The abundance of theatrical activity in nineteenth-century Britain and the centrality of the theatre in the popular culture of the age cannot be gainsaid. Paradoxically, this very abundance and popularity have in the past discouraged scholarly investigation of the subject. The theatre historian, overwhelmed by the myriad of performers and performances—not only in the drama proper but also in pantomime, ballet, opera, and music-hall, all of which flourished as never before or since—typically went no further than a sketch of major developments in Shakespearean productions from Kemble to Irving, with possibly a word or two about the stage reforms of Madame Vestris, Tom Robertson, and the Bancrofts. The critic, also with one evaluative eye fixed upon Shakespeare, despaired over the derivative and halting blank verse of the tragedies, the wearisome stereotypes of the melodramas, the outrageous puns of the extravaganzas, and the shopworn banalities of the comedies and farces. Such a critic either ignored the period from Sheridan to Shaw or studied it in those genres of indisputable literary excellence, poetry and the novel.

By now, numerous scholars have recognized that the theatre of the last century presents an extraordinarily dynamic picture of continuity and change, a period in which the drama should not be assessed solely by some absolute literary criteria but as a manifestation of something quite new and essentially modern: a popular art appealing to a mass audience of urban and industrial background. Whatever the composition of theatrical audiences in London in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, they were, both numerically and critically, elitist. In the nineteenth century the population of London grew from one million in 1800 to two
and one half million in 1850 and to six and one half million in 1900, with the working-class proportion rising, as Michael Booth points out, to a staggering eighty per cent by mid-century. Much of this populace was politically conservative, morally conventional, and aesthetically naive and undiscriminating. Many were illiterate. Their lives were drab and humdrum at best, and what they sought in their amusements was, quite understandably, escape. They wanted color, excitement, magic, adventure, laughter, and tears. Notwithstanding the social and political revolutions going on around them, and of which they were \textit{ipso facto} a part, they rarely sought polemic or doctrine or even satire in their theatre. (Censorship of religious and political subjects seems to have coincided with popular taste rather than to have channeled it.) Perhaps the only popularly supported “revolution” in the nineteenth-century British theatre was the growing rebellion against the traditional wing-and-shutter stage, dominated by the individual actor, and the increasing demand for a realistic one, dominated by the director and designer. The various ways by which authors, actors, and managers attempted to find common theatrical denominators that would appeal to large segments of this public could be almost endlessly enumerated, but in general the ways led away from a drama of poetry, words, and ideas towards a theatre of songs, music, and pictures. Aristotle’s hierarchy of the elements of tragedy was, as it were, up-ended, music and spectacle given careful and elaborate priority while plot and character languished in perfunctory predictability.

The following essays are a selection from papers given at a Conference on the Nineteenth-Century British Theatre held at the Amherst campus of the University of Massachusetts on 10-12 May 1974. Although we had hoped to publish all of the papers as a separate volume, we are grateful to Theatre Survey to be able to offer at least this generous sample of the kinds and quality of the presentations. Some of the other papers are being published elsewhere, and still others form parts of larger works-in-progress that will emerge in due course. A synoptic account of all twenty-one of the papers should prove of value, however, not simply as a record of the first conference in America devoted exclusively to the nineteenth-century British theatre, but more particularly because of what, as an aggregate, they suggest about certain preoccupations and predilections of the age, and the dominant ways by which traditional artistic forms accommodated themselves to growing audiences and changing tastes and values.

The topics of the conference papers were intentionally allowed to vary widely, ranging from the management of the patent theatres, to acting
styles of star performers, to popular modes of entertainment, to scenic theory and practice, to matters of methodology in the research of the period. Three of the essays—Cecil Price’s account of Sheridan’s troubled management of Drury Lane, Alfred Nelson and Gilbert Cross’s work on the diaries of the Drury Lane acting manager James Winston, and Don Wilmeth’s description of George Frederick Cooke’s first seasons at Covent Garden—offered evidence of the strong continuity between the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century theatre. The patent houses continued to hold their monopoly on the legitimate drama, and it was on their stages that the most acclaimed actors and actresses continued to play (or vie) with one another in a standard repertory consisting mostly of tragedy, comedy, and farce. With the triumph of Macready’s fatherly Victorian Virginius over Kean’s bombastic Roman one, as Harry Ritchie demonstrates, there came a shift from heroic to domestic ideals of acting. So, too, in Carol Carlisle’s assessment of the acting style of Macready’s protégée and leading lady Helen Faucit, there is a recognition of the actress’s distinctly human realization of her roles, as, for example, she pictures Desdemona in the willow scene being prompted by Emilia’s words to contemplate the early loss of her mother. A similar domestic note was struck in Harold Nichols’ discussion of the melodramatic acting of Thomas Potter Cooke, a performer most applauded over the years for his tender-hearted reunion with his “little Sue” in Black-Eyed Susan.

However distinct the “lines of business” pursued by Macready and T. P. Cooke, from our perspective there is a noticeable family resemblance between the noble Virginius of the one and the nautical William of the other, and it should be borne in mind that melodrama, not tragedy, was the dominant and successful serious mode of the century. The two major ingredients of melodrama, in name and substance, the music (“melo”) and the drama, were treated respectively by David Mayer and Michael Booth. Mr. Mayer (whose paper was read in his absence by George Rowell) documented with two of the most popular melodramas of the century—The Miller and His Men and The Corsican Brothers—the significance of the substantial musical score that was performed with such pieces. Professor Booth’s survey of East End melodrama reveals that working-class audiences in the 1860s and 1870s continued to delight in the same sort of fare that had been in fashion in the West End decades earlier—an instance of a traditional form preserved and revitalized by a new audience.

If “domestic” and “melodramatic” are terms readily applicable to much nineteenth-century popular theatre, a third is “musical.” Little wonder that a century in which almost every parlor had its piano, every
street corner its organ-grinder, and every park its band, should demand music as an integral part of its theatre. P. T. Dircks explores the continued popularity in the early nineteenth century of an eighteenth-century form, the burletta, and the refinement of it by the prolific dramatist James Robinson Planché. In the second half of the century another musical form emerges, one that out-distanced all other forms of theatre in popularity by the last quarter of the century—the music-hall. Laurence Senelick, verifying some of Professor Booth’s contentions, made abundantly and amusingly clear that working-class audiences in the halls were not inclined toward radical political or social views.

Visual spectacle also delighted nineteenth-century audiences. Trevor Griffiths described Frederick Reynolds’ 1816 adaptation of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, long on pageantry, if short on Shakespeare, which displeased Hazlitt but pleased many others. Martin Meisel considered the pervasive influence of the imposing romantic paintings of John Martin on the staging of romantic, particularly Byronic, drama. An obituary of Martin quoted by Professor Meisel could well be applied to many another stage practitioner of the age: “He addresses the eye rather than the mind.” (This would hardly be a fair description of Gordon Craig, however, the subject of a paper delivered by Arnold Rood.) Perhaps the most enduring form of romantic spectacle and aesthetic, the ballet, is considered in Selma Jeanne Cohen’s essay on its critical reception in England.

The rich array of theatrical entertainment in the last century, and the abundance of unexamined documents and evidence, will offer attractive new territory for scholarly exploration for some time to come. Pioneer work in one direction was presented by Harry Beaudry, in his brief introduction to private theatres in London at the start of the century. Equally new ground was broken by Marian Hannah Winter, in her examination of some extraordinarily colorful provincial theatrical and circus posters.

If the wilderness of nineteenth-century British theatre is vast and fascinating, it is also without many scholarly sign-posts, and a concern with careful methodology dominated several papers. A. H. Saxon, using his investigations into the life of the great equestrian Andrew Ducrow as an example, makes vividly clear that much of the plentiful secondary biographical materials and sometimes primary sources as well are erroneous in whole or in part and dare not be trusted. James Stottlir stressed the need for publication of the most significant titles among the great number of Victorian plays that have never been published. A brief proposal was made by L. W. Conolly (in association with J. P. Wearing)
for the reprinting of scarce and inaccessible plays. William Green's speculations as to the identity of Wilde's Bunbury were a reminder that even the best-known and most accessible of nineteenth-century dramas remain relatively unexamined. John Bush Jones, in a counsel of perhaps unrealizable perfection, questions whether anything short of the most rigorous editorial and bibliographical principles should be admitted in preparing texts of Victorian plays.

The Amherst conference was planned in part to publicize the London Stage 1800-1900 calendar and to allow its editors to benefit from the shared knowledge of scholars working in the nineteenth-century theatre. We believe that the conference testified both to the substantial scholarly interest in the subject and to the need and desire for the basic calendar research that has now been initiated. A full and proper understanding of the subject will emerge only from a combination of individual investigations illuminating particular points on the theatrical landscape, such as those examined by the conference participants, and collective, large-scale enterprises mapping out the entire terrain. The examination of plays, players, playwrights, and playhouses will need increasingly to be substantiated and supplemented by massive reliable factual information. Such information need not and should not be collected piecemeal; it must be assembled through a cooperative arrangement among numerous scholars, one that will guarantee fullness of coverage and uniformity of method, and will avoid unnecessary or duplicated effort.

Present endeavors and future accomplishments, then, rest on the primary importance of basic research itself. Study of the nineteenth-century British theatre, and the London theatre that lies at its center, will for some time remain pioneer work. For scholars engaged in the enterprise, that, of course, is part of its fascination.

James Ellis and Joseph Donohue

NOTES

1The papers have been slightly edited for the accommodation of a reading instead of a listening audience.