THE AGE OF IMPROVEMENT
1783–1867

by
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LONGMANS
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VICTORIANISM

1. ‘THE VICTORIAN COMMONWEALTH’

The adjective ‘Victorian’ was apparently coined exactly half way through the nineteenth century by an almost forgotten writer, Edwin Paxton Hood, who set out in his *The Age and its Architects* (1851) to relate the conditions of his own time to the whole ‘development of the ages’. In a chapter called ‘the Victorian Commonwealth’ he began by describing it as ‘the most wonderful picture on the face of the earth’ and recorded as a ‘fact’ the observation ‘perhaps on no other spot of ground has heaven ever grouped so bright a constellation of its best mercies’. He rounded off the comment with an appropriate biblical text, ‘He hath not done so with any people.’ The ‘fact’ and its trimmings may properly be taken as evidence of enhanced national self-consciousness on the eve of the greatest period of Victorian prosperity.

In an England relatively undisturbed by violent class conflicts or political upheavals, there was room for the free exchange of ideas, the cultivation of enjoyment, the quest for personal fulfilment, even for personal rebellion. Though freedom was hampered by private reticence and social conformity, enjoyment was restricted by shibboleths, fulfilment was obstructed by convention, confidence was underscored by anxiety and doubt, and rebellion was confronted by stern orthodoxy and authority, the recognition of limits and barriers lent both edge and inner tension to much of the critical and creative writing of the period. Neither the edge nor the tension was universal, however. There was room also for humour, good nature, making allowances, and reaching compromises. There was above all—though some found it elusive—room for a sense of peace which was usually associated with familiar faces, scenes, and experiences.

1 *The Age and its Architects* (1852 edn.), p. 73.

The domestic ties of the family itself were sung more loudly than at any other period of English history, and the large mid-Victorian family with so many children about the place that it was a necessary rule of reason that ‘little children should be seen and not heard’ was hailed as ‘the unit upon which a constitutional government has been raised which is the admiration and envy of mankind’. There were as many treatises on ‘domestic economy’ in mid-Victorian England as on political economy, all of them designed to foster ‘happy families’. The phrase taken from a familiar hymn, ‘sweet are the ties that bind’, was a key phrase in the 1850s and 1860s. The home was felt to be the centre of virtues and emotions which could not be found in completed form outside, and even in the ties of daily routine there seemed to be special harmony and peace. As Coventry Patmore, one of the most characteristic of Victorian poets, put it:

> Not in the crisis of events,  
> Of compass’d hopes, or fears fulfill’d,  
> Or acts of gravest consequence  
> Are life’s delight and depth reveal’d.  
> The day of days was not the day . . .  
> But, oh, the walk that afternoon  
> We saw the water-flags in flower.

It is perhaps nostalgia for this sense of inner peace against a background of an undisturbed landscape which has drawn the ‘displaced persons’ of the mid-twentieth century back to the Victorian Commonwealth to settle there ‘like illegal immigrants for the rest of their lives’. The prevailing feeling about Victorian England has changed completely since the revolt of Lytton Strachey and the intellectuals of the first quarter of the twentieth century, and in recent years elegant criticism has given way to exaggerated revival. In consequence, a fair appraisal of the Victorian Commonwealth demands a knowledge of historiography as well as of

1 Some of the other necessary rules, e.g. ‘A place for everything and everything in its place’, and ‘early rising’, are well described in a book which ran through many editions, T. G. Hatchard, *Hints for the Improvement of Early Education and Nursery Discipline*. The sixteenth edition appeared in 1853.
2 W. Cooke Taylor, in the T.N.A.P.S. (1874).
3 Mrs. Beeton’s *Book of Household Management* first appeared in 1861. It was one of a whole genre. See J. A. Banks, *Prosperity and Parenthood* (1954), Appendix I.
4 Mill’s phrase was ‘the reciprocity of duty’ (*The Subjection of Women*, ch. IV).
history. It is perhaps now beginning to be possible for the first
time to see both anti-Victorian revolt and Victorian revival in
perspective and to form an impression of the age itself and not of
a distorted image of it. Two necessary qualifications for a fair
appraisal are a sense of time and a sense of discrimination. The
first enables the light and shade of successive Victorian generations
to be recaptured, for there was never one single ‘Victorian Com-
monwealth’ beginning in 1837 and ending in 1901. The second
enables a proper distinction to be made between Victorian achieve-
ments and Victorian failures. For all the achievements implicit in
the dynamic economy and the free society, for all the wonder in
‘the most wonderful picture on the face of the earth’, many Vic-
torians were lonely and isolated, and many others were ‘stupid,
vulgar, unhappy and unsuccessful’. The loneliness adds to the
melancholy beauty of much Victorian literature (Arnold’s Dover
Beach is a classic example); the vulgarity and stupidity still survive
in many of the ‘objects, the buildings, the pictures and the literature
that have been left to us’. The deficiencies were there in the balanced
England of the mid-Victorian years as much as in the England of the
1880s and ’90s. G. M. Young, who considers ‘the life of the
university-bred classes’ in the England of the 1860s to be ‘the
culminating achievement of European culture’, has also written
that if you fall asleep tonight and wake up in 1860 your impression
of Victorian England will depend on where you wake up.

The most sensitive Victorians—and many of the least sensitive
too—were as aware of the contrasts in the Victorian Commonwealth
as historians writing in the twentieth century. E. P. Hoo, for
instance, devoted a large part of his book to the failings of his age.
One Englishman in seven was a pauper; crime was ‘well housed,
well fed, educated and indulged’ while poverty was ‘crushed,
trampled and left uncared for’; the rural ‘Arcadias’ were usually
places of low wages, inferior diets, inadequate housing accommoda-
tion, and illiteracy, while the cities, symbols of progress and in
themselves a ‘great modern treatise on political economy’, were
scarred by dark areas still largely unvisited by the respectable
members of society. ‘Sparta’, wrote Hood, ‘had 300,000 slaves to
30,000 freemen; does not our situation in some sort resemble hers?

... Already we have a revolution, slumbering, but gathering power
in all our cities, and still we pursue our way with intrepid stupidity,
dreaming of Eden in the very midst of a reign of terror.

Hood’s descriptions of the black spots of English city life were
paralleled in many other studies of the 1850s and ’60s. The most
famous was Henry Mayhew’s London Labour and the London Poor,
the first volume of which appeared in book form in 1861. Two years
before, George Godwin, the editor of The Builder, had published his
Town Swamps and Social Bridges, and there was a considerable mid-
Victorian literature of exposure of ‘moral debasement and physical
decay’, much of it ‘making one-half of the people of London known
to the other half’ or trying as Mayhew did to persuade those in
‘high places’ to ‘bestir themselves to improve the conditions of a
class of people whose misery, ignorance, and vice ... is, to say
the very least, a national disgrace’.

It is impossible to understand the Victorian Commonwealth
without entering its underworld, part of which was inherited from
the past, part of which was expanding yearly not only in London
but in Liverpool, Birmingham, Manchester and all the large cities.
And in the countryside, as Bagehot himself was at pains to stress,
there were ‘crowds of people scarcely more civilized than the
majority of two thousand years ago’. ‘Great communities’, he
concluded, ‘are like great mountains—they have in them the primary,
secondary and tertiary strata of human progress; the characteristics
of the lower regions resemble the life of old times rather than the
present life of higher regions.’ As far as the implications of this
social structure for politics were concerned, there were difficulties
which even the Greeks did not have to face. They were not comp-
pelled to combine in their polity the labourers of Somerset and men
like Mr. Grote, the philosophical radical. They ‘had not to deal with
a community in which primitive barbarism lay as a recognized basis
to acquired civilization’. It was in italics that Bagehot printed his
next two words, ‘we have’.

‘Victorianism’—the word was not coined by the Victorians—was
neither a universally congenial nor a universally accepted moral and
social concept in the Victorian Commonwealth. Its four main

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2 E.g. H. Gwinn, Sanitary Ramblings (1861).
3 J. Garwood, The Million Peopled City (1853); see also J. Hollingshead, Ragged
London in 1865 (1865).
4 The English Constitution, ch. I.
elements—the gospel of work, ‘seriousness’ of character, respectability and self-help—were often proclaimed not because they were conspicuous but because they were absent.

For all the Victorian emphasis on work not only as a means to money, respectability and success, but as a supreme virtue, involving both self-denial and creative accomplishment, there is much evidence of scamped work, of absenteeism, above all of drudgery in mid-Victorian England, particularly the drudgery of domestic service on which many happy families depended. Carlyle from his lofty eminence might pontificate that ‘properly speaking all true work is religion’, and the Great Exhibition might render unqualified homage to ‘the working bees of the world’s hive’, but Smiles, the most powerful advocate of the gospel, laid as much emphasis on the existence of social sins as of social virtues, and rebels like John Ruskin and William Morris left no doubt that their ideal of truly rich and creative work was far removed from Victorian practice. Even taken simply as a gospel, the Victorian belief in work often had an element of escape in it, escape from nagging doubts and hidden despair. Many breakdowns which were attributed to overwork were rather due, as Lecky observed, to anxiety.1

‘Seriousness’ or ‘earnestness’ of character expressed itself in many ways—in Carlyle’s attack on ‘Dilettantism’, in Thomas Arnold’s ethos of the public school, in George Eliot’s sense of public duty, in the aristocratic Lord Granville’s refusal to be ‘a gentleman at ease’ and his willingness, as Lord Russell said, ‘to postpone everything to public business’2—but there were many Victorian aristocrats who made no contribution to national life and many ‘members of the middle classes’ who belonged to what Matthew Arnold called the ‘gay’ and even ‘rowdy’ and not to the ‘serious’ section.

Respectability shone out as a virtue only when it was contrasted with the lack of it; cleanliness, sobriety, forethought, and thrift could never be taken for granted. ‘Prodigality’, Smiles wrote, ‘is much more natural to men than thrift [and] economy is not a natural instinct but the growth of experience and example.’3 The respectable gained in their own estimation by shunning ways that others chose to tread; and most of the propaganda to encourage thrift had an element of cant about it. We have heard a man with a mass of unpaid college debts of many years standing’, a writer in the Saturday Review stated, ‘urge the practice of thrift upon an assemblage of mechanics, everyone of whom had money in the savings’ bank, with a fervour that astounded the few persons present who knew [his] . . . private position.’4

Self-help was not easily taught to a substantial majority of the total population, for most of them were in no position to practise it. Skilled artisans might turn with enthusiasm to Samuel Smiles—20,000 copies of Self-Help (1859) were sold within a year of its first appearance—as might ambitious youths from all sections of unprivileged society, but for large numbers of people the walls of necessity were too high and too thick. Hood was wise to distinguish between the needs of two classes—for the first, ‘that all restrictions be removed in their seeking their own elevation’, for the second that they should ‘be lifted entirely from their present sphere, and surrounded by new circumstances and enlightened by new ideas’.5

Emphasis on all the four elements in ‘Victorianism’ reflected not smugness but the need contemporaries felt to discover a secure moral order which would enable them to harness the machine, to improve their standard of living and to coexist powerfully side by side in a country which had travelled far and fast since the 1780s.

There were many deviants from what we have come to call ‘Victorianism’—Richard Monckton Milnes, for example, who in addition to encouraging mechanists’ institutes and penny banks was an indefatigable collector of erotic literature and went to the Great Exhibition to admire ‘lace shawls etc.’,6 or the Crimean War hero, the Earl of Cardigan, who had fought a duel in 1840, had been accused of adultery (and of spiritiing away the chief witness against him) in 1843, and whose men in the Crimea wore ‘tight cherry-coloured pants . . . as utterly unfit for war service as the garb of the female husars in the ballet of Gustavus’.7 There were, however, powerful forces which made for conformity and drove John Stuart Mill in his Essay on Liberty (1859) to complain that ‘society has now fairly got the better of individuality’. Four of them were of special

1 Modern Characteristics, A Series of Short Essays from the Saturday Review (1860), p. 72.
2 The Saturday Review, founded in 1855, was one of the most brilliant Victorian periodicals, a relentless critic of Victorian cant. ‘Every good man’, said the famous preacher Spurgeon, ‘is born for the love of God and the hatred of the Saturday Review’.
5 The Times, 22 April 1854, quoted by C. Woodham Smith, op. cit., p. 138.
importance—the reinforcement of the social and moral position of the ‘middle classes’ as a result of continued economic growth; the pressure of Evangelicalism on all sections of the new society; a further reaction against the ‘barbarism’ of old customs and habits, influenced partly by religion, partly by social change, partly by what Bagehot called ‘an extreme, perhaps an excessive, sensibility towards human suffering’; and a growing sense of the ‘seriousness’ of life not only in the world of work but even in the criticism of that world. The Victorians were their own best critics, but in almost all their criticisms they accepted premises which in retrospect make them as ‘Victorian’ as the targets of their irony or their indignation.

Before examining in more detail certain of these basic features of ‘Victorianism’ it is necessary to view the subject as a whole from two quite different angles.

First, ‘Victorianism’ was not a completely new phenomenon. It was rather the culmination of tendencies going back to the eighteenth century. The fifty years before Victoria came to the throne have often been considered as a ‘Victorian prelude’ during which changes in morals, manners, styles and tastes began to influence the quality of life of the community. There was, of course, no single or unbroken line of development. In Regency England, after the Napoleonic Wars had ended, there was an ostentatious parade not of the virtues but of the vices of Society; behind the stucco there were cracks, but bravura was as much a feature of the age as squalor. For all the arrogance of what Peacock called ‘a steam-nurtured, steam-borne, steam-killed and gas-enlightened race’, there still existed a luxury-living, gay and dissipated, vain and exuberant minority. The romantic movement might eventually play itself out in Victorian hymn-books\(^1\) and even in the pulpit, but in the world after the Napoleonic Wars it expressed itself in the life of Byron, the teachings of Shelley, and the voluminous cravats and quilted waistcoats of the Regency beau. Neither the spirit of Regency England evaporate mysteriously in 1830, or even in 1837. There were dandies in the early 1840s—even a few duels—and scandals in the 1830s; old and new manners, old and new predilections overlapped in nineteenth-century society as much as in nineteenth-century politics. If there was Victorianism before Victoria—Dr Bowdler published his ‘bowderized’ family editions of Shakespeare

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in 1818—there was a flavour of the Regency long after the Prince Regent had given way to the Prince Consort.

By the 1850s and 1860s, however, the code of honour was in eclipse and there was a marked tendency to distrust Regency clothes, Regency entertainments, Regency morals, and even Regency architecture. Journalists writing in 1850 on the significance of the death of Peel pointed out how he had outstripped his schoolmate Byron as the idol of the public; in the same year the Pavilion at Brighton was sold to the local Corporation, and admirers of the age’s new architectural triumph, the Crystal Palace, dwelt not only on its exploitation of glass and iron but on the fact that its designer, Joseph Paxton, had become head gardener at Chatsworth at the age of 23 and since then, as engineer, railway director, and man of affairs had shown, as the Queen herself remarked, how the lowest were able to rise by their own merits to the highest grade of society. It only needed Martin Tupper, the author as early as 1838 of what is regarded as a supremely Victorian book of verse, Proverbial Philosophy—it had run through ten editions by 1850—to proclaim the transition from Victorian prelude to Victorian achievement.

This double decade of the world’s short span
Is richer than two centuries of old;
Richer in helps, advantages and pleasures,
In all things richer—even down to gold.

Second, Victorianism from a different angle was ‘the insular phase of a movement common to the whole of Western Europe and its offshoots beyond the seas’. Mr. Young has quoted a passage from Gogol which might have come straight from any mid-Victorian writer\(^2\); he might have referred also to examples of furniture from the Second Empire or to manuals of business success in the United States. What distinguished English Victorianism from foreign phenomena of a similar kind then and since was not only the peculiar characteristics of English liberalism—ranging from Mill’s passionate belief in representative government and a free society to the non-explosive liberal-conservatism of Trollope and Bagehot—but the way in which that liberalism fitted into a shell of convention which itself was the product of centuries of puritan religion, voluntary effort, and the moulding of a complex social system which made for balance and not for domination. Above all else, what

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\(^1\) The first edition of Hymns Ancient and Modern appeared in 1861.

distinguished England was a very special sort of monarchy and a Queen who gave her name both to her age and her Commonwealth, ‘Victorianism’ before Victoria there was, but she herself had no prototype and in many ways she could claim to represent the spirit of the age as faithfully as her devoted servant Peel and far more faithfully than her aged whipping-boy Lord Palmerston.

2. QUEEN, PRINCE, AND COURT

When Victoria came to the throne in 1837 at the age of 18 the monarchy was at a low ebb. There was little republican sentiment and much talk of ‘altar, throne and cottage’, but William IV’s early popularity had withered away. Victoria’s initial advantages were threefold—her youth, her sex, and her already clearly formed sense of duty. When George IV and William IV ascended the throne they had a past behind them; Victoria, whose succession to the throne had been far from certain, had only a future. Her sex, which might in different circumstances have been a handicap, enabled her to make a special appeal not only to the public but to her prime minister, Melbourne. He was fascinated by the ‘girl-Queen’ and she by him, and the first phase of their ‘partnership’ between 1837 and 1839 was stimulating and happy for both of them. Moreover, from the start the Queen displayed great strength of character and responsibility. She wrote in her journal on the day of her accession that she would do her utmost to fulfil her duty to her country, and despite her youth and lack of experience she immediately took it for granted that others would obey her. Her first triumph of character was over the experienced and worldly-wise Melbourne, whose occupations and habits she revolutionized. She have no doubt he is passionately fond of her as he might be of his daughter if he had one’, Greville wrote, ‘and the more because he is a man with capacity for loving without having anything in the world to love. It has become his province to educate, to instruct, and to form the most interesting mind and character in the world.’ He watched his language—usually ‘interlarded with damns’—sat bolt upright rather than lounged in his chair, and greatly restricted the range of his anecdotes.

Victoria’s childish resolves ‘to be good’ were in harmony with a new spirit in society, and Melbourne was responding to pressures which even at the time were applied not only by the Queen but by ‘respectable’ opinion. He enjoyed the one form of pressure but hated the second. ‘All the young people are growing mad about religion’, he once lamented. As it was, he could scarcely protest when the etiquette of the Court was tightened up and the Queen revealed herself as a stern and self-determined moralist, on one occasion at least exposing herself to great unpopularity by wrongly ‘suspecting the worst’ of a member of her Court. Admission to the Court was made to depend on good character, and ‘rakishness’ which Melbourne thought ‘refreshing’ the Queen considered at best ‘melancholy’ and at worst ‘bad’. Manners as well as morals changed. The relatively easy informality of ‘drawing room’ and ‘levées’, during which the King might talk frankly or even rudely to people he knew, gave way to far more restrained and dignified ceremonial. Victoria’s own sense of dignity was prominently displayed in 1839 when after Melbourne’s defeat in the House of Commons she quarrelled with Peel about the party affiliations of the Ladies of the Bedchamber and prevented him from forming a new government. ‘The Queen maintains all her ladies’, she wrote to Melbourne (her dignity had been the surface defence of her warm affection for her old prime minister) ‘and thinks her Prime Minister will cut a sorry figure indeed if he resigns on this’. Melbourne was back in office again for two more years and Peel, condemned simply because he did not share Melbourne’s delightful qualities, was left with the cares of ‘responsible opposition’.

The position was altered, however, as a result of the Queen’s marriage in February 1840, and after the influence of her husband had established itself—almost at once—Melbourne was inevitably pushed more and more into the background. It had long been the ambition of King Leopold of the Belgians, the Queen’s uncle and one of her earliest confidants, to marry his niece to her cousin, Prince Albert of Saxe Coburg Gotha, and there had been much gossip about the match from 1837 onwards. Fortunately for Victoria, the marriage which had been planned was also a marriage of love. Albert, in her own words, ‘completely won my heart’, and the wedding, celebrated quietly in St. James’s Palace, with no signs of enthusiasm in the country, began the happiest period of her life. Her husband was still six months under the age of 21 in 1840 and he was a far from popular figure with the aristocracy, the crowds, or the House of Commons—by a majority of 104 votes the annuity

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of £50,000 the government proposed to pay him was reduced to £30,000—but he was just as resolved as Victoria to take the task of government seriously and willing in so doing to sink ‘his own individual existence in that of his wife’. Stiff and conservative, his first efforts were devoted to reinforcing the Queen’s own desire to set an example of strict propriety at Court.

The difference between old ways and new was well brought out in an early clash of ideas with Melbourne about the nature of social morality. ‘Character’, Melbourne maintained, ‘can be attended to when people are of no consequence, but it will not do when people are of high rank.’ Albert cared far less about rank than industry and integrity, and besides being willing to work long hours with a Germanic thoroughness that Smiles could not have excelled, he displayed all those ‘Victorian’ virtues of character which Melbourne regarded as unnecessary in a man of his station. His ‘ seriousness’ of purpose is witnessed by the causes to which he gave his full support. His first public speech was at a meeting on behalf of the abolition of slavery; he was a vigorous advocate of scientific research and education, of official patronage of art, and of reformed universities; he took an active interest in the work of the Society for Improving the Condition of the Labouring Classes, founded in 1844, and when criticized by Lord John Russell for attending one of its meetings replied firmly that he conceived ‘one has a Duty to perform towards the great mass of the working classes (and particularly at this moment) which will not allow one’s yielding to the fear for some possible inconvenience’; he helped to design and plan the building of a block of houses known as Prince Albert’s ‘model houses for families’; and last, but perhaps most important of all, he played such an important part in organizing the Great Exhibition of 1851 that if it had not been for his efforts, it is doubtful whether the Exhibition would have been held. In all these efforts Albert met with resistance and opposition, much of it centred in the country houses and the universities, places where old prejudices were strong and suspicions difficult to break down.

Albert had perforce to follow the dictates of self-help as much as Stephenson or Paxton, and on many doors which were open to them he had to knock loudly. Two years after the Queen had written in 1853 that the nation appreciated him and fully acknowledg what he had done ‘daily and hourly for the country’, he was being lampooned in the popular press and attacked in the clubs more than ever before. If there was any truth in the Queen’s claim that he eventually succeeded in raising monarchy to ‘the highest pinnacle of respect’ and rendering it ‘popular beyond what it ever was in this country’, it was entirely as a result of his own exertions and courage. He had no deficiency of spirit. When times were blackest for him on the eve of the Crimean War, he could still write that he looked upon his troubles as ‘a fiery ordeal that will serve to purge away impurities’.

Friendship with Peel was as important to Albert as friendship with Melbourne had been to Victoria, and it helped in itself to set the tone of mid-Victorian England. Between 1841 and 1846 the Queen and her husband came to put their full trust in their great prime minister and the causes for which he stood—sound administration, strong government, and free trade. As early as 1843 the Queen wrote to the King of the Belgians praising Peel as ‘a great statesman, a man who thinks but little of party and never of himself’; after Peel’s death she wrote that Albert felt the loss ‘dreadfully’. He feels ‘he has lost a second father’.

There was something in common, indeed, between Peel and Albert, not only in their dislike of the noisy clamour of party but in their desire for practical improvement and their resentment of unthinking aristocracies. During the Crimean War Albert complained of the ‘hostility or bitterness towards me’ not only of the radicals but of the old High Tory or Protectionist Party on account of my friendship with the late Sir Robert Peel and of my success with the Exhibition, and the bitterness certainly went deep. If in the case of Peel the main taunt was one of betrayal of the landed interest, in the case of Albert it was one of never having belonged to it, of being un-English, of working by slow deliberation, not by instinct, of paying attention to the wrong things in the wrong way. In such a context of criticism even Albert’s virtues

1 Sir Theodore Martin, Life of His Royal Highness the Prince Consort (1873), vol. II, p. 461.
5 Ibid., vol. II, p. 305.
6 K. Jagow, op. cit., p. 204.
7 ‘Prince Albert was unloved’, Greville maintained, ‘because he possessed all the virtues sometimes lacking in the Englishman.’ Quoted Prince von Bülow, Memoirs 1897-1903, p. 356.
could appear as vices. He was ridiculed in *Punch* for trying to act twenty different character parts; he was criticized in army messes for his zealous interference; he was attacked in Cambridge University for trying to do too much as Chancellor, not too little. He had won a hotly contested election for the chancellorship in 1847, and it is easy to guess the reaction of Cambridge dons to his earnest desire to look at ‘schemes of tuition’ and examination papers on subjects in which he was particularly interested. His collection of information on every conceivable issue of public policy, his investigation of statistics, his preparation of memoranda, and his considerable European correspondence were all activities calculated to alienate aristocratic holders of power. So too was his stern insistence on the morality of the Court. There was an interesting incident in 1852 when the new prime minister, Lord Derby, submitted his list of names for household appointments and Albert noted with horror that ‘the greater part were the Dandies and Roués of London and the Turf’. The Prince cared little for aristocratic company or aristocratic pursuits—in 1861, the year of his death, for instance, he described Ascot as rendered ‘much more tedious than usual by incessant rain’—and he did not attempt to hide his preference for the company of authors, scientists, social reformers, and pioneers of education. ‘Culture superseded blood, and South Kensington became the hub of the universe.’

Victoria did not share all Albert’s enthusiasms or even understand them. She cared little for the company of scientists, showed no interest in royal patronage of art, and in only few of her letters referred to literature. She delighted, however, in the Exhibition of 1851 and thrilled to the bravery of British troops in the Crimea. On thirty occasions she visited the Crystal Palace, noting in her Journal that she never remembered anything before that everyone was so pleased with as the Exhibition; during the war she wrote that ‘the conduct of our dear noble Troops is beyond praise’, said that she felt as if ‘they were my own children’, and objected to those critics of the military system who detracted from British victories by ‘croaking’. Just because she genuinely shared such English sentiments and was not tempted, as Albert was, to seek for forms of intellectual expres-

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1 *Leeds Mercury*, 11 September 1858.
2 *Op. cit.*, ch. II.
produced a grandchild for the Queen, the future Emperor William II of Germany. On more than one state occasion in the '40s and '50s the royal children accompanied the Queen. In 1849, for instance, on the occasion of her first visit to Ireland (she went there again in 1853 and 1861) she took her four children with her. 'They were objects of universal attention and admiration. Oh, Queen, dear,' screamed a stout old lady, 'make one of them Prince Patrick, and all Ireland will die for you.'

The death of the Prince Consort from typhoid fever in 1861 was a tragic blow to the Queen from which she never fully recovered. 'The loss of her husband,' wrote Lady Lewis to her brother, Lord Clarendon, 'has changed her from a powerful sovereign (which she was with the knowledge and judgement of her husband to guide her opinions and strengthen her will) into a weak and desolate woman with the weight of duties she has not the moral and physical power to support.' Conventional condolences meant nothing to her, and only those who could find the right words to demonstrate their understanding of the extent of her loss were likely to touch any chord in her heart. Strangely enough, it was Palmerston, with whom both she and the Prince had had so many differences and had fought such hectic battles, who found the correct phrase and wrote to her of the Prince as 'that perfect Being'.

From 1861 to the end of the period covered in this book the Queen was in the deepest retirement, resolved irrevocably that Albert's 'wishes—his plans—about everything are to be my law'. Although she found some consolation in the affairs of her family and its network of associations with other European courts, and although she spent many peaceful days at Balmoral, her favourite home, she wore mourning, shrank from large crowds, and feared formal social gatherings. She hated the thought of appearing in public as a 'poor, brokenhearted widow' and declared that she 'would as soon clasp the hand of the poorest widow in the land if she had truly loved her husband and felt for me, as I would a Queen, or any other in high position'. It was natural, though hard for her to bear, that the public could not appreciate the reason for her social abdication. In 1865 Punch printed a famous cartoon in which Paulina (Britannia) unveiled the covered statue and addressed Hermione (Victoria) with the words 'Tis time! descend; be stone no more!' Two years later the Queen was still lost in an unfinished winter's tale and Bagehot could dismiss her and the Prince of Wales in the tersest of phrases as 'a retired widow and an unemployed youth'.

In time the Queen's age and experience were to produce new waves of loyalty and admiration, but the comment of Bagehot is the epitaph on the mid-Victorian period. What would have happened had the Prince Consort lived is a speculative puzzle which has fascinated many specialists in historical 'ifs'. Disraeli believed that 'if he had outlived some of our old stagers he would have given us, while retaining all constitutional guarantees, the blessings of absolute government'. It was a dubious estimate of future probabilities. For all Albert's belief (and that of Stockmar, his tutor) in strong government with a monarchy raised high above the noisy clamour of party and exercising unobtrusive but effective power, he was not able—nor was the Queen—to influence politics decisively even in the period of group politics from 1846 to 1859. For the most part the Queen and Albert were forced to 'maintain a position of neutrality towards the leaders of party on both sides', discriminating against individuals, like Bright, but not against groups. When they were shaken out of their neutrality—by sympathy with the Peelites, for instance, in the early 1850s—they could act only within closely circumscribed limits, while the royal disagreement with Palmerston about the methods and the objectives of British foreign policy left the Crown powerful but by no means supreme. There was no alternative to accepting Palmerston in the Crimean War crisis, and the attempt to make Granville prime minister in 1859 was a failure from the start. The Queen was even driven to the same conclusion as Disraeli and Gladstone in the 1850s, 'that out of the present state of confusion and discordance, a sound state of parties will be obtained and two parties, as of old, will again exist, without which it is impossible to have strong government'.

1 Quoted M. G. Fawcett, Life of Her Majesty Queen Victoria (1893), p. 125.
3 Quoted Fulford, op. cit., p. 271.

1 September 1865.
2 Miongenny and Buckle, op. cit., vol. II, p. 177.
3 Martin, op. cit., vol. I, p. 36. The Queen revised and checked passages of this kind in Martin's Life.
4 Albert strongly disliked the power of the press, applying to it the motto 'Vox populi, vox Rindvlei' (blockheads), and maintaining that 'there is at all times something wrong with newspaper diplomacy and newspaper strategy'. See Jagow, op. cit., p. 217.
parties, particularly after the extension of the suffrage in 1867, was bound in the long run to limit royal power still further, and in the twentieth century strong government could be provided only by organized party machines served by a neutral civil service and squeezing the monarchy out of politics altogether. Albert had believed that 'the exaltation of Royalty is possible only through the personal character or the sovereign. When a person enjoys complete confidence we desire for him more power and influence in the conduct of affairs', but even this worthy Victorian maxim has lost most of its political relevance in an age when issues are discussed not only in courts and cabinets but in party meetings and when 'public relations' count for as much as private rectitude in determining popular reactions.

What was left after 1861 was a series of royal prejudices, which increased in intensity in the last thirty years of Victoria's reign, and the moral force of monarchy, whenever the Queen cared to emphasize it. That the force counted for much is well brought out in the comment of the great historian, W. H. Lecky, on 'the profound feeling of sorrow and admiration' which greeted the news of her death. 'It shows', he said, 'that the vulgar ideals, the false moral measurements, the feverish social ambitions, the love of ostentatious and the factious, and the disdain for simple habits, pleasures and characters so apparent in certain conspicuous sectors of society, have not yet blunted the moral sense or prevented the moral perceptions of the great masses.' To appreciate the significance of the comment it is necessary to turn in greater detail to the morals, manners, tastes, and styles of the majority of the Queen's mid-Victorian subjects.

3. MORALS, MANNERS, TASTES, AND STYLES

While Queen Victoria shared many contemporary tastes and opinions, in one respect at least her conceptions of morality were somewhat different from those of a highly influential and articulate section of her subjects. She cared little for 'extreme views' in religion, and in teaching her children—surely the best test of religious outlook—she chose to dwell not on 'the supernatural features of the Christian religion, but rather upon the pure and comprehensive morality which it teaches as its essential and indestructible element'.

It is difficult to separate out ethical and theological problems in mid-Victorian England, but the Queen's views and those of Prince Albert were bound to appear vague both to the Tractarians whom the Queen disliked and held responsible for the religious disputes of her reign, and to the Evangelicals who believed in a divine plan of personal salvation through Grace.

The essentials of Evangelical morality, the dominant morality of the age, were well expressed in up-to-date language in a poem The Upward Line, which compared life's pilgrimage with a railway journey:

The line to Heaven by us is made,
With heavenly truth the rails are laid;
From Earth to Heaven the line extends
And in eternal life it ends.

'Repentance' was the station where the passengers embarked, 'God's word' was the First Engineer, God's love the Fire and His Grace the steam, and although there were many dark tunnels, all passengers on the 'glory ride' were sure that they would reach their ultimate destination. If, however,

... neither truth, nor fire, nor steam
Can make you willing to get in,
Then sinners you will weep at last
When Heaven is lost and time is past;
The Heavenly trains are all gone by,
The sinner must for ever die.

The theme and the treatment were essentially Evangelical, but the sense of sin and the fear of death played almost as big a part in all formal Victorian religion; it certainly found a place in Tractarian sermons and writings. It should be remembered that Victorian England still had a high child mortality rate and that the experience of a large number of deaths within a family was a chastening and disturbing experience. Christians like Charles Kingsley, who believed in a vigorous 'muscular' religion, were numbed by bereavement; vague Christian sympathizers like Dickens wallowed in death-bed sentimentality.

In evaluating Evangelical or Tractarian statements of belief, the question immediately arises as to how far the conceptions of the influential and articulate were generally accepted by most people in

3 Fawcett, op. cit., p. 131.
the country. How many parents were anxious in teaching their children, as Prince Albert was, to ‘root up the Covenant theory that man’s nature is sinful’?1 How many ‘respectable citizens’ behind a façade of Bible reading, family prayers, quiet Sundays and sober weekdays were grounding their morality in a deep sense of piety and personal faith? The great growth of Sunday newspapers in mid-Victorian England—the News of the World (1846) attracted a large working-class reading public by its sensationalism as well as its radical politics—suggests that piety was counterbalanced by vicarious pleasure even on a Sunday. The enormous number of prostitutes in London and the big cities—the Burlington Arcade was described by a writer in the Saturday Review as the ‘Western counterpart of an Eastern slave market’, and in 1857 the Lancet claimed that one house in every sixty in London was a brothel2—and showed that not all the pleasure was vicarious. Pictures of mid-Victorian morality derived from the respectable novels in Mudie’s Circulating Library or on sale at W. H. Smith’s station bookstalls are notoriously unreliable. Indeed W. H. Smith, who by 1862 had built up a flourishing railway bookstall business, was nicknamed ‘Old Morality’ and ‘the North Western Missionary’.3 In such matters the respectable mid-Victorians often tried to hide the truth from themselves. It was regarded as a testimony to the readability of a great novelist like Dickens that ‘in forty works or more you will not find a phrase which a mother need withhold from her grown daughter’.4 Yet Dickens’s morality owed nothing to Evangelicalism or Tractarianism. Much religion, he suggested, was a ‘vent for bad humours and arrogance’ and there was no authority for the Murders in the New Testament; David Copperfield’s opinion that ‘we can all do some good if we will’ was far more appealing. Dickens’s obituary notice in Fraser’s Magazine (July 1870) rightly seized on the point that ‘he spent no thought on religious doctrines or religious reforms but regarded the Sermon on the Mount as good teaching, had a regard for the village church and churchyard, and quarrelled with nothing but intolerance.’ The appeal of moral generalities was at least as great in mid-Victorian England as it is today.

It is certainly dangerous to assume that because there was a mass of religious pamphleteering in mid-Victorian England, there was a generally valid connection between strong religious convictions and everyday morality, just as it is dangerous to deduce from the ubiquitous preaching of the gospel of work the existence of an unremittingly industrious working-class population. Many Victorians were at pains to emphasize that theirs was an age when all religions were highly organized, but not on that account generally and profoundly believed in; an age of observance more than assurance. In evaluating outer forms of Victorian conduct it is necessary therefore to investigate not only the ‘fundamental principles’ of religion but the economic, social and legal sanctions which kept men ‘good’. Just as the threat of the sack, the fear of the poor law, and the absence of unemployment benefit were more important than treatises and homilies in ensuring steady and disciplined work, so ‘good behaviour’ was conditioned not only by ‘vital religion’ or belief in the authority of the Church, but by the fear of the police and of eternal punishment and more generally by concern for social ostracism and stigmas.

The Religious Census of 1851 demonstrated what Christians had long feared, that a large proportion of the population of England were neither Church people nor of any other religion. Although the exact figures must be treated with great caution, it seems clear that at least one-half of the people who might have been expected to go to church or chapel in 1851 did not do so. Most of the non-attenders came from the working classes. and local clergy in the towns were almost unanimous in pointing to the difficulties of attracting ‘mass’ support. ‘The Population consists chiefly of Colliers and Foundry Men’, a Chesterfield clergyman wrote, ‘whose habits are very unfavourable to moral and religious influences and to attendance upon public worship’; ‘the population having been till recently all but destitute of church ordinances, has relapsed into a state of semi-heathenism’, wrote a vicar in a new parish near Oldham.1 The same story was told by many other

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1 Quoted Fulford, op. cit., p. 183.
2 For a recent appraisal see C. Peach, The Girl with the Sausalito Seat (1915). For a contemporary view, see Taine, op. cit., passim. He called prostitution ‘a festering sore, the real sore on the body of English society’ (1871 edn., p. 31). See also W. Logan, The Great Social Evil (1871).
5 These and later extracts from local sources have been taken from the Ecclesiastical Return (H.O. 129, 1851). These have recently been studied along with the full statistics by K. Inglis in an unpublished Oxford doctoral thesis ‘English Churches and the Working Classes’.
people before and after 1851. 'What is St. Paul’s?' Henry Mayhew asked one of his London costermongers. 'A Church, sir, so I’ve heard. I never was in Church.'

It was not enough to argue as some Anglicans did that shortage of Church accommodation was responsible for the failure to win over the ‘labouring miyriads’, or to take the view of many proud and quarrelsome Dissenters that all was well with their own communions and that it was the Established Church which was at fault. There were fundamental reasons for anxiety. Many of them were social. Pew rents alienated many people who could not afford them. As the official 1851 Report put it, ‘working men, it is contended, cannot enter our religious structures without having pressed upon their notice some memento of inferiority’. Lack of good clothes was another deterrent. A rector in Worcestershire observed that ‘many parents, well-disposed to attend Public Worship, absent themselves on account of their dress, and the same remark is applicable to their children’; more simply and eloquently, a Roman Catholic priest from Walsall wrote: ‘There is a service on Sunday morning at 8 o’clock for poor people who from want of proper clothes do not like to appear out of doors at a later period of the day—average attendance at this service 330.’ Finally, there was a more profound social problem involved in non-attendance. Within the village or the small town, with its hierarchical society and its intensive social life, church-going was, at least as far as the ‘respectable’ were concerned, reasonably regular and unpremeditated. The large city with its social gulf between rich and poor posed many problems other than those of social order and public health.

For all the efforts of hard-working vicars and curates in smoky urban parishes, of Tractarian priests injecting colour into drab working-class districts, of Evangelical and Nonconformist city missionaries deliberately cultivating rough and stony soil, and of the 318,000 Sunday School teachers (1851), there was much ‘spiritual destitution’ in mid-Victorian England, particularly among the poor. Ignorance and indifference were more widespread than ‘secularism’, although in London and the big cities there was a small but often influential group of sober-living working men who were animated ‘with an inveterately hostile sentiment’ towards religion. Their morality was usually indistinguishable from that of Nonconformist lay preachers or regular chapel-goers, just as the morality of thoughtful agnostics and rationalists in higher places was indistinguishable from that of the accepted Christian guides and teachers of the day. Indeed many mid-Victorian Evangelicals were content to note the part their religion had played in improving English morals while admitting at the same time, however reluctantly, that by that ‘we do not mean that great masses are converted to God but . . . that great numbers are under the indirect influence of the Christian religion’. The dominant morality of mid-Victorian England was very closely associated with the middle-class element in English society. Within that element Nonconformity remained more important than Anglican Evangelicalism, separated from it by a social as much as by a spiritual gulf. It was frequently a sign of social advancement for a Nonconformist businessman to abandon the chapel and turn to the Church. The Establishment conferred ‘status’, and in small market towns like Mark Rutherford’s Bedford or large cities like Mrs. Gaskell’s Manchester, Nonconformists had to be content at best with wealth and comfort. Some of them were very frank about the association of religion and class and even gloried in it. ‘Our mission’, wrote the Congregationalist Binney, ‘is neither to the very rich nor to the very poor but to that great middle section of the community.’ Such men often believed that the social influence of the middle classes would be sufficient in itself to ensure the diffusion of their moral ideas and to guarantee national moral standards. They saw themselves as the guardians of the Protestant conscience, of the authority of the Bible ‘and the Bible only’, and, divided though they were not only between sects but within sects, they were united in resisting Tractarianism on the one hand and latitudinarianism, the absence of clearly defined religious dogmas, on the other. The views they heard propounded in their chapels were not very different from the views expressed in the Upward Line—the minister invariably began with the fall of man; propounded the scheme of redemption, and ended by depicting in the morning the blessedness of the saints, and in the evening the doom of the lost.1

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1 The Congregational Year Book (1849), p. 76.
2 For a fascinating picture of local Dissent, see all the books of Mark Rutherford (W. Hale White), The Revolution in Tanner’s Lane (1881) describes religious life in Cowfold (Bedford). The only aristocratic street there was three-quarters occupied by church people.
3 T. Binney, Congregationalism and Modern Church Movements (1882), p. 36.

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2 Census of Great Britain, 1851, Religious Worship in England and Wales (1855) p. 90.
morality, they were often accused of narrow-mindedness and self-righteousness, but at their best they were vigorous and self-reliant. Their dislike of established ecclesiastical authority frequently moved alongside their dislike of State interference with the economic market, but there was a warmth and sincerity in their attachment to the so-called ‘voluntary principle’ in religion and their ideal of ‘affectionate service’. Their main weaknesses were an inability to do justice to the opinions of individuals and groups with whom they disagreed, their tendency to run to cant and hypocrisy, their frequently cramped social life, and their emphasis on the moral side of life at the expense of the intellectual and cultural. All these weaknesses were shared by large numbers of Victorians who were not Nonconformists: they were as much deficiencies of a social group as of a religious body.

The deficiencies of this group account in large measure for the weakness of Victorian tastes and the profusion of Victorian styles. ‘Festus’ Bailey, in his poem ‘The Age’ (1838), complained that

> What England as a nation wants is taste;
> The judgement that’s in due proportion placed;
> We overdo, we underdo, we waste.

Narrowness of education, pride in possession, fascination with ingenuity, and a bantering after ‘sublime display’ led most of the mid-Victorians to prefer the ornate to the simple, the vast to the balanced. Their emphasis on ‘morality’ confused both the majority and the minority in their assessment both of old works of art and new creations. While Ruskin was trying to persuade his contemporaries that ‘taste is the only morality’, most Victorians looked not to the artist’s integrity but to his private life, not to the ‘deep significance’ of taste, but to its externals. The way of life of the artist was thought to be especially conducive to ‘immorality’—he lived in an atmosphere of ‘periodical impecuniosity and much tobacco smoke’. In consequence, if artists wanted approval they had to take care to emphasize the morality of their conduct. Some of them began their day’s work with a prayer; most of them followed up the prayer with hard work ‘in the sense of regular and unremitting industry rather than of self-torturing effort after the unattainable’.

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1. Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), passim.

The ‘unattainable’ was not particularly prized by the middle classes, who were mainly interested either in old and established works of art, about which there could be no controversy, or in modern works based on obvious themes treated in a literal manner and calculated to evoke proper sentiment—the proper sentiment turning, of course, all too easily into lush sentimentality. Aristocratic patronage of art counted for far less than in previous periods of English history, and there was powerful opposition to the much canvassed idea, strongly supported by Prince Albert, that the State should step in as fairy godmother.

The middle classes not only could not buy ‘taste’: they frequently debased what taste remained. They liked anecdote in art, talked ponderously of the ‘moral content’ of a picture, preferred ‘big pictures’ to small ones, and allowed themselves the occasional luxury of intoxication with colour. The best-known Victorian pictures like Sir Edwin Landseer’s *The Old Shepherd’s Chief Mourner* (1843) with its anthropomorphic sheep dog or W. P. Frith’s *Derby Day* (1858) with its crowded and detailed canvas, were the kind of paintings not only that the public wanted but that most lesser artists wanted to paint. At a distance, the pre-Raphaelite group of painters who set up a ‘brotherhood’ in the year of revolutions, 1848, and were soon the centre of a sharp controversy about both the subject-matter of art and the ‘right’ method of treatment, seem to fit into their age rather than to be in violent contrast to it. They attacked Frith’s *Derby Day* not on aesthetic grounds but because of its subject, they were as preoccupied with precise realistic detail as their opponents, and most of them were fully accepted by the critics of the late ’40s. Holman Hunt’s *Light of the World* (1854) was a great public success, and Millais’s *Bubbles* eventually became one of the most effective late Victorian advertisements.

Parallel developments can be traced in the story of architecture and design. In early Victorian England there had been a celebrated ‘battle of the styles’ between the ‘Gothic’ and the ‘classical’. Pugin’s dedicated championship of Gothic was grounded in carefully considered principles; he related architecture both to religion and life, believed that there should be one style as there was one faith, and maintained that good buildings could be built only by good men. On his death in 1852—on the same day as the Duke of Wellington—Gothic had established itself (it was well represented

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in the mediaeval court at the Great Exhibition), but in a world where 'taste' depended more on businessmen than on eccesiologists Gothic was only one style among many. Mid-Victorian architects ransacked every age in the past and every country for models and examples, and many new hybrid styles appeared. Pugin had laid down austerely that 'there should be no features about a building which are not necessary for convenience, construction and propriety' and that 'all ornament should consist of enrichment in the essential construction of the building'; but the mid-Victorians completely ignored this advice. They did nothing either to implement the hopes of a small group of architects who pleaded for a genuine 'contemporary style', which would make intelligent use of nineteenth-century materials like iron and glass. They liked imposing public architecture with 'pretensions', wanted it to demonstrate wealth, to abound in decoration, even in polychromatic effects, and to incorporate the elaborate symbolism of an age of free trade and material progress. In their domestic architecture they demanded solidity, permanence, elaboration, and rich façades. Sir John Hawkwood's house in Kingsley's *Water Babies* (1863) had been 'built at ninety different times and in nineteen different styles'. It bore traces of the Parthenon, the Brighton Pavilion and the Taj Mahal.

Inside the houses there was a similar bastardization of styles, a love of rich and generous curves, a profusion of ornament, and a lavish use of nineteenth-century materials such as papier-maché and silver plate. The objects on display at the Great Exhibition revealed many of the 'tastes' of the men of the 1850s, particularly their trust in the relevance of the machine to the 'success' of 'art'. Objects were especially prized which displayed mechanical ingenuity, and there was great public acclaim for 'steam machinery' which made it possible 'to produce involved tracery and deep undercutting' with far less labour than craftsmen of the past had found necessary. 'Pleasing objects' could be turned out in great quantities to make their way not only into the villas of the middle classes but also into the homes of the skilled artisans. Thus, there was 'progress' in art as well as in manners; whereas art in the past had previously gratified the tastes of the few, it now served the wants of the many. Unfortunately, the fact that vast quantities of 'pleasing objects' and 'elegant trifles' were turned out in Birmingham or London was no guarantee of quality. There was always a danger of the 'swamping' of the good by the bad, and even established painters were afraid of the fashionable daguerreotypes of the fifties and then of the camera. Landseer's brother told Frith in 1870 that science had at last produced 'a foe-to-graphic art'.

Similar trends can be traced in the story of mid-Victorian music. The moral content of music was always stressed, and the charms of the artist and the virtuosity of his performance captured audiences more than the quality of the work performed. Exaggerated importance was given also to the publication of cheap editions of oratorios and choral music—most of them either hackneyed or pretentious. Abroad England was regarded as an 'unmusical country', but one in which foreign musicians might make their fortunes; the distinction was far more eloquent than a dozen volumes of Victorian musical appreciation.

Any evaluation of mid-Victorian tastes must necessarily depend on the taste of the commentator, and during the last twenty years the 'Victorian revival' has done much to rehabilitate many Victorian objects—from monuments and buildings to bric-à-brac. Indiscriminate praise has taken the place of indiscriminate blame, pilgrimages to Victorian sites are undertaken, and collectors have forced up the prices of many objects which earlier in the century were relegated to the dust heap or the lumber room. The Victorians would have appreciated our mid-century collectors, for they were great collectors themselves, and art was not so much integrated

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1 True Principles of Pointed or Ecclesiastical Architecture (1841).
3 Leeds Town Hall (1853–5) is a good example. In a lively debate during the building between the 'civic pride' party and the 'economists', the former insisted on a Tower which was to be 'useless' but 'dignified and with pretensions'. The economic symbolism of the Town Hall was as elaborate as the religious symbolism of Worcester College Chapel (1864). It is interesting too to compare the elaborate, polychromatic Albert Memorial (1863–72) with the early Gothic Martyrs' Memorial in Oxford (1841).
4 Papier-maché had long been made in Persia and was made in Birmingham in the eighteenth century, but it was not until the mid-nineteenth century that it became popular, particularly when combined with mother-of-pearl. The electro-plating process was not discovered until 1856 and not commercialized until after 1840.
6 R. Hunt, *Handbook to the Great Exhibition* (1851), judged many of the exhibits in this way.
9 This was probably true too of the stage. For an interesting attempt to relate these manifestations of taste in different acts, see J. H. Buckley, *The Victorian Temper* (1958), esp. ch. VII.
in their society as superimposed on it. To take Victoriana out of
museums and art galleries and put them in their proper place, it
is necessary to understand the kind of society which wanted them
and the far from unanimous views which were expressed about
them at the time. In other words, it is necessary to turn in more
detail to the mid-Victorian critics of Victorianism.

4. VICTORIAN CRITICS OF VICTORIANISM

Most of the critics were concerned with the rôle of money in the
new society and the narrowness of outlook of the moneymakers.
In the 1840s Carlyle had condemned the 'cash nexus' and had
challenged 'mammon worship': in the 1860s, when the web of credit
had stretched further and tighter, Dickens in Our Mutual Friend
(1864–5) drew powerful sketches of the shams and inherent empti-
ness of the world of mid-Victorian finance. He had always been
fascinated by the effect of money on character, and in a brilliant
chapter on 'Podsnappery' (Book I, ch. II) looked behind the well-
regulated and pre-eminently respectable routine of Mr. Podsnap's
life to the shabby 'values' which sustained it. All the elements in
Victorianism were sharply criticized in a few pages. Mr. Podsnap
lacked taste. 'Hideous solidity was the characteristic of the Podsnap
plate. Everything was made to look as heavy as it could, and to
take up as much room as possible.' Mr. Podsnap had supreme
confidence in his own moral integrity. 'He always knew exactly
what Providence meant. Inferior and less respectable men might
fall short of that mark, but Mr. Podsnap was always up to it.' Mr.
Podsnap sheltered himself from those things in the world which
he did not like. 'I don't want to know about it; I don't choose to
discuss it; I don't admit it.' Mr. Podsnap believed in sheltering
other respectable people too; he felt that there were certain subjects
which ought not to be introduced 'among our wives and young
persons'. The picture both of high finance and of spiritual poverty
in Our Mutual Friend had a powerful influence on many discontented
mid-Victorians, including William Morris who later in life published
extracts from it in his socialist Commonweal. Dickens's novel, how-
ever, was in no sense socialistic, and very similar criticisms of
traffic in shares, false pretences, and financial and social maladju-
ments can be found in the liberal-conservative Trollope's mordantly
satirical masterpiece, The Way We Live Now (1875). Arthur Hugh

Clough, the poet, went further. In his revision of the Decalogue, he
included the precepts

Thou shalt not steal; an empty feat
When it's so lucrative to cheat . . .
Thou shalt not covet, but tradition
Approves all forms of competition.

Disgust with the tissue of false values surrounding money-
making was one of the forces leading the critics of Victorianism to
sanctify the claims of hard and honest work. The chapter imme-
diately following 'Podsnappery' in Our Mutual Friend is called 'The
Sweat of an Honest Man's Brow'. Once again it was Carlyle who
was the first great sage to draw the right lessons. 'Properly speaking,
all true Work is Religion,' he wrote in Past and Present (1843) and
he went on to show how it meant 'communication with Nature' and
revealed 'something of divineness' in even the humblest hand
worker. Not even the cash nexus could completely ruin good work:
'Labour is ever an imprisoned God, w rithing unconsciously or
consciously to escape out of Mammonism.' These thunderous
propositions, central to Carlyle's philosophy of life, were capable
of becoming either platitudes—as they often were in the dullest
pages of Samuel Smiles—or cornerstones of a new view of society
as they were for Ruskin, Morris, and later still for the young Keir
Hardie. John Ruskin in The Stones of Venice (1853) was the first to
use them to support an unorthodox political economy which paid
as much attention in its analysis to the man who worked as to the

discretion. He went on to admit that in order to achieve this
'the government must have an authority over the people of which
we do not so much as dream.' 1 William Morris went further than

1 E. T. Cook and A. D. O. Wedderburn, The Works of John Ruskin (1903–12), vol. II,
p. 263.
Ruskin, and in 1883 became an active propagandist of socialism. In the period covered in this book, however, he was not taking an active part in politics but establishing his reputation as a poet and a craftsman in the decorative arts. His building of the Red House at Bexley Heath in Kent in 1859 was a deliberate reaction against the tastelessness of his age—"pedantic imitations of classical architecture... ridiculous travesties of Gothic buildings... and the utilitarian brick box with a slate lid". He looked back to the Middle Ages, as both Carlyle and Ruskin had done, for an integration of taste, style, and social purpose, but he was no mere revivalist. His dream was of the future. "Were the rows of square brown brick boxes which Keats and Shelley had to look on, or the stubbed villa which enshrined Tennyson's genius, to be the perpetual concomitants of such masters of verbal beauty?... Was the intelligence of the age to be for ever so preposterously lop-sided?" The building of the Red House and the foundation of his famous 'Firm' of decorators and craftsmen in 1861 were important incidents in the journey from mid- to late-Victorian England. Morris himself worked on everything the firm produced, designing, painting, dyeing, and weaving with his own hands. He tried to guide his customers towards a genuine appreciation of 'simplicity' and 'sincerity' in the creative arts. It was as a result of his experiences with the Firm that he came to the conclusion that 'a reform in art which is founded on individualism must perish with the individuals who have set it going'.

Behind the social criticisms of Carlyle, Ruskin and Morris was a fundamental criticism of the competitive industrial society, founded on free enterprise and machine production, which had developed out of the older agricultural and mercantile society during the previous seventy or eighty years of English history: of the whole 'age of improvement' described in this book. Carlyle was never sure about remedies; he turned and twisted about, looking for 'captains of industry', 'heroes' and 'doers, not talkers', until many of his readers must have waited for the descent of that silence which he had always praised as the 'silence of deep Eternities'. Ruskin was curiously whimsical, muddled, inconsistent, and indecisive for all his insight, and there is profound truth in a comment he made in a letter to his father in 1848: "I seem born to conceive what I cannot execute, recommend what I cannot obtain, and mourn over what I cannot save." Morris found the answers to many of his most searching questions only after the social balance of mid-Victorian England had given way to a new period of cleavage and tension. None of the criticisms of Carlyle, Ruskin and Morris, however, can be overlooked. They make it impossible for posterity to take most of their fellow-Victorians at their face value.

There was a fourth critic who claimed that the effect of criticism depended not on prophetic fury but on 'the power of persuasion, of charm'. Matthew Arnold was neat, orderly and ironical where Carlyle was rough, mysterious and metaphorical; he was liberal when both Ruskin and Morris were leaning towards socialism; he disliked abstruse argument and he liked to choose concrete examples. He was anxious 'to meditate not a view of the world, but a habit of mind', the open mind. As surely as his fellow writers, however, Arnold criticized the lopsidedness of his age, and in a mass of miscellaneous writings caught the manifold weaknesses—and sometimes the strength—of mid-Victorian England more effectively than any other writer in his generation.

His main aim was to teach his contemporaries the meaning of 'perfection', to carry into the heart of a society which seemed to care little for it an 'idea of the best', a feeling for the quality of life. Industrial civilization, he maintained, had encouraged a warping and stultifying 'faith in machinery' and a belief that greater material wealth was a 'precious end in itself'. The only counterpoise to such a faith in externals was a 'search after human perfection in an internal condition'. It was fortunate that there were 'in each class a certain number of natures with a curiosity about their best self, with a bent for seeing things as they are, for disentangling themselves from machinery... for the pursuit, in a word, of perfection.' This minority, he argued, shared 'humanity' as their distinguishing

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3 The Works of Matthew Arnold (1933-4), vol. XIII, p. 266.
4 John Hollaway, The Victorian Sage (1951), p. 267. Arnold called Ruskin 'provincial' and 'never much liked Carlyle', who in his view preached 'earnestness to a nation which had plenty of it by nature, but was less abundantly supplied with several other useful things'. (G. W. E. Russell (ed.) Letters (1901), vol. II, p. 222.)
5 It is important not to take Culture and Anarchy in isolation from the rest of his work as so many literary critics have been prone to do. Friendship's Garland (1871), Popular Education in France (1861), and Schools and Universities on the Continent (1868) are of equal significance in assessing his social thought.
characteristic. The result was that, generally speaking, they had ‘a rough time of it in their lives’. Both the economic and social system made it difficult for them to pursue ‘the best’. The English aristocracy were ‘Barbarians’. They had had their day, and in an age of rapid change showed a sterile ‘inaccessibility to ideas’. They might still possess sweetness, but they had far too little light. The English working classes, ‘the Populace’, were still for the most part brutalized by the struggle for existence. They had a future, but in the Victorian present they were often raw and blind. One part was a ‘rabbles’; the other part looked up to the middle classes and sought to emulate them. The middle classes themselves, the Philistines, lacked both sweetness and light. They were the ‘kernel of the nation’, the pride of its propagandists, in a real sense ‘preponderating in importance in late years’, but they were narrow and prejudiced, handicapped by a ‘defective type of religion’, a stunted sense of beauty, and a low standard of manners. Even worse, they were ‘averse’ to whatever might disturb them in the enjoyment of their ‘vulgarity’. Arnold laid particular emphasis on the effects of their defective type of religion. As a whole, the middle class had ‘entered the prison of Puritanism and had the key turned upon its spirit there for two hundred years’. The influence it had been able to exert on other classes in the community had been disastrously misused. ‘Look at the life imaged in such a newspaper as the Nonconformist; a life of jealousy of the Establishment, disputes, tea-meetings, openings of chapels, sermons, and then think of it as an ideal of human life ... aspiring with all its organs after sweetness, light and perfection.’

It was easy to dismiss Arnold as a ‘bighbrow’—the word had not then been invented—and to regard him as a ‘man who held a moral smelling-bottle at his nose, and exacted an impossible standard of life from a busy and strenuous people who had a living to get’. It remains easy in retrospect to demonstrate how his own temperament, upbringing and circumstances shaped his view of ‘perfection’ both in literature and in society and how he always looked at the problems of his country from the vantage point of his beloved Oxford, a university which ‘by her ineffable charm keeps ever calling us nearer to the true goal of all of us, to the idea’. His view of ‘culture’, however, was not a purely personal one. It was directly related both to the facts of difference between England and the Continent and to an already rich tradition of English critical thought. Arnold was right to direct attention to the neglected ‘virtues’ of French and German society, to plead for ‘flexibility’ and to query the rigid domestic presuppositions of much of English middle-class liberalism. ‘Your middle-class man thinks it the highest pitch of development and civilization when his letters are carried twelve times a day from Islington to Camberwell... and if railway trains run to and from them every quarter of an hour. He thinks it is nothing that the trains only carry him from an illiberal, dismal life at Islington to an illiberal, dismal life at Camberwell; and the letters only tell him that such is the life there.’

The critical view of ‘perfection’ he advocated was not his own individual discovery. It looked back to Coleridge, to the anti-utilitarian movement of the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries, and to the growth of a society dependent on industrial change. Wordsworth had written at the very beginning of the century of the emergence of ‘a multitude of causes, unknown to former times, (which) are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind’; Coleridge had distinguished between ‘cultivation’ (culture), which was difficult to nurture, and ‘civilization’, which just grew, and had gone on to describe the necessary role of a minority—the ‘clerisy’, he called it—in supervising the task of nurture; Newman, a subtle and appealing critic of his age, had talked of ‘perfection’ and of the difficulties of realizing it. Even John Stuart Mill had criticized Bentham for not recognizing that ‘man is a being capable of pursuing spiritual perfection as an end’, and had looked to Wordsworth to discover ‘the importance of poetry and art as instruments of human culture’.

3 *The Idea of a University* (1852). Newman queried the whole philosophy of ‘improvement’, the doctrine that ‘education, railroad travelling, ventilation, drainage and the acts of life, when fully carried out, serve to make a population moral and happy’.
4 *Apologia, Note on Liberalism*.
rather to those people in every class of society who were endowed with an honest ‘curiosity about their best selves’. He was no more happy about the actual state of religion in mid-nineteenth-century England than he was about the state of politics, but he saw how closely religion and culture were connected. ‘At the present moment’, he wrote rather later in his life, ‘two things about the Christian religion must surely be true to anybody with eyes in his head. One is, that men cannot do without it; the other, that they cannot do with it as it is.’ It is essential to examine the whole of Arnold’s cultural pedigree if his criticism of mid-Victorian England is to be put in its proper place.

Against this background and drawing upon his experiences as an inspector of schools (1851–86), Arnold pleaded above all else for a genuine national educational system which would go far towards guaranteeing the achievement of his main purpose. He disliked views of elementary education which concentrated on the commonplace and the practical; he attacked the ‘commercial academies’ of the middle classes on the grounds that they were designed simply to enable children to ‘get on in the world’; he criticized equally strongly the limitations of the public schools, particularly those schools which were mainly concerned with turning out ‘gentlemen’. He thus directed attention to the weaknesses of the two ‘ideal types’ of Victorian character—the self-made man, Smiles’s hero, and the ‘gentleman’, even the Christian gentleman whom his father had tried to produce in large numbers at Rugby School. He went on to query the over-confidence and negative attitude of Victorian ‘advanced liberals’, their dislike of all forms of state interference, and their indifference to the fate of the very poor.* You seem to think*, Arnold told his fellow countrymen through the mouth of his Prussian ‘stooge’, Arminius, ‘that you have only got to get on the back of your horse Freedom, or your horse Industry, and to ride away as hard as you can, to be sure of coming to the right destination.’

Arnold’s un easiness about where the two horses Freedom and Industry were carrying his country was matched by an equally relentless uneasiness about where his own life was leading, and in neither of these manifestations of uncertainty was he exceptional or alone. Humphry House has rightly related ultimate Victorian questions concerning the immortality of the soul to immediate questions of ‘self-culture’ and individual fulfilment, and has quoted Tennyson’s remark in 1872 that if he ceased to believe in any chance of another life, and of a great Personality somewhere in the Universe, ‘he should not care a pin for anything’.* This was a dangerous prop for a superficially confident society to rely upon and ‘in an age of material advance and scientific discovery, the will to know frequently overpowered the will to believe’.* The conflict between science and religion in particular underlined those mid-Victorian doubts which were as illuminating and eloquent as the noisiest or the most sophisticated criticism.

### 3. RELIGION AND SCIENCE

Although there were signs in the late eighteenth century that the pursuit of scientific enquiry and experiment upset those churchmen who were afraid of ‘human presumption’, devotion from Biblical orthodoxy, and intellectual ‘Jacobinism’, most early nineteenth-century scientists believed that there was a more confident link between science and morality than there was between morality and art. Some of them talked in familiar terms, as Paley had done, of Divine Design in the pattern of the Universe; others employed new theories of catastrophic geology to ‘prove’ the Flood or, when these had been discounted, looked for manifestations of God’s ‘government’ in the history of the natural world. ‘Truth is always delightful to an uncorrupted mind’, the Cambridge scientist, Professor Adam Sedgwick, wrote in 1845, ‘and it is most delightful when it reaches us in the form of some great abstraction which links together the material and moral parts of nature.’* It was thought proper to extend the influence of science outside the laboratory and the study. The universities might prefer the classics, but in the popular education of mechanics and artisans in institutes and night

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3. This was the view put forward by the most eminent English geologist, Professor William Buckland, in 1820. ‘The grand fact of an universal deluge ... is proved on grounds so decisive and incontrovertible, that had we never heard of such an event from scripture ... Geology of itself must have called in the assistance of some such catastrophe.’ *Vindiciae Geologicae* (1852), pp. 23–4.
Yet although scientists were able to point out scores of serious academic and scientific shortcomings in Chambers’s work, they could not ‘muzzle’ a thesis which appealed both to poets like Tennyson and to secularist working men.¹

Before Darwin gave a responsible scientist’s answer in 1859 to the problem of the descent of man, the work of other responsible scientists was raising difficulties for those people who placed a simple trust in the infallibility of the Biblical record. Sir Charles Lyell, whose three-volume Principles of Geology (1830–3) destroyed the dramatic geological case for the Flood, had made it equally difficult to believe in the simple Biblical view that the world was created in 4004 B.C. His book created much popular interest but little scandal, for it was unimpeachably scholarly, and Lyell himself was extremely tactful and reserved, as conscious of his social as of his scientific rôle. He believed in man’s absolute uniqueness and the immutability of other species, but had come to the conclusion that Mosaic chronology was ‘an incubus on our science’.² This was a most important conclusion, for it not only altered the whole sense of time span, but left less and less of the record of the past to be explained in terms of supernatural intervention. In private circles in the ‘40s and ’50s it was well known that most distinguished scientists, whatever their public utterances, agreed with Lyell that it was impossible to hold to a strictly literal interpretation of the Old Testament. Not only was the earth far older than the Bible suggested but, just as serious, the order of creation of the various living forms described in Genesis did not correspond with the order in which the creatures appeared in the rocks. At this point archaeology lent its aid to geology and natural history. In 1857 the first remains of Neanderthal man came to light, and the discovery of stone implements and other objects demonstrated conclusively that long before the time of Biblically-placed Adam there were beings on earth to whom the name of ‘man’ could not be denied.

Darwin’s Origin of Species ‘from the standpoint of the providentialist interpretation of nature... was a coup de grâce rather than an entering wedge’.³ For years before 1859 the cautious, cultivated, retiring, and sickly Darwin was collecting facts about evolution—he wrote out a long and coherent statement of 231 pages in 1844 which included nearly every detail of the final theory—but he

¹ See above, p. 401.
³ Gillispie, op. cit., p. 320.
shrank from writing a book on a subject which he knew would cause great controversy. It was only when he read an article by A. R. Wallace in the *Annals of Natural History* in 1855 that he began to feel that it would be vexing ‘if anyone were to publish my doctrines before me’; the further revelation of the nature of Wallace’s work and the pressure of his friends led him into producing *The Origin of Species*, one of the most important books of the nineteenth century, a book based on the accumulation of a mass of detailed and carefully checked information.

It began with a brief but shattering introduction which stated simply that ‘the view which most naturalists until recently entertained, and which I formerly entertained—that each species has been independently created—is erroneous’. Species were not immutable. Hereditary modification was possible under human control—the first part of the book was devoted to careful conclusions drawn from horse-breeding and pigeon-fancying—and stood out as the main theme of natural history, the doctrine of Malthus applied to ‘the whole animal and vegetable kingdoms’. During a relentless ‘struggle for existence’, ‘natural selection’ had determined the future of living creatures ‘under the complex and sometimes varying conditions of life’. In the final paragraphs of peroration, with their stormy note of optimism, Darwin claimed that there was ‘grandeur’ in his new view of life. ‘Whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed laws of gravity’, he concluded in a sentence reminiscent of Chambers, ‘from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved’.

Darwin’s sense of beauty did not impress a large number of his influential contemporaries. The most dangerous of his critics were not the Biblical fundamentalists—they had been shocked by so many scientific writings before 1859 that *The Origin of Species* was merely the latest and biggest blow—but those scientists who felt that Darwin had destroyed the much-treasured link between morality and science. The theory of spontaneous ‘natural selection’, they believed, substituted accident—or perhaps mechanism—for intelligent purpose in the world of nature. It was this aspect of Darwin’s theory which T. H. Huxley, Darwin’s great protagonist, claimed was new in 1859. Darwin made little attempt to resolve the dilemma between chance and design; instead, he took the view that when he used the word ‘spontaneous’ he merely meant that he was ignorant of the causes of that which he so termed. His ‘ignorance’ on what after all was a key point in Victorian argument was as upsetting as his positive conclusions. It was his old Cambridge geology professor, Sedgwick, who had predicted a brilliant scientific future for him, who wrote that Darwin had revealed ‘dеморализованный ум’ and had done his best to plunge humanity into ‘a lower grade of degradation’ than any yet recorded. Reverting to the argument he had advanced against Chambers, he maintained that ‘there is a moral or metaphysical part of nature as well as a physical’ and that a man who denied this was ‘deep in the mire of fallacy’. In conclusion he objected to the manner of Darwin’s conclusion, particularly the appeal to ‘the rising generation’.

Huxley, bold, brilliant, and pugnacious, did much to publicize Darwin’s thesis and to defend it against more old-fashioned scientists. He spoke the new language of the ‘rising generation’, compared Darwin with Galileo and Newton, and warned his countrymen that ‘the origin of species’ was not the first, and would not be the last, of ‘the great questions born in science, which will demand settlement from this generation. The general mind is seething strangely, and to those who watch the signs of the times, it seems plain that this nineteenth century will see revolutions of thought and practice as great as those which the sixteenth welcomed’.

There was not the slightest doubt, Huxley later said, that if a general council of the Church scientific had been held in 1860 Darwin’s views would have been condemned by an overwhelming majority. As it was, it was not the Church scientific but the Christian Church militant and non-militant which was quickest to give an opinion. Bishops, parish clergy, journalists, and laymen almost all condemned that part of Darwinism which they thought they understood, and only a few priests of the Church of England, notably Charles Kingsley, showed any sympathy with the new

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2 A joint paper summarizing both his own and Wallace’s views was read before the Linnean Society in July 1858 and published in that society’s *Journal of Proceedings (Zoology)*, vol. III, August 1858.
3 See above, p. 402.
picture of evolution by natural selection. Darwin's main ecclesiastical antagonist was Bishop Wilberforce of Oxford who at a famous meeting of the British Association at Oxford in 1860 asked Huxley with studied politeness whether 'it was through his grandfather or his grandmother that he claimed his descent from a monkey'. The ecclesiastical case often rose to no higher a level than this, but in reality the divided Church of England was shaken by the impact of the new views in a way that a more authoritarian body would not have been, and there was no single effective answer which any Churchman could make at that time, with any hope of securing general agreement. Throughout the 1860s and '70s Christianity as 'a system of ideas, aspirations and practices' was facing a far graver challenge than the Church of England had faced as an ecclesiastical institution in the 'Church in danger' days of the mid-1830s.

The challenge from science was not the only one, and there was in fact an important intellectual link between the problems of the 1830s and those of the 1860s. Ever since the early Tractarians began to examine the origins of ecclesiastical authority, many Anglicans were drawn into a study of history which might lead them out of the Church of England either into the Roman communion or out of Christianity altogether. The two Newman brothers—John Henry and Francis—typified the choice. Pulled in the two opposing directions, the first passed from Protestantism to Roman Catholicism, becoming a cardinal in 1879, while the second moved from Protestantism into a religious 'modernism' which stopped short at the confused boundaries of agnosticism. 'It is as if,' Basil Willey has written in a most illuminating image, 'two rivers, taking their rise in the same dividing range, should yet be so deflected by some minute original irregularity of level, so that one pours its waters into the Mediterranean, the other into the German ocean.'1 Germany was the great centre of Biblical criticism, but before German influence helped to provide a scholarly foundation for a new English view of the Bible as a historical document and of Jesus as a historical figure, sensitive English intellectuals were already feeling a sense of insecurity in the traditional Christianity of their fathers, particularly Evangelical Christianity. 'Whether or not Anglicanism leads to Rome', John Henry Newman was writing in 1840, 'so far is clear as day that Protestantism leads to infidelity.'2

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against traditional Christianity were so optimistic. Like the scientists, they could either view the process of human change with eager anticipation or they could contemplate it with alarm—and even with despair.

George Eliot, as an artist, and T. H. Huxley as a scientist, agreed with the Comtists that the abandonment of Christianity did not mean the abandonment of ‘morality’. They believed instead that they had to be good for good’s sake not God’s, to cultivate broad human sympathies, and to find a moral ‘aim’ or ‘object’ in life. George Eliot held that ‘in proportion as the thoughts of men and women are removed from the earth on which they live, are diverted from their own mutual relations and responsibilities of which they alone know anything to an invisible world which can only be apprehended by belief, they are led to neglect their duty to each other [and] to squander their strength in vain speculations’. Huxley had no doubt that ‘the ledger of the Almighty is strictly kept and every one of us has the balance of his operations paid over to him of every minute of his existence.’

For those who did not abandon Christianity, though they often went through religious crises and experienced intense moments of ‘honest doubt’, three ways were open—complete indifference to the impact of science on older views of life and history, an attempt to adapt Christian argument to new challenges, and an obedience to the full authority of the Roman Catholic Church. The first choice was the most frequent, and there were enough disputes within the Church of England on matters of religious observance and discipline in the 1850s and 1860s to keep conventional ecclesiastical energies active and passions alive. The world of Barchester Towers (1857) was far more satisfying to a large section of the clergy than the world of The Origin of Species. Those people who chose the second way were in an extremely difficult position, meeting with great hostility from both Evangelicals and Tractarians alike. When in 1860—the year of the foundation of the High Church English Church Union—seven talented members of the Church produced a volume of essays designed to cast off ‘incrustations’ from Christianity and to bring out the ‘eternal import’ of religion, they were attacked as ‘Seven against Christ’ by both Pusey and Shaffersbury. Their essays were,

in fact, reasonably mild and thoughtful attempts to ‘reconcile intellectual persons to Christianity’. Only one of the essayists referred to Darwin (very favourably), although there were frequent references to Biblical criticism, appeals to theologians to stop clinging to out-of-date theories of ‘God’s procedure towards man’, and demands for further discussion by churchmen of contemporary intellectual issues. ‘It is a stifling of the true Christian life’, one of the most-criticized writers declared, ‘both in the individual and in the Church, to require of many men a unanimity in speculative doctrine, which is unattainable, and a uniformity of historical belief, which can never exist.’

For all the mildness of most of the seven writers, two of them were condemned officially by the Court of Arches and suspended from their offices for a year. All of them were rebuked by Bishop Wilberforce with as little subtlety as he had shown in his rebuke to Darwin. At the same time they were all sharply criticized by secularists and Postivists for not going far enough. It was Frederic Harrison and not Wilberforce who remarked that their views were ‘incompatible with the religious belief of the mass of the Christian public, and the broad principles on which the Protestantism of Englishmen rests’.

The third choice is best represented by John Henry Newman, although his methods of argument and the quality of his thinking were quite exceptional. In his Apologia Pro Vita Sua (1864), Newman described the Roman Catholic Church as a ‘port after a rough sea’ and added that from the time that he became a Catholic he never had one doubt. ‘Ten thousand difficulties do not make one doubt.’ Even before he became a Catholic, however, he had reacted strongly against attempts to relate the existence of God, as Paley did, to the Divine Design of the Universe and had come to the conclusion that the religious apologetics of the day discussed the wrong problems in the wrong way. He was neither surprised by Darwin’s theory of evolution nor shocked by it, preferring to ground his faith


1 Quoted Bennett, op. cit., p. 21.
3 Essays and Reviews (1860). The seven writers included Frederick Temple, Headmaster of Rugby and later Archbishop of Canterbury, Mark Pattison, and Benjamin.
not in ‘mutilated and defective evidence’ but in ‘a right state of heart’. His Grammar of Assent (1870) rejected all ideas of a ‘balance of arguments’ to control and fix man’s minds, and he was thus able to by-pass not only the immediate problems of his age but the technique of free discussion and enquiry which the leading spokesmen of his age considered the necessary means to increase understanding. Harrison believed that Newman’s brother Francis much surpassed him in ‘mental versatility’ and that ‘the central ideas of the Cardinal’s philosophy are so wild and incongruous that we can only account for them as intellectual “faults” (in the geological sense), abysmal fractures produced by a truly “seismic” act of the will’, but what Harrison craved for was what John Henry Newman considered basically unprofitable—the meeting of brain with brain, Christians, atheists, Positivists and ‘agnostics’ (the word was coined by Huxley in 1870) all together. It was a craving which has little appeal in the mid-twentieth century, but it was satisfied for a time by the remarkable Metaphysical Society, set up in London in 1869, which really did bring many of the great men of the age together to discuss the central philosophical problems of the day.

For Huxley—and he should have the last word as a scientist—it was just as necessary as it was for the orthodox Anglican theologians that one side should win the debate between science and religion. He had no doubt which side it would be. After a struggle of ‘unknown duration’, which would have as its ‘side issues vast political and social troubles’, ‘free thought’ would conquer and organize itself ‘into one coherent system, embracing human life and the world as one harmonious whole’. It would need generations, however, to complete the task, and those who further it most will be those who teach men to rest in no lie, and to rest in no verbal delusions’. In the middle of the vast political and social troubles which followed the end of the period of mid-Victorian equilibrium, Huxley’s prophecy already began to date. The conflict between science and religion petered out, giving way to new debates about the nature not of the Universe but of society. At the same time, the verbal delusions persisted, the mid-Victorian quest for ‘ultimate truths’ was followed by a period of flirtation with every form of historical and moral relativism, and, above all, the sheer indifference to the issues raised by both Huxley and Wilberforce increased.

1 Realities and Ideals (1908), p. 195.

THE LEAP IN THE DARK

I. Prelude to Change

To return from the world of religion and science to the world of politics is to return to another area of conflict and contention. Between 1859 and 1865, despite the continued presence and personal popularity of Palmerston as prime minister, it was impossible to suppress all the forces which were leading up to large-scale changes. Indeed by 1865 Palmerston was regarded by radicals of all shades as the great obstacle to reform, and they were making preparations for the change in political mood and opportunities which they believed would follow his death. Particularly in the large cities, ‘inflamable masses’ were easily stirred up by ‘demagogues’ (to use conservative terminology) or (in radical terminology) ‘the tribunals of the people’ were boldly challenging ‘the absolute and unquestioned sway’ of an unrepresentative parliament. There was a revealing episode when Palmerston himself visited Bradford in 1864. At a workingmen’s meeting before he arrived, it was decided to receive him in stony silence and to present him with an address stigmatizing him as ‘the greatest obstruction to every means of Reform’. Although it was impossible to apply these tactics rigidly, Palmerston was left in no doubt that there was a substantial body of local opinion which agreed with the tone of the address. It was clearly a relief for him to leave Bradford a fortnight later and to go to his home constituency at Tiverton where he was sure of a friendly welcome and a display of affection and respect. After all, he could console himself, he was in his eightieth year, and in the year when he was born the town of Bradford scarcely existed.

It is significant that in his Bradford speech Palmerston dwelt on the triumph of free trade, and in this aspect of national policy his