

Introduction

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THE papers in this collection arose from the first joint symposium between the British Academy and the Royal Society of Edinburgh, which took place in the Society's rooms in Edinburgh, December 12-14, 1990. The theme for this historic meeting had been proposed to the councils of each organisation as peculiarly apt, bearing in mind the great contemporary interest in 'Victorian values' as an exemplar to modern Britain, and Scotland's own distinctive contribution to nineteenth-century moral systems. The details were then worked out by a joint organising committee, consisting of the editor of the present volume as chairman, Lord Briggs of Lewes, Professor J.W. Burrow and Professor F.M.L. Thompson, FBA, and Professor R.S. Downie, Professor F.W. Robertson and Dr. W.D.I. Rolfe, FRSE.

Almost all the texts printed here are substantially the same as delivered at the symposium, apart from minor corrections and adjustments in the light of discussion at the meeting. The main exception is Raphael Samuel's paper on Margaret Thatcher's use of the concept of 'Victorian values', which is the development of a strand in his original contribution on 'Victorian values and the working classes', and a theme much enlarged upon throughout the symposium: we gathered in Edinburgh, after all, within a month of the Prime Minister's dramatic fall from office. Because of its different character, it comes first in this collection.

The final contribution, also, has a special character. Dr. A.J.P. Kenny, as President of the British Academy, provided a reflective tail-piece which

was not, he insisted, an academic research paper but the reflections of a philosopher on a field not his own. We prevailed upon him to allow its publication providing this proper distinction was made.

The symposium was structured to allow the Victorian system of values to be examined from many angles, in the belief that light from only one approach would inevitably fail to illuminate its vast complexity. On the first afternoon, R.J. Morris led us off with a fine-tuned exploration into the Scottish contribution to Victorian values which he described as a 'mixture of the practical and the moral'. In a country that had a sharp awareness of its distinctiveness yet no central machinery of government, where aristocracy was often despised but the dominant religious tradition stressed each soul's egalitarian responsibility to answer to God, the 'value of the individual operating in the moral framework of small communities' was well developed. Mark Girouard, by contrast, speaking of the upper classes in a British perspective, distinguished three types – the earnest Victorian, responsible, respectable and puritan; the Victorian swell, as profligate and stylish as any eighteenth-century progenitor; and the Victorian gentleman, a conflation inspired by ideas of chivalry and natural leadership. Each of them, in their common easy assumption of the importance of the high-born as an example to society at large, were miles removed in their value systems from the tortured, boot-strap approach to life of Samuel Smiles of Haddington and his middle-class readership. Raphael Samuel speaking on Victorian values and the working class again stressed variety. The independent artisans of the East Midlands, proud to stand on their own two feet, were distant from the swells and the gentlemen: but working-class mutuality and ability to make the most fun out of life was also far removed from the strait-laced and atomistic Victorian world of popular conception.

The following morning we explored religion and literature. S.J. Brown introduced us to Thomas Chalmers' subtle attempt to marry 'concern for individual morality and personal salvation' with 'the desire to organise society into closely-knit communities independent of upper-class patronage and State paternalism': he showed us how traditional this was in Scottish life, and how, therefore, Chalmers' territorial ideals of church organisation had a powerful grip in Scotland long after his death. Perhaps an even greater service that Professor Brown provided for the symposium, however, was to throw into sharp relief how Chalmers epitomised one peculiarly enduring strand of the popular notion of Victorian values, as standing for the dignity of an individual's independence from state help. Clyde Binfield next explored the interplay between community and the networks of related or mutually admiring individuals in English non-conformity, and beautifully drew for us the mind-set of those to whom Mr. Gladstone was

practically a deity. This essay as printed is substantially longer than as delivered. Valentine Cunningham brought out the anti-materialist values of Victorian literature, the critique of money-grubbing and compassion for the poor illustrated in Dickens, Arnold, Elliott, Brontë and Kingsley; but the writers themselves lived in fear and distaste of slum and its denizens, and coped in a materialist world of unbalanced accounts and opportunistic publishers.

Saturday afternoon began with science and medicine. In a most illuminating and wide-ranging introduction to nineteenth-century evolutionary ideas from the pre-Darwinian Scottish evolutionists, through Darwin and Huxley to the non-Darwinian early twentieth-century theorists, Peter Bowler again reminded us of the perils when historical myths are used to support modern values; 'the familiar images begin to blur when the past is studied in more detail'. The true originality of Darwin was obscured when Huxley used his own interpretation of *The Origin of Species* as a weapon to take control of the scientific community, and Herbert Spencer allied with Huxley in promoting notions of liberal social evolutionism, 'a naturalistic interpretation of the Protestant work ethic'. Non-Darwinian ideas, Lamarckian theories of cycles of evolution and decline, had wide currency among anthropologists and palaeontologists at the start of this century, and were used to support racialist theories that had no basis in Darwin's thought at all. So while it is true that most Victorians and Edwardians came to accept the general concept of evolutionism, the authentic originality of Darwin's discoveries was overlaid and perverted, and had to be rediscovered in much more recent times.

The medical profession was the subject of William Bynum's paper focusing on the response to competition in the market place. 'The most striking features of this adaptation were the growth of an occupational diversity and increasing reliance on the state as an important patron'. The 1911 National Health Act thus came as a culmination of processes which had been in train since 1834. He reminds us that for Sir John Simon the essence of his age was not simply the growing wealth and power of the community but 'the constantly increasing care of the community at large for the welfare of its individual parts'.

This perspective interlocked neatly with that of José Harris on the founders of the welfare state. She contrasted Mrs. Thatcher's view of Victorian values as individualistic with those of Corelli Barnett, whose *Audit of War* portrays the contemporary welfare state as the major inheritance of soft-centred Victorian Christianity and sentimentalism. The fathers and mothers of the welfare state in fact drew their ideas from admiration of the culture and institutions of the late Victorian and

Edwardian organised working class and found in its unions and friendly societies what appeared to them to be a model for an escape route from the poor law. The framers of the welfare state, notably Beveridge, went to great lengths to imitate the self-help rules of the big trades unions, with their Draconian penalties for misbehaviour, though they found almost insuperable problems in imposing them. Correlli Barnett thus looks quite wrong, Mrs. Thatcher closer to the truth, but authentic Victorian values had always flourished in a less commercial and consumerist world than ours.

On Sunday we heard three very different papers. Anne Crowther followed the previous theme in examining the workhouse. The Victorians neither invented this institution nor found themselves able to get rid of it. Some supported its principles against what Chadwick's assistant called 'anti-poor-law, pseudo-philanthropic agitators': others became enmeshed in controversies about the relationship between the poor house and charity. But no-one even in our century has been able to deny for long the need for some sort of less eligibility principle. Anne Digby took us into the realm of women's relationship with Victorian values, examining the ideological divide between the public sphere, viewed as a masculine domain of work and politics, and the private sphere, viewed as a female domain of home and family. The important territory here was the shifting border between public and private spheres, and the ability of the women's movement to turn it into a moving frontier of expanding opportunity. Little protest was heard from men while women pushed the frontier forward through work in philanthropy, social work or even local government: the threshold was crossed in the campaign for parliamentary suffrage and in other manifestations of 'unladylike' behaviour.

The last paper, unfortunately not available for publication in this collection, was Clive Dewey's examination of the export of Victorian values to India. The conquerors were anxious that the empire should be administered by Victorian gentlemen – definitely upper class, but preferably not by the earnest and certainly not by the swells of Mark Girouard's three-fold classification. While the rules did not totally exclude natives, or whites of relatively humble origin, the demand that admission to higher administrative grades should include proof of ability to ride and jump meant that many literally fell at the last fence.

So our symposium was a very rich *mélange* – too fruit-filled a mixture, some might say, to stick together or to be easily digested. Yet the emphasis on diversity, even a certain incoherence, does better justice to Victorian values than the simplicities of political slogans. As José Harris put it in her paper:

‘Victorian Britain was a large, ramshackle, complex, diverse society that lasted a very long time and embraced a multiplicity of cultural traditions – and is therefore open to a wide variety of often mutually-conflicting stereotyped interpretations’.

We were only able to begin to indicate just how large, ramshackle and complex the value system was.

The editor may perhaps allow himself a final tailpiece and speculation of his own. If one considers Mrs. Thatcher’s own version of Victorian values (which is the starting point of the chapters that follow) it is clear that it was very selective: but we can now see that the immense complexity of that value system made selectivity inevitable. More to the point, it was selected from a range of attitudes in many respects (not in all) close to those expressed by Thomas Chalmers. There will be scholars who will want to emphasise, as S.J. Brown would, that Chalmers was fundamentally more of a communitarian than Mrs. Thatcher, and that the drive of his evangelical message was the need to redeem capitalism, which he saw as basically selfish though capable of conferring great benefits, by an infusion of traditional Christian community values, the very cement of which was unstinted generosity of time and money by the rich and attention to work, subordination and familial responsibility by the poor. It was to be a true Godly Commonwealth, and a true community. Chalmers, however, was vulgarised and misunderstood by contemporaries, few of whom could respond to the sternness of his call for unstinted sacrifice of wealth and time on the part of the middle and upper classes, and preferred to emphasise another, equally real part of his message: that the poor could not evade a personal responsibility for their own plight, and that automatic entitlement to poor relief did more harm than good by undermining the motivation, thrift and work ethic of recipients and their families. This deep suspicion of welfare, and the belief that virtue was equated with thrift, sobriety and family responsibility, undoubtedly bit deep into Victorian attitudes, especially in Scotland.

As the twentieth century progressed, the sun at last set on the great reputation of Thomas Chalmers. The ethic of the welfare state, however hedged about with thrifty Victorian qualifications insisted upon by Beveridge and others, replaced the ethic both of Thomas Chalmers and of the English poor law. In public speeches in the twentieth century, politicians took the line that if there was a genuine social need, a way should somehow be explored to relieve it, rather than the Victorian line that if there absolutely had to be relief, a way must be found to ensure that it did not destroy the motivation and character of the recipient. The post-war world that had listened to Keynes and Beveridge considered *laissez-faire* a dirty word, and generally regarded those who still

emphasised those values in economics and social philosophy, balefully or indifferently.

One such leopard who would not change his spots was the eccentric Professor of Political Economy at Thomas Chalmers' own University of St. Andrews, J. Wilkie Nisbet, who was wont even in the 1950s and 1960s to deliver public diatribes against the welfare state and who continued to regard Chalmers as an inspiration. In his small corpus of published work is a paper in the *Scottish Journal of Political Economy* for 1964 on the neglected thought of Chalmers, whom he described as an 'intellectual giant . . . and a remarkable exponent of Political Economy'. He praised in particular his views on 'Voluntary Action' in welfare as opposed to public intervention. Nisbet, though something of a figure of fun to Keynesian colleagues elsewhere, was a memorable teacher, with a reputation for looking after his students. Several moved into positions of influence in the financial establishment: a few became extremely able luminaries of the New Right, notably Lord Harris of High Cross, and Sir Alan Peacock who also began his academic career in the Political Economy department in St. Andrews. Sir Alan's aphorism, 'the true purpose of the welfare state is to teach people how to do without it' was deeply rooted in the tradition of which Chalmers was such an a major proponent, and his scepticism about the appropriate role of the state in economic life was also entirely in tune with that tradition.

It is not suggested that Mrs. Thatcher and the economists of the New Right retired with a copy of Chalmers' *Political Economy in connexion with the Moral State and Moral Prospects of Society* on their bedside tables, but it is easy to see that some of the foremost economists with whom she was associated came from a stable where certain basic ideas of Thomas Chalmers were still thought relevant. Her own internalised version of the meaning of Victorian values arises, Raphael Samuel suggests, from the values of her Methodist shopkeeper, preacher father, and an East Midland radical root. Certain key intellectual mentors, however, drew their understanding of Victorian values from a Chalmerian Scottish professor. When they came together in the world of inflation and growing doubt about Britain's economic, social and political performance – not to say moral fibre – in the 1970s, their union conflated two parts of the nineteenth-century mental legacy into Thatcherism – out of Grantham, by St. Andrews, as it were.

Mrs. Thatcher is often justly compared to Mr. Gladstone, alike in their hegemony over the British political scene for so long, setting the political agenda even for their opponents, and successfully claiming the high moral ground. It is tempting to say they also shared the legacy of the chapel (Grantham) and the kirk (St. Andrews), but the inheritance even from

those institutions is deeply ambiguous. Whereas the north and the west had adored Mr. Gladstone in his day, the same areas gave only scant support to Mrs. Thatcher a hundred years later. The voters of Scotland, Wales and the North of England also inherited Victorian values from Mr. Gladstone's admirers, but in their own selectivity from the past they apparently gave that old-fashioned Liberal belief in mutuality some priority over belief in the individual. As is clear from many papers in the book, both were left to posterity in the Victorian will.

On an occasion like this, so many debts of gratitude are incurred by the organising committee and the participants that it is odious to single out particular names. It would be most ungracious, however, not to take this opportunity to thank Mr. Peter Brown of the British Academy, and Dr. William Duncan and Sandra Macdougall of the Royal Society of Edinburgh for the enormous effort that they put in to making the symposium a success.