stands to reason, therefore, that an opera singer might be able to raise his own status if he positioned himself as an author, rather than a singer. Indeed, Reeves attempted to invoke the heroic 'man of letters' through his fiction. He was clearly not attempting to write straight fiction, as his work was sold as autobiography with a title that conforms to this genre. Nevertheless, his stories suggest a desire to turn his hand to this art form, and there is evidence that he used Dickens as a blueprint. Reeves' story entitled 'A Railway Tragedy' (SR 70–79) strongly supports this interpretation. In this tale, Reeves tells of his fictional chance encounter with a railway signalman whose children have been killed by a train. This train now haunts the signalman's dreams; he tells Reeves:

At night I seem to follow its course into the darkness,
and when the gleam of its accursed lamps has passed, I
trace its black outline and I curse it. I know, too, that
one day I shall either find the means to destroy it, or it
will kill me. (SR 70)

This story is strongly reminiscent of Dickens' own ghost story, 'The Signalman'. Published in 1866, Dickens' story predated Reeves' by twenty-two years. While the railway was not an uncommon theme for Victorian fiction, the similarities between the two stories are significant; they both feature a haunted and ill-fated railway signalman, tortured by his experience of rail accidents. Moreover, both stories also end ambiguously, with the reader left to decide whether the hauntings are supernatural or psychological in origin. By closely imitating Dickens' story, Reeves perhaps hoped to forge a pathway to literature by following in the footsteps of one the period's greatest authors.

Opera singers, by nature, were interpreters of other's work. They sang the works of the great composers, and told stories penned by great

writers in words that were not their own. Although, of course, a singer had artistic agency in his interpretation of an opera or ballad, what he did not do was create his own lasting work. He was primarily a public performer. As Santley said, the work of a singer was ‘painted on air’ (SS 19). This idea is reflected in Samuel Smiles’ influential 1859 work *Self Help*, in which the author encouraged men to strive in order to improve themselves. In a chapter entitled ‘Workers In Art’ (98–130), Smiles praises composers as well as artists and architects, whose works are lasting. He does not, however, extend his praise to musicians or singers. Actors were placed in the same category, as has been noted by Baker, who describes ‘the assumption, which was widespread among mid-century intellectuals, that the actor was inferior to the writer, just as the singer or musician was inferior to the composer’ (32). Baker explains that this was due to acting (or singing) being seen as intellectually inferior to writing or composing. Reeves as a singer, therefore, lacked both the means to create his own lasting art and the ability to be respected and recognised for it. As an author, however, Reeves could perhaps hope to create work that would endure; work that would invite the respect of the public in a way that opera could not.

Despite his repeated attempts to use a blend of autobiography and fiction in order to project a very particular image, Reeves’ volume was largely met with disapproval and confusion. Critics found the fictional portions of the work strange and even distasteful, instead tending to focus their reviews on the more conventional minority of the text. For example, a reviewer in *Lloyd’s Weekly Newspaper* found the ‘strange romances’ to be ‘unduly tragic’ (5). The more gothic chapters were singled out for criticism:

We could spare the first chapter, with its description of a fourfold murder...also the harrowing recital of the death of two children on the railway before the eyes of their father; and some other mournful fatalities. (5)

Similarly, a reviewer in *The Observer* felt that these stories were of ‘an unpleasing character’, regretting that these ‘irrelevant’ episodes took up ‘more than two-thirds’ of the book (3). What is most interesting about this lengthy review, however, is the fact that it does not refer to the fictional majority of the volume until the penultimate paragraph. The reviewer is clearly unsure what to make of these stories, concluding only that they are ‘irrelevant’ and expressing the wish that they be withdrawn from future editions of the volume. Notably, this review fails to make it

clear that Reeves' stories are in fact fictitious, suggesting that there may have been some confusion surrounding their veracity.

Most damning by far was a review in *The Spectator*. Like other reviewers, its critic expressed regret that the work consisted largely of 'sensation novels condensed', instead of focusing on the details of Reeves' musical career (1558). Nevertheless, it is the only review that attempted to engage with Reeves' fiction in a substantial way. Instead of attempting to interpret this fiction, however, it merely lampooned it. The review quoted mockingly from several of Reeves' stories, selecting lines that highlighted his overwrought style and ridiculing the names he had chosen for his characters. It quoted from one particular story at length, which included a description of a 'circling kingfisher' (1558). The critic then commented:

A student of natural history will not fail to notice the singular originality of the epithet 'circling', as applied to the flight of the kingfisher. It is as if one should speak of the lightning rapidity of the snail, the melodious note of the peacock, or the modesty of the operatic tenor. (1558)

As well as mocking Reeves' fiction, this reviewer criticised his repeated references to praise he had received. The review concluded with the damning lines:

Such a book as this leads one to the conclusion that it is rash to expect a singer to be able to reveal in writing the secret of the almost magical power which he exercises over the hearts of men. At any rate, such expectations will be grievously disappointed by these memoirs. Their egotism would be intolerable if it were not so naïve. But at best they do no more than constitute an addition to the annals of conceit. (1559)

This is not to say that the reception of Reeves' fiction was entirely negative: a more generous critic at *The Musical Times* described how they were 'entranced' by Reeves' 'literary powers' (620). However, they still expressed the wish that Reeves should not include any further fiction in future autobiographical efforts. Reeves heeded this advice; his second autobiography included no fiction.

Not a single review of Reeves' *Recollections* attempted to engage with or interpret his fiction in a serious way. At best, reviews ignored or

dismissed it, while at least one reviewer seemed to be uncertain as to whether or not the stories were fictitious. At worst, Reeves' fiction was mocked and interpreted as evidence of his vanity. These reactions are not surprising, given the highly unusual form that Reeves adopted. His peculiar approach to autobiography seems ultimately to have been a failure in the eyes of the critics. While it is clear that Reeves' inventiveness represents a unique creative effort to forge a respectable identity for himself, his public persona was ultimately unaffected by his literary efforts. The fictitious elements of this work received so little critical attention that they did not go so far as to damage his reputation. Despite the limited impact that his stories created, however, Reeves' fiction nevertheless offers us a fascinating glimpse into the anxieties, intentions and imagination of a celebrated Victorian cultural figure. These stories remain a unique example of Victorian life writing.

This is not to say, however, that other Victorian opera singers did not also attempt innovative approaches to autobiography. Sir Charles Santley was another British opera singer who achieved great success in Victorian Britain. The first singer to be knighted, he had a long and distinguished career which he sustained, like Reeves, for over fifty years. During this time he achieved great international success. Santley was close friends with Reeves and the two men occasionally appeared on stage together. Like his older friend, Santley also wrote two autobiographies. The first, *Student and Singer: The Reminiscences of Charles Santley* appeared in 1893, while *Reminiscences of my Life* was published in 1909. Following a similar pattern to Reeves, Santley's second volume was released shortly after his fifty-year jubilee. Santley's memoirs, too, deviate from the conventional theatrical memoir: while Reeves adopted fiction, Santley turned to travel writing.

Santley's career took him across the globe; he toured Europe, America, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. His autobiographies are packed with tales of adventure in the farthest corners of the world. While these are true accounts of Santley's travels, they are presented in a very particular way. In the late nineteenth century, British masculinity was perhaps best represented by the popular figure of the adventurer, bound up with the imagery of imperialism. Joseph Kestner quotes H. Rider Haggard's protagonist Allan Quartermain in *King Solomon's Mines* (1885), who states: 'This is what Englishmen are, adventurers to the backbone' (1). John Tosh has argued that, during the late Victorian period

empire was seen as a projection of masculinity.... There was a striking convergence between the language of

empire and the language of manliness: both made much of struggle, duty, action, will and ‘character’. (193)

Men of the British Empire were heroic figures, popularised through fiction and literature concerning real-life explorers. This is a trend that Santley deliberately drew upon; he explicitly states his love of adventure literature of this type. In *Student and Singer* he tells us:

At an early age my greatest pleasure consisted in reading the adventures of great travellers, such as Bruce’s ‘Travels in Abyssinia,’ Captain Cook’s ‘Voyages,’ Franklin’s ‘Expedition to the North Pole,’ and Ross’s in search of him. (SS 3)

It is exactly this sort of literature that Santley attempts to emulate. He repeatedly describes his adventures on the sea, over the desert and even across the ice in a way that is reminiscent of the great travellers he admires. By appealing to the imperial feeling of the age, he is able to craft a masculine and British identity that protects him from any criticism he could receive for being a male opera singer. Santley makes a notable statement early in his first volume: ‘I may say that all my travelling by sea has been for pleasure; the voyage was my chief inducement to accept engagements in America and the colonies’ (SS 5). This is a remarkable claim, but also very astute. With this assertion Santley presents himself as an adventurer first, and a singer second. He also implies that money was not an inducement to perform overseas. It is clear, then, that Santley is attempting to construct himself as a gentleman traveller, rather than a far less masculine figure: a professional singer. This statement encapsulates the aim of Santley’s memoirs; he repeatedly gives precedence to accounts of travel and adventure instead of focussing on the details of his musical career, as would have been expected by contemporary readers.

The idea of travelling by sea is at the heart of Santley’s travel writing. He repeatedly talks of his love for the sea and recounts the many voyages he has taken. His first volume opens with the words ‘I’m on the sea! I’m on the sea!’ (SS 1) before explaining that he is, in fact, writing this work while sailing from Auckland to Wellington in New Zealand. This immediately establishes Santley as an adventurer at the very frontiers of Empire. The same chapter then goes on to describe, at length, his relationship with the sea and his childhood desire to become a sailor. He recounts a recent conversation with an old sailor friend who told him: ‘Charlie, you’re a good sailor spoiled! You ought to be ordering your

men on board ship, instead of bawling and squalling your voice away in that stuffy theatre!’ (SS 3). This anecdote, appearing at the very beginning of his first volume, establishes the idea that Santley is capable of a more masculine occupation than singing; he should be ‘ordering’ other men, instead of ‘bawling and squalling’. By presenting himself as a born sailor, Santley attempts to redeem himself from his feminised career. Santley describes his ‘great attachment’ to ‘open-hearted’ (SS 3) sailors before recounting his first ever voyage at the age of seven. Only after this lengthy discussion of sailing and the sea does Santley’s volume begin with a more conventional account of his childhood and upbringing.

Santley’s preoccupation with the sea should be viewed as part of a wider cultural relationship between British male opera singers and the sea during the long nineteenth century.³ During the Napoleonic Wars male opera singers successfully appropriated the figure of the sailor in order to project masculine and British identities. Most notable was John Braham (1777–1856), who often appeared on stage as a sailor and performed many naval-themed songs, including his famous composition ‘The Death of Nelson’ (1811). The popularity of such songs endured, and they were sung by successive generations of British opera singers, including both Reeves and Santley. Santley also appeared on stage in character as a sailor, for example in the role of Tom Tug in Charles Dibdin’s ballad opera *The Waterman* (1774). Santley’s preoccupation with the sea, then, can be interpreted as an attempt to feed into the long-established relationship between British singers and sailors, which had historically proved successful at creating masculine, patriotic reputations for British male opera singers.

Over the course of Santley’s two volumes, he gives vivid accounts of everyday life on-board ships around the world, recounting the characters and circumstances he has encountered and offering his thoughts on topics such as dining, lodging and tipping. A recurrent theme is Santley’s preference for sail rather than steam, and carriage rather than motorcar. In his first volume, he states: ‘I should like...to try the real thing in a sailing-ship; for on board a steamer I do not find the perfect repose I expected’ (SS 5). By continually expressing a preference for older forms of travel, Santley attempts to distance himself from modernised, mechanised and relatively comfortable modes of travel. Instead, he invokes heroic travellers of the past, who struggled without the conveniences of modern transport. In a typical passage, he reflects upon knights who travelled to the Holy Land ‘on horseback, or afoot, through unexplored regions...among hostile people, and deprived of most of the necessaries which make life bearable’ (SS 60). He then considers Columbus, ‘exposed to drenching rain, freezing cold and fiery heat;

driven beyond the power of guidance by raging storm' (*SS* 60). These heroic explorers are then contrasted with modern travellers, 'provided with luxurious coaches, furnished with lavatories and dining-rooms' (*SS* 61). Santley's reader is left in no doubt which model of travel their author prefers. Indeed, Santley gleefully recounts his own travelling privations, such as his tolerance of dirt and his ability to share a bunk with cockroaches (*SS* 236, 327). In this way he aligns himself with the more masculine adventurers of a bygone age.

Isaac Land has described how industrialisation created a sense of nostalgia for the age of sail in the Victorian period. The heroic sailor of Nelson's navy was recollected with affection, and was romanticised in fiction (131–58). It is possible to interpret Santley's repeated eulogies for the age of sail as an invocation of a more romantic period of bravery and adventure. Through this process, he allies himself with these past models of heroic masculinity. Land has also drawn attention to the Victorian interest in Arctic exploration, most notably Franklin's expedition, arguing that this is where 'the spirit of Nelson's navy remain[ed] alive and relevant in the age of steam' (153). Santley, who explicitly expresses his interest in Franklin's expedition to the North Pole, also draws upon this trend. He offers several accounts of journeys made across ice, but most notable is his account of crossing St Gothard's Pass as a young student. He recounts how he made this perilous journey in a sledge during a snowstorm in the middle of the night:

We were requested to keep the weight of our bodies directed towards the side opposed to declivity, in order to avoid the possibility of an upset into the deep snow, from which rescue would have been difficult if not impossible. I felt the cold penetrating to my bones. (*SS* 55)

It is clear that, in this instance, Santley is attempting to project his bravery and spirit for adventure in a way that invokes the legend of his hero, Franklin.

Repeatedly, Santley presents himself as a specifically British traveller, who is not afraid to stand up for his values and challenge foreign deviance. This reflects the imperial belief that Britain and her men were the moral guardians of the Empire. In one chapter he discusses the various unsavoury characters he has encountered on his travels, including a man who attempted to rob him in Suez (*RML* 250) and vendors of fake and overpriced goods in Egypt and Ceylon (*RML* 251–52). Santley describes confronting such characters in a masculine and

respectable fashion, successfully ensuring that these immoral foreign men fail in their schemes. It is interesting to note that reviewers of Santley's autobiography seized upon these relatively minor anecdotes. A reviewer in the *Manchester Guardian*, for example, declared, 'Whoever has heard Santley sing "Why do the nations?" will understand that the singer was not the man to stand nonsense from foreign curio-vendors' (14). This comment demonstrates the success of Santley's approach to autobiography. The reviewer has clearly interpreted Santley's anecdote about the curio-vendor as proof of his British masculinity. Furthermore, the reviewer links his favourable personality traits directly to Santley's musical career, claiming that whoever has heard him sing the rousing and powerful 'Why Do The Nations?' from Handel's *Messiah* (1741) will understand his brave and respectable actions. For this reviewer at least, Santley's accounts of travel were successful in cultivating a persona that presented his singing career in a favourable light: one that accentuated his British masculinity and respectability.

Reviews of Santley's two volumes were overwhelmingly positive. They repeatedly lauded Santley's openness and honesty, describing him as a man of honour and a patriot. Although no reviewers discussed Santley's accounts of travel in any great depth, his status as a traveller was repeatedly cited as evidence of his good character. Santley's second volume is described as

the bluff and hearty record of a life enjoyed to the full, and an inexhaustible energy spending itself in vigorous denunciation of bad cooking, the tipping evil...and equally vigorous praise of staunch friends, remembered bottles of Clos de Vougeot, the hospitality of 'The Bell' at Leicester, and music with no nonsense about it.
(*Manchester Guardian* 14)

The *Manchester Guardian* reviewer references several of Santley's accounts of travel, such as his discussions of food, wine, tipping and lodging. These anecdotes clearly indicate to the reviewer that Santley is a man of 'vigour', suggesting strength and masculinity. Furthermore, the use of the words 'bluff' and 'hearty' are distinctly sailor-like, suggesting the success of Santley's attempt to invoke this figure.

It is difficult to evaluate the relative successes of both Reeves and Santley's unique approaches to autobiography. While this article has examined their use of adopted literary formats, the more conventional sections of these memoirs, dealing with their musical careers, also had a

bearing on how these works were received. It is clear, however, that Santley's travel writing had a greater and more positive impact on critics than Reeves' fiction. Critics seized upon Santley's stories of travel, interpreting them as evidence of a respectable and masculine personality. On the other hand, Reeves' fiction was met largely with confusion and even distaste. It is notable that Santley was the first singer ever to be knighted in Britain, an honour that many British male opera singers before him had hoped for in vain.⁴ While many other factors contributed to him receiving this honour, it is arguable that Santley's successful attempts at writing autobiography went some way towards making this possible, as they were so effective at creating a respectable public persona for their author.

Despite Santley's greater success, the autobiographies of these two great singers remain as remarkable examples of Victorian life writing. These texts represent highly unusual and extremely creative efforts to blend autobiography with other literary styles in order to craft very specific public personae. Furthermore, these works demonstrate the great richness of nineteenth-century theatrical memoir, a great many examples of which remain neglected and unexplored by scholars. They also demonstrate that the works of male performers can be every bit as rich and rewarding as those written by their female counterparts. While Sims Reeves and Charles Santley may have been forgotten by most and their 'pictures painted on air' are sadly no longer with us, we are still able to read about the lives of these remarkable men in their very own words.⁵

NOTES

Abbreviations

<i>MJ</i>	<i>My Jubilee, Or Fifty Years of Artistic Life</i>
<i>SR</i>	<i>Sims Reeves: His Life and Recollections</i>
<i>SS</i>	<i>Student and Singer: The Reminiscences of Charles Santley</i>
<i>RML</i>	<i>Reminiscences of My Life</i>

¹ The representation of male opera singers in Victorian fiction is covered extensively in my PhD thesis (in progress), at Oxford Brookes University.

² It is worth noting that Reeves repeats this story in his second autobiography, which features no fiction (*MJ* 42–47). This suggests that this story alone might be true.

³ I am developing this topic further in my PhD thesis.

⁴ In 1833 John Braham drafted a letter to King William IV, asking to be knighted. It is unclear whether this letter, which resides in his personal papers, was ever sent (see Braham).

⁵ Towards the end of his career, Charles Santley did make some recordings that are widely available online. These recordings were, however, made when Santley's voice was past its prime and therefore do not offer an accurate representation of his vocal skill.

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