

INTRODUCTION TO THE VICTORIAN AGE (1837-1901)

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The Best of Times and the Worst of Times? A sweeping statement about the Victorian Age as a whole might be that it was marked by change-induced crisis in politics, economics, religion, and social affairs as well as by faith in “progress” as almost a metaphysical imperative. People came to expect that things would continue to change more rapidly than even the most forward-looking person could account for. But it is best to keep such statements in perspective; after all, they cannot ultimately do the age justice, any more than our comments about our own times can make them fully intelligible to ourselves or those who come after us.

The Hanoverian Line. Victoria became Queen at the age of 18 in 1837 when her uncle, King William IV, passed away, and she died on January 22nd of 1901 after a reign of 63 years. She was a member of the Hanoverian line, which dates back to George I in 1714. The Hanoverians followed William and Mary (the rulers who established themselves in what has become known as the “Glorious Revolution” of 1688, which settled the throne on thoroughly Protestant rulers once and for all, and then Queen Anne. Among the many developments that made Victoria’s reign seem markedly different from earlier periods in British history, two are especially deserving of attention. The first is the French Revolution (1789-1815), and the second is the Industrial Revolution that began around 1780 and accelerated all through the Victorian Age.

The French Revolution. Victorians lived through momentous times—they had to face the world after a long and bitter struggle with Revolutionary and Napoleonic France, which had overthrown an ancient feudal aristocracy in the name of democratic ideals, only to export “liberty, equality, and fraternity” by military violence. In England there was much early enthusiasm on the part of poets and intellectuals for the Revolution’s claim that human institutions were improvable, not immutably natural or god-ordained. The revolutionaries toppled an undemocratic and corrupt system and meant to put in place more democratic institutions. But by late 1792, the Terror had begun. The French Jacobins were determined to purge their country and did so by means of the guillotine. By 1793, the French and British were at war—and the situation lasted on and off for 22 years. By the late 1790’s Napoleon Bonaparte had become First Consul, and he declared himself Emperor in 1804. It would be wrong to say that the political violence and war completely effaced revolutionary ideals, and in fact Napoleon was not only one of the greatest generals in history but also one of the most momentous reorganizers of government. Still, it would be correct to suppose that a great price in human suffering was paid when democratic ideals were exported at the point of the sword and cannon—Napoleon’s means did not do justice to his designs on the human spirit.

After Waterloo: the Conservative Reaction. After Napoleon’s defeat and final exile in 1815, the British Tories who had conducted the war, wanting no manifestations of French revolutionism in an economically depressed post-war Great Britain, enacted repressive legislation to tamp down dissent by “the lower orders.” Freedom of speech and assembly were curtailed, even though George III (insane since 1810) was not as disliked as Shelley’s label “an old, mad, blind, despised and dying king” would have us believe. The king remained popular, but serious socio-economic troubles were undeniably at hand. In fact, some historians put the beginnings of what we call “the Victorian Period” right back to 1815, the end of the War. That makes sense because there really was no going back to the stable old aristocratic order; new developments were in process, and not all of them were directly connected to the war. Post-war European governments, along with that of the British war hero turned Tory¹ Prime Minister, the Duke of Wellington, tried to suppress these values after defeating Napoleon, but ultimately they failed: there was to be no turning back to the ancient way of living and governance, and the expectation of change that gave birth to the French Revolution itself continued into the new century, becoming a constant of the Victorian Age.

The Industrial Revolution. Among the changes taking place and making it impossible to “turn back the clock”—especially in Great Britain—was a second great development: the Industrial Revolution, the beginnings of which we may trace back to the late Eighteenth Century, around 1780. Commerce had long been important in Europe, and the

commercial classes had extracted from monarchs the right to control their own property. Aside from religious strife, that aim was, of course, part of what the Puritan “Roundheads” of the 1640’s achieved when they beheaded the pro-Catholic, absolutist Stuart monarch Charles I. These early “businessmen” required a broader market for their goods along with more and more raw materials with which to make them. That broader market came into being partly through foreign exploration and conquest in India, Africa, and the Americas. Population growth in Europe itself also made for an increase in the size of the market as well as more labor for the work force. So an increasingly important commercial class, bigger markets, and expanded population made the Industrial Revolution possible.

Why the Industrial Revolution in England First? The transformation occurred in Britain first since the British economy was strong—there was capital to invest, and at least some of the people already had a high standard of living compared to those on the Continent. The food supply was impressive thanks to large-scale farming, London was already a great commercial center, and the English didn’t seem to have the same snobbish attitude about money-making that, say, the French or Spanish aristocrats exhibited. John Bull was no Don Quixote. The men who had brought down an English King in the 1640’s were on the whole landed “gentlemen,” but they were also commonsensical Protestants with good business sense. Their descendants (especially the “Dissenters” who were excluded from the Anglican Establishment² and from the higher reaches of civic life) had nothing against making a living, and were a substantial portion of England’s business class. So by 1780, England, with its huge naval power, its successive foreign expansions, and its clear-headed commercial class, was ready to revolutionize its means and modes of production to meet the greater demand for its goods that was to come with expanded markets.

Cotton, Iron and Coal. Cotton textiles were a key British export, and James Hargreaves’ spinning jenny (1770), Arkwright’s water frame, and Samuel Crompton’s spinning mule (1779) made it possible to produce vastly more cotton textiles for export—around 40% of British exports by 1815. Other developments made the revolution take off: coal power for iron production, and, above all, steam power (James Watt and Matthew Boulton, 1769). As steam power gradually replaced water as the source for industrial production, it became possible to locate large factories conveniently in large urban complexes in the north of England, and great industrial towns like Manchester begin to transform English life and landscape. Add to all this the coming of the railroads from the 1830’s-40’s, which networked commercial centers and greatly increased the speed of production and sale of commodities while at the same time amounting to a new investment and manufacturing opportunity, and the effect is stunning: people’s sensibilities and ways of living were changing at an exciting-but also anxiety-provoking-speed.

Post-War Slump and Industrialization Contribute to Need for Reforms. Industrial and economic transformation brought with them intensely felt social transformation, too: urbanization meant employment for some, unemployment for others—a heart-wrenching instance of this fact would be rural handloom weavers thrown out of work by the new cotton-working devices. These people had always struggled to keep body and soul together, and when the machines came into play, they lost the fight. And one must consider the human cost of urbanization: the early industrial city was no paradise—in its rawest form, industrial production was carried on at great risk to the workers (men, women, and children) and with great harm to their quality of life. Before the reformist wave in the 1830’s, there was little talk of “labor laws” to protect those whose toil made the augmentation of capital possible. Dickens’ mid-Victorian satires of factory conditions, as well as the scathing accounts written by Marx and Engels, ring true. Moreover, life was rather precarious in other ways since the kinds of sanitary knowledge and measures we take for granted in the twenty-first century simply did not exist through much of the Victorian Period. Outbreaks of typhus and cholera due to unsanitary water were a fact of life, even for those above the lowest levels of society, and the same was true of infant mortality. Medical care might be more deadly than the condition for which one sought relief. All in all, during the early and even the middle Victorian Era, many aspects of life that now seem safe and not worth remarking upon cried out—not often with immediate success—for systemic and sustained attention.

Class Consciousness. As a result of concentration and discontent, a sense of “class consciousness” began to infiltrate British life and discourse—poor people were no longer so inclined as formerly to respect their betters, while the new factory owners often saw their employees as little more than chattel or cogs in the profit-engendering machine. Those who fell behind in the race to survive swelled the ranks of the urban poor—a new concentration whose

anonymous, yet intense and appalling, poverty simply could not be dealt with by the old-fashioned private application of charity. Carlyle wrote truly when he argued that in early Victorian England, little tied one human being to another except “the Cash Nexus.” An urbanizing population, a transforming society, requires a transformation in other areas too—most notably in the area of politics or “governance.” In post-Napoleonic England, the poor were seldom satisfied with their condition, the economy had many rough rides, and the middle class manufacturers had no real political representation, no say in England’s affairs. Politics had long been the province of the landed aristocracy. There were new groups to be represented, and new problems to be solved. The ways in which these matters got themselves discussed and dealt with (or not dealt with), as well as the dynamic people who did the discussing and dealing with, account for a lot of the interest historians and literary people continue to take in the Victorian Period.

DIVIDING THE NINETEENTH CENTURY INTO MANAGEABLE UNITS

It is customary to divide the Victorian Period into three manageable sections, easy to remember by the phrase “30/50/70.” Before the earliest Victorian date comes the Regency Period, which deserves a brief mention because of its connection to the romantic poets.

THE REGENCY PERIOD AND ROMANTICISM (1810-20)

The years from 1810-20, which encompass the transition from wartime to post-war Britain, are called the Regency Period, during which a rather dissolute Prince Regent filled in for his mad father George III. This is the period we associate most closely with the second wave of romantic poets Byron, Shelley, and Keats, the first two of whom held fast to democratic ideals and condemned George III’s regime as tyrannical. The very early 1790’s had seen the idealism of the first wave British romantic poets Blake, Wordsworth, and Coleridge, but that idealism gave way to disillusionment and patriotic sentiment, perhaps, as M.H. Abrams suggests, to an internalization or privatization of the revolutionary ideals liberty, equality, and fraternity. By the mid 1820’s the younger romantics had passed away, and only a conservative-tending Coleridge and Wordsworth clung to life, the latter living on to 1850 as poet laureate and conservative “Victorian.” Romanticism, which in Britain was more a literary movement than a political or historical one, had spent its most direct cultural force—though indirectly romantic ideals continued to exercise much influence during the Victorian Age, and as yet no new literary movement had come into play. George III died in 1820, and his regent son ruled for ten years as George IV.

THE EARLY VICTORIAN PERIOD (1830-50)

Economic, political, social difficulties became increasingly evident during these two decades, and it was clear that “the spirit of the age” differed from anything that had gone before. Industrial development and urbanization, as discussed above, were key factors, along with increasing class consciousness and strife. The two most important political events during this period are the Whig Prime Minister Earl Gray’s First Reform Bill of 1832, which gave limited representation to the prosperous middle class sections of Britain, and Tory Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel’s repeal of the protectionist Corn (i.e. Wheat) Laws in 1846.

The First Reform Bill (1832). By 1830, when William IV became king, England had already seen the makings not so much of French-style revolutionism as of the kind of agitation for change that would come to characterize the Victorian “Age of Improvement,” as historian Asa Briggs calls it. There was some violence by and against laborers—most notably the violent repression of working people at a gathering in Manchester’s Saint Peter’s Fields, 1819, but with the coming into power of the Whig Party in 1830, the political system passed into the hands of men willing to make concessions if not to the unskilled working people, then at least to the capitalists of Manchester, Leeds, and Birmingham—men responsible for Britain’s new and remarkable urban and industrial development and for augmenting its economic power at home and abroad. Following the prime ministership of the Tory war hero Wellington, Whig Earl Grey and his cabinet saw that Britain had serious problems, and they made a decision to adapt the system sufficiently to stave off disaster. When the Reform Bill finally made it past the conservative House of Lords in 1832, the vote was extended to men of much less wealth than before; further, some of the most absurd abuses in

parliamentary districting were removed. The Whig reformers saw their decision not as a great revolution but as a final, moderate settlement. Still, what they did influenced Britain's future development, setting the stage in future decades for further democratization that would keep pace with changing demographics and expectations.

Repeal of the Corn Laws (1846). The Corn Laws were a protectionist measure from the Napoleonic Period that had served the landed aristocracy well by keeping their wheat sales safe from cheap foreign competition. But the working people disliked such protectionism because it increased food prices, and industrial capitalists disliked it because they had to pay those workers higher wages. And in more philosophical terms, protectionism offended the manufacturers and men of commerce whose dissent went into the making of the first modern "interest group," the Anti-Corn Law League (founded 1839) under the leadership of Richard Cobden and John Bright. Such men favored the *laissez-faire* principles of Political Economy as laid out by Adam Smith, David Ricardo, Thomas Malthus, and others. The removal of the wheat tariff was a triumph, then, for middle-class economic aspirations.

The Hungry Forties and Chartism. While amounting to a momentous show of good sense on the part of England's rulers, the 1832 Reform Bill and the Corn Law Repeal didn't solve all of the country's problems-economic troubles continued to generate working-class unrest, and the manufacturing class still didn't have the control they wanted over the political system. The 1840's were particularly tough times, railroad-building and investment aside-they are sometimes called the "Hungry Forties" because of famine in Ireland and intense misery in Britain. Many people feared a continental-style socialist revolution (Marx's Communist Manifesto was published in 1848, a year of revolution on the Continent.) The 1830's-40's are the era of Chartism, or working-class radicalism; though this loosely organized movement failed to transform the system, it certainly made a deep impact on the consciousness of the well-to-do and the middle classes alike. (The People's Charter that gave the movement its name is included in the Tucker-Mermin anthology.)

The Sage Writers. In literature, the first Victorian sage-writers made their appearance during the early part of the period: John Stuart Mill and Thomas Carlyle were among those debating the "Condition of England Question" and trying to find a new principle of moral authority and intelligibility for a country undergoing deep political unrest and religious doubt. John Henry Newman (later a catholic convert and Cardinal) was primarily concerned with religion-not so much with religious doubt as with what he perceived as an Anglican failure to assume its proper spiritual role in English life. He and other members of the Tractarian or Oxford Movement (1833-41) railed away at the holdover attitude of Deist rationalism into which the Church of England had fallen during the eighteenth century. But other early and mid-Victorians were concerned with the problem of outright doubt, thanks to the "Higher Critics" (textual scholars) and to precursors of Darwin like the geologist Sir Charles Lyell. Lyell's 1833 volume *Principles of Geology* asserted the doctrine of uniformitarianism, implying that the same forces that shaped the earth had operated consistently over vast periods of time and thereby contradicting the Bible's temporal scheme. The more readerly of the early Victorians began to feel the impact of what historian Robin Gilmour calls "deep time," and as the century wears on, science more and more takes on the role of history. While this scientific view generally came with an embedded concept of "progress" or "teleology," that embedded concept could not make up entirely for the promise offered by older, more humanistic notions of history.

Evangelical Religion. This focus on the persistence of doubt is not to say that the Victorian Age "killed god," as Nietzsche's madman says modern humans had. In fact, along with the sage-writers we should place Britain's dissenting Protestants and the more evangelical among the Anglicans: they generally comprised the middle-class commercial and manufacturing element, and were very much in favor of social reform: much of the impetus behind the era's great reforms in labor conditions and political process came from evangelical Christians who felt that improvement of the human condition was their moral duty. They tended to emphasize private or individual philanthropy over government action, but the impulse to reform was widespread.

Benthamites. Another element tending to reform was the influence of the early Utilitarians, whose leading author was Jeremy Bentham. While Benthamites supported the basic tenets of Political Economy or *laissez-faire* capitalism-free markets and minimal government interference in people's affairs, they also believed along with the earlier

empiricist philosopher John Locke that humans come into the world as “blank slates” and that, therefore, education and government are central to the possibility of achieving human happiness. On the whole, they wanted to rearrange human affairs to suit the “greatest happiness for the greatest number,” and their desire to accomplish that goal in a scientific, rational manner is responsible for the kinds of “blue-book” studies that inaugurated some of the major Victorian reforms. It is easy to criticize the cruder formulations of the thinkers that Carlyle scornfully labeled “Benthamee radicals,” but the essence of their philosophy is that the goal of humanity is happiness and that society ought to be so arranged as to allow free people to seek that happiness. At its best, Utilitarian thought—especially in the formulations of John Stuart Mill, responds in a refreshingly democratic-spirited, systematic way to Aristotle’s ancient questions about what constitutes “the good life” and how each person might best attain it.

THE MID-VICTORIAN PERIOD (1851-70)

The Great Exhibition (1851) and the Second Reform Bill (1867). 1851 is a good year to choose as the start of this supposed reign of confidence and optimism since during that year the Great Exhibition at the specially built “Crystal Palace” showcased the latest and grandest scientific wonders for an admiring world. Parliamentary attempts to deal with the crisis atmosphere of the 30’s and the “Hungry 40’s” were to a large extent successful, at least insofar as there was no Continental-style radical revolution in Britain. While the aristocracy continued to hold the reigns of political and social power, it at least accorded the urban middle classes a say in British affairs. There was still much social inequality, but Britain’s increasing domestic productivity and foreign power made this period what historian W.L. Burn calls an “age of equipoise” presided over by the independent-minded Whig Prime Minister Lord Palmerston. The Second Reform Bill of 1867 (the Tory Derby/Disraeli ministership’s doing) extended the vote to still more of the middle class and even to some working-class householders, furthering Britain’s move towards greater democracy. The Forster Education Act of 1870 (education for children from 5-13) eventually had the same tendency in that it heralded the advent of a relatively educated, informed public that could perpetuate a democratic, adaptable, market-oriented society. Mid-Victorian England seemed to have got some sense of itself, one might say, and the necessary thing was progress—continual social, political, scientific, and economic progress. These were also the years of the Sepoy Indian mutiny, the Crimean War, and Governor Eyre’s brutal mishandling of an anti-colonial uprising in Jamaica, but on the whole the mid-Victorian years were prosperous and generated much hope for better things to come.

The Culture Critics. Still, if nothing succeeds like success, nothing except abject failure comes in for more concentrated critical fire. Among those who questioned the reigning evangelical and utilitarian self-satisfaction were a matured Carlyle, John Ruskin, and Matthew Arnold, all of whom we will study this semester. These authors were not great lovers of democracy in matters of culture or politics, but at times their critiques hit home and undercut the more sanctimonious attitudes and practices of mid-Victorian Britain. They still have much of value to say to us, provided that we read them in a truly historicist spirit. In particular, Arnold’s anxiety about a world changing so much and so rapidly as to become “multitudinous” or unintelligible is illuminating. Along with expectation of change and progress, apparently, came fear of its effects upon the human psyche, and much argument over what exactly ought to be meant by that ambiguous word “progress.”

THE LATE VICTORIAN PERIOD (1871-1901)

Empire and the State. The late Victorian Period saw economic uncertainties (agricultural depression) and an ominous lunge towards imperial conquest, which of course means tremendous opportunities but also puts one in mind of Acton’s Law about the corruptive effects of power on those who wield it. Events in India and Africa (The Boer War lasted from 1899-1902), among other places, were to show the dangers of imperial glory-seeking. Victoria was pro-Empire, as was Tory Prime Minister Disraeli, while Liberal Prime Minister Gladstone opposed it as best he could, not necessarily with the support of the average Briton. Militarist adventurism in foreign affairs contrasted with genuine progress in the areas of health, democratic participation, education, women’s rights, financial accountability for banks and corporations, and other areas. The advances came even though some of those who had the most zeal for reform in the mid-Victorian Period began to feel uncomfortable with the increasing role of the State in effecting that reform and administering the country. And this period saw one last Reform Bill (Gladstone, 1884) that largely

completed the decades-long project of expanding the male franchise. (In spite of suffragette campaigns, women did not get the vote in Britain until after World War I, 1918.)

Literary Decadence and Modernity. Increasingly as the century progressed, the U.S. and Prussia threatened British hegemony-Britain was not alone in seeking to play a large role on the world's stage. By Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897 (briefly captured on film!), it was clear to just about everyone that her era was over. From the late 1880's through the mid-1890's, a brilliant period of literary Decadence flourished, its most notable figure being Oscar Wilde, whose witty plays and self-commodifying celebrity mocked the earnestness and pretensions of the middle-class Victorian audiences who applauded him. A more thoroughly "modern" world awaited Great Britain in the twentieth century. Much attenuated were the earnest Evangelical moral tone, the straightforward acceptance of political economy's prescription for social and economic progress, simple faith in the religion of one's parents and comfort in time-honored social distinctions of rank and birth. "Progress" seemed to many people a much less comforting word than it did during the mid-Victorian period. The longstanding troubles between Catholics and Protestants in Ireland continued into the twentieth century, long after the establishment by Prime Minister David Lloyd George of the Irish Free State in 1922.

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NOTES

¹ Tory and Whig. Harold Schultz points out that the origin of the British political parties is rather colorful. The Tories were those who favored Charles II's new Anglican and royalist strategy after his pro-Catholic maneuvering reminded everyone just how much they had disliked his father Charles I. This "Court Party" unwillingly took its name from a pejorative term for Irish cattle thieves. The Whigs, who received their appellation just as unwillingly from a term for murderous Scottish highway robbers, disliked Charles II's heavy Anglicanism and his insistence on meddling in Parliamentary affairs. By and large, these men (some of them merchants) wanted to limit the King's power and demanded that "Dissenters" from the Church of England be tolerated. As Schultz says, they were the heirs of the Puritans under Cromwell who had brought down Charles I in the 1640's. The Whigs later got the name "Liberals" (the latter term seems especially appropriate for the mid-century, middle-class supporters of laissez-faire) while today we generally call the Tories "Conservatives." The Labour Party now in power under Gordon Brown (and until recently Tony Blair) didn't come along until very early in the twentieth century.

² Anglican Church or Church of England. Martin Luther had split from the Catholic Church in 1517, nailing to a church door in Wittenberg his famous Ninety-Five Theses against Catholic Indulgence-peddling. England's Tudor King Henry VIII, frustrated in his attempt to divorce Catherine of Aragon and marry her assistant Anne Boleyn, broke from the Catholic Church in 1534. Henry's decision had little to do with theology and a lot to do with his dynastic desire for a male heir as well as his wish to exercise political power without interference from the Pope. His daughter Elizabeth I settled the Anglican Church as a fixture in English life, though of course later on its royally backed semi-Catholic theological stances upset more deeply "Protestant" English citizens enough to lead to the Civil War of 1642-48 and the reign of Oliver Cromwell from 1653-58. The whole period from 1649-1659 is called the Interregnum ("time between the [Stuart] reigns").