Early Victorian Britain, 1832-51

J. F. C. Harrison

John Fletcher Clews Harrison

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In this fascinating and well researched work of the history of the heyday of Victorian British society, Harrison seamlessly weaves together the overlapping developments in politics, economy, social and culture.It was a period that saw Britain become a predominantly urban society, continuing industrialization, the growth of new and distinct social classes, as well as social conflict over the New Poor Law and the emergence of Chartism.

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Preface

The writing of this book was begun in September 1968 when the author was a visiting research fellow in the Research School of Social Sciences at the Australian National University, Canberra. My thanks are due to Professor John A. LaNauze and his colleagues in the Department of History for their very great kindness to me, and for providing the most perfect conditions for academic work.

The manuscript was read in part by Dr F. B. Smith, Professorial Fellow in the Department of History, RSSS, Australian National University, and in whole by Dr E. J. Hobsbawm, Emeritus Professor of History at Birkbeck College, University of London. To both of them I wish to express my thanks and appreciation.

In part of Chapter Five I have drawn upon material which I used previously in my book *Learning and Living, 1790–1960* (1961), and I am grateful to the publishers, Messrs Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, London, and the University of Toronto Press, Toronto, Canada, for permission to do this.

J.F.C.H.

Introduction

This book is intended to be a brief introduction to the history of British society between 1832 and 1851. It is not a sociological history, nor does it take a 'men and manners' approach. Rather it is an attempt to synthesise recent work in the field and indicate the way in which social historians in Britain and America are now interpreting the early Victorian period. The work of the pioneers in this area (J. L. and Barbara Hammond, G. D. H. Cole, J. H. Clapham, G. M. Young and others) is still indispensable for a study of early Victorian society. But this work was mostly rooted in the 1920s and 1930s, and in the years since then interest has shifted to new problems and new ways of sifting the evidence, though this re-evaluation has not yet proceeded very far. One of the purposes of this book is to convey a sense of the problems which face the social historian, to enable the reader to glimpse some of the difficulties as well as the intellectual excitement in recreating and analysing a past society. 'History,' said a very great social and economic historian, R. H. Tawney, in his inaugural lecture at the London School of Economics in 1932, 'is concerned with the study, not of a series of past events, but of the life of society, and with records of the past as a means to that end.' The historian's role 'is ultimately to widen the range of observation from the experience of a single generation or society to that of mankind'.

The period under review in this book begins with the passing of the Great Reform Bill in 1832 and ends with the Great Exhibition of 1851. Between these terminal dates lies a turbulent, confusing era variously labelled the Age of Reform, the Age of the Chartists or the Hungry Forties. Massive events like the New Poor Law, Chartism, the repeal of the Corn Laws and the Great Irish Famine are played out amidst pedestrian political manoeuvrings and violent fluctuations of the economy. Statesmen later to become the most famous of household names (Gladstone and Disraeli) hover in the wings; figures now long forgotten (like George Hudson the Railway King) dazzle the public eye for their brief period of glory. A young, attractive (if not beautiful) Queen is a refreshing change from the previous despised monarchs, her wicked uncles. Presiding over the nation in his unique role as a folk hero is the arch-conservative and victor of Waterloo, the ageing Duke of Wellington.

Some of these characters and events will appear from time to time, but they are incidental to the main subject of the book which is society as a whole. We shall be concerned with the total structure of society, and social relationships between groups and individuals and the social institutions which define those relationships. The economic roots of these social patterns, the different life styles among various groups, and the corresponding ideologies will be brought out. Industrialism, urbanisation, improvement and self-help will provide dominant themes. In a final chapter on social mobility and social reform movements we shall consider problems of change, both sanctioned and rebellious. The regional and national diversity of Britain is seldom sufficiently emphasised by historians. Differences between town and countryside, metropolis and provinces, one main region and another, are mentioned in this book, but Irish, Scottish and Welsh readers may well feel that its bias is too exclusively English.

This last difficulty points up the limitations of a book such as this. Inevitably the writer of a general history has to draw upon the specialist work which has been done in various areas of the field. Sometimes these specialist studies will be plentiful and useful; at other times they may be completely lacking or only marginally useful. There are many questions which the historian would like to, but which he cannot answer, simply because he lacks the relevant data or monographs. It is therefore important to establish at the beginning what we know, what we don't know and what we need to know about the social history of the early Victorian period.

Apart from politics, we probably know most about the economic background and the social costs of the process of intensive industrialism. A lively debate as to whether the standard of living of the working classes improved or deteriorated still continues, and has stimulated research into little-known aspects of the day-to-day life of labouring people. Because of the interest which labour and

socialist historians from Karl Marx onwards have always shown in this period, we know a good deal about the various radical and social reform movements of the 1830s and 1840s. Examinations of the concept of class and the dynamics of popular protest have further deepened our understanding in this area. Recently there have been studies of the New Poor Law; and the shadowy underworld of crime, prostitution and pornography has begun to be seriously probed. The landed interest has been systematically described and analysed; and the respectable, self-help classes have begun to attract more sympathetic study than they once did. Literary evidence (novels, poems and articles) has been well used to characterise Victorianism, and to explore, among other things, the social attitudes of the age. In general, the substance of this book has been drawn from those parts of early Victorian social history about which we know most.

But in writing it the author has been greatly aware of what we don't know, and where further research is necessary. Although excellent monographic work on Irish, Scottish and Welsh history has been and is being done, we have not yet reached the stage when it can easily be integrated into a general history of the British Isles. Ireland, except when events impinge on English politics, is seldom mentioned, and then always as a 'problem'. Scotland, with its very different systems of law, education and poor relief, is usually ignored; while Wales is simply lumped with England as a single statistical unit. This is to say that the Celtic fringe is virtually left out of the standard British histories, which are written from an English (if not metropolitan) perspective. For political history this is misleading enough, but for social history it is much worse. Most of the generalisations made, for instance, about social structure and social movements, probably need qualification in the light of the Irish and Scottish experiences. And the difficulty cannot be overcome by throwing in the odd example or illustration from Dublin or Aberdeen. Only a series of comparative social studies, concentrating on fairly narrow periods or topics, is likely to uncover significant points of similarity or uniqueness.

There are other, if less dramatically obvious, areas of darkness. Despite the excellent work of modern historical demographers, we still do not understand very clearly the relation between population increase and economic growth – a vital concern of early Victorian Britain. There is no history of the basic social institution in Britain, the family, nor any evidence of much interest in it among historians. The social content of Victorian religion has been largely neglected, except for occasional forays by interested parties. How long have we to wait for a modern history of Methodism, which will do justice to the social complexities of the schisms and connextional strife which plagued the chapels in the nineteenth century? Similarly for education there is a need to get beyond institutional histories, and examine the (largely unstated) social goals of educational movements and efforts. Working class culture, which has received some attention for its more recent periods, remains virtually *terra incognita* for the first half of the nineteenth century; although oral folk tradition, dialect, popular poetry and songs, and material on feasts, festivals and the use of leisure could be used to explore it. We also need more local studies of towns, counties and regions, to document the diversity and richness of our social heritage, and to correct the naivety of much 'national' history. A comparative approach is particularly valuable here, as it is also in intellectual history, which has been much slower to develop in Britain than in the USA. The social roots of ideas, including the ideas of the majority of ordinary people, have to be investigated before we can understand many aspects of a society. But such investigations have not yet gone very far into the period 1832–51.

This recital of the limitations of our present knowledge is not to be taken as meaning that nothing worthwhile can be written about early Victorian society, but that a healthy scepticism towards some of our accepted interpretations is in order. A final caution may also not be out of place. The early Victorian period has an air of familiarity about it, mainly because of our reading of the great novelists, especially Charles Dickens. Yet this can be very deceptive, for we no longer share many of the basic assumptions of that society, and our sympathies and responses are likely to be different from those of contemporary readers. They believed in immutable economic laws, in Malthusian fears of overpopulation, and in objective factors controlling man and society; we for the most part do not.

Nobody in Britain today is prepared to accept poverty and gross inequality as part of a God-given order of the universe; in the 1830s and 1840s the affluent classes and most of the labouring poor took it for granted that rich and poor (like good and bad) would always exist. The barrier to historical understanding is not ignorance of the material facts of our great-great-grandparents' life (for we can easily look at pictures of them at work and play), but lack of sympathy for their fundamental ideas and attitudes. The world of Charles Dickens is a long way, mentally and materially, from us; and the distance increases every year. But if we can manage to overcome the obstacles to historical understanding we shall begin to deepen our awareness of our own society by extending the range of our experience through contact with the past.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.