

## Victorian People

*A reassessment of persons & themes 1851-1867*

A. Briggs

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'Eminent Victorians'<sup>1</sup> was a hit with the English reading public. Lytton Strachey took a few eminent personages from the previous age out which everyone just had emerged and took them down to size in such hilarious manner that Bertrand Russell was admonished sitting in jail for having so much fun and laughing so loud, which was not in keeping with his predicament. The present book will hardly provoke in like manner.

The Victorian age was a stuffy age, supposedly of caste privilege and hypocrisy, not the least sexual, and hardly a popular topic for a historian, nevertheless in view of the extensive documentary material, thoroughly covered in the literature. But any historian worth his salt can find an untrodden niche and get purchase. For that reason Briggs decide to concentrate on the period 1851-1867 which has to a large extent been left alone by historians. Except of course for the Crimean war 1854-6 nothing exciting happened. This is of course not strictly true, there are always things happening, but the period nevertheless can be hailed as the height of the Victorian age at its most established. Politically it is hemmed in between the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 and the second Reform Bill of 1867, and it is also the time of Lord Palmerston's political domination.

1851 was the year of the Crystal Palace. This was meant to be a symbol of the progress of the new modern age, as well as one of peace and international competition. Half of the exhibits were British, the other half invitations. The remarkable building itself, designed by a self-made man - John Paxton, was erected in record time, consisting mostly of glass, for which excessive taxes had recently been removed<sup>2</sup>. It was modern also in conception, the erection simplified by using standard interchangeable parts. This was the modern age indeed, which we tend to forget. Photography was already established as well as the telegraph allowing news to spread almost instantaneously. Thus in many ways, although now over 150 years into the past (and a mere hundred at the time of writing), part of the world we live in now, and hence easy to identify with. But the author does not provide his reader with details of what was exhibited and how it was received, we only learn about long lines and general excitement. It must have been a hit. Politically the situation was somewhat chaotic, the Parliament being in a confused mess with many different parties and conflicting interests, represented by not only Whigs and Tories, but also Radicals and other transversal groupings such as the Peelites (supporter of the recently deceased Peel) and the Protectionists (who opposed the repeal of the Corn Laws and resisted free trade). As to individuals there was the Whig John Russell, the grandfather of the above mentioned Bertrand, trying the best to hold a tenuous coalition, being disposed in February only

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<sup>1</sup> Reviewed in 8b

<sup>2</sup> The reader may recall the unpopular window tax

to be reinstated in March. Such a situation of a Parliament in disarray is a common one in modern European politics. Russel does not come across as a powerful personality, rather as one who barely scrapes by, being overshadowed by the far more charismatic Lord Palmerston mainly known at the time as a powerful Foreign Secretary forcefully serving British National and Economic interests<sup>3</sup>. He was also a controversial figure, and intensely disliked by Victoria and her consort, and when he was forced out of office in December, there was relief at the Court, yet his time was yet to come.

The pacific and peace loving mood of the Crystal Palace was completely overturned a few years later when there was great popular appeal for a war against Russia. So called popular opinion is a rather mischievous notion, it certainly refers to opinion, but what about the popular aspect? Does it really exist beyond the newspapers? To what extent is the various mass demonstrations that purportedly serve it, authentic or stage set? Anyway there was a great tide of warmongering and excitement of going to war. Clearly the supposed militarism of the Germans, as exhibited at the verge of the First World War, was to be found all over Europe. One may ponder why the Christian British should side with the Muslim Turks against Christian (if Orthodox) Russians? Not everyone drew that conclusion but they were in a minority. Obviously there were other considerations, such as far east rivalry getting into play. In particular there was the fear that the Russians would take advantage of the decaying Ottoman Empire and seize Constantinople, long thought of as the grand ambition of Russian expansion. The British allied with the French did miserably, failed to take Sebastopol and the enthusiasm quickly faded. Instead there were calls for inquiries and an appeal to army reform. The greatest impact, at least as to posterity, was the appearance on the scene by Florence Nightingale, who more to the point as merely playing the role of the angle tending the sick and dying, was very hardheaded and brought about much needed reform. The Crimean war may have been the last war when more soldiers died from disease than battle. In the end the British and the French managed to prevail but hardly in any strapping heroic way, and could extricate themselves from an ill-thought-out adventure.

Now we are introduced to a variety of Victorians. Roebuck, a radical inveighing against the war, even when it was popular and instrumental in setting up a parliamentary commission to look into the mishandling of the war by the Government. It led to a crisis which resulted in Palmerston taking the lead and holding on to it until his death ten years later in 1865. In particular one started to question the tradition that the officer corps was only open to the aristocracy and suggesting it would be based on merit instead. But if the military would be reformed, should not the entire Civil Service undergo a similar reform with exams in order to find out who would be the most suitable for the jobs, which until now often went as sinecures to the idle elements of the aristocracy. Another Victorian, the novelist Trollope is brought up in a subsequent chapter. Trollope regarded a seat in the Commons as the pinnacle of a man's career and he himself tried twice for such elated office, failing both times, being aghast as to the corruption involved. He had to resign his ambitions and decide that he might be more influential as a novelist than as a member of Parliament, but the experience allowed him to write on the topic of parliamentary

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<sup>3</sup> He is known for his saying that a country does not have any friends, just interests.

election as an insider. He made his living as a Civil Servant in the Postal Department<sup>4</sup>. Trollope was against entrance exams for the selection of Civil servants on the belief that they should be gentlemen, whatever that meant, and that subtle but yet so fundamental quality had nothing to do with examinations for which one may be forced to cram (not very gentlemanly I presume). Now there is a chapter on Samuel Smiles extolling the virtues of work in almost evangelical terms, starting the tradition of self-help books which tends to swamp the shelves of bookstores along with cook-books in modern times. Those books were very successful<sup>5</sup> and catered of course mainly to the middle-classes but also to the most ambitious among the lower classes. Smiles, very much emphasized regulations and opposed the dominant creed of the time of *laissez-faire* as manifested, as he satirically noted in the Nobody who does everything. Nobody poisons our drink, Nobody adulterates our food, Nobody leaves towns undrained. In short Nobody is too blame, doing a lot of mischief. Smiles who was for social intervention at the same time opposed socialism as unfair, it being up to the individual to help himself<sup>6</sup>

Victorian England was of course a class society when the populace were divided almost into castes. The caste system in India is essentially one of job-division into which everyone is born into his or her station in life, and happiness lies in accepting your place. Mobility across class barriers is only effected in exceptional cases, and even then the taint of your origins may stick to you. At the top we had the aristocracy, man of position, but not necessarily wealth, to which the most prestigious occupations were reserved. The members of Parliament was usually of the aristocracy, serving as *noblesse obliges*. Russell, Palmerston, Newcastle, Aberdeen all the leading men of politics were of the aristocracy. Many of them were undoubtedly competent and served their country well, while nowadays it is hard to believe that a country could be competently well-managed if it was governed by men drawn from such a narrow segment of the population. Has the aristocracy declined since then? Were are their able men? But maybe ableness, at least not in politics, is not inborn but as a result of education and a sense of being entitled. If you firmly believe you are of the ruling class, you will automatically become a good political leader, because what you look for in those is not so much intelligence as confidence, common sense rather than brilliancy, although a display of the latter never hurts. Now below the aristocracy we have the middle classes, which themselves are stratified in subtle ways. This class emerged as a consequence of the industrialization and made their mark in manufacture and trade, non-traditional occupations. Their growing political influence could not be indefinitely stemmed in a democratic society, meaning on based on representation. The Reform Bill of 1832 confirmed their political standing and the repeal of the Corn laws in 1846 confirmed their creed of free trade. The economic importance of land, on which the aristocracy based their privilege, declined seriously in England during the 19th century and with that the dominance of the upper classes. Then we had the great mass of people, in political discussions referred to as the working classes, and whose influence on the state of affairs was

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<sup>4</sup> Clearly he must have been able to supplement his regular income handsomely from his writing.

<sup>5</sup> Structured around anecdotes they became very accessible and allowed a wider spectrum of interpretations

<sup>6</sup> Smiles born in 1812 suffered a stroke in 1871 and had to relearn himself to read and write. One cannot fault him for not living as he taught.

negligible. A class to be feared and despised and dismissed as the mob whose members could only articulate through violence. Of course it may contain exceptional individuals, whose rise and accomplishments were always appreciated, as well as responsible individuals whose ambitions should be respected maybe even encouraged, and be welcome additions to the lower strata of the middle classes, no man in his right mind had any objections to that. Another Victorian - Applegarth - is presented and his successful efforts to create Trade Unions. His idea was to organize, not the rubble, but the responsible segment represented by artisans. There was opposition to the idea which focused on the fact that the members were treated as a collective and not as individuals, that e.g. piecework was prohibited. Then there was a vaguer threat of the unions becoming too powerful and upsetting the natural order of things, i.e. the stratification which guaranteed the stability of a society which was the foremost ambition of Government. Applegarth laid emphasis on responsibility and peaceful means, earning himself the opprobrium of Marx who favored a more confrontational and romantically violent confrontation. As to education there were Public Schools, which only catered to a very thin segment of the population. In the book there is no indication as how the great mass of children were educated, if at all. The Public School education was not geared towards scholarship but sports, its object was not to impart learning per se, but gentlemanly attitudes. The father of Matthew Arnold was the Headmaster of Rugby and as such legendary. Sentimentalized memories thereof were put in fictional form in the classic book *Tom Brown's School Days* by the educator Hughes and became a kind of propaganda book for the values of the classical Public School education<sup>7</sup>. The system had obvious flaws, but was seen by its advocates to be basically sound and any reform thereof should limit itself to the obvious and not meddle with its essence. The Public School, of which new ones were formed in the 19th century, has survived in England to this day. It would be instructive to compare it to the Prussian educational system which was put in place in the early 19th century.

Another forgotten Victorian was Bright who fought in Parliament for enfranchising the working classes, in other words to improve the Reform Bill of 1832 with a more extensive one. Bright was a committed man of *laissez-faire* he opposed any legislation when it came to factory work, as that would interfere with the freedom of action. The purpose of the State was to provide a minimal amount of meddling into private matters. Such attitudes today would be incompatible with the view of somebody committed to democracy and liberal views, but liberal can mean many things, as can democracy. But nevertheless, as noted above, Bright fought tenuously for widened democracy. In this he was greatly assisted by his bitter opponent Robert Lowe who became a kind of bogey man, and whose vociferous opposition galvanized wide support for the reform. In fact among all the Victorian characters presented in the book, Lowe is by far the most colorful (in spite ironically of being an albino) of all the Victorians presented, and in a sense what makes the book worth reading.

Lowe did not oppose the Bill out of narrow reasons of self-interest, his opposition was principled and intellectual and delivered in a very spirited way. His qualms were exactly those expressed by Plato, namely that an illiterate majority is not able to govern wisely,

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<sup>7</sup> The mathematician G.H. Hardy read it as a child and was inspired by it, although as an adult he realized that it was a trashy book

that giving more rope to the lower classes would only invite mayhem and disaster. It was the classical fear of the mob<sup>8</sup>, when it came to the more responsible members of the lower classes, those who could muster some economic muscle (a ten pound lower limit was in effect), it was different. Lowe was also a proponent of educational reform, if more and more of the rubble would be given responsibility it was of the utmost importance that they were educated. As to education Lowe was dismissive of tradition, and by that he did not so much concern himself with the forms of education, didactical considerations came later in history, but with the contents. He was opposed to the Classical curriculum and proposed instead science. For the lower classes the 'reading 'riting and "rithmetic was more than enough (although he would of course not be adverse to the cultivation of the supremely talented to be rescued out of their circumstances). Lowe was incidentally no mean classicist himself, and it was rumored that his distinction in the field would have become more apparent in examinations, if his nose did not rub out what his pencil had just drawn, because he was of slight physical endowments as to health and suppleness and handicapped by being severely short-sighted. Lowe was considered absolutely brilliant, and his nature was quarrelsome, cherishing the fight and the confrontation for its own sake. It was even rumored that when arriving too early to a train station he turned to his companion suggesting that in order to while away the time they had a row with the cab man, to which he proceeded to turn his belligerent attention. Not surprisingly in the long run his disdain of those intellectually inferior would only gain him enemies and make him lose friends, and when Disraeli once were asked if there was a man he would not deign to shake hands with, he unhesitatingly singled out Lowe and no other. In short Lowe became something of a '*Rechtshaber*' the victim of his own '*Rechtshaberei* painting himself into a corner and becoming a disability. In fact his personal history shows great public success, as during his youth in Australia, only to be squandered. In the end he became involved with the Civil Service, where he would prove to be a kind and conscientious man. In short he was the very opposite of a mere careerist, instead one who never compromised on his personal integrity. You may disagree with him on principle, but you cannot refrain from admiring his pluck and utter disdain of social obsequiousness. That certainly cannot be said of Disraeli who managed to get the Reform Bill of 1867 through Parliament, once Palmerston died in 1865. He apparently was not so much interested in the Bill itself and what it stood for, only the prestige it entailed to get it through and the skill it testified to. Disraeli was a Tory, but as a shrewd and unprincipled politician he could sense the tenor of the times and where to put your bids when it came to court the favors of posterity. Disraeli was the one who brought Democracy to England, just as Arvid Lindman did it in Sweden more than fifty years later.

August 28-29, 2017 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden ulfp@chalmers.se*

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<sup>8</sup> The resentment of the mob still survives into the modern age. Who are electing people like Trump? White trash, who really should be disenfranchised, although few would are to say this aloud. The Republican party in the States has been instrumental in limiting the vote and its influence in a number of ways.