

Victorian Cities

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December 4, 2017 - January 24, 2018

The author wrote *Victorian People*¹, which was a series of portraits of some eminent Victorians active in mid-century Victorian England, a period, the author claims, has not been as intensively covered as other periods (the professional historian looking for a gap in which to step in?). This worked, because people tend to be interesting, at least if they are active, and it is a good way of presenting a window to the past. Encouraged by success, he followed by a companion volume to describe in a similar way Victorian cities. But it does not work. Are not cities as interesting as people? Probably not, as you can readily identify with people, and hence make comparisons with your own life. You also understand a lot of a personal life, and thus you are able to gauge the significance of events, this is not true for cities. You need to have them explained and to have comparisons made. What is a city, and what is distinctive about a city say in the 19th century, the bulk of which is headed under the Victorian Age. You also need to compare cities, in order to enhance their differences which are the main sources of their individual interests. In short there need to be if not plots, at least some drama. There is none of that in the book. As a professional and conscientious historian the author has surely done his homework and furrowing through the archives undug a lot of bones which he presents seemingly halter-skelter, with little if any structure nor explanation. Admittedly, this is not uncommon among historians in an attempt to express the richness and complexity of the past, or maybe as a result of intellectual laziness combined with plodding diligence. As a consequence the books reads tediously as in an never ending stream of consciousness, which like a large sea laps onto the shore the one barge of flotsam and jetsam after each other, the debris of sustained archival inquiry.

For one thing Britain was the first country to undergo a so called industrial revolution, and this must have effected the cities profoundly, but how? Without an explanation of such a general context, much of the histories of modern cities are rendered inexplicable. For one thing, the traditional city was one of trade and small scale manufacture, the size of which was generally very modest. Most people lived in the country side where food was produced presenting the backbone of the economy in terms which are easy to understand. Some statistics would have been useful². The industrial revolution meant a transformation from small-scale manufacture to large scale, involving huge work-forces drawn from the surrounding countryside, concentrating into tight spaces. Cities normally

¹ Reviewed in those volumes

² There is a habit among historians to present statistics, but apparently more as ornament as an indication of commitment to hard facts and empiricism, than as illumination. Haphazard numerical figures mean nothing, only when they are exploited to prove a point or to derive further insights do they justify their inclusions.

not planed³, were even less so during times of fast growth, when profit was the overriding issue. Hence the modern industrial cities were considered a blight on the landscape and a pit of human misery, and a whole generation of socially concerned Victorian novelists came to the fore, the most notable being Dickens.

The book covers the Victorian era, i.e. from late 1830's to the turn of the century. While a modern reader has a firm grasp of the different decades of the 20th century, distinguishing easily an unavoidably between say the 20's and the 80's, each of them giving rich set of associations, knowing the great defining events of the century such as the world wars and the ensuing old war and decolonization to the end of the cold war, as well as the transformation of daily life, brought about by the development of the car-borne society, the ubiquity of airline travel, the advent of the personal computer, the mobile phone and the internet dependence; the corresponding facts for the previous century are not as obvious, not even for the professional historian. In what way did the 1830's differ from the 1870's? In what sense was it more primitive? Was it poorer and less developed? Would someone from the 70's find himself basically at home in the 30's. Is there such a distinct thing as the 1830's for the 19th century resident as a 1930's for a 20th century dweller? Or was the 19th century more homogeneous? In the various presentations of the cities the narrative ranges freely across decades without any sense of gradients.

As to individual cities a few have been chosen as representative. Let us briefly discuss some of them as presented.

Manchester: This is the quintessential industrial city based on cotton and the textile industry the staple of Britain's manufacturing revolution. As an industrial city it was an eye-sore of grim buildings and poverty. It was not strictly speaking a new town emerging from out of nowhere, but had a medieval provenience and had been in the past a most charming town. Of that little if anything would remain as the city rapidly grew. The division between the well-to-do and the poor would of course create a lot of social tension, and in the 1830's it got the reputation as a center of social disturbances and a potential cradle for revolution. In fact the division between classes was too strong to allow a fairly moderate reform movement in the city. It was considered also as the modern city par excellence and a harbinger of the future. It attracted the curiosity of writers such as Dickens, Carlyle and Disraeli, to name the most noteworthy, making for new serious themes in literature. And Victorian literature to a large extent made for documentary exercises in exploratory sociology. Most significantly though, its very newness and the rise of a manufacturing class of wealth, indicated that the old order with the aristocracy at the top was being seriously challenged. In fact a sundering of the ties between nobility and wealth, the latter becoming independent from the former. The Manchester businessman disliked prestige unearned by achievement, they also resented external meddling, and adhered to the principle of each man for himself, which of course made them disdainful of notions such as collective solidarity. Others, such as notably Engels, drew more radical conclusions, the future was not with the ascending capitalists and the self-made man, but with the working people, indeed heralding a proletarian revolution, something he assumed to be inevitable, just as the ramifications of a mechanical or mathematical law. And economic growth was

³ exceptions occur of course, some such Mannheim founded as Garrison towns with regular grids of streets laid out

not straightforward, slumps and depressions seemed to be built into the system, to the detriment both of workers and capitalists. The first of which occurred in the 1830's (and incidentally ought in retrospect to color our conception of the decade, but which are not part of general knowledge). Among the more pressing needs to be addressed, however, was the rampant unhealthiness of the city, and how this was strongly correlated with poverty. The poorer the population, the unhealthier, the lower the average life-expectancy. The streets in the opulent parts of the city were cleansed every week, in the poorer parts every month, if even that. Anyway the sentiments of the city of Manchester brought about what would result in the death-knell of the landed aristocracy, namely the repeal of the Corn Law in 1846, this protectionist measure that had been to the advantage of the country by making bread more expensive, but clearly went against the interests of the urban workers, and by implications against those of the industrialists and businessmen, who were all for laissez-faire anyway, and the doing away of custom duties. Gradually the squalor of the city (actually it did not become a formal city until the mid-century), grated less and less on general opinion, and as a phenomenon it became more and more accepted and normalized.

Birmingham: This city differed from Manchester that it was less focused in its economic base, and less of a working class city, where instead the artisan and small businesses dominated. Briggs spends most of his time on describing the purely civic aspects of the city, and the development of its self-governance. In particular he elucidates in great detail the influence exerted by the radical liberal politician and former self-made businessman Joseph Chamberlain (1836-14) in creating a strong local government and for it to take responsibility for taking charge of the communal affairs, such as water, sewage and gas, and not leave them in the hands of private initiative, a development which has been reversed in recent decades in the Western world, following the mantra that profit and competition guarantees efficiency. Chamberlain later rose to National eminence.

Middlesbrough: This is indeed the most complete and satisfying picture presented. The city did hardly exist even as a settlement before the Victorian era, and here the statistical figures presented actually make sense, showing how it grew rapidly in extent and population until reaching a 100'000 at the end of the century. In a way it was a planned city, being new with no history nor any precedent, an innovation thrust upon the world, like the steam-engine. It underwent a couple of stages. First its accidental location close to newly built railways, and this by the way is an excellent topic for a history of the 19th century, the railroad being to the 19th century what the car and airplane has been to the 20th century, served as an impetus for it to serve as a harbor shipping coal transported by those very railroads. However, the expansion of the railroad network made shipping of coal obsolete, and the city which had sprung up, threatened to become a ghost town, had not the unexpected discovery of iron changed all that, and the city got a new lease on life as an iron-Klondike. Eventually iron production was overtaken by steel production. Initially, steel had only been manufactured in small amounts and used in implements and weapons, but with the introduction of the Bessemer process in 1856, this changed and it became possible to produce steel in large quantities. It required iron-ore free from phosphorous, which was not available nearby. But the city managed to adept extend and became in the process more dependent on the international market.

And there is the personal element, the German immigrant Henry Bolckow (1806-1878)

and his partner the Welsh John Vaughan (1799-1868) whose entrepreneurial skills drove much of the development of the city, and who also took an active part in politics and local governing, Bolckow serving both as mayor and a M.P. representative for the city. Being a German immigrant born in Mecklenburg necessitated a special act of Parliament in 1841 to make him a naturalized British citizen for him to serve. Learning commerce in Rostock he was a young man invited to Newcastle in 1827. Which eventually led him to tie up with Vaughan and together they founded and managed the largest Victorian iron and steel company.

Melbourne Just as Middlesbrough started from scratch, so did Melbourne, a tiny settlement given the name of a minor politician. Admittedly not British it was nevertheless quintessentially Victorian. In fact Victoria as an Australian state had just extricated itself from New South Wales. The growth of Melbourne was spectacular, from essentially nothing at the dawn of the Victorian Age it had reached about half a million by the 1890's greatly abetted in its final growth by the great boom of the 1880's. It peaked in 1888, with sky-high property prices not only rivaling those of London but actually exceeding them. Then came the inevitable bursting of the bubble, and during the 90's there was an extended slump with a concomitant decrease in population, and Sydney, its northern rival, caught on and surpassed and would eventually become the largest and the most important city but that was to be seen in the 20th century. Australia shared many characteristics with the States, but of course it was firmly in the British fold, and a place where the British would feel at home, and in fact Melbourne received many British immigrants during its heady growth, as well as much British capital to fuel the economic boom. Still of course there were significant differences. Australia was founded more or less on virgin territory, forgetting about the marginal Aborigines, seen mostly as a nuisance, unencumbered by history and ossified traditions and inflexible social stratification. A much less 'snobby' society. Melbourne was also less densely populated than major cities, and also a larger part of the Australian population was urban than elsewhere. This might go part of the way of explaining the special Australian conceit of the outback, of going into the bush. Australian fauna and flora being significantly different than European and North American one, must also have contributed to a sharper demarcation between country and town. And, one surmises, a deeper sense of alienation, although this is not discussed in the book, It was a new country a new experience, and Melbourne reflected all of that, entailing in its planned grids of streets, a hodge-podge of architectural styles, not seen anywhere else, and also a more democratic one (in the often misused sense of egalitarian) in which the same tastes were to be found among the rich as well as the poor. One particular manifestation of this being the fanciful cast-iron decorations, which in succeeding decades were disparaged as Victorian junk, but which have in recent years been revived, aesthetic taste being but a fashion, notoriously fickle by nature.

London This city is special, and not quite like another city. For one thing where does London begin and where does it end? A cancerous growth almost, invariably gobbling up its surrounding countryside, spreading all over, an awesome conglomeration of people, endlessly fascinating as no other city. But not cohesive in any way, divided roughly into the West End and the East End, with various gradations in between. West End is the rich, glitzy part, with which to this day people associate with London, where all the museums,

stately residences, and governmental institutions are to be found, and the East End a place of squalor and poverty and facelessness, which could as well have been situated in the darkest recesses of Africa. What do these regions have in common? In a way nothing at all. East Enders have seldom if ever been to the West End, and West Enders ignore more or less completely their unfortunate brothers languishing in the East, an unknown dangerous territory where they would be loath to tread⁴. In fact the lack of cohesiveness of London is the topic of the chapter, discussing various ways of forming a civic unity of the city and a common governance, initiatives which were strongly resisted, but eventually prevailed. London eventually got its communal water and gasworks, as well as proper sewage all to improve the deplorable sanitary conditions, on the level of a Third World Mega city as of today. There were also unionizing of the work forces at the end of the era, demonstrations, some of them violent with actual casualties of which some were even fatal, which belatedly made London a hotbed for political radicalism, engendering the usual fears that the ignorant mob would be given undue powers and tax the rich out of existence. London was also the cultural capital of the country, and political radicalism became chic and the darling of the intellectuals, this manifesting itself in the Fabian society, strongly identified with the busybody couple Sidney and Beatrice Webb, with Shaw and Wells as flamboyant spokesmen. The author notes that authors usually are able to present more vivid and true accounts than mere historians, whose dry and factual presentations may depict the body of facts but fail to catch the 'soul'. The classical London narrator is of course Dickens, who was able, intentionally or not, to make the poor foggy town into a romantic spectacle of crime and love. Dickens, whose novels were not only meant to entertain but also to instruct, engage and ultimately to raise the necessary indignation to cause effective action, although the first tended to take precedence. Dickens came of age in the early Victorian era, and due to his untimely death had little to say about the latter half. Instead the author refers to writers such as Gissing and Wells. Gissing was more or less forgotten by the time Briggs wrote, although Orwell in the previous decades had tried to revive him. And Wells, whose more science-fictional works still linger on, is now more or less forgotten as a writer of serious novels in which he sincerely tried to paint the tenor of the times, especially as to London.

As a final epilogue the author discusses the contrast between the old classical cities with Medieval city centers often with majestic cathedrals and the more modern industrial cities with rapid growth. The old traditional cities followed different trajectories, some were able to adapt to the changing times take advantage of the expanding railroad networks attract industry and thrive, others languished, such as York, which not only failed to grow and attract but could not even contain and leaked and diminished in size, although only temporarily. The Victorian century, due to the advent of the railroad, tended to soften the sharp demarcation between country and city, and also to break the power of the landed aristocracy being to a large extent reduced to a more or less charming anachronism. In the competition between land and trade, agriculture and industry, the former lost out, the repeal of the Corn Law being a decisive act of parliamentary legislation confirming the

⁴ The German writer and journalist Fontane, who for many years was stationed in London, gives a vivid account from the 1850's how the cab in which they were traveling lost its way and passed through sections of the city, where they feared for their lives.

invariable march of change and concomitant progress, which was in a sense the defining quality of the Victorian Age.

January 10, 21-22, 25-26, 2018 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se ■