

Victoria & the Victorians

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Here is the familiar image of Queen Victoria who reigned from 1837 until her death in 1901. That is the longest reign in British history but who knows (?) that of her great-great granddaughter, Elizabeth II (1952- present), may surpass her in terms of years upon the throne.

I doubt, however, that the current British monarch will be judged to have reigned over such a revolutionary era. The young woman who was crowned at Westminster in 1837 reigned over a kingdom that led the world into a new era—an industrial era—that essentially reshaped the planet.

She had much in her favor for that task: an agile mind, a strong temperament, and a passion for decorum. That latter quality was much welcomed by the British ruling class who, since the death in 1820 of Victoria's mad grandfather [George III] had been obliged to tolerate the madcap behavior of Victoria's two royal uncles, George IV (1820-1830) and William IV (1830-1837), and had given the House of Hanover a bad name.

The little German kingdom of Hanover had supplied England's royals since 1714; yet, because its laws forbade female accession, Great Britain finally became independent of that dynastic tie. It was linked instead by ties of Victoria's marriage to Albert, Prince of the tiny German duchy of Saxe-Coburg, whom she married in 1840. As we noted last time in connection with the Crystal Palace he contributed mightily to the success of the reign until his death in December 1861. He was, for example, an important factor in keeping Great Britain out of the Civil War in America.

Another important element in Victoria's success was that she came to the throne after a great constitutional crisis had passed. In 1832 parliament adopted a Reform Bill that increased the size of the electorate from about half a million to 813,000; not a breath-taking advancement. But it also abolished 56 "rotten

boroughs” and allocated those seats to the new industrial cities. Britain did not become democratic as a consequence, but at last industrial and commercial interests had a real voice in shaping the kingdom’s affairs and the landowners’ power in parliament was diminished.

The industrialists had a definite point of view expounded eloquently by what’s called “the Manchester School.” Among its chief exponents were:

- Jeremy Bentham (1746-1832), a wealthy recluse who fathered a philosophy of “utilitarianism” best encompassed by his phrase “the greatest happiness for the greatest number.” The individual, he argued, was best suited to decide what that happiness would be, thus government should not decide what is best for him (or her).
- Thomas Malthus (1766-1834), an English clergyman best known for his 1798 Essay on Population in which he warned that growing population numbers would soon outstrip the planet’s capacity for producing sufficient quantities of food.
- Adam Smith (1723-1790), an eccentric professor of logic at the University of Edinburgh, who authored the still-admired Wealth of Nations (1776). This volume is a learned attack on the prevailing economic theory of the day, mercantilism. That doctrine held that the wealth of the planet was limited and that it was government’s duty to see to it that it got its share through careful regulation; thus, Britain’s restrictions on American trade prior to 1776. Smith argued that there was no limit to wealth that could be produced and that the best thing governments could do was “laissez-faire;” leave individuals alone to exploit the planet’s resources for their own (and society’s) benefit.

We are all familiar with these arguments and they are still in the public domain to this day. Smith had acutely observed the benefits, for example, of “the specialization of labor” as part of what was happening in the emerging industrial world. Here, instead of one person producing one pin by converting raw material into a finished product, specialization (in factories) allowed groups of workers to produce far greater numbers of pins simply specializing in one part of the

production process. Of course, he couldn't have known what the factories of the early nineteenth century would be like. Their squalor, their exploitation of child and female labor, the unsafe and often deadly conditions to which they exposed workers made the phrase "laissez faire" ring hollow.

Interestingly enough the resistance to the inhumane exploitation of labor was intertwined with the anti-slavery movement. The French revolutionaries had abolished slavery in France's colonies in the 1790's. The English followed suit slowly; first by outlawing the slave trade in 1807 (the US Constitution did the same the following year) and then by abolishing the practice altogether only in 1833. The driving force behind these measures was William Willberforce (1759-1833) who died just a few days after learning that his efforts had been approved in parliament.

What happened next is truly interesting. The Tories (Conservatives) representing landed interests went after the Whigs (often capital interests) by championing the working class in England, recalling the days of "noblesse oblige." It was the Tories who pushed through parliament the following reforms:

- The Factory Act of 1833 forbade the labor of children under nine in textile mills.
- Another act of 1842 forbade work by women and boys under 10 in the mines.
- Then came the Ten Hours Act of 1847 which limited the working day of women and children to 10 hours.

That might not sound like much but even a parliament dominated by the wealthiest classes in British society were beginning to yield on the most outrageous consequences of "laissez-faire."

There was a rising tide of protest, of course. The Chartist Movement in the 1830's and 40's gained millions of signatures on a charter presented to parliament that demanded: universal male suffrage, the secret ballot, equal electoral districts, no property qualifications for members of parliament, payment for those members,

and annual parliamentary elections. It took until 1918 that these measures were put into effect, except annual elections.

The Chartists attracted much working class support, but even more successful in reform was the Anti-Corn Law League. Founded at Manchester in 1838, this organization functioned like a modern political party encouraging mass support. Its leading lights, John Bight (1811-1889), son of a cotton manufacturer, and Richard Cobden (1804-1865), a Manchester manufacturer, persuaded parliament in 1846 to reduce the tariffs that had been placed on British-produced wheat and corn in 1815 to support the landowners and thus introduce a long era of free trade as national policy. Many of these reforms, you'll note, took place even before Victoria reached the throne, but the passage of the Corn Law Act in 1846 just happened to coincide with a potato famine in Ireland that underlined the callousness of "laissez-faire."

Ireland had a population of about 8.3 million in 1845 when the island's potato crop first failed. A fungus struck this mainstay of the Irish diet and continued its blight over the next five years. People starved; 1.1 million of them between 1845 and 1850. Even more emigrated, often to the United States. By 1850 the island's population had shrunk to about 5 million. Even so, the British government stuck to its devotion to free trade and Irish wheat was exported abroad while Irishmen starved at home. London's callousness would not soon (or ever) be forgotten.

There were, of course, plenty places to go. In addition to the United States there was Canada, Australia (thanks to Captain Cook's voyages from 1768 to 1779), New Zealand (after 1840), and the former Dutch territories of Ceylon and South Africa gained by Great Britain by agreements in Vienna in 1815. While the proportion of Europeans on the planet grew astonishingly after 1650 to nearly 25 %, Britain alone exported two million people. Small wonder. One Englishman in seven was a pauper in the decade between 1850-1860.

Still the increasing application of science to technology was enhancing the quality of life for many Britons. Iron production skyrocketed, for example, when Henry Cort (1740-1800) invented the process of "puddling" that made iron practical for industrial uses (wrought iron or bar iron). He then went on to build a rolling mill

to fabricate the stuff. In 1740 Britain could count only 56 furnaces producing 17,350 tons of iron annually. By 1840 the number of furnaces had climbed to 378 and they were turning out 1,348,000 a year. The railroad was another obvious example of enhanced life quality but their extension to distant corners of Europe and the globe was markedly accelerated by the invention of a practical telegraph by Samuel Morse (1791-1872) in 1844. Only seven years later underwater telegraph lines linked Dover to Calais (just in time for the Crimean War) and by 1870 those lines extended all the way to India.

It was thus becoming increasingly clear that science was opening the path toward real progress in the human condition. During the seventeenth century European intellectuals had entertained themselves by engaging in debate about whether “the ancients” or the “moderns” had produced a superior civilization. A century later during the “Enlightenment” it was simply assumed by many that progress was inevitable and was driving mankind toward perfectibility. The Marquis de Condorcet (1743-1794) was the most eloquent on this subject. In 1794 he penned his famous Progress of the Human Mind, arguing that humanity was on the verge of creating the perfect society after eons of striving toward that goal. The Marquis then committed suicide rather than facing the guillotine that was awaiting him in Paris.

The wars of the French Revolution and Napoleon gave some pause in such an optimistic view of the future but the railroad and the telegraph and all that convinced many that progress was history’s main theme. Then came Charles Darwin (1809-1882). One cannot think of a more Victorian figure even though to this day his work remains such a source of controversy. Next to Karl Marx (1818-1883) he is one of the most important intellectual figures of modern times. What did Darwin say that was so controversial? In his 1859 publication, On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favored Races in the Struggle for Life, Darwin touched off a debate that continues even today. He was hardly the first to suggest that life had evolved over eons, but his observations implied that:

- The biblical account of creation was not supportable by science.

- Existing species were not divinely created; one by one to exist for all times.
- Something called evolution was at work in Nature that was not purposeful (teleological) but rather based on “natural selection,” a random sorting process that had to do with adaptability to environment.

He reached these conclusions as he sailed aboard *the Beagle* in 1834 on a voyage that took him to the Galapagos Islands, but it wasn't for another 20 years that he decided to publish those observations. One reason for that decision was that Alfred Russel Wallace (1823-1913) had reached much the same conclusions and decided to publish them in the magazine *Ibis* in 1858. Darwin then rushed to publication.

It has often been maintained that Charles Darwin was a quiet man, not at all interested in public debate, and inclined instead to enjoy the solitude and leisure that his inheritance from his uncle, Josiah Wedgwood, afforded him. It usually fell to such intellectual lions as Thomas Huxley (1825-1895) to defend Darwin's views publicly. In a famous debate with Bishop Samuel Wilberforce at Oxford in 1860 Wilberforce asked: “do you trace your monkey ancestry on your father's side or on your mother's?” “Darwin's Bulldog” Huxley responded, “I would rather be descended from the humble ape than to trace my ancestry to one who used his ability and position to discredit and to crush those who sought after truth.”

But there was in Darwin's later writings a hint of far more objectionable views, reflective of the period in which he lived. In The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex (1871) he wrote: “Man still bears in his bodily frame the indelible stamp of his lowly origin” and speaks of “the inferior vitality of mulattoes.”

It is no surprise that writers such as Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) picked up on the theme and applied it to human society in his much-celebrated Social Statistics (1850) and the later Synthetic Philosophy (1860). In these much-celebrated works, Spencer took the idea of “survival of the fittest” to its logical conclusion; that those who were thriving in the new industrial age did so because they were more able than their humble human counterparts to prosper.

Samuel Smiles (1812-1904) was another of these popular “Social Darwinists.” In his 1859 masterpiece, Self Help, he proclaimed: *“Even the best institutions can give a man no active aid. Perhaps the utmost they can do is, to leave him free to develop himself and improve his individual condition. But in all times men have been prone to believe that their happiness and well-being were to be secured by institutions rather than by their own conduct. Hence the value of legislation as an agent of human advancement has always been greatly over-estimated.”*

Not everyone agreed. Working away steadily at reading room of the British Museum in London was Karl Marx (1818-1883), a German exile who spent years in that cold atmosphere to foster the idea that working people not only should share the benefits of industrial society but actually control that new form of wealth. I’ll have more to say about Marx later in this course, but for the moment let me note that he, too, shared the Victorian vision of inevitable progress toward perfection. Marx was born in Trier, Germany, to a well-to-do family. His father, born a Jew, was a lawyer and had recently converted to Christianity. He saw to it that his son was well-educated. Karl received his Ph.D. from the University of Jena in 1843. But along the way, including the University of Berlin, he fell under the influence of G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831) whom he never met. That intellectual encounter radicalized his politics and he was obliged in 1849 to move to London where he wrote and with his wife, Jenny (a German aristocrat’s daughter) had seven children (three of whom survived).

Victoria never met this foreigner in her realm. She was busy enough, instead, in dealing with the native Britons chosen by parliament to administer her government. Among the foremost were:

- Henry Temple, third Viscount Palmerston (1784-1865) whom she thoroughly disliked. He served repeatedly as foreign minister and then Prime Minister during the Crimean War and was responsible for the defeat of the Chinese Empire in what is now known as the first Opium War [1841] (in which the British insisted under “free trade” as their right import opium from its territories from India into China against Chinese wishes). A bit later (1850) he (as Foreign Secretary) blockaded the port of Athens when a

Gibraltar-born merchant (now Portuguese)—a certain Don Pacifico—was assailed in his home by a mob. Palmerston sent in the fleet to defend him because he was technically Victoria's subject.

- Then there was the Conservative Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881) who coaxed Victoria out of isolation after Albert died and served twice as Prime Minister (1868 and 1874-1880). He was the major force behind the Reform Bill of 1867 which extended the franchise from one to two million voters. Richard Nixon much admired him.
- Most difficult for her was the Liberal William Gladstone (1809-1898) who on four different occasions (1868-1874, 1880-1885, 1886, 1892-1894) she was obliged to invite to form a government. "He always addresses me as if I were a public meeting," she complained. Gladstone, too, extended the franchise in 1884 to include three-quarters of adult males. Not until 1918 were all males allowed to vote. He could also claim credit for establishing state-supported public education, the adoption of the secret ballot, the legalization of labor unions, the abolition of the sale of commissions in the army, and the abolition of religious tests for those entering Oxford and Cambridge. In that connection, the issue of religion, he suffered his greatest defeat because he came to favor HOME RULE for Ireland.

This is an ancient and difficult issue, as you well know. Once England became a Protestant monarchy under Elizabeth I (1558-1603) the English began confiscating Irish estates on the northern part of the island (Ulster) because they were owned by devout Catholics. The Irish resisted and in the battle of the Boyne (July 1690) they were crushed and the Ulster Protestants still celebrate this victory by marching through Londonderry to this day. Gladstone wanted to give the Irish their own parliament (Home Rule) but his efforts failed in parliament and the issue was left for later generations to solve (if ever).

