

Exploding the Hearth: Considering Victorian Aging

Lauren Palmor

If asked to describe an image of later life in Victorian times, it is likely that many respondents would conjure scenes of mature men and women sitting by the fireplace, enjoying the perceived quiet, peace, and comfort of old age. One may readily imagine pictures of grandfathers reading the newspaper with their feet perched on hassocks, or grandmothers warming their hands by the fire, holding their knitting in their laps. These popularly held, sentimental stereotypes of sedate, fireside senescence are relatively common. Examples of such pictures were particularly popular in the mid- and late-nineteenth century, when they were exhibited at the Royal Academy in London, widely distributed by the American Art Union in New York, and reproduced in great numbers by American publishers Currier & Ives and by British firms like Raphael Tuck & Sons.

By most accounts, the Victorians were responsible for initially shaping many of the concepts of aging that have since developed into the basic framework by which late life is still defined and understood. These complex and diverse ideas about aging in the mid- and late-nineteenth century were reflected in a visual culture that communicated the problematic contemporary ideas of “good” and “bad” aging. The production of British images of aging in the mid- and late-nineteenth century paid deference to these conflicting states, especially in the context of genre painting. Such works include examples by successful Victorian artists like Frank Bramley, Stanhope Alexander Forbes, Hubert von Herkomer, Walter Langley, and Thomas Webster. While these genre painters may not have intended to reflect the quality of later life in Britain at the time or to present a specific idea of the habits and treatment of age, their representations of these themes came to have a profound, lasting impact, irrevocably forming a conceptual basis for understanding aging that has

long endured (Chase 3).

This paper examines the archetypal image of the senescent hearthside figure in order to better evaluate the larger context in which Victorian aging was visually interpreted and generally understood. Looking at what is, perhaps, the most common trope in the visual culture of Victorian late life in two diverse scenes of “good” and “bad” aging, by the popular British painters Walter Dendy Sadler (1854-1923) and Frederick Daniel Hardy (1827-1911), provides an opportunity to develop new art historical approaches to the subject of aging.

Unfortunately, older adults have not traditionally been afforded such investigations in the discipline of art history. Despite the frequency with which elderly figures populate images of the Victorian era, there do not seem to be any academic volumes produced by art historians that specifically address the subject of late life in Victorian art. There are, of course, some very fine book chapters available on the subject by scholars working outside the field of art history, including Mike Hepworth’s essay, “Framing Old Age: Sociological Perspectives on Ageing in Victorian Painting,” in *The Sociology of Art*, edited by David Inglis and John Hughson (2005); Karen Chase’s “Artistic Investigations and the Elderly Subject” in *The Victorians and Old Age* (2009); and Esther Godfrey’s sensitive interpretation of the fine arts in her chapter, “Visualizing Power: Age, Embodiment, and Aesthetics” in *The January-May Marriage in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (2009). However, the inclusion of art historians in this dialogue would introduce an essential critical voice and provide necessary disciplinary context from an alternative perspective.

This lack of art-historical focus also overlooks the reality that Victorian artists themselves must have given some consideration to the subject of age. Patrick McKee and Heta Kauppinen write, “In representing old age artists cannot help revealing their basic ideas about it. Just by selecting old age or an elderly person as subject the artist attributes some significance to aging” (17). Although a great deal has changed in the discipline of art history since these words were written in 1994, the evidence remains that artists considered aging an essential factor in the

construction of visual narratives. This remains true in spite of art history's delayed engagement with the expansion of gerontological studies throughout the humanities.

However, before we address the lack of regard habitually paid to images of Victorian aging, it is helpful to briefly consider historical contexts for the status of the elderly in society at large. Recognizing the diminished status of seniors, particularly in nineteenth-century Britain, helps account for their perceived marginal significance in visual culture, while simultaneously producing an argument for the application of age studies to the practice of social art history.

There is a presumed, collective notion that in the eras before our own, older adults were generally venerated. As diverse work in age studies has demonstrated, this idea is simply not universally true, and an application of this understanding to visual readings of the reverence for or dismissal of older age can elucidate its portrayal in Victorian art. Jill Quadagno describes the negative Victorian view of old age at length in her chapter "The Degradation of Age" in *Aging in Early Industrial Society*, a study that outlines the labor and economic patterns that contributed to the diminished position of older adults and confirms the emergence of the dual categories of "good old age" and "bad old age."

Forged by increasingly prevalent anxieties about virtue, morality, and dependency, Victorian "good old age" was associated with productivity and independence, while "bad old age" was identified with indolence, decline, and reliance upon external support. Largely determined by the factors of prosperity and poverty, these designations adhere to the quintessentially Victorian dichotomy of virtue and idleness, and fears about aging applied these categories to notions of physical vitality. As the ideal of the vigorous, robust, youthful body emerged in the nineteenth century, it became associated with activity and endurance. The inactive body, or the body afflicted with "bad old age," was associated with frailty and moral feebleness. These readings of the aging body have not always sustained a correlation with interpretations of the older image in art.

This disjunction among age, body, and image may be explained by

the fact that, although bodies develop and change over time, there is no rigid, prescribed manifestation of age at designated stages. The physical aspects of aging provide tangible evidence of its effects, inviting interpretation of the sundry social ideas that accompany the late life stages. In the introduction to her book *From Old Woman to Older Women*, Sally Chivers asserts:

Age theorists tend to argue that the body becomes paramount in daily experience during old age. Whatever power the mind may have to influence physical change and whatever cultural narratives may affect concrete experience, aging is currently associated with decrepitude. Because this usually entails a physical decline, a body that lives to old age is (almost always, at this historical moment) eventually (however briefly) circumscribed by its physicality. (ix)

Physical changes are a primary indicator of age, and the corporeal dimension of the aged Victorian body contributes to many of the resulting perceptions and treatments of the visual context of senectitude. The body outwardly demonstrates age, which permits the analysis of a number of adverse changes that impact more than just the biological aspects of life.

Simplistic perceptions of aging in the Victorian period in Britain and the United States affected people differently, depending on factors such as class and gender. Middle-class men often had to challenge the idea that, once aged, they could no longer contribute effectively to the working world. Older middle-class women were confronted by a view of aging that held that they should principally confine their attentions and activities to the emotional aspects of the domestic sphere (Ballenger 32). Much like her younger counterpart, an older Victorian woman was, in many ways, confined to the house and viewed in the restricted context that would naturally result from this placement. While images of younger middle-class mothers could be set within bedchambers, nurseries, or parlors, once that same woman reaches late life, she is generally pictured by the hearthside, her limited role in society mirrored by her diminished role in the home (Casteras 149). These lessened visual positions for both men and women form a body of images—now considered normative—which have not benefitted from a serious art-historical inquiry into their

social context.

Painterly declarations of Victorian aging have generally been overlooked, resulting in crude scholarly characterizations that have contributed to a lack of serious regard for the subject. Unfortunately, at first glance it may seem that Victorian images of senescence did not illustrate its tentative and enigmatic nature. In place of vague declarations, Victorians depicted distinctly positive and negative ideas of late life, presenting aging as possessing the potential to be either “good” or “bad.” This opposition, inevitably determined by social and economic factors, may have thwarted an intellectually sensitive reading of such pictures, particularly within the discipline of art history.

In their introduction to *Women and Ageing in British Society Since 1500*, Lynn Botelho and Pat Thane effectively describe the ways in which age studies has had to challenge the idea that the lives of older adults were historically uncomplex and marginal. However, art history has recently—and successfully—accorded critical reexamination to similarly marginal groups, including children and minority subjects. This demonstrates the discipline’s capacity for interrogating what Botelho and Thane call “counter-factual assumptions” and the potential to acknowledge that aging, like youth and race, is “highly nuanced . . . culturally embedded and not merely biological”(3). It is precisely this embeddedness of aging within cultural studies that should make the subject most attractive to social art history. By increasing mindfulness of the role of aging within Victorian society at large, scholars can better interpret images of older figures from this period in the context of visual culture.

As mentioned above, the image of the aged parent or grandparent sitting contentedly before the hearth is a nearly canonical trope in various contexts in Victorian visual culture, including examples in the fine arts, trade cards, magazine illustrations, greeting cards, paper toys, and song sheets. The fireside was, at this time, a significant center of the home and family. Additionally, in many homes, the older members of the household were viewed as the principal force around which family unity was organized at this central gathering place. In Mary Allen West’s

Childhood: Its Care and Culture, published in 1887, the author counsels, “Often the presence of grandfather or grandmother is a benediction to the entire household; their room, or their chair by the family hearth, is the center around which all cluster. Father and mother come to them for advice; the children bring to them all their little joys and sorrows . . .” (235). In terms of such prescriptions, it is understandable why representations of mid- and late-nineteenth-century aging are frequently situated at home, with artistic commentaries on the life cycle largely confined to the domestic sphere.

Perhaps because the hearth was the focus of ceaseless attentiveness, its significance as a symbol of Victorian domesticity is too readily assumed. Thus, the significance of the hearthside sitter is enhanced by an intentional reappraisal of the importance of the family fireside. In *The Victorian Parlour: A Cultural Study*, Thad Logan describes the manner in which the hearth constituted the physical and ideological center of the Victorian home. She explains how domestic manuals, in their “obsessive attention” to the construction of ideal family environments, prescribe “the daily cleaning, polishing, and ‘blacking’ required to keep the fireplace and its accessories in an appropriately showy condition” (121). Such manuals illustrate how “the hearth, besides serving very obvious purposes in providing light and warmth, was also weighted with symbolic meaning in the landscape of the parlor” (Logan 121). As the site where older adults found their place in the domestic space of family structure, the fireside became the central source for the symbolic meanings of the family that depended upon markers of the lifecycle for their currency.

In the introduction to her book *From the Hearth to the Open Road*, Barbara Frey Waxman discusses this leitmotif, paying particular attention to the ways in which the hearthside theme has been treated in magazine articles since 1890. She refers to an article titled “Being Happy in Old Age,” which appeared in *Ladies’ Home Journal* in March 1900, in which “Mrs. Burton Kingsland admonished her female readership to enjoy the ‘winter of life’ and keep their hearts warmed, despite the bad news in the mirror, by clinging to family and loved ones: ‘We must hug the closer

the joys of the fireside” (10). The fireside, though, imbued with conflicting characteristics, was also viewed as the location where recurring stereotyped figures—“the aged dandy or the too merry old widow, the demented or foolish old person, the inactivated fireside knitter who has essentially given up”—could be found (Waxman 28).

In these standard configurations, the hearthside is often treated as an unavoidable component of the domestic life of one’s twilight years—a looming inevitability to be gladly accepted. Mary Elizabeth Wilson Sherwood, a tenacious and respected writer of social, domestic, and fashion advice, advocated a treatment of age in the home not unlike her approval of certain kinds of furniture. She calls older family members “very useful article[s], whether to quote from or to enjoy daily” (79). In these ways, older members of the household suffused with ornamental status; they were expected to contribute to the visible manifestation of Victorian domestic bliss and its cachet, which was then transposed to the depiction of such persons in the genre paintings of this period.

The decorative status of the older figure by the fire is expressed by Sherwood in her 1881 guide, *Amenities of Home*, where she asserts, “There is no genre picture so ornamental to the fireside as an old lady with gray curls” (79). Sherwood advises her readers that an ideal “[h]ome should always contain a grandmother, old aunt, or some relative who has seen the world, lived her life, and who is now . . . taking a pleasant interest in the little tragedy or comedy of everyday life, and being the particular providence of the younger children. Such an old lady is as agreeable as she is ornamental” (79). *Amenities of Home* addresses older masculinities as well, declaring, “An agreeable old man is the most delightful acquisition to any society” (79). It is not surprising, then, that despite the frequency of such figures in genre painting, art historians have often addressed images of older men and women seated by the fire in similarly superficial and decorative terms.

In a well-appointed Victorian home, the hearth was a central gathering place, often surrounded by the comforts of rugs, overstuffed chairs, hassocks, pillows, and sofas. The prized possessions of the family were

usually displayed near the fire, as the mantel often proudly held collections of clocks, mirrors, and various possessions that could be covered by decorative bell jars. An arrangement of comfortable chairs beside the hearth was customary in most Victorian homes, and the people intended to occupy those seats of honor were expected to fit within a similarly prescribed model of spatial organization.

In describing the arrangement of the hearthside, Logan writes, “the most common arrangements included easy chairs and footstools near the fire” (38). Lucy Orrin Smith, author of *The Drawing Room: Its Decorations and Furniture* (1878), recommended, “Every effort should conduce to make the hearth the rallying spot of the home” (32). In *Inside the Victorian Home*, Judith Flanders quotes the Victorian architect Robert Kerr, who similarly noted, “For a Sitting-room, keeping in view the English climate and habits, a fireside is practically the most important of all considerations. No such apartment can pass muster with domestic critics unless there be convenient space for a wide circle of persons round the fire” (108). The seats by the hearth were the places in the home closest to a family’s significant material treasures and the warmth of the fire, making them one of the most honored places in the house.

These “seats of honor and affection” were reserved as places of reverence and tenderness, and this evidence should be considered when appraising the innumerable images of older Victorians sitting before the fireside. Perhaps it is their perceived sentimentality, coupled with their abundance, which has historically led to the superficial treatment of older fireside subjects in visual culture. However, the hearthside condition can be disrupted to demonstrate patterns of artistic reverence and social concern.

The following comparison between two drastically different pictures of this type aims to demonstrate flaws in traditional approaches to similar Victorian paintings and to spark a fruitful dialogue on this topic. Dissimilar artistic interpretations of hearthside aging present possible ways to address these images with regard to their social context, as well as to demonstrate methods for visualizing “good old age” against the

contrary “bad old age.” By considering figures of advanced age in an upper-middle-class parlor, as portrayed by Walter Dendy Sadler, and in a rural, working class cottage, as depicted by Frederick Daniel Hardy, one can begin to probe the meaning of the hearth and the greater social framework for recognizing older Victorians and their diverse social and economic contexts, as interpreted by two popular English genre painters of the period.

Walter Dendy Sadler was born in Surrey and trained in London and Düsseldorf. Famed for his genre paintings, which were often set in an earlier period (1830-1840), he often prominently portrayed older figures. When he was only nineteen years old he began exhibiting at the Royal Academy, where he was represented by pictures of older adults in many of the institution’s annual exhibitions. With titles like *The Old Squire and The Young Squire* (RA exhibition 1887), *Old and Crusted* (RA exhibition 1888), and *The Young and the Old* (RA exhibition 1898), Sadler’s work was identified with the senescent subjects who dominated his oeuvre. He was praised by critics for his “close sympathy with human life in its many phases, and a keen appreciation of its spirit, whether humorous or pathetic,” as described by Daniel B. Shepp in his 1905 survey *Library of History and Art* (236).

Reproductions made after Sadler’s pictures were exceedingly popular on both sides of the Atlantic, and one profile of the artist published in *Good Housekeeping* in 1912 claimed that, “Few American homes contain no reproduction of Dendy Sadler’s studies of pre-Victorian middle class life” (Fletcher 181). Sadler prints sold in the millions in the United States, with original canvases fetching prices in the thousands. In the same magazine profile, Sadler responds to readers who may be curious about his predilection for painting older figures. He explains, “I have been asked why so often I choose old people to smile and frown and think in my compositions. To me, the dignity of old age is most appealing. To me, the pathetic beauty of the autumn of our years is more stirring than the senseless impatience of youth and the heat of our amorous summers” (173). Sadler’s employment of older models is thus framed as purposeful,

bridging decisions executed by the artist both in terms of content and context.



FIG 1. WALTER DENDY SADLER. *THE END OF THE SKEIN*, 1896. OIL ON CANVAS. 96.5 X 127 CM. LADY LEVER ART GALLERY, NATIONAL MUSEUMS LIVERPOOL.

This partiality for old age is recognizable in Sadler's *The End of the Skein* of 1896 (fig. 1), exhibited that same year at the Royal Academy. In this scene, the artist illustrates an ideal, well-appointed sitting room, complete with an older man and woman sitting in the seats of honor by the fire. The husband and wife, productive and independent paradigms of “good old age,” work together to ball a skein of red yarn, their cooperative activity testifying to an enduring engagement with leisure pursuits.

Their quiet activity is overshadowed, in some respects, by their richly ornamented room. The mantel is decorated in a prescribed manner, with a naval scene hanging in an ornate frame behind a handsome clock, which is framed by two matching blue and white Chinese jars. The woman sits beside a decorative fire screen in a striped armchair across from her husband, who sits in a padded mahogany chair draped with a

paisley Kashmir shawl. While many descriptions of these figures would stop at this point, there is arguably far more to say about the inclusion of elderly figures in such a well-appointed space. For instance, it is worth noting their clear upper-middle or upper-class status, which would have some bearing on their life expectancy, comfort, and veneration within the family structure.

Sadler's genteel husband and wife likely have a higher-than-average life expectancy, due to a comfortable economic status that allowed for a better diet, restful domestic atmosphere, and higher standard of living. In *Death in the Victorian Family*, Pat Jalland describes the diverse concerns that dictated the uncertainty of advanced age, dependent upon one's social station. Of the upper classes and upper-middle classes, she writes, "they did not have to fear old age and death in the workhouse. The chief problems for older members of the upper middle and upper classes were deteriorating mental and physical health, a declining sense of usefulness, decreasing mobility, loneliness, and increased dependency on family, friends, or servants" (144). Sadler's older couple lives their late life in discernable financial comfort. They may enjoy better care than most, and the biggest threats to their happiness are probably related to the social and physical effects of growing older.

With their collection of fine *objets d'art* and artistically decorated home, this couple is likely unburdened by the various financial pressures and consequences that were visited upon many of their contemporaries in the working classes, whose access to economic stability and comfort could be rather tenuous at times. It is evident that pictures such as *The End of the Skein* have the ability not only to describe the lives of upper-and middle-class seniors, but also to contextualize such lives within the wider spectrum of Victorian aging and social strata. Sadler's able resistance of caricature, which also inspires identification by the viewer, aids this reevaluation. W. L. Woodroffe, writing for *The Magazine of Art* in 1896, remarked, "You sympathize with these old people of Mr. Sadler as you do with the lovers of other painters" (273). This sympathy is enabled, in part, by a familiarity with their surroundings and an adherence to popular

Victorian notions of ornament and taste. Viewers could recognize the established and prescribed markers of domestic comfort in Sadler's picture, reducing the sense of "otherness" that may be perceived by some younger viewers upon encountering such a scene of advanced age.

While Sadler made many similar depictions of older members of the upper-middle class sitting near well-appointed hearths, the theme of the elderly figures by the fireside included images of the working classes as well. Comparing Sadler's interpretation with a formally similar composition by a member of the Cranbrook Colony, a group of English painters who specialized in painting rural domestic scenes, results in a similarly expanded reading.

Frederick Daniel Hardy was a founding member of the colony at Cranbrook, Kent, an artistic alliance formed by followers of the genre painter Thomas Webster (1800-1886). Hardy went to Cranbrook in 1854 and was joined by his brother George, as well as their teacher, who arrived in 1857. The painters John Callcott Horsley and George Bernard O'Neill later became members of the group, which eventually counted Augustus E. Mulready and George Henry Boughton among their visitors and associates. Like his Cranbrook colleagues, Hardy developed a reputation for painting many interior scenes of rural cottage life. Recognized for his impassive observation, compassionate characterization, and unpretentious compositions, Hardy found great success with his pictures of English country life, exhibiting about seventy pictures at the Royal Academy throughout his lifetime. Like Sadler's, many of these canvases allude to an interest in aging in their titles, including *Blind Granny* (exhibited at the RA in 1858), *Granny's Visit* (RA 1868), and *Mrs. Herne and her Grandniece, Miss Fanny Homan* (RA 1870).

Perhaps as a product of the success he found at the annual Academy exhibition, Hardy developed a national reputation for his modest cottage pictures. The art critic James Dafforne, contributing to *The Art Journal* in 1875, described a few select pictures in his profile of the painter, adding "there is scarcely a subject among them all which does not offer ample materials for description" (73). Many of his compositions also include

older figures sitting near the hearth, like *The Clergyman's Visit*, c. 1850-1855 (fig. 2). As in most of Hardy's pictures, "the story of the picture was [likely] suggested to the artist by some incident . . . of which he had been an actual witness" (Dafforne 73). This early Hardy composition depicts a rural interior, a setting he painted frequently throughout the course of his career. However, unlike most of his cottage scenes of happy families and rambunctious children, *The Clergyman's Visit* shows an elderly couple stoically sitting by the fireplace, listening to a visiting clergyman read aloud, presumably from the Bible. Although the figures are not confidently painted, they are detailed enough to effectively communicate their age. The older figures sit beside the hearth with their visitor, their clustered bodies emphasizing the emptiness of the room.



FIG 2. FREDRICK DANIEL HARDY. *THE CLERGYMAN'S VISIT*, 1850-1855. OIL ON CANVAS. 22.9 X 33.1 CM. WOLVERHAMPTON ART GALLERY

Like Sadler, Hardy treats his older couple with an esteem that Dafforne describes as a favorable thread running through his oeuvre, characterizing these pictures as products of "judgment, feeling, good taste, and without the slightest taint of vulgarity in their humor" (76). However,

despite this sensitivity and sympathy, the figures also demonstrate their status as exemplars of “bad old age.” Their room is plainly appointed; unlike the fine and imported decorative arts found in Sadler’s parlor, their mantle decorations are utilitarian objects like teapots, bellows, and a worn leather case. The very nature of the clergyman’s visit speaks to the couple’s reliance upon external support, an essential marker of “bad old age.” Further, they are unable to comfortably accommodate their visitor, who has had to place his hat on the ground behind the simple wooden stool upon which he sits. Select markers of ill health found throughout the scene also demonstrate their working-class circumstances. The older woman cups her right ear, eagerly trying to listen to the clergyman’s reading despite some difficulties. The foreground is detailed with a few scattered onions, perhaps a staple element of the couple’s poor diet.

Closely reading such small details reveals that this scene provides visual evidence of the experience of “bad old age” as it was visited upon the rural aged. Their unique breed of poverty invited the concern of private religious charities, and Hardy’s scene speaks to an interest in those who cared for the people who found themselves impacted by the problems of pastoral poverty that distinctively concerned figures such as these. Hardy’s celebrated earnestness and detachment further enhance the value of *The Clergyman’s Visit* as social documentary and artistic evidence of artist’s myriad interests in aging and its domestic effects.

Lynn Botelho and Pat Thane remind their readers that, “The conjunction between old age and poverty is well known, and the elderly poor have been identified as pre-eminent amongst the worthy poor for centuries. As individuals age, their economic viability typically declines, and sometimes their income terminates” (7). It is well understood that the elderly are especially prone to poverty, and they are as extremely susceptible to such circumstances as children, an effect deemed “lifecycle poverty.” (Botelho and Thane 8). The marginalization of rural, older laborers is recognized by contemporary age studies, which acknowledges the vulnerability of this population, who “were used as a reserve labor supply, hired at low wages, and employed in the most hazardous and least

desirable work” (Quadagno 168). These susceptibilities also contributed to them becoming a burden to their families or to the public or private institutions that aided the poor. Hardy’s scene may function to show the kind of private, church-based support upon which many of the aged, rural poor would come to rely.

It is also worth addressing these scenes in terms of another adverse facet of aging—the effects of loneliness and isolation. The visiting clergyman in Hardy’s picture proposes a kind of solution to this difficult effect of aging in the post-industrial era. With regular visits from clergy, senior members of the community are spared from such confinement. Unlike Sadler’s upper-class couple, who likely receive visits from relations who intend to receive an inheritance, Hardy’s husband and wife are perhaps not “owed” any calls by family. Although it may seem a pessimistic outlook, it is possible that because they have little to offer in terms of an inheritance, their family may not feel obligated to care for or visit them. The disorderly state of their sparse room implies that they have been left alone and undisturbed for some time. The visit from the clergy could represent charitable outreach that seeks to preclude such isolation, while perhaps also signifying a manner of external financial support from their local parish (Quadagno 18-20).

Hardy’s picture also provides a forum in which to consider the structure of Victorian public and private charity organizations through the injurious effects of the New Poor Law of 1834, which challenged and systematized organized distribution of such private, parish-based charity. Introduced with the intention of establishing stronger legal, financial, and administrative structures for assessing and distributing charity to the segments of the population threatened by penury, the New Poor Law initiated the organization of modern systems of welfare under the national jurisdiction of the Poor Law Commissioners. Unfortunately, these initiatives led to the founding of workhouses, which ultimately penalized at-risk groups, such as children, older adults, and the indigent, for their own poverty. Hardy’s clergyman, a remnant of earlier, less formal systems for the distribution of support to the elderly, offers a sensitive and

holistic alternative to the cruel indignities that resulted from the implementation of these misguided bureaucratic enterprises.

Older members of the Victorian working classes were in particular jeopardy, often suffering from what James Walvin describes as “the inescapable penury of old age.” In *Victorian Values* Walvin asserts, “It was no accident that the largest single group to be found in the workhouses were the old. Indeed, the largest single group of paupers at the end of Victoria’s reign as at the beginning was the old; the next largest group was that of children” (17-21). While the difficult lived experiences of disadvantaged children have been addressed by social art history in a thoughtful manner, particularly by Nancy Rose Marshall in her masterful 2012 book, *City of Gold and Mud*, scholars have yet to apply such lines of inquiry to images of the largest single group who were challenged by the twinned trials of poverty and age.

Although images like the fireside scenes of Sadler and Hardy often evade meaningful consideration by art historians, there is significant sociohistorical and artistic content made available by these pictures. Scholars of aging empower the study of visual and material culture to move beyond such ideas as “the old-fashioned hearthside archetype” (Waxman 11). Insights from age studies can help complicate our reading of Victorian projections of “good old age” and “bad old age” and help us better understand the spectrum of social class, family network, and other factors that contributed to them.

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