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EPIC AND EMPIRE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITAIN

In the nineteenth century, epic poetry in the Homeric style was widely seen as an ancient and anachronistic genre, yet Victorian authors worked to re-create it for the modern world. Simon Dentith explores the relationship between epic and the evolution of Britain's national identity in the nineteenth century up to the apparent demise of all notions of heroic warfare in the catastrophe of the First World War. Paradoxically, writers found equivalents of the societies which produced Homeric or Northern epics not in Europe, but on the margins of empire and among its subject peoples. Dentith considers the implication of the status of epic for a range of nineteenth-century writers, including Walter Scott, Matthew Arnold, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, William Morris and Rudyard Kipling. He also considers the relationship between epic poetry and the novel and discusses late nineteenth-century adventure novels, concluding with a brief survey of epic in the twentieth century.

SIMON DENTITH is a Professor of English at the University of Gloucestershire.

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>vii</i>
Introduction	I
1 Homer, Ossian and Modernity	16
2 Walter Scott and Heroic Minstrelsy	26
3 Epic Translation and the National Ballad Metre	48
4 The Matter of Britain and the Search for a National Epic	64
5 ‘As Flat as Fleet Street’: Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Matthew Arnold and George Eliot on Epic and Modernity	84
6 Mapping Epic and Novel	105
7 Epic and the Imperial Theme	127
8 Kipling, Bard of Empire	150
9 Epic and the Subject Peoples of Empire	175
10 Coda: Some Homeric Futures	196
 <i>Notes</i>	 219
<i>Bibliography</i>	231
<i>Index</i>	241

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