

## The Mid-Victorian Generation 1846-1886

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Miles Taylor

Nearly one hundred years after the death of Queen Victoria, Victorian history is, on the face of it, in remarkably good shape. Alongside Hitler, the period remains the staple fare of the English and Welsh sixth-form syllabus. In the universities - old and new - British nineteenth-century historians outnumber their eighteenth-century counterparts by about two to one. The subject boasts two interdisciplinary journals:- *Victorian Studies*, now in its early forties, and the more recently established *Journal of Victorian Culture*, as well as a handful of other journals mainly devoted to literature and the press. Victorian (and Edwardian) historians lead the field in terms of output - in 1997 (according to the Royal Historical Society's *Annual Bibliography of British & Irish History*) some 1,143 books, articles, and chapters in collective volumes were published on British history, 1815-1914 (not including Ireland or the empire), compared to 713 for the 1714-1815 period, and 1,075 for Britain since 1914. In North America, where the lines between Victorian political, social and literary history are more blurred, a similar success story can be told, judging from the activities reported in the *Victorian Studies Bulletin* and from the Victorian studies web-sites based at the universities of Alberta, Brown and Indiana. Yet despite its rude health, the Victorian era has not been the subject of a major synthesis for well over a generation. The best-known and best-selling historian of the Victorian period remains Asa Briggs, whose *Age of Improvement* was first published in 1959, and whose *Victorian People* (the first of his famous trilogy) appeared as long ago as 1954. Alongside Briggs the older surveys of Geoffrey Best, John Harrison and L.C.B Seaman continue to be reprinted, and two other classics from the same period - W.L. Burn's *Age of Equipoise* and George Kitson Clark's *Making of Victorian England* still enjoy a high reputation. For a subject which in recent years has become so preoccupied by new approaches it is remarkable that the standard text books remain those of the 1950s and 1960s. It is as though

eighteenth-century historians still took their cue from J.H. Plumb, or twentieth-century historians from A.J.P. Taylor.

Given this vacuum, the publication in the spring of 1998 of Professor K. Theodore Hoppen's volume in the New Oxford History of England was a welcome development in Victorian historiography. It augured well for a subject in which for thirty years special research has crowded out more thematic or interpretative approaches. Although the period covered in the book - 1846-86 - is not the whole of the Victorian era, it is the bulk of it, and it turns out that Professor Hoppen has much to say about developments in the later 1880s and 1890s as well. No other volume in the Oxford series will focus so centrally on the Victorian period. And although other new syntheses of Victorian history are in the offing - most notably in the new Penguin History - *The Mid-Victorian Generation*, with all the scholarly trappings of a volume in an Oxford history, is the benchmark against which the next few decades of scholarship will be tested. The book has already been widely reviewed, so it seems appropriate to not only consider its merits, but also to assess some of the criticism that it has provoked.

Those who are wanting a completely new perspective on the Victorian era should be warned straightaway that Professor Hoppen does not see this as his task. In his introduction Professor Hoppen states that he has deliberately avoided a 'single overarching thesis' (p. 3). This is not to say that the book is not revisionist. Indeed, throughout the volume Professor Hoppen brushes aside many of the contentious and speculative viewpoints which have flourished in post-war nineteenth-century British historiography. Take his chapters on society and the economy. The industrial bourgeoisie do not exist (chapter 2), nor do the labour aristocracy (chapter 3). The standard of living debate is declared a draw, that is wages went up, but poor quality of life persisted for workers until the onset of smaller families later in the nineteenth century (chapter 3). The Benthamite state is seen off (chapter 4), as are the mid-Victorian boom, the great depression and entrepreneurial failure (chapter 9). Secularisation is ruled out as a purely twentieth-century phenomenon (chapter 12). Even more myths are dispelled in the political chapters. Chartism, Professor Hoppen suggests, was torpedoed almost as soon as it began, by the moral energy of not only Peel and Russell, but, perhaps less plausibly, Melbourne (pp. 129-31). The reputations of most of the mid-Victorian political heavyweights are downsized. The Peelites were 'highly strung athletes too nervous to respond to the starting pistol' (p. 138), whilst Russell's Whigs were on their last legs after 1846 (p. 140). Their successors fare no better. Palmerston was a triumph, although not as a war leader (pp. 165-6), but because he avoided controversy (p. 199) and only offended one group at a time (p. 217). In the 1860s and 1870s Gladstone - 'energetic surface disturbance and submarine stability' (p. 601) - and the policy-less Disraeli (p. 613), are revealed as less dynamic than their rhetoric suggested. Nor is Professor Hoppen very impressed by the big legislative agendas of the period. Parliamentary reform made very little difference until the mid-1880s, as elections remained violent, costly and parochial affairs (p. 259). The opening up of the civil service and the overhaul of the army and navy come over as expensive and only partially successful (pp. 601-4). Elsewhere sober correctives are applied to Britain's external relations. There was no coherence - no 'official mind' - behind imperial expansion, but there was no retreat from empire either (pp. 155-8). In foreign policy Palmerstonian 'sleight of hand' (p. 161) and Disraelian grand 'gestures' (p. 620) blinded Britain from appreciating her loss of continental power status. Other topics, singled out for special attention by Victorian historians in past decades, are similarly scaled down in importance. Although it receives a great deal of attention, Celtic nationalism is put in its place (chapters 14-15). For all their militant dissent and linguistic nationalism, the Welsh proved tame Gladstonian liberals (p. 555). The Scottish complaint of a dispossessed Highland identity masked what was in fact an integrative and modernising economy north of the border (p. 543). Conservative-minded small farmers are shown to have been the dominant force in Irish politics, as opposed to ardent home-rulers (p. 578). The renowned sexual prudery of the Victorians is put into proper proportion (p. 324). Liberal Unionism comes over as a damp squib (p. 688).

In other words, revisionism of the hard-headed, no-nonsense variety runs through *The Mid-Victorian Generation*. It is a revisionism which is based on an enormously wide range of reading on Professor Hoppen's part, as well as an even-tempered and judicious handling of the scholarship of so many fellow historians. It is also a revisionism which reflects the concerns of Professor Hoppen's own generation. As Michael Bentley has observed ('Doing it by numbers', *Times Literary Supplement*, 17 April 1998) there is at times in *The Mid-Victorian Generation* an over-zealous reverence for the statistical certainties beloved by quantitative social history of the 1960s and 1970s. And as Jonathan Parry has pointed out ('Bovril and biscuits', *London Review of Books*, 13 May 1999) Professor Hoppen's sceptical treatment of party politics and of Britain's place in the wider world bears the hallmark of the 'irreverent' political history of the 1970s, as well as post-1945 end of empire pessimism.

But beyond this kind of piecemeal revisionism  $\frac{3}{4}$  admirably scholarly yet iconoclastic in its own way - Professor Hoppen is reluctant to go. Rather than offering a new view of the period he has opted for what he calls 'a series of linked interpretations which do as little violence to the essentially ragged and confused nature of the past as is compatible with understanding and good sense' (p. 2). This posture can be interpreted in a number of ways. It can be seen as a declaration of traditional scholarship. Perhaps all of the past is 'ragged and confused', or perhaps the way historians write about it is 'ragged and confused'. In which case, the task of an Oxford history might be to offer a plausible and reliable guide through a great deal of complexity and variety. This is Peter Mandler's verdict on *The Mid-Victorian Generation (Parliamentary History* vol. 18, Pt. 1, 1999), namely that it is 'hard to imagine how else but traditionally such a textbook could be written'. It is also hard to imagine, amidst a dense and constantly changing field, how durable such a text-book will prove to be. As Donald Read tartly observed (*English Historical Review*, vol. 14, February, 1999), 'Ensor never went into a second edition in sixty years: Hoppen will need revision every five'. Or is Professor Hoppen saying that the mid-Victorian period, or indeed his allotted time-span of 1846-86, is uniquely or especially 'ragged and confused'. This seems to be nearer the mark. He writes in the opening pages of the striking contradictions between the peace and understanding exemplified in the 1851 Great Exhibition and the outbreak of rabid anti-popery the same year, or the fact that the 'Liberal ascendancy' was based on the firm foundations of an opposing political party:- the Peelite Conservatives. In which case there might have been an argument when the new series was conceived several years ago for selecting an alternative time period in which there were less contradictions. For example, the volume might have followed the original Oxford series:- Woodward's 1815-70, or Ensor's 1870-1914, or, perhaps 1850-1900, since, as Duncan Bythell has noted (*Economic History Review*, vol. 52, May, 1999) many of the key developments (politics aside) in Professor Hoppen's story take place after 1886, notably fertility decline and the economic climacteric, and, one might add, the impact of evolutionism (most of the key figures cited are all from the later 1880s and 1890s, i.e.: Pearson, Kidd, Galton, Hardy). But perhaps the weightiest charge (made, by implication, by both Dr Parry and Professor Bentley) against this piecemeal approach is that the burden of writing an authoritative Oxford history has prevented Professor Hoppen from tearing from his leash and offering a wholly new interpretation rather than a resume of three decades of research. Text-books need not be straitjackets. Paul Langford's eighteenth-century volume in the Oxford series - *A Polite and Commercial People* (1989) - has been commended for the freshness and originality of its interpretation, even if it has provoked disagreement. And other recent histories of the Hanoverian era, notably Wilfrid Prest's *Albion Ascendant* (1998) and Frank O'Gorman's *The Long Eighteenth Century* (1997) are very much interpretation-led, for better or for worse.

The problem is not so much Professor Hoppen's caution or circumspection, as other reviewers have suggested, as the lack of any obvious paradigm by which mid-Victorian Britain might be readily understood. It is relatively easy for eighteenth-century British historians to wade into contentious issues, for the

reverberations of recent revisionist work such as Jonathan Clark's *English Society* (1985), John Brewer's *Sinews of Power* (1989) and Linda Colley's *Britons* (1992) are still being felt. By way of contrast, whilst historians of Victorian Britain differ loudly over method and approach - witness the older skirmishes over class, or 'high politics', or the more recent anxiety over the 'linguistic turn' - there has always been a surprising lack of debate over what were the dynamic forces or larger thematic issues in the period. To his credit Professor Hoppen does try to impose some fairly loose organising themes on his material. But they do not work particularly well. His 'linked interpretations' are threefold:- 'established industrialism' (factory and manufacturing life had come to stay); 'multiple national identities' (the separate traditions of England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland); and the 'interlocking spheres' of public culture. 'Established industrialism' is effectively undermined by chapters 2-3, in which it emerges that industrial enterprises remained small, most of the middle class lived in non-industrial towns, and the typical worker remained an artisan, craftsman or domestic servant, and not a textile worker. 'Multiple national identities' sounds fashionable, but is disarmed somewhat by Professor Hoppen's revelation that in 1841 80.2% of the British and 55.7% of the UK population lived in England, and by 1901 that had increased to 82.5 and 73.6 respectively (p. 513). In other words, put Ireland on one side (which in most respects Professor Hoppen is quite right not to do), and 'multiple national identities' refers to under a fifth of the population. Whither the English regions, asks Duncan Bythell, and wherefore English patriotism, wonders Jonathan Parry, and with good cause. Finally, 'interlocking spheres' of public culture is rather undone by Professor Hoppen carefully showing in chapter 10 just how separately leisure, family life and illness were experienced by different people in different regions and from different social groups. Moreover, in chapter 11 it becomes clear that middle-class taste drove the increasing commercialisation of publishing, painting and architecture, yet we are also told of the forgotten hack writers, producers of penny dreadfuls and gallows speeches who sold in their hundreds of thousands to a largely working-class readership. Not much interlocking going on there.

Other themes are notable by their absence from Professor Hoppen's book, and consideration of some of them might have made for a more interpretative account. Apart from evolution, the intellectual history of the period is ignored, so the widely different verdicts of, for example, Maurice Cowling and Stefan Collini, on the nature of Victorian 'public doctrine' cannot be addressed. There is not much on the religious impact on social thought, so the influential reformulation of 'laissez-faire' which the work of Boyd Hilton and Martin Wiener has produced goes almost unnoticed. Monarchy and empire (that is, the effect of empire on metropolitan culture) get formal consideration, but are denied the extended attention that the arguments of David Cannadine and John M. Mackenzie would suggest they deserve. Although Professor Hoppen minimises the idea of the state, its effective substitute, the voluntary sector (friendly societies and trade unions, philanthropy, and local government, especially in London, where the pace of collectivism was so much faster), is not treated in detail. And the workings of Lords and Commons (we now know more about the representative system and the legislative process in the eighteenth century than in the nineteenth) are dealt with as political narrative rather than problems in their own right. No doubt reasons can be given for these issues not being included in this volume in more detail, but it would be interesting to know where Professor Hoppen stands in relation to those historians who have recently attempted to construct an single arch over the Victorians.

Is Michael Bentley right? Has Professor Hoppen left the 'mid-Victorians more complicated than he found them'. Not really. As Professor Bentley suggests elsewhere in his review, *The Mid-Victorian Generation* amounts to a comprehensive, fair and indispensable review of the last thirty years of scholarly work on the period. Professor Hoppen has rendered an older complex historiography more intelligible. The book will quickly take its place alongside those other vital tools of the Victorian specialist:- H.J. Hanham's *Bibliography of British History, 1851-1914* (1978) and the *Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals* (1966-89). But Professor Hoppen has left the Victorians pretty much as Briggs, Burn (whose sub-title Professor Hoppen has taken as his own), Kitson Clark and others found them in the 1960s - cushioned by prosperity and national security, a society stabilised by a faith in British institutions and a common moral code, and

only troubled by the dangers of democracy and imperial anxiety in the last quarter of the century. Only time will tell whether or not the next generation wishes to leave the mid-Victorians in the same state.

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