

From *Victorian England*, W. J. Reader (Putnam, 1964)

1 The Victorian Setting

There were twice as many people living in England and Wales when Queen Victoria died [1901] as there had been fifty years before.

. . . many were underfed, many were discontented, but few wished to overthrow the Queen and constitution. . .

. . . they had greater faith in peaceful reform than in violence. For they had already survived the social strain of altering, in a couple of generations, the whole basis of national life from farming to industry, from country to town. (15)

[Decades pre-1850s] The onrush of change was in a fair way to bursting the framework of society.

. . . [early in the reign of Queen Victoria, lacking proper statistics] those who governed did not know what the needs of the governed were. . .

. . . the political economists who so greatly influenced early Victorian policy. . . was against interfering with the liberty of the governing classes.

The first thing Victorian reformers had to do, therefore, was to find out what had to be done. Hence the Royal Commissions, the Select Committees, the reports, returns and statistical tables, the Blue Books and White Papers which became a necessary part of the law-making process.

Some of this activity was the result of sheer necessity, as when cholera frightened people into accepting strong measures to look after the health of towns.

A great deal of it arose from change in the balance of power as the middle classes first and then the working classes came to the vote. But there remains much which must be put down to an awakening of the social conscience formerly unparalleled. (18)

...early Victorian England was predominantly young. This was partly because...in the raw horrors of the new towns and amid the unregulated hazards of industry, many people died before they were old. [Census, 1851—half were under 20?] (20)

From God downwards through the Queen and the established social order, there were those, it was generally held, whose place it was to give orders and those

whose duty it was to obey. Obedience was one of the first of many duties exacted of a child by its parents, and it was a virtue highly prized throughout society by those who considered that they had a right to demand it.

As late as the eighties 'democracy' was a dirty word in the political vocabulary of the ruling classes. . . . (21)

With their acceptance of established authority the Victorians combined a settled belief in individual responsibility and individual rights.

The State, according to this view of affairs, should intervene as little as possible, and as late as the eighties it was possible to refer to the Education Act of 1870 in these terms: 'No such organized intervention between parent and child, no such systematic inquisition into those private affairs which Englishmen are in the habit of keeping religiously to themselves, had ever been attempted in this country.'

. . . [there were] appalling handicaps against which the poor had to struggle. . . (23)

. . . the sixty years of Queen Victoria' reign were above all the sixty years of the middle-class man. . . . he saw no reason to doubt that this happy process flowed from the exercise of the middle-class virtues of sobriety, thrift, piety and hard work. (24)

'Dissolute life' was pretty generally regarded as characteristic of eighteenth century behaviour, and a powerful movement against it had been gathering force since Wesley's time.

There was great brutality and great coarseness, both of which the Victorians [eventually, both by laws and numerous initiatives in civil society] did a good deal to remove from English life. (25)

After about the middle of the century [with the Chartist movement pushing for electoral change in 1848] the danger of revolution rapidly dwindled, though even in the mid-eighties the idea of a working class rising could still be seriously discussed in print. (26)

Quite apart from the risk of revolution, violence was never very far under the surface, though much better controlled than formerly. The police had been invented about eight years before the Queen's accession.

'In the new, raw, crude, growing town,' as G. E. Diggle says of Widnes [in the north], 'deeds of violence were...all too frequent'; and property needed protection, too.

The law, less savage than in the eighteenth century, still met violence with brutality. Transportation went on until 1846. The prison system was explicitly punitive; rehabilitation had little part. Public hangings [which Dickens successfully campaigned against], until 1868, were a spectacle of immense popularity.

Strikes were generally expected to be violent... (27)

Trade unions sometimes organized campaigns of terrorism.

For the first dozen years or so of Queen Victoria's reign [1836-1901], then, there was a lively fear or hope of revolution, depending on which side of the barricades you expected to be. Even when that died away, the ordinary and ancient violence of town life, so much more threatening now that towns were so much bigger, was barely being brought under control. (28/29)

The whole basis of English life was changing, and changing much faster than in any of the other social upheavals which England, in her long history, had undergone. The ancient social order of the countryside, with its roots running back into prehistory, was giving place to a strange new town-based society of machinery and mass-production, looking to the twentieth century and beyond. (29)

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