The Making of VICTORIAN ENGLAND

G. Kitson Clark

ROUTLEDGE

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The Making of Victorian England

BEING THE FORD LECTURES DELIVERED
BEFORE THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

by

G. KITSON CLARK

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 1962
by Routledge

Published 2013 by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY, 10017, USA

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available

ISBN 13: 978-0-415-06591-7 (pbk)

Dedicated with respect and affection to
G. M. Trevelyan
To whom most of this book was read
before publication
NOSTRI HISTORICORUM
GENERIS AUCTORI

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Preface

This book is founded on the Ford lectures which I delivered at Oxford in 1960 and I would like to begin by thanking those who gave me that opportunity. Professor Richard Pares, whose untimely illness and death was one of the most severe blows historical scholarship in Britain has received for a very long time, once wrote that the invitation to give the Ford lectures was "the highest honour . . . an English historian can receive", meaning it is to be presumed that can be received by an historian working in the field of English history, for it is to English history that the Ford lectures are confined. I feel no disposition to quarrel with this statement, though I find it alarming; that, however, does not diminish my gratitude.

The lectures were delivered from notes not a complete text, and it has therefore been necessary to write them out in full before publication. At certain points I have gone into greater detail than I could have done in the time at my disposal, at some points I have done additional research to confirm or check what I said at the time of delivery and on some points I have changed my mind, particularly towards the end of Chapter VI. I have also, for convenience in reading, redistributed and redivided the matter at certain points. Most of what is covered in Chapters III and IV was originally in one lecture, part of Chapter VIII was originally in a lecture which included most of the material in Chapter VII, and the rest of Chapter VIII was combined with a summary which is now contained in Chapter IX. For this reason I think it is better to call my divisions chapters and not lectures; but I do not think that I have at any point substantially altered the argument. What I give here is to all intents and purposes what I gave in the Ford lectures at Oxford.

I have more than the usual reasons for wishing to thank those who have helped me in preparing this book and also for exonerating them from all responsibility for what appears in it. As is the case with other historians nowadays, I have been

anxious to write what might be called "history in depth", that is history which gains a perspective from the use, in combination, of the various technical forms of history, each of which gives a special insight into a particular aspect of history. I feel quite sure that this is the right line of development for historiography at this moment, when so much specialized work has been done and it becomes increasingly important to see whether we can not use it to give a deeper reality to our general picture. But it is a line of development which has its own peculiar perils, for it renders necessary the use of professional techniques and specialized forms of knowledge by those who have never been trained to handle them. In preparing this volume I have been particularly uneasy about my use of economic history and demography. Though primarily a political historian, I have worked alongside economic historians all my life. Sir John Clapham was the first Cambridge historian I ever knew. I have for many years had the advantage of the friendship and advice of Professor Postan, and for the purposes of this book I have had the ready and constant help of Mr Charles Wilson and Mr David Joslin, to whom I am very grateful indeed. At the same time I know that it is one thing to receive expert advice and something quite different to use specialized material as an expert, and I want to emphasize the fact that any mistakes I have made in the handling of the material that comes within the category of economic history come from me not from them. I also wish to add that even if it turns out that in some of these matters I have got things egregiously wrong, I hope that other political historians will try to use economic history for their purposes for I am sure that very much can be done by combining such history with the detailed political research which is now in fashion.

I have another special obligation of a different sort to record. Since the last war a number of scholars have worked with me at Cambridge as research students. In the preparation of this book I have gained greatly from the ideas and help of those whose work was relevant to its subject. In some instances work by them has already been published or is going to be published very soon. This is, for instance, the case of Dr H. J. Hanham, whose work on *Elections and Party Management* in the time of Gladstone and Disraeli is already well known. Even

so, the assistance I have received from Dr Hanham extends to matters which lie outside the compass of that book and goes back to the time when he was working with me as a research student. The same is true of Dr R. Robson, who only for a brief moment worked with me as a research student, but who has helped me continuously during the preparation of this book, and was also kind enough to read it in proof, and of Dr G. F. A. Best, whose most important work on the history of the Ecclesiastical Commissioners is indeed on the eve of publication. To all these I owe much, but I am also in the debt of several men none of whose work has reached the stage of publication. In particular there is Dr D. Cresap Moore, from whom I learnt a very great deal about the collapse of the old aristocratic control in the counties, Dr R. J. Lambert, from whom I gained much on Sir John Simon and the history of public health in the middle of the 19th century and Mr James Cornford, who has investigated the economic and social background to Conservative politics between 1870 and 1890. I have also to thank Mr F. B. Smith who has given me much help on the Act of 1867, and throughout. To these I would like to add another scholar, who never worked with me as a research student, but who taught in Cambridge for a time, the Rev. J. H. S. Kent. From him I learnt much about religious revivalism in the 19th century; he also helped me to find documents which illustrated the history of Nonconformity in the middle of the century.

I ought to say that, though in each case I was immensely helped by these men in the approach to their subjects, the views I put forward in this book are my own and have been arrived at after research which may have led me to make assertions for which they might not wish to be responsible. I hope therefore that nothing that I say will be taken as an anticipation of what they will in due course publish and I hope that each of them will soon have an opportunity of putting forward his own ideas for himself.

I wish also to express my great debt to Professor David Spring of Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, who has done important work on the economy and management of the great landed estates in England in the 19th century. I ought to say that in the last two years my help from him has been necessarily by letter and that he has had no opportunity of

checking the statements which I refer to his authority. I also wish to thank Professor W. O. Aydelotte of the State University of Iowa State, U.S.A., for his help. I refer to his work in the course of my first lecture and in reply to a question which I referred to him he sent to me a paper which seemed to me of such value and so relevant to part of my argument that with his leave I print it as an appendix at the end of the volume. Dr J. P. C. Roach gave me help with regard to 19th century Universities, Mr Frank Beckwith of the Leeds Library, Commercial Street, Leeds, gave me repeated assistance from his unrivalled knowledge of Yorkshire in the 19th century, Dr A. J. Rook gave me help on medical matters, Professor H. W. R. Wade upon law, the Rt Rev. Mgr A. N. Gilbey on Roman Catholic history in the 19th century and Mr G. O. Pierce help towards the study of a point in Welsh history. Professors Asa Briggs, W. L. Burn, Sydney Checkland, W. O. Chadwick, and Arnold Lloyd and Drs F. C. Mather, W. H. Chaloner and O. MacDonagh have all been very kind in answering questions and suggesting lines of thought and I have been helped by others too numerous to mention individually and who will, I hope, forgive me for not naming them.

My list of obligations is very long, and this is not only evidence of the great generosity with which I have been treated, but also of the very large numbers of scholars working on the subject. Indeed, the volume of the work being produced on British history in the 19th century is beginning to present a very serious problem. I will frankly confess that I have not read all the books, articles and unpublished theses which are relevant to the subjects with which I have dealt. To have attempted to do so would have made it impossible to have delivered the Ford lectures in the time granted to me, or would have interposed an unconscionable delay between delivery and publication. It would also have left no time to refer directly to contemporary 19th century documents on points on which it seemed to be important to do so. For this reason I have not produced a list of books which purports to cover the whole subject, but have contented myself with footnotes which refer to books which are directly relevant to particular topics. My time was by the nature of my case somewhat restricted, but I very much doubt whether any

writer wishing to write a general book on 19th century Britain even if he had very much more time available, would be able to take into account all the work, of reasonable importance, which has been done on the subjects which he has been handling; and each year this problem is rather rapidly getting worse. The solution to it, however, is not to give up the attempt to write general history books and so to allow the body of history to be torn in pieces by the specialists, nor is it to write general history by the old impressionistic methods without any relation to specialist studies and techniques; the solution must be to make repeated attempts to write general histories which take account of the depth and exactitude which specialized studies afford. Only so can we get a little nearer to historical truth. I have, in fact, been anxious to do something of this sort, and where I have failed I hope that I shall at least inspire others to do the work more effectively.

G.K.C.

CAMBRIDGE, *April 1961*.

Note

Where in the footnotes reference is made to a work which has been cited already, the page reference *within* the square bracket refers to the page in *this* book on which the first citation can be found, the number *outside and following* the bracket to the pages in the work cited to which reference is made.

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CHAPTER I

The Task of Revision

In what follows I want to consider some of the factors which might be said to have created Victorian England. This does not mean that I wish to write a complete history of Victorian England, or even to draw a comprehensive composite picture of the Victorian period. Both tasks have been done repeatedly and very well. Recently Professor Asa Briggs in his *Age of Improvement* produced a general history which though it started at an earlier date went well into the Victorian period, in 1936 there was published the full version of that remarkable *tour de force* G. M. Young's *Portrait of an Age*, there are the volumes of Elie Halévy who must always remain the master of those who try to write the history of England in the nineteenth century, and there are many others upon whose excellences it would be impertinent to comment. I have no ambition to rival any of these books. What I want to do is to call attention to some particular factors, or possibly it would be best to call them forces, which called into existence a historic situation with special characteristics in England in the middle of the nineteenth century. To that situation it is best to give the nickname of 'Victorian', but since these creative forces did not cease to operate in 1837 or in 1850 I want to try to show not only how Victorian England was made but also how it developed towards the point when it could be called Victorian England no longer.

I believe that the existence of some of these forces has been at times neglected or the results of their action misapprehended, so that I hope this work may help the next person who turns his hand to the task of writing a new history of Victorian England. For however excellent are the existing books that work will have to be done again. The account of the past which satisfies a particular generation must be regarded as a working hypothesis, no more. We can use what we have received to give form and direction to our thought, but we have no right to regard it as an

unquestionably and exhaustively correct view of what actually happened, or of the meaning of what happened. As we see further we ought to realize the defects of what we have written and thought, so that as soon as we have finished writing our histories we ought to start to write them all over again. Each revision we must hope will tell a little more about humanity and its arrangements, but it is not possible that any revision will be final.

'The Priest who slew the slayer and shall himself be slain'; that is, and should be, the condition of the scholar who tries to describe any period of history, and the turn-over is likely to be at its most rapid for those who try their hand on Victorian England which is the subject of so many men's active thought and research. I have no great anxiety to play a leading part at either stage of that transaction; but even though I do not aim at a complete revision of previous work and have no expectation of replacing it by a new comprehensive picture I still think it is necessary to clear the ground a little before I start operations. In doing this I want to do two things. I want to get out of the way certain mistaken conceptions, and I want to suggest methods of work which will I hope challenge those habits of mind which I believe have been the cause of error. I fully realize that those methods may be turned with destructive effect on assumptions that I shall make later, or suggestions that I shall put forward, but that is only as things should be.

II

The tools for any reconstruction of English nineteenth-century history must be forged from the great mass of evidence which is now available for the student—the very large and varied collections of documents, reams of newspapers local and national, ephemeral literature, the results of Government enquiries, etc., etc. It is I believe a larger mass than exists for any country in any previous century, though heaven alone can know what we are depositing now. Upon that mass an almost comparably large swarm of research students has settled, and part of the work of anyone trying to deal with nineteenth-century history must be an attempt, probably an unsuccessful attempt, to cover the relevant work which is being done on his subject; he must

also gain for himself some direct experience of the varied evidence which is now so profusely available.

At first sight many of the new details which will emerge from all this may not seem worth all this trouble, for they will often be the details of events in relatively obscure places and often be facts concerning people whose utmost claim to notice might be that they were of secondary importance. The nineteenth century printed its records about its great men and important events very industriously, and, though their habits in editing the private letters which they printed often left a great deal to be desired, a good many of the major facts about important people have in fact been recorded. Certainly there are some strange gaps and no doubt even about the primary characters there is still much to come to light; what however exists in the greatest profusion is unpublished information which the biographers and editors thought to be of no interest, and it is precisely from such information that, or so I believe, the larger changes in our view of nineteenth-century history will come.

For the nineteenth-century historian, and these things are often enough true about historians writing on other centuries, often worked on his central figures and events very carefully, but he filled in their background more easily, accepting generalizations about it without paying much critical attention to them. Those generalizations had sometimes actually been inherited from contemporaries of the events themselves, who might have been strong partisans of one side or other in the conflicts of the period; sometimes, as was inevitable, they had been suggested by the fact that the historian was himself emotionally committed on the issue with which he was treating, but most often they had been accepted casually, simply because scholars had got into the habit of repeating set phrases about certain groups or particular periods without checking their truth in any systematic fashion, or even expending much thought on what they might mean. Now, however, historians have begun to use the vast wealth of evidence which is available for them and to recover a great deal of information about the men and women who were the units covered by these large generalizations, and it would not be too bold to say that wherever this has been done the results have always been surprising and very often revolutionary.

Of course, to assemble this evidence for effective use is a very laborious and sometimes a very dreary task. It is indeed a laborious, and it must be said sometimes a rather dreary task, to try to cover the work of those who have already worked on the evidence, particularly since so much of it is in the form of unpublished Ph.D. theses. But it will I believe become more and more dangerous to write history which has not at least been checked by reference to some of this detail. And it ought to be so. The old bland confident general statements about whole groups of men, or classes, or nations ought to disappear from history; or if something of their sort must remain, and it is difficult to say anything about history or politics or society without making use of general statements, they must remain under suspicion, as expedients which are convenient, possibly necessary, for use at the moment, but are not the best that we shall be able to do in the way of truth.

This matter concerns all historians—the biographer, or the historian of art, or of religion, or of the law and not simply those who are trying to make quantitative generalizations about society as a whole. Indeed, every historical statement even if it is about the most individual of individuals is also a statement about society as a whole, and it is also true that in order to discuss any individual case generalizations about society must be assumed. The subject of a biographer emerges from a particular environment, he lives in a particular environment, if he is a writer he must write for a contemporary public, if he is a politician or a divine he must operate on human raw material provided by the circumstances of his time. To understand him it is necessary to think carefully about these things and not to assume general impressions about them, or to take statements about them ready made from someone else. But this is not always done, indeed even what one might have thought were obviously relevant facts are sometimes neglected because they are at one remove from the central figure. For instance, the lives of statesmen are still too frequently described entirely in terms of the relationships between important individuals at the centre of politics without any thought for the party organizations on which a politician's effectiveness largely depended, still less for the changing social conditions in the constituencies to which they had at some time to appeal. But to leave out these

things is to leave out at least half of the factors which determined a man's success or failure. It is history without background, and therefore obviously questionable; but history without background seems to me to be better than history with a false background provided by well-worn general phrases about whose general accuracy no one has ever bothered to think.

May I give, as an example of what goes to create such a false background, the phrases connected with two words, which as I believe have done more to stultify thought about Victorian England than anything else? They are the words 'middle class'. It may be that straight historians, the historians so to speak of the legitimate stage, have by now become a little uneasy about the use of those words, but what one might call para-historians —the writers and broadcasters on the history of art, the literary critics, the politicians and preachers dabbling in history—still use those words with avidity and with them the whole weary range of phrases which have become normal in any description of England at any period of the nineteenth century—'the rising middle class', 'the predominant middle class', 'middle-class taste', and perhaps above all 'middle-class morality'. These conceptions are still offered with a great deal of confidence as a complete explanation for much that was done or produced in the nineteenth century. Nor have the writers of text books, nor I am afraid many of the teachers in schools, abandoned that curious legend that the middle class came to dominate politics and the country immediately after the Reform Bill of 1832 and remained in control till, presumably, the working classes took over—but those who write in this way are normally a little vague on that point.

Now all this needs probing and correcting, indeed it should become the custom, when anyone shews a tendency to talk about the middle class, to make him answer this simple but very difficult question—'Who precisely were the middle class?' Presumably they were all the people who at any given moment came in income, or in social estimation, between the nobility and landed gentry on the one hand and the manual labourers on a weekly or daily wage on the other. If so, the bracket is a wide one. On this calculation a merchant prince in Liverpool would be middle class or a banker in the City and at the same time a linen draper in Exeter would be middle class

and so would be those cheeky shabby clerks you so often meet in Dickens. The range of income must have been very great, and the variety in ways of life almost beyond calculation, particularly if you include not only the town but the countryside, the tenant farmers, the corn merchants, the millers, in fact all that society which George Eliot knew so well.

As their environment differed, so did their culture. The middle class included some of the most refined and cultivated people in the kingdom; it provided the society which produced men like William Roscoe of Liverpool, the historian of Lorenzo the Magnificent, Shorthouse of Birmingham, the author of *John Inglesant*, or Thomas Hodgkin, the author of *Italy and her Invaders*; and it also produced, in large numbers, the Philistines of the sort that Matthew Arnold met and disliked in his business as a school inspector. The middle class filled every kind of religious denomination. The nonconformists were held to be distinctively middle class, but the relatively large congregations which the enumerators of the census of 1851 found in Anglican churches cannot all have been gentry or working class, particularly in the towns. The middle class were the backbone at least of the constituency organization of all political parties. In fact, the people who at any given moment might be called middle class vary so widely in so many different ways that there seems to be a high probability that any general statement that purports to include them all must be fallacious, any common attribute credited to them all must be a delusion.

Of course, the general expression 'middle class' remains useful, as a name for a large section of society. Moreover, it is necessary to remember that a belief in the importance and significance of the middle class in the nineteenth century derives from contemporary opinion. From fairly early on in the century men were fond of discussing the part which they thought the middle class was likely to play in the life of the nation. They do not always say clearly whom they have in mind, and since the possible varieties are so great a modern writer should follow them with great caution coupling any reference to the middle class with as precise an analysis as possible of what groups are under discussion.

Above all things it is most important not to attribute too readily to middle-class characteristics, whatever they may have

been, matters in which people who were palpably not middle class took part, possibly a leading part. For instance the decay of taste after the elegancies of the regency period has been attributed to the pervasive influence of the 'rising middle class'; this however seems to be very doubtful when it is considered how readily and how widely the aristocracy was infected. Middle-class morality presents a more difficult question, since that is connected with the conception of 'respectability' which was considered to be almost the determining characteristic of the middle class. But it must be remembered that many members of the working classes and even of the aristocracy were 'respectable', while many in the middle income groups palpably were not.

Nor did the middle class, however defined, dominate the country after 1832. Certainly they were deemed to be politically important at the time of that Reform Bill, and that Bill was proposed and passed largely as a recognition of their importance; but after the Bill the final control in politics still lay without question in the hands of the old governing classes, the nobility and gentry. It is sometimes suggested that the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 is a sign that by then the decisive political power had passed to the middle classes. Again it is unquestionable that the case for repeal had been vehemently pressed by what was on any calculation a middle-class body, the Anti-Corn Law League; but the actual repeal was carried through by the head of one aristocratic party because he believed it to be desirable with the assent of the other because, at least, he believed it to be expedient. It seems to be very doubtful that Cobden and Bright and the Anti-Corn Law League could have forced the repeal of the Corn Law if neither Sir Robert Peel nor Lord John Russell had agreed with the policy, and what is not doubtful at all is that after the repeal of the Corn Laws as before the final control of politics still remained in the hands of the old governing classes. It was a control which Bright devoted all his powers to fight, yet in spite of all his efforts any further reform of Parliament was postponed another twenty years.

III

The history of the repeal of the Corn Laws has however another lesson for those who would revise history. In most of the older

histories the account of the behaviour and the case of each side to this controversy came directly from the political statements of the leaders of the Anti-Corn Law League, unmodified and unquestioned. In the official life of Disraeli and in the writings of Mr Charles Whibley a differently balanced account was given, but it did not convince many and was not much attended to. The other side's point of view held the field and nobody bothered to go directly to the contemporary documents to see whether all the statements made by the champions of the League in the heat of the battle were consistent with ascertainable fact, or whether the accusations which the League rather profusely made against their opponents could be answered or balanced by anything that was said on the other side.

To take one question of fact. The spokesmen of the League always asserted that the main opponents of the repeal of the Corn Laws were the aristocracy and the squires, but that the farmers could be persuaded that the repeal was in their interest, when it was possible to make contact with them. At that date this was a natural claim to make for the purposes of propaganda, but a review of the evidence does not confirm it. The strongest and most passionate objections to repeal seem to have been entertained by the tenant farmers, whose economic margin was small and who were terrified at what might be the result if repeal were passed. This feeling comes out in the various agitations among the farmers between 1830 and 1846 about which the older historians were silent. It is also very marked in the behaviour of farmers at the general elections of 1837 and 1841, and particularly in the elections for county seats which took place in 1846 itself, about which also the older historians said nothing. In contrast to this, many of the country gentry seemed to have been divided in mind, or at least in allegiance, on the matter of the Corn Laws, for they were pushed in one direction by their leader Sir Robert Peel but pulled in the other by their farming constituents, and it seems that the attitude of members of the House of Lords was even more equivocal. None of this required very much research to uncover, but the older historians did not feel the need to do research, since they accepted the League's account of the crisis as obvious truth.

Or to take another point. As was natural in the circumstances the League asserted that the tenants of the aristocracy were

forced by the threat of eviction to vote for protectionist candidates, a statement which has been repeated by most historians without the rider that exactly the same electoral influence or pressure was at that time being exerted on their dependants by landlords and employers on the other side in politics, and, further, that there is every reason to believe that agricultural tenants wished to vote for protectionist candidates and that trouble did occur on several occasions even between landlord and tenant when the tenants suspected that the proposed candidate was not sufficiently sound upon protection. In fact, at the time of the Anti-Corn Law controversy accusations of undue influence were being violently made by each side against the other, but it has only been the accusations of the Anti-Corn Law League that have managed to lodge themselves in the history books. Nor till recently was there any reconsideration of the very interesting question of the relation of the behaviour of the League to the disturbances of 1842, though it caused much interest at the time.[1]

It would probably be unreasonable to blame the older historians for accepting a one-sided account of this particular transaction. What happened here has happened so often that it must be considered one of the ordinary hazards of historiography. The case for one side to a controversy has seemed so coherent and cogent that historians have accepted it as evident truth; it has not seemed to be necessary to waste time checking it, or troubling about what the other side had to say. After all, in the ordinary business of life *audi alteram partem* is one of the least frequently observed of all important maxims; considerations of urgency and lack of time seem normally to forbid attention to it. But without any desire to attack his predecessors a revising historian must pay attention to this habit particularly because it is the normal habit of partisans to make, and believe, dogmatic statements of fact for which they have little or no evidence, and it is of some importance that these should be recognized, tested and if necessary removed from the historical canon.

Indeed, another example of party statements taking their place unblushingly as the solemn results of research can be

[1] G. Kitson Clark *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 'The Electorate and the Repeal of the Corn Laws', 5th Series, Vol I (1951). G. Kitson Clark *Journal of Modern History*, 'Hunger and Politics in 1842' (Chicago), Vol XXV, No. 4. N. McCord *The Anti-Corn Law League* (London 1958)

found in a matter of recurrent importance in Victorian history, the statements which are made from time to time as to why a particular party won or lost a general election. These are sometimes the guess of an historian long after the event, but very often they derive from a phrase made by a party orator who wished to point the moral of the election as soon as it was over, particularly if his side had lost. Such statements were usually made in good faith, but there is seldom much reason to believe that they were made after any close study of the facts. Now elections are won or lost in the constituencies, and in order to learn what happened in any given general election it has proved to be necessary to make a rather close local study of particular constituencies. A statement based upon a general impression and not upon this research is worth very little, and one made by an active politician on the morrow of a hard-fought election which has occupied all his energies must be of this nature, even if it were not also inevitably highly coloured by strong party feelings. It is not therefore fair to perpetuate such a statement as if it were a serious contribution to history. As a matter of fact there has been of recent years a good deal of very close work on electoral matters, material has been found in local newspapers, in solicitors' offices, in collections of private papers, and the results have been both complicated and interesting. These results do not seem to bear any very close relationship to the naïve dogmatic statements which still do duty for history in too many books when the results of a particular general election are to be explained.

When historians accept the statement of a partisan as a truth of history they often put themselves at the mercy of a bias which is not their own, the word of a controversialist is received without criticism because it is convenient to do so and not because the historian shares the controversialist's passions; indeed he may never have given much thought about the direction in which those passions might have pulled the statements he accepts. But of course there are many instances when the historian's own emotions are committed. This is liable to happen in all sorts of ways to the student of any history at any period; but as far as English history in the nineteenth century is concerned the student is nowadays less likely to feel himself to be emotionally involved in the quarrels between Liberal and

Conservative or Free Trader and Protectionist than in the issues raised by the whole question of poverty and wealth in the England of the Industrial Revolution.

Emotional commitment on this issue may lead the student to accept consciously, or unconsciously, a pattern of history suggested by a belief in economic conflict and the class struggle as the overriding factor in history, to assume the truth of statements which conform to this pattern and to allow this pattern to give a particular meaning to facts and statements which a normal interpretation would by no means naturally attribute to them. It would of course be idle to deny that economic conflict and the class struggle gives its shape to much of English nineteenth-century history; the danger is that they should be called on to explain too much and to explain it too easily, particularly when political motives are in question. In fact, it is often very difficult to detect the link between political action and economic interest and no historian has a right to believe that he knows, by *a priori* methods and without direct evidence, what it was in any individual case. He has no right to assume that in any action a man has been activated by a regard for his economic interest and by nothing else, he has no right to assume that he knows without enquiry all of a man's economic interests, nor, without direct evidence on the point, that he knows what political action a man might have thought was best suited to further his economic interests.

For instance, a wealthy man in an important position is very likely to have a good many different economic interests and consideration for one of them might easily seem to work for the destruction of another. It is not possible to begin to calculate which affected his politics until they are all known, and also till it is known in what order he valued them. In addition to this a politician, particularly a politician before 1870, is often partially swayed by the hope of Government employment or other favours for himself and his relatives. This may rank as a motive inspired by economic interest, but it will not be discovered by disinterring his sources of income. A poorer man, a wage earner, may have to face a simpler economic problem, but an historian has no right to be sure that he will interpret his economic interest according to the terms of the class war as conceived by someone writing a long time afterwards, or in the

confirmed belief that there must be a necessary clash of interest between capital and labour; in fact, it is clear that many of the working men who followed and believed in John Bright did not think in this fashion.

It is necessary to say this because some very crude work has sometimes been published on the relation between economic interest and political action and it will be impossible to think about the problems of Victorian England unless this problem is brought into more accurate focus. But, in fact, most historians are unlikely to adopt these oversimplified economic categories, they are more likely to distribute their sympathies according to rather loosely conceived divisions of the rich and poor, the established and the dispossessed, the comfortable and the miserable. This distribution is likely to be suggested by very natural feelings. Nineteenth-century Britain, especially early nineteenth-century Britain, was a very harsh place, and it has probably been made to seem harsher to us than the Britain of earlier centuries because we know more about it. In the circumstances it is natural for a generous-minded man to feel for the sufferers, and to be angry with those who may have been callous about their sufferings, who may even have inflicted them and who certainly did not redress them. These feelings may be the stronger because many feel that the conditions and the classes which caused them are not yet extinct. Nor has history always been the loser by these tendencies to honest indignation. They have lent enthusiasm to research and imaginative force to the work that has resulted.

But indignation, however honest, is a dangerous passion for historians. Dislike tends to simplify the men and women disliked and to make it impossible for them to be seen for what they were, complex human beings, creatures of a moment necessarily purblind with the prejudices of the time and ignorant of much that it would have been better for them to know. Historians with strong feelings often tend to forget that the people they dislike were possibly victims of incapacity and ignorance and ascribe their actions too consistently to simple inhumanity and greed. Accusations on such counts are of course not easy to answer when little direct evidence survives about a man's thoughts, which therefore must be supplied by supposition. But they may not be just.

An example of the loss and gain in this matter can be found in the work of J. L. and Barbara Hammond. No one interested in nineteenth-century studies should refuse to be grateful to them. They uncovered much, and the strong emotions which inspired their work were in many ways appropriate, for there is material which ought not to be considered in cold blood. But those emotions were not always good servants. Their use of evidence in some instances has been severely questioned, but what is more relevant here, their very strong feelings have too often led them to see the classes they disliked as odious stereotypes with few individual and no mitigating characteristics, about whom merciless generalization was relatively easy. It may indeed be worth while to re-read the two, relatively short, chapters 'On the mind of the Rich' and 'The Conscience of the Rich' in *The Town Labourer* and to note the facility with which the authors slip into talking generally about what the 'Upper Classes' in general thought and felt, and the ease with which they disregard the very difficult problem of what a man of a different era could be reasonably expected to understand or to do. It is also well worth while to compare the very disagreeable picture which the authors draw of Hannah More and Wilberforce with the longer accounts of those two in the books on them by Miss Gwladys Jones and Sir Reginald Coupland, books which possibly show how much more complex are the problems of men and women when they are studied in greater detail than the Hammonds afforded, and with less indignation.

The work of the Hammonds was written some time ago, and in many ways they deserved well of history. It would be harsh to criticize them now, if it were not for the fact that the tendencies which they exemplify still sometimes affect history as written today, and particularly as taught in the schools. Such tendencies are not of course peculiar to any particular type of history. They are common to all history written with strong feelings i which men have to generalize about people they dislike. They are common in religious history and very common in nationalist history. Indeed, the most important task of historical revision is to rescue real men and women who have been shrunk by historians into the bloodless units of a generalization, or have become the ugly depersonalized caricatures of partisan legend or modern prejudice. It is a task well worth

doing, since from the contemplation of the stereotypes which have been drawn by historians and by politicians is engendered much of the hatred of the world. The appeal must always be to contemporary documents, and since the number of those which have survived from the England of the nineteenth century is almost overwhelming, we ought, if we have courage and industry, to find it easier to break the existing patterns and to creep a little nearer reality when describing Victorian England than when dealing with most communities in most earlier centuries.

IV

This work needs courage and industry and organizing power and it is necessary to think a little how to do it. Possibly the most effective way to organize the mass of evidence available is to appeal to arithmetic where this is possible. It might perhaps be a good thing to say to anyone who has to make a large quantitative statement about a group or class, 'do not guess, try to count, and if you can not count admit that you are guessing'. The appropriate reply to such a challenge might, however, well be to admit at once that most historical generalizations are necessarily founded on guesses, guesses informed by much general reading and relevant knowledge, guesses shaped by much brooding on the matter in hand, but on guesses none the less. This is, however, not a matter of which there is any reason to be ashamed; it is rather a matter for pride. If it were not for guesses the historical imagination could never build up a complete picture of any period, event or man, and much of the most valuable, and all of the most attractive, work of the historian would remain undone. Nevertheless, the result of that work should be seen for what it is, an hypothesis about the past and no more. As an hypothesis it must always wait to be tested, and one of the most salutory tests to which it can be subjected might be called the discipline of arithmetic. It is particularly healthy to ask of any generalization the questions how many? how often? how much and in what proportion?

The appeal to figures is, however, neither easy, nor certain in its action. Figures can be treacherous. If a mistake is made

in the premises of the calculation or in the identification of the units to be counted, the resulting figures can be simply a source of error. Nor are figures always easy to use and it is probable that more historians should learn about the technique of handling them than now do. Yet with all this they may introduce an element of relative certainty into a generalization which no speculation, however intelligent, can ever provide.

One of the most interesting attempts to use figures in research in political history which is going forward at the moment is being practised on British material on the very threshold of what I have called Victorian England. Professor W. O. Aydelotte of the State University of Iowa has investigated the members of the British Parliament which was elected in 1841 and sat till 1847. He has endeavoured to find out all about each one of them, their sources of wealth, their family connections, their personal histories and to correlate these by the technique of the punched card and the calculating machine with their political behaviour in debates and divisions. Perhaps it is as yet too early to express an opinion on the results of this method, but three things I think it has demonstrated already: first, how diverse were the economic interests of individual members of Parliament, second, how complicated is the problem of establishing a relationship between these interests and the way in which they voted, and third, how crude and unsatisfactory are some of the general statements which in the past have been made on that topic.

In many cases, however, arithmetic can not be easily used because a complete count can not be made. Even so, it is better to multiply instances as far as is possible, so that the cases produced are in some way examples of a group of analogous facts large enough to be significant, and not simply illustrations produced to support an intuition or enforce a prejudice. For instance, it is a matter of considerable importance, when trying to estimate what was the condition of agricultural labourers at any point in nineteenth-century England, to find out how many of them controlled a vegetable garden or a potato patch which they could cultivate as an addition to their wages. Sir John Clapham, in his *Early Railway Age*, tackles the question as best he can. He accumulates evidence on this point from various counties for the first thirty years of the century. There is a good

deal of it, but not enough, or so one would have said, to make a complete count. It would be difficult to be sure from what he collects exactly what proportion of agricultural labourers of that period possessed gardens, or at least gardens of any appreciable size. This is no doubt unsatisfactory, but it is more satisfying than the conclusion of Mr and Mrs Hammond. When summarizing the events of the period 1760-1832 they said without qualification that the English labourers 'had lost their gardens', giving as their sole evidence, according to Sir John Clapham, 'one extract from a Kentish newspaper'. Sir John called attention to Mr and Mrs Hammond's statement in a footnote, and in the next edition of *The Village Labourer* the statement about the English labourers having lost their gardens disappeared. But in the version which is published today a new sentence has been added that 'They had lost their pigs and fowls'. It is a little difficult to reconcile this statement with the contemporary evidence that a good many agricultural labourers did in fact possess pigs in 1830 and the years that immediately preceded 1830, which appear on the pages which immediately succeed in Sir John Clapham's book his stricture on the Hammonds' original statement. Since Mr and Mrs Hammond presumably dropped their original statement as a result of Sir John Clapham's work they had presumably read these pages, unless they were so clear that they knew what they were talking about that they had not the curiosity to turn over.[1]

Now I suppose that it would not be asserted that there were no labourers in 1830 who were unable to keep pigs where their predecessors had kept them; there may have been a good many. But Mr and Mrs Hammond's statement purports to be 'the whole truth'. This it palpably is not. Therefore it can not be said to be 'nothing but the truth'. It is indeed a very notable example of how much better it is to collect a series of separate instances from the contemporary evidence even though the tale is never going to be complete enough to build up into a generalization than to be so sure of your generalization that you feel justified

[1] Sir John Clapham *An Economic History of Great Britain. The Early Railway Age* (Cambridge 1926) pp. 119-21 (see note 3, p. 119). Mr and Mrs Hammond *The Village Labourer*, ed. 1911, pp. 241-2. In the 1920 edition (pp. 217-18) the remark about gardens is repeated. In the 1927 edition it is dropped out and is replaced by the general statement: 'The general conditions of their daily lives had changed for the worse' (p. 218). In the Guild Books edition first published 1948, the statement about 'pigs and fowls' is made (Vol II, p. 42)

in ignoring any number of separate instances, even when they are brought under your nose.

The effect of such detailed work may very well be disheartening, its result may be to break up an existing picture and replace it with nothing that can be seen as a whole, to lead to a kind of historical nominalism with innumerable accidentals and no universals. Indeed, much of Sir John Clapham's work has seemed to students to produce just this effect. But even if this must be its result, if it is accepted that history should have anything to do with truth the work of accepting this detail into history must be done and the vast accumulation of evidence which is available for Britain in the nineteenth century must be used to do it. Perhaps when the work has been done new patterns, a new general story, may be produced to replace the old to serve their turn and then be discarded when the time comes. But the revision of history cannot wait until the new generalizations appear. Before they appear the results of detailed research must be used even if their only result is to destroy.

V

Certainly there is much that they will destroy. As far as nineteenth-century Britain is concerned this detailed research based on the close study of local evidence will necessarily check and may alter much that men have been accustomed to say about social conditions. It will necessarily check and will certainly alter much that they used to say about politics and elections, and it will probably modify the way men have handled the history of how men and women thought and felt, for on this too there is a good deal of detailed contemporary evidence.

Anyone who has engaged in the kind of research, in old newspapers or in very dead ephemeral literature, to which the study of elections and local politics inevitably leads will have been struck by the number of controversial points of view which clearly excited great feeling at the time, either in support of them or in antagonism to them, which have now sunk without trace into the dust of history, as if no one ever had bothered to think about them. Sometimes the whole controversy which

produced them has been forgotten or nearly forgotten, or sometimes it has seemed afterwards that one side was so decisively right that historians have not bothered to find out what the other side had to say for itself, or how much it appealed to contemporaries. A case in point is the controversy over monetary matters which raged in the 'twenties and 'thirties after Peel's Act of 1819. Until recently historians have by no means realized how cogent were the arguments against the return to a currency based on gold and how bitterly many people, particularly farmers, attributed all the ills they suffered in the next two decades to this return.[1] Even now I do not think that sufficient account is taken of the great potential political importance of this opinion. But it was an opinion that was held in opposition to the views of the great orthodox economists, who were by assumption right on these matters and so it has been thought to be eccentric, not worthy of the attention of history, and has been left out.

This fate it has shared with a good many other opinions which in their day gained approval, often enthusiastic approval, from considerable sections of the community. In some ways what may be called intellectual history or the history of opinion suffers from much the same tendencies as those which have distorted political history. In political history historians concentrated too much on the principal characters—the kings, the generals, the ambassadors and the leaders of the people—and did not bother about what seemed to be the secondary characters or the communities in the background. In the history of opinion there has been a tendency to concentrate attention on those men whose intellectual standing is still recognized today. Their influence has therefore been exaggerated, or at least there has been some neglect to look for others who might have been influential as well. It is a very natural tendency. The great figures obviously present themselves for consideration, they have not to be sought out; their thought has normally come to be accepted as being within the canon of those opinions which rational men could possibly entertain: it seems to be intelligible, if not necessarily acceptable. There is little doubt that their

[1] Asa Briggs *Age of Improvement* (London 1959) pp. 204-5. See also A. Briggs *Cambridge Historical Journal*, 'Thomas Attwood and the Economic background of the Birmingham Political Union', Vol IX, No. 2 (1948) (IV) pp. 190-216