

Victorian Values

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WHEN I was asked to contribute to this symposium, I made clear to the organisers that I was no Victorian scholar. Though I have a passionate interest in some individual Victorians my knowledge of the period as a whole is very patchy, and I would not be competent to write a scholarly publishable contribution.

Instead, I want to do two things. First, very briefly, I want to thank the Royal Society of Edinburgh, on behalf of the British Academy, for hosting and organising this joint symposium. All of us here have experienced the excellence of the organisation and the success of the symposium: I can testify that the great majority of the work has been done by the RSE, while the contribution of the BA has been very slight. We are very honoured to have been associated with the RSE in this venture, and proud that our joint names will appear together on the published proceedings.

Secondly, I want to make some shamelessly personal remarks on the topic of Victorian Values and on the question, put to me by the organisers: do they differ greatly from our own?

I am a philosopher, and as a philosopher I have been brought up to make a distinction between facts and values. So far as I can tell, this conference has so far been much more about Victorian facts than about Victorian values. I will talk, not being a historian, exclusively about values.

In order to judge Victorian values, the question each of us should ask ourselves is not: would I like to be the kind of person the Victorians were;

but: would I like to be the kind of person the Victorians admired. In my own case, the answer to the first question would be a definite no, the answer to the second question would be a qualified yes.

But of course there is something very forced in talking about Victorian Values, as if there were a uniform set of values endorsed by all Victorians. The values of John Henry Newman and John Stuart Mill were as different from each other as the values of Paul Johnson and Paul Foot.

If we are to compare Victorian and contemporary values, it is the wrong approach to ask how far Victorian values survive today. We should start from the other end, and ask how far our own values derive from the Victorian era. Or rather, since 'our values' are at least as heterogenous as Victorian values, I will ask myself how far my own values are Victorian in origin. When I put this question to myself: how many of my values are Victorian? I found, rather to my own surprise, that the answer was: almost every single one of them.

For twenty-five years I worked at Balliol College, Oxford. Though Balliol had eked out an undistinguished existence for some 600 years previously, it was in the Victorian era that it acquired distinction and took on the characteristics for which it is nowadays known. It has remained up to the present day dominated by the ethos and aspirations of its Victorian dons.

For fourteen of the twenty-five years I was a tutorial fellow of Balliol. The role of an Oxbridge tutor is one that was defined in the nineteenth century: tutors as we understand them are a unique and Victorian institution, unknown in other times or places, but surviving there from Victorian times to the present.

The honours school in which I was a tutor was *Literae Humaniores* or *Greats*: that mixture of Greek and Latin literature, history and philosophy, which was concocted in the Victorian era to fit the administrators of the British Empire for their allotted task. The school was to teach them skill in abstract thought, in the evaluation of evidence, and in the ability to write concise and elegant minutes. The subject matter of the school was not to be any contemporary or recent European culture: it was to be a culture of the distant past, so as to accustom its students to bridge the chasms between their own culture and cultures of very different kinds, such as they would meet in carrying out their imperial vocation.

For eleven years I was Master of Balliol. As Master, I found my job description simply given: the life of Benjamin Jowett was placed in my hands. It was Jowett who had shown what kind of things a Master of Balliol should do, and what kind of person he should be. It was by the standards he had formulated and incarnated that one was judged and found wanting. On the other hand to be told that, in one or other respect, one resembled him was the greatest compliment that a Master could be given by an old member

of the College. At the top of the stairs in the Master's lodgings, just at the entrance to his study, there was a vivid photograph of the old Master. As I would return from chairing some difficult meeting of the Governing Body I was met by Jowett's penetrating gaze, conveying unmistakably 'I would have handled that a lot better than you, young man'.

Even during the late sixties and early seventies, the years of socialist student revolution, the two most popular undergraduate societies at Balliol were the Arnold and Brakenbury Society (a Victorian debating society, now, it must be confessed, more frivolous than in the days of its origins) and a society devoted to community singing of allegedly nineteenth-century songs, which was called the Victorian Society and which held its meetings under a portrait of the Queen Empress.

No doubt it will be argued that Oxbridge, and in particular Balliol, are untypical, anachronistic institutions which are overdue for reform. So too, no doubt, are those other Victorian elitist institutions, the public schools. But even in our egalitarian age almost everyone who has the means and opportunity to do so seems to wish their children to attend one or other of these Victorian educational establishments.

I have now left Balliol and work for two Edwardian institutions: the British Academy and the Rhodes Trust. However, both of these bodies, though founded in the early years of the twentieth century, spend a considerable amount of their effort in the perpetuation of Victorian values.

As President of the Academy, one of my major recent concerns has been to secure public funding for a new edition of the *Dictionary of National Biography*. We are anxious to prolong into the twenty-first century that monument of Victorian scholarship.

As Secretary of the Rhodes Trust, I have to see that scholars elected to Rhodes Scholarships are elected in accordance with the provision of Cecil Rhodes will:

'My desire being that the students who shall be elected to the Scholarships shall not be merely bookworms I direct that in the election of a student to a Scholarship regard shall be had to (i) his literary and scholastic attainments (ii) his fondness of and success in manly outdoor sports such as cricket, football and the like (iii) his qualities of manhood truth courage devotion to duty sympathy for and protection of the weak kindness unselfishness and fellowship and (iv) his exhibition during school days of moral force of character and of instincts to lead and to take an interest in his schoolmates for those latter attributes will be likely in afterlife to guide him to esteem the performance of public duties as his highest aim.'

The approximately one hundred Rhodes selection committees throughout the world are thus dedicated to the task of perpetuating the ideal of a

Victorian gentleman. They are to perpetuate it, of course, in non-British material – and, in recent years, female as well as male material, the words ‘manly’ and ‘manhood’ having been struck out of the list of qualifications.

As I travel around the world to visit and observe the operation of these selection committees, from the Liguanea club in Kingston to the Sindh club in Karachi, I am sometimes tempted to feel that the Rhodes Trust is the ghost of the British Empire sitting uncrowned on the grave thereof.

Some of the happiest times of my twenty-five years at Balliol have been the months in summer when I have taken reading parties of my students. Reading parties, as you will know, are quintessentially Victorian institutions, half seminar, half holiday. The chalet to which my wife and I take my students, owned by a Trust of which I am a Trustee, is situated on a spur of Mont Blanc, the Prarion, and was built by a Victorian eccentric, David Urquhart, one-time British Ambassador to the Sublime Porte.

Urquhart held two important theories. First, he believed that the human mind did not work well below an altitude of 6,000 feet: at lower levels the brain was too fuddled by oxygen. Second, he believed that the Turkish bath was the solution to the social problems of the age. In the eighteenth and earlier centuries the poor had been exploited by the rich; but, according to Urquhart, it was only in the nineteenth century that the poor had begun to be despised by the rich. This was because until the nineteenth-century rich and poor had both smelt; but now the rich were sweet and clean, and despised the poor for being dirty. The poor should strike back by taking steam baths, which cleansed the body far more effectively than hours of soaking in tubs of dirty water. Urquhart established a Hammam in Jermyn St, and founded a magazine, the *Diplomatic Courier*, based at Blarney, Co. Cork, devoted exclusively to propaganda for the Turkish bath. And when the time came for him to retire he built on Mont Blanc a chalet at six thousand feet equipped with a Turkish Bath. It is there that I take my yearly reading parties.

Apart from reading parties, my favourite forms of holiday are Victorian: walking in mountains and viewing Italian works of art. I have no stomach for the unguided technical climbing and elaborate mechanical aids of the twentieth-century mountaineer; if I wish to get to the summit of a high alp I will take an ice axe and secure the services of a local guide like any Victorian. In viewing the beauties of the cities of Italy I find no handbook so instructive and enchanting as the works of Augustus Hare.

When the twentieth century allows me the choice and permits me leisure, I prefer Victorian modes of travel – the train and the steamship – to the twentieth century motor and aeroplane.

For most of my married life I have lived, by choice, in Victorian houses:

first in a Victorian farm labourer's cottage, and later in dwellings designed by Waterhouse and Jackson. Whenever I go into a room I choose a chair which is, or resembles, a Victorian armchair. (Those who collect eighteenth century furniture do so in order to look at it rather than to snuggle into it). When I wash, I prefer to soak in a Victorian tub rather than stand beneath a modern shower. Like the rest of you, I use a Victorian invention to discharge my waste into a Victorian sewer.

From this conference I will go home to spend Christmas according to a ritual laid down in the Victorian period, decorating the house with Victorian symbols, singing carols by Victorian writers and composers, eating a menu derived from Victorian cookbooks, and mimicking Victorian methods of domestic heating.

When I have time for leisure reading, it will almost always be a Victorian novel to which I will turn. I can read, and re-read, for pleasure Trollope, Dickens and Eliot; I can rarely get to the end of a novel short listed for the Booker Prize (though even Booker prizewinners are beginning to realise the attractions of the Victorian age). I can understand the motives of the characters in Victorian novels. I can enter into their griefs, share their hopes, suffer with them in their shame. I can do so in a way which I find very difficult in the case of characters in the novels of Updike, Roth or Murdoch.

When I listen to music, the composers I prefer are those the Victorians loved: Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Verdi. The works of Gilbert and Sullivan are not my favourite form of musical experience, but I can listen to Savoy Operas with very much greater pleasure than any popular music since the Beatles.

The one really original art form of the twentieth century, the cinema, is one for which I have little taste. Of course I watch the news on television, but in the last six months the only extended television programmes I have watched with pleasure have been the episodes in the rerun of Barchester Towers.

The political institutions under which I live, and am content to live, are essentially Victorian. The British constitutional monarchy today is essentially as it was left by Queen Victoria. The two party system (a system of parties divided by policy issues, rather than patronage networks differentiated by their attitude to the monarch) is essentially the creation of Queen Victoria's Prime Ministers.

Of course, it is not now true, as it was in the days of Iolanthe, that every child is born either a little liberal or a little conservative. But I have come to think that in England it least it would be preferable if the voters were indeed faced with a choice between conservative and liberal parties, rather than between conservative and labour parties.

The criminal and penal system which we attempt to operate is, again, in its essence a product of the Victorian age. The use of imprisonment – rather than death, mutilation, or exile – as the major means of enforcing the criminal law is something which became fully developed only during the reign of Queen Victoria. The very prison buildings which we use in pursuit of this system were almost without exception built during that reign. This fact reflects more credit on the Victorians than it does on us.

There are, of course, differences between Victorian attitudes to penal institutions and those prevalent nowadays. The Victorians emphasized the deterrent purpose of prison; in our age it is more common to talk about reform. The Victorian M'Naghten rules enshrined a view about the relation between crime and insanity which has lost favour in recent times. We, unlike the Victorians, like to have on the statute book laws (such as anti-discrimination laws) which forbid not actions of a specific kind, but actions inspired by a particular motive. In each of these respects – and in others also – I think the Victorians, in comparison with the theorists of our own age, showed a clearer and more realistic grasp of the purpose and scope of the criminal law and the penal system. For all its defects in practice, I believe that Macaulay's Indian Penal Code represents one of the most rationally motivated systems of jurisprudence ever devised.

The most obvious difference between the Victorian era and our own is in relationships between the sexes. I said earlier that in judging Victorian values we have to ask ourselves: would I like to be the kind of person whom the Victorians admired? If asked: would you like to be the kind of husband whom the Victorians admired? I have to give the answer no. This, notwithstanding the fact that the best known of Victorian husbands, Prince Albert, seems to me an admirable figure who did a difficult job well, and made no trouble about adapting his own ambitions to his wife's independent career.

The strongest objection to Victorian morality is that it left a wife very little recourse from marital tyranny. It is perhaps no accident that the most vivid and chilling account of marital tyranny in all literature should be from the pen of a Victorian poet, in Browning's *My Last Duchess*.

But even in the case of marriage and the family, the difference between the Victorian age and our own is much more in respect of practice than in respect of ideals. Even nowadays, most people, when they marry, set themselves an ideal of lifelong monogamy involving the shared raising of children. It is still comparatively rare for a bridegroom, on his wedding day, to think to himself 'Well, I'll stay with Jane for eight years or so, and then I will trade her in for a new and improved model'.

Where we differ from the Victorians is in the degree of sympathy and indulgence which we show to those who are unable to live up to this ideal

whether married couples who fall out of love, or women who have children outside marriage. Given the problems which face children from broken homes, or from single-parent families, it is hard to be certain that in this area the Victorians had got it all wrong, and we have got it all right.

Most Victorians believed that morality was objective and absolute: that customs such as slavery and suttee were not just different but wrong. I share their belief, and I think that the Victorians were right to use their power, where they could, to put an end to these institutions. It was this conviction of objective morality that lay behind the paternalism of the Victorian imperial administrators.

Established Christianity is less important in the national life now than it was in Victorian times; many of those who take religion most seriously in the U.K. are not Christians at all, but members of other world religions. Within Christianity, the Roman Catholic Church has grown while the Church of England has lost influence.

But within these two churches the Victorian influence is still strongly felt. The three major parties in the Church of England – high church, liberal, and evangelical – are the heirs of the three parties which fought each other at the time of the Oxford movement. Within Roman Catholicism the Second Vatican Council altered profoundly the aspect which the Church had borne since the First Vatican Council. But the change could be described as the substitution for a model imposed on the Church by one Victorian Cardinal, Manning, of a model inspired by the thought of another Victorian Cardinal, Newman. Indeed, until the present Pope no individual has left such a mark on the Universal Church as these two eminent Victorian converts.

Being myself neither Roman Catholic nor Anglican, I feel at home more with the writings of Victorians such as Clough, Arnold, Stephen and Huxley. Unlike many philosophers of the present day I think both that it matters greatly whether the main doctrines of Christianity are true, and that it is very difficult to be rationally certain either way. I have more sympathy therefore with the agonizing of the Victorians than with those at the present time who think that Christianity can be embraced without struggle or shrugged off with ease.

Of course, I am not myself a Victorian. I have no courage to face the cold bath on rising. I cannot ride a horse. Faced with rioting Pathans I would, I fear, run away rather than stare them down. Like most of us in these post-prohibition days I drink spirits before, rather than wine after, dinner.

But in all these respects I wish I were more, rather than less, like the Victorians. The Victorians were, of course, selfish, greedy, corrupt and hypocritical, as every generation of human beings has been since humanity began. But their ideals – as opposed to their practice – were, I believe, among the noblest recorded in history.

I feel more sympathy with the eminent Victorians than with the sniggers of Lytton Strachey. Our own century has made three great social experiments: communism, fascism, and nazism. Happily all three of these experiments, in Europe at least, appear to be over. Those nations which have fought against these experiments have essentially been fighting to preserve important values of the nineteenth century (parliamentary democracy and a scope for free market individualism) against the depredations of the twentieth. The British people of a century which has twice waged war on a cruel and gigantic scale have no right to condescend to a reign in which the United Kingdom avoided world and continental war.

Did not the Victorian era suffer from one particularly odious feature, namely hypocrisy? Certainly, the Victorians, to encourage the practice of virtue, exaggerated the degree to which the great figures of their own and previous ages actually lived up to their ideals. This was indeed an error. But we, to palliate our own vices, rejoice in contemplating the failures of past heroes. We like to cut down to our own size our more austere, unselfish, and energetic ancestors.

But surely the Victorians took themselves too seriously? Some of them undoubtedly did. But anyone who believes that the Victorians were incapable of mocking at their own solemnity should read Arthur Hugh Clough's epistolary novel in verse, *Amours de Voyage*.

I have set out the ways in which my own life has been embedded in Victorian institutions and guided by Victorian ideals. I do not know how typical my own experience is. Perhaps I am quite untypical. If so, you Victorianists should take good care of me, as a rare surviving dinosaur not in captivity. But I am inclined to believe that there may be many others who, if they examine themselves, will see that like myself they are fundamentally creatures of the Victorians. If you seek a monument, look within.