

An Age of Equipoise?

Reassessing Mid-Victorian Britain

Edited by Martin Hewitt

An Age of Equipoise?



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

An Age of Equipoise?

Reassessing Mid-Victorian Britain

Edited by

MARTIN HEWITT

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2000 by Ashgate Publishing

Published 2017 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

Copyright © Martin Hewitt and the contributors, 2000

The authors have asserted their moral right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the authors of this work.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Notice:

Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

An Age of Equipoise? Reassessing Mid-Victorian Britain.

1. Great Britain—Social life and customs—19th century.
2. Great Britain—Social conditions—19th century.
3. Great Britain—Intellectual life—19th century.

I. Hewitt, Martin.
941'.081

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

An age of equipoise? Reassessing mid-Victorian Britain/edited by
Martin Hewitt.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-7546-0257-5 (alk. paper)

1. Great Britain—History—Victoria, 1837-1901.
2. Great Britain—Civilization—19th century.
3. Burn, William Laurence. Age of Equipoise.

I. Hewitt, Martin.

DA550.A35 2000

941.081—dc21

00-57605

ISBN 13: 978-0-7546-0257-6 (hbk)

Typeset in Sabon by Manton Typesetters, Louth, Lincolnshire

Contents

<i>List of figures and tables</i>	vii
<i>Notes on contributors</i>	ix
Prologue: reassessing <i>The Age of Equipoise</i> <i>Martin Hewitt</i>	1
1 Equipoise and its discontents: voices of dissent during the international exhibitions <i>Peter H. Hoffenberg</i>	39
2 Equipoise and the object: the South Kensington Museum <i>Tim Barringer</i>	68
3 Spectacular failures: Thomas Hopley, Wilkie Collins, and the reconstruction of Victorian masculinity <i>Sheila Sullivan</i>	84
4 Democracy and the mid-Victorians <i>Roland Quinault</i>	109
5 Equipoise and the myth of an open élite: new men of wealth and the purchase of land in the equipoise decades, 1850–69 <i>David Brown</i>	122
6 Domesticity: a legal discipline for men? <i>Martin J. Wiener</i>	155
7 Helps and Ruskin in the age of equipoise <i>Stephen L. Keck</i>	168
8 ‘The hand of the Lord is upon the cattle’: religious reactions to the cattle plague, 1865–67 <i>Matthew Cragoe</i>	190
9 Sensational imbalance: the child acrobat and the mid-Victorians <i>Brenda Assael</i>	207
10 Harboursing discontent: British imperialism through Brazilian eyes in the Christie Affair <i>Ross G. Forman</i>	225
<i>Index</i>	245



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

List of figures and tables

Figures

- | | | |
|-----|---|-----|
| 5.1 | Estate purchase by new men of wealth in the United Kingdom, 1780–1879 | 127 |
| 5.2 | Land purchase by new men of wealth in the United Kingdom, 1850–69 | 129 |
| 5.3 | Source of wealth of <i>nouveau riche</i> land purchasers, 1850–69 | 130 |

Tables

- | | | |
|-----|--|-----|
| 5.1 | Comparison of median and mean figures for new-wealth purchasers, 1850–69 | 131 |
| 5.2 | Penetration of the landed élite in England and Wales, 1780–1879 | 137 |



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

Notes on contributors

Brenda Assael is a lecturer in Modern Britain in the History Department of the University of Wales, Swansea. Her forthcoming book, *The Circus and Victorian Society*, will be published by the University Press of Virginia. She has also written numerous entries for the *New Dictionary of National Biography* on Victorian performers and her essay on 'Theatre History' appears in the *Encyclopedia of Historians and Historical Writing*, edited by Kelly Boyd.

Tim Barringer is Assistant Professor in the Department of History of Art at Yale University. He has written widely on nineteenth-century visual culture. He is co-editor of *Colonialism and the Object* (with Tom Flynn, 1998) and *Frederic Leighton: Antiquity, Renaissance, Modernity* (with Elizabeth Prettejohn, 1999) and is author of *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites* (1999).

David Brown is a field co-ordinator for History at City College, Norwich. With the help of a British Academy award, he is completing research on the subject of 'New men of wealth and the purchase of land in the United Kingdom 1780–1879'.

Matthew Cragoe is a senior lecturer in History at the University of Hertfordshire. He is the author of *An Anglican Aristocracy: the Moral Economy of the Landed Estate in Carmarthenshire 1832–95* (OUP, 1996) and has published widely on the history of Victorian Wales. He is currently writing a political history of the principality during the nineteenth century.

Ross G. Forman is a research fellow in English at Kingston University (UK). His work focuses on nineteenth-century British imperialism in Latin America and China. He is currently completing a book manuscript on Victorian and Edwardian images of China.

Martin Hewitt is Director of the Leeds Centre for Victorian Studies and editor of the *Journal of Victorian Culture*. Along with Robert Poole he has recently produced an edition of *The Diaries of Samuel Bamford, 1858–61* (Sutton, 2000).

Peter H. Hoffenberg (PhD, University of California, Berkeley) is Associate Professor of History at the University of Hawaii, Manoa. He is the author of *An Empire on Display: English, Indian and Australian Exhibitions from the Crystal Palace to the Great War*, forthcoming from the

University of California Press. His work also includes the study of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Australian political culture and the life and times of John Lockwood Kipling, artist and art-school administrator.

Stephen L. Keck is currently working on projects which involve both Ruskin and Helps. Having taught at the College of Charleston (USA), he is currently Assistant Professor of History at the National University of Singapore.

Roland Quinault teaches modern British history at the University of North London. He has published extensively on Victorian political and social history and is currently writing a book on prime ministers and democracy. He was formerly Honorary Secretary of the Royal Historical Society.

Sheila Sullivan received her PhD in English from the University of Chicago in 1995 and teaches at St Mary's College of Maryland. She has written articles on late Victorian masculinity (Sherlock Holmes), Newgate fiction, illustrated journalism, Victorian scandal (the Road Murder and *The Woman in White*) and Madeleine Smith. She is completing a book tentatively titled *Authorizing Gestures: Gender, Criminality and the Creation of Professional Authority in the 1860s*. She is also working with a collaborator on a book of essays: *The Function of the Courtroom at the Present Time: Rereading the English Trial (1840–1920)*.

Martin J. Wiener, Mary Gibbs Jones Professor of History at Rice University, is the author of *Between Two Worlds: The Political Thought of Graham Wallas* (1971), *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850–1980* (1981) and *Reconstructing the Criminal: Culture, Law and Policy in England 1830–1914* (1990). He has recently published in the *Journal of British Studies*, the *Journal of Modern History*, *Social History* and *Law and History Review*. The essay here is part of a book project on the role of law in 'reconstructing' manliness in nineteenth-century Britain.

Prologue: reassessing *The Age of Equipoise*

Martin Hewitt

... a fair appraisal of the Victorian commonwealth demands a knowledge of historiography as well as of history

Asa Briggs, *Age of Improvement* (1959)

W.L. Burn's *The Age of Equipoise* is one of those books that have attained classic status. Few serious students of mid-nineteenth-century Britain can be unaware of the book and its characterization of the period. In print at least until the later 1970s, it was for the twenty or twenty-five years after its publication in 1964 a virtually ubiquitous presence on the bibliographies and lists of recommended reading for the period. Of course, G.M. Young's *Victorian England: Portrait of an Age* (1936) remained – and in many respects remains – unassailable as the fundamental interpretation of the Victorian era; but Burn's book was usually the *proxime accessit*, showered with praise by subsequent scholars as 'indispensable for an understanding of the cross-currents and anomalies of mid-Victorian society', and 'perhaps the best general study of mid-Victorian life in every aspect'.¹

Admittedly, it is a text that has fallen out of favour in recent years. In the 1970s Geoffrey Best commented that by the 1990s 'hard-pressed historians who have no time to read the book will still be using the concept'.² And so it has proved. *The Age of Equipoise* has suffered the fate of most classics, increasingly passing out of the purview of scholarship, becoming a book more cited than read.³ Recent studies of the mid-Victorian period have ceased to feel the need to give it even token acknowledgement as part of the literature which defines current interpretations of the period.⁴ At the turn of the twenty-first century, attempts to generate a discussion of the book among Victorianists are likely to be met by nostalgic, but time-dimmed, encomiums from the generation which read it with pleasure in the 1960s and 1970s, and vague acknowledgements of an indirect knowledge of the book from younger scholars.⁵ At the Brotherton Library, University of Leeds, even the hardback first edition has been transferred from the main academic collection to the student collection. Here, alongside its battered paperback successor, it is apparently reduced to supplying regular service to undergraduates in search of an interpretative text for the

period.⁶ It is clearly not thought to have an enduring use for the faculty.

Nevertheless, for a good part of the nearly forty years since its first appearance, *The Age of Equipoise* was unquestionably a central text in the canon of interpretations of the Victorians. At the time of its publication, reviewers were quick and fulsome in their praise. There was a general sense that this was an important and impressive book, in the tradition of the 'overall impressionistic survey' established by Young.⁷ For the 'popular' reviewers in particular, the association with Young was too easy to resist, and *The Age of Equipoise* was widely welcomed as a masterly, impressionistic and personal analysis of an age in the grand tradition of the *Portrait*.⁸ In *Punch*, R.G.G. Price remarked that though Burn was certainly 'less bubblingly allusive than G.M. Young', he had 'the same kind of learning and the same gift for showing the unfamiliarity of a familiar landscape'.⁹ In the scholarly journals too there were generous tributes: a 'vivid recreation of a vanished society [which] cuts through the deadening layers of over-simplified generalisations, labels, categories and catchwords to reveal a rich diversity of life and thought buried beneath them', remarked one reviewer;¹⁰ 'profound and lively', suggested another.¹¹

The Age of Equipoise quickly became a staple of Victorian reading lists and annotated bibliographies as a general interpretative essay. Recommendation was often preceded by comment on the extent to which it might be 'too specialized for the novice', or at least likely to 'give greatest pleasure to those who already have some acquaintance with the period'.¹² But it still featured prominently in the general reading cited by standard texts for both British and American students. Hence R.K. Webb, in his widely used *Modern Britain*, recommended it as close to Young in 'learning, provocativeness and idiosyncrasy'; John Roach deemed it 'magisterial', Norman McCord pronounced it '*inter alia* a subtle and perceptive analysis of relations between government and society, and currents among the legislative innovations of these years', while Joseph Altholz described it in 1976 as quite simply an 'essential study of the mid-Victorian period'.¹³ Even those who remained sceptical about its overall arguments showed little hesitation in recommending it. Hence D.G. Wright, who spoke of the 'so-called "age of equipoise"', still recommended it as 'a scholarly and subtle analysis of the balance of interests in mid-Victorian society'.¹⁴

Burn's book also rapidly achieved a central place in the scholarship of the period. In the later 1960s H.J. Dyos, driving force in the development of urban history in Britain, and also co-editor of the influential volumes of essays on *The Victorian City* (1973), treated *The Age of*

Equipoise, along with Young's *Portrait* and Kitson Clark's *The Making of Victorian England* (1962), with what one reminiscence has described as 'affection bordering on awe'.¹⁵ It was quickly installed in the small (and variably defined) canon of key interpretative texts on the Victorian period, alongside Young, Kitson Clark, Walter Houghton's *The Victorian Frame of Mind* (1957), Asa Briggs's *Victorian People* (1954) and *The Age of Improvement* (1959), and Jerome Buckley's *The Victorian Temper* (1951).¹⁶ Above all, the idea of mid-Victorian Britain as 'the age of equipoise' has sunk deeply into the scholarly consciousness. So much so that authors no longer feel obliged to link their usage of the concept back to Burn's book, almost as if, like the 'railway age' or the 'age of Palmerston', the notion is felt to have some natural connection with the period.¹⁷

Of course, the book is now nearly forty years old, and it is perhaps unsurprising that its key idea has passed into a currency sufficiently general to obviate the need for repeated genuflection to the initial text. Indeed, the drifting of the text beyond the horizon of most current scholars might be entirely unproblematic were it not for the fact that *The Age of Equipoise* remained until very recently unsurpassed as the standard scholarly interpretation of the mid-Victorian period. It is true that G.F. Best's *Mid-Victorian Britain* (1971) provided a later and more encyclopaedic view of the mid-century, but the years between 1964 and 1998 saw no systematic attempt at reinterpretation. Perhaps the publication in 1998 of Theodore K. Hoppen's *The Mid-Victorian Generation* might have marked the final eclipse of Burn's text; but while this is a magisterial volume, drawing together the state of scholarship at the end of the twentieth century, and will undoubtedly be the bedrock of further examination of this period over the coming decades, it quite explicitly eschews the establishment of a major new interpretative frame for understanding the period. One of the ironies of its appearance is that its implicit claims to establish a new historiographical standard have prompted reviewers to cast back to Burn's book as the orthodox standard against which it is to be judged.¹⁸

So, *The Age of Equipoise* is back on the agenda. Its position as an important text in current understandings of the mid-Victorian period has been partially reaffirmed, even if with a certain scholarly embarrassment, and this has in turn brought into play more general questions about the development, or lack of it, of the historiography of the Victorian period. And yet, the closer one considers the impact of Burn's book, the more difficult it becomes to sustain the impression of its influence. Indeed, it is possible to argue that the wide divergence between the apparent importance of the text and its actual scholarly

impact (as well as the lack of an obvious replacement) is symptomatic of the difficulties of Victorian Studies as an interdisciplinary field – of the extent to which the notional key texts of the field have failed to constitute it as a coherent arena of scholarly activity. For these reasons amongst others a reappraisal of the author, his text and its relationship with the broader scholarship of the mid-Victorian period itself would seem timely.

A reluctant Victorianist?

The position that W.L. Burn occupied for so long, and indeed continues by default to occupy in part, would probably have surprised him, for it might be said that he was a reluctant Victorianist. At the very least he came late to the Victorians, and he was never preoccupied by them to the extent that many of the other scholars with whom he came to be bracketed were. His early work concentrated on eighteenth-century government and society, especially in Scotland, but also with an interest in the history of British North America which he retained to the end of his life. His first (and only other) major scholarly work was a study of *Emancipation and Apprenticeship in the British West Indies* (1937). Even in the post-1945 period, when his attention turned increasingly to the Victorians, he retained broad historical interests, from Gibbon to the Chamberlains, from early British imperialism to American foreign policy in the twentieth century. Much of his writing in this period appeared not in specialized academic journals, but in the pages of the intellectual monthlies, the *Quarterly Review*, the *Listener*, *Parliamentary Affairs*, and above all *The Nineteenth Century and After*. In these journals Burn's writing revealed as much interest in the contemporary world and the ability of the nineteenth century to speak to it as it did a passion for the period itself.

Burn's engagement with the Victorians was that of an outsider. G.M. Young had written as a Victorian seeking to stem the tide of Bloomsbury group anti-Victorianism, convinced that the age, and especially the mid-Victorian years, were the period out of all British history when a wise man would choose, if he could, to be young.¹⁹ His was the view of the mandarin and the metropolitan, secure in its classical education, its gentility and its persistent preference for style over substance, emotionally rooted in the nineteenth century and steeped in the values of that century's liberalism. Burn, in contrast, was a post-Victorian, dryly sceptical of the Victorian revival which was gathering pace around him, and this, along with the changed intellectual climate in which he wrote,

produced a quite different emotional engagement with what he called the 'nostalgic dream' of mid-Victorian England (p. 25). In writings throughout the 1950s he warned against the dangers of, as he put it in one review in 1960,

making the mid-Victorian scene the object of an uncritical and disingenuous admiration. We are apt to select what pleases us and to ignore the rest. We are careful to see the merits of the closely-knit family life, but less careful to see that it depended in the last resort on a system of family law which few of us would wish to have re-enacted.

Under the sanction of commentators such as Bagehot, he cautioned, there was a tendency to overlook the 'rigid Sabbatarians, the rabid teetotallers, the readers of the *Record*, the men who courted bribes at elections ...'.²⁰

Like many of his contemporary Victorianists, Burn was philosophically conservative, abidingly unsympathetic to Liberal idealism, and with strong Leavisite concerns about the decay of British culture in the second half of the twentieth century. His antipathy to post-war Britain under Labour, a society in which 'too many people want too many things too urgently',²¹ would have struck a chord widely. But Burn was not just culturally conservative, he was politically Conservative. He was quite happy needling colleagues of more liberal inclinations by preaching to them the virtues of what he described as 'the essential Toryism'.²² Partly out of a natural desire to rein in some of the more uncritical exuberance he saw around him, and partly out of his real philosophical antipathy to some key aspects of the period, Burn presented a much more jaundiced view of the mid-Victorians than was common during the post-war revival. It was, as he noted in one of his essays from the later 1940s and early 1950s, 'not an attractive [period] in its public aspects',²³ chilled by the 'damp fog of liberalism', an era in which expediency dominated over principle, in which politics was 'drab utilitarianism behind an aristocratic façade'.²⁴

His was not a view from the centre of the academic universe, like Houghton's or Kitson Clark's. Although an undergraduate at Oxford in the early 1920s, and a civil servant during the Second World War, he was as essentially provincial as they were not.²⁵ His roots were firmly in County Durham, and his only extensive period of time spent away from the North-East was his period in the 1920s and 1930s at the University of St Andrews. His work as a barrister was focused on the north-eastern circuit, and in the post-war period in which *The Age of Equipoise* took shape, he was a country landowner and JP, as well as Professor of History at Newcastle, dividing his time between the university and

fishing, shooting and looking after his farms in his native Weardale.²⁶ Like Asa Briggs, Burn homed in on the 1850s and 1860s as the essence of 'Victorian' civilization; with Briggs he shared the provincial's suspicion of the cultural and political élites; but while Briggs's Victorianism was rooted in the emerging cities and the urban middle classes who dominated them, Burn was more at home in the gentler and more long-standing traditions of the county towns and country districts which were in the process of being pushed aside by the forces of 'progress'. As he wrote at the outset of *The Age of Equipoise*,

My England ... is rural rather than urban, professional rather than industrial or proletarian; the England of the rectory and the modest mansion-house and the farmhouse, of the courts and the clubs and the 'public offices', rather than that of the manse and the factories and the co-operative stores and the Positivist congregations'. (p. 7)

He shared with many of the founding fathers of Victorian Studies an immense knowledge of the by-ways of the period. Yet his view of Victorian culture was in many respects an external one. His use of the conceit of an imaginary photograph of the Victorian rector's family for his famous exploration of selective Victorianism was suggestive in this regard, for his was the photographer's view: worldly, perceptive, brought to bear from many angles, but detached. While Buckley and Houghton and other scholars of Victorian literature and intellectual history were beginning to explore for the first time the complex emotional and intellectual make-up of the Victorian mind, Burn was more comfortable discussing the outward forms, the social practices, the legal forms, and the institutions which both embodied and sought to assuage the contending forces of optimism and pessimism. The breadth of his knowledge enabled him to produce rich and densely packed canvases which were a triumph of analytical illustration; but his engagement with the Victorians was not such that he either attempted, or was capable of, the encapsulation of the whole culture in the way that Young had managed, and to which others aspired.

Characterizing *The Age of Equipoise*

Just as Burn can be seen as a Victorianist of unusual stamp, so *The Age of Equipoise*, on closer analysis, is much less of a comprehensive portrait, in the manner of Young, than has often been assumed. That it was able to attain and retain the status of a central interpretative text of the high Victorian period for as long as it did indicates the difficulties Victorian

Studies as an interdisciplinary field has had in producing interpretative paradigms. Despite the way in which it has been conventional to bracket it with Young's *Portrait* – to present them as two of a kind, allusive, personal, idiosyncratic, and above all patrician cultural history – on closer inspection, Burn's book is of a different kind altogether.

This difference is shown at the outset by the much-praised first chapter, 'The Distorting Mirror', in which Burn took considerable pains to construct a warning of the perils of 'selective Victorianism', especially of the type which took mid-Victorian self-satisfaction at face value. The task of the historian, Burn commented, was to navigate a middle way between emphasis on 'individual idiosyncrasies' and 'wide generalisation about classes, types and occupations' (p. 23). Reading an imaginary photograph of a comfortable clerical family on a sun-drenched lawn, he uncovered piece by piece the potential disruptions of the idyll which lay behind the image, the intellectual indifference of the cleric, the genteel poverty which wears down his wife, the doubt which assails his son, the sexual exploitation of at least one of the servants. The mid-Victorian period, Burn was at pains to demonstrate, shared many of the problems of the 1960s; but it was also separated from that time by a historical gulf which ought not to be underestimated. 'Over and over again', he reminds us, 'in examining mid-Victorian England, one comes across modes of thought and action so bizarre, so little credible, that the men and women who practised them appear as inhabitants, not just of another century, but of another world' (p. 38).

In deference to these insights, Burn did not attempt a comprehensive survey of the Victorians, concentrating instead on a slice of less than two decades. It is true that the years chosen are those most usually identified as the heart of the high Victorian period, the quintessentially Victorian decades of the 1850s and 1860s, which had themselves engrossed more than their fair share of Young's attention, and tended to be over-represented in other contemporary attempts at encompassing things 'Victorian'. But his explicit concern with 'mid-Victorianism' and his desire to consider the nature and timing of the moves into and out of this era mean that Burn was much more concerned with issues of periodicity than Buckley, Houghton or Young.

Hence two of the book's six chapters, 'The Day After the Feast' and 'The End of an Epoch', consider the nature of the transition into and out of the age of equipoise. Of these the first was the more searching and successful. In it Burn was careful not to present the mid-Victorian years as the product either of some sudden political demobilization or material amelioration effected in the 1840s, but rather to tease out shifts in the culture drawn from broader and more diffuse sources. His

central assertion was that far from being an age of repression, the early Victorian years were best seen as decades of Romanticism, emotionally charged, intellectually heated, febrile and passionate, principled and gripped by agitations of many sorts, shot through with the fear of revolution. In part the years after 1851 represented a closing down of some of the vitality of these years: 'doors which had been open too long and wide, with great gusts of wind and rain sweeping through them, were being closed' (p. 71), and a move towards more mundane ambitions, as 'speculative theology gave way to speculation in railway shares' (p. 72); but they also represented the achievement of new vistas, a pausing for breath and to appreciate the view, after a long climb up a steep hill. His concluding chapter, 'The End of an Epoch', was less sharply sketched, not least because Burn spent much of it considering the longevity of landed power, and the persistence of patterns of rural landownership, governance and social relations well into the later century. Nevertheless, he suggested that the degree of contrast between the 1870s and 1860s, exemplified by the more open agnosticism, the revived republicanism, the perceptible shift from statutory permission to statutory compulsion, and the expansion of the bureaucratic apparatus, all indicated that '[a] dam, of some sort, had burst' (p. 329). If England in the 1850s and early 1860s had been surfeited after the feast, by the mid-1860s 'appetites were sharpening again', and as the impetus for reform gathered pace on various fronts, so the comfortable – and only partly illusory – mid-Victorian freedom derived from the 'preservation of an inner sphere, exempt from state power' (p. 330) was rapidly eroded.

Notwithstanding that in the first of these two chapters Burn provided enough of a sense of the early Victorians to permit the illusion that his text aimed at a general interpretation, the compression of his study of the end of the age of equipoise should alert us to the book's partial coverage of the Victorian era. At the same time, *The Age of Equipoise* is also explicitly partial in its thematic coverage, omitting, in particular, any substantial reference to politics (Burn explained that he had drafted two chapters on the subject, but had eventually decided – on what grounds it is not entirely clear – to omit them). It is also – as the subtitle announces – 'a study of the mid-Victorian generation', and this generation most often turns out to be the children of the 1790s rather than the 1820s, not those who were in the first flush of adulthood as the 1850s broke, but rather those comfortably ensconced in middle age. Its list of *dramatis personae* is dominated by those – like Joseph Parkes (1796–1865), a Birmingham radical who talked of revolution in 1832, but who from the late 1840s settled for service as a functionary of the

Chancery court, Matthew Davenport Hill (1792–1872), defender of advanced radicalism in the 1820s and 1830s, but advocate of extreme caution in the 1850s, and John Fife (1795–1871), radical surgeon turned lieutenant-colonel in the rifle corps – for whom early radicalism had mellowed with age into a more comfortable and – the word is almost inevitable in dealing with the period – complacent acceptance of the prospect of gentle and moderate ‘progress’.

Above all, however, what marks Burn’s book off from Young’s is the extent to which it is not so much a general interpretative survey in the grand manner as an analysis which addresses specific – if broad – questions. Burn’s enquiry starts from the paradox of a society in the throes of substantial social, economic, political and intellectual transformation managing to maintain its cohesiveness and avoid any conflicts sufficiently powerful and fundamental to threaten violent upheaval, while at the same time boasting of its almost complete individualism and absence of forces and institutions of control. His concern is to dispel the notion of mid-Victorian Britain as an age of *laissez-faire* and the unfettered freedom of the individual. The mid-Victorians might have believed that they lived in this kind of world, but this was merely the kind of ‘comfortable illusion’ to which every age is entitled (p. 7). Instead they inhabited a society marked by various types of discipline. These were not merged into a single force, and as such it was possible, especially for the rich, to evade most of them for most of the time. Nevertheless, commented Burn, ‘England, as I see it, was more notable in this period for discipline than for freedom from discipline’ (p. 7). To this end, the three central chapters of the book sought to examine the balances of freedom and constraint which characterized the period.

The first of these (the third chapter of the book), entitled ‘Getting and Spending’, while providing evidence of the fragile and circumscribed nature of mid-Victorian prosperity, used it to consider the play of *laissez-faire* and interventionism in contemporary attitudes to wealth and poverty. The emphasis on the insecurity of success and the ever-present spectre of poverty needs to be underlined, in the light of the way in which Burn has at times been invoked as a conjuror of comfortable prosperity. To the contrary, Burn was quite explicit that ‘the abyss’ was all too real for most mid-Victorians, and that the rising wealth of many groups only intensified the apprehension of want. At the same time he pointed out that the threat of poverty was enshrined in mid-Victorian social thought; indeed it was central to that thought that the threat of poverty and the stimulus to exertion it provided was a vital social discipline. Remove it, especially (but not only) from the poor, and the result would be idleness, improvidence and ultimately immorality. State

intervention needs must be heavily circumscribed for this reason, but also because as much scope as possible had to be left to private charity 'because it constituted for those who practised it a moral and social discipline' (p. 115). It was easy, as Burn conceded, for such attitudes to be deployed in the self-interested defence of wealth from the burdens of increased taxation; but for the majority, he argues, a genuine belief in the double disciplines of philanthropy underpinned the restricted role of the mid-Victorian state, and the extended discipline of mid-Victorian earnestness.

The second central chapter examined 'Legal Disciplines', illustrated by five case studies, of legislation on the police, prisons, the endowed schools, the medical profession, and the 1866 cattle plague. After an especially active period of legislation around 1850, Burn noted that these years were marked, if not by a lull, then at least by a confusion in which it is difficult to trace clear lines of policy. Without doubt the action of the state was constrained by the transitional position of parliamentary politics, the disinclination of the state to formulate long-term plans and policies, the passion for public economy, defects in the administrative structure (with respect both to the formulation of policy and its implementation by the central administration and by local bureaucracies). In some respects it might be argued that individual liberty was extended, but in others it was curtailed; and if, more significantly, there was a shift in the balance of discipline from the localities to the centre, this shift was made uneven by the greater tolerance which had to be shown to local government than to other corporations, and unpredictable by the permissive cast of much legislation, and the reliance on delegated authority (to inspectors, the Privy Council) for a good deal of the rest. Nevertheless, wherever the absence of legislative intervention gave rise to palpable evils or obvious abuses, or wherever it was in the interests of powerful social groups that the regulatory authority of the state be extended, the mid-Victorians proved themselves quite capable of extending legal disciplines. Hence not just the extension of sanitary legislation, but the Vaccination Act of 1853, Police Act of 1856, the Prisons Act of 1865, the (albeit belated) Cattle Plague Act of 1866. There remained the steady accumulation of knowledge for which, before 1867, the will to act did not exist; but mid-Victorian citizens still lived in an increasingly disciplined environment, even if the discipline had 'come to be so quietly and decorously applied that they could almost ignore its existence' (p. 136).

In any case, wide-ranging as legal disciplines might be, the reach of the mid-Victorian state was limited, and there were what might at best be described as 'awkward gaps in the administrative chain' (p. 291),

and here, where the state could not or would not provide, argues Burn, a range of non-statutory bodies and non-legal codes of behaviour stepped in – the ‘social disciplines’ which formed the basis of his fifth chapter. In practice it was difficult to draw a hard and fast line between the legal and the social, and to an extent, this was a residual category, encompassing all that was not legal, and some at least of the forces Burn identified, including the ‘discipline of dependence’ and of the family, were perhaps more economic than social. Nevertheless, Burn suggests, it might be that the latter were ultimately more important than the former. Certainly, mid-Victorian culture contained a range of practices which themselves placed considerable constraints on individual freedom of action, such as the obligations and expectations enshrined in codes of gentility, the hierarchical subordinations of the family, the moral codes which prevailed even as religious doctrines and beliefs fell increasingly into doubt, and the over-arching constraints of the press and publicity by which discovery and disgrace threatened those who transgressed. The authority of the newspaper editor, the factory paternalist, the domestic patriarch, the country gentleman, the dissenting minister, even the professional association, might be subject to a constant process of piecemeal challenge, but viewed in the round constituted a society more ‘strongly authoritarian’ (p. 286) than conventional invocations of *laissez-faire* individualism could possibly encompass.

The result is a book whose commitment to a specific focus should not be underestimated. While his range of example was imposing, Burn never strayed long from the tensions which were at the root of his enquiry, individualism versus collectivism, the centralizing state *versus* local autonomy, freedom versus discipline, licence versus authority, and his discussions of such central topics as religion, gentility, even sport, were refracted through this strong diagnostic impulse.

The influence of The Age of Equipoise

It is no easy matter to assess the significance of a single book, to attempt to isolate the impact of one text among the myriad influences and juxtapositions that comprise the texture against which all scholarship is written. It is doubly difficult for a book which ranged as broadly as *The Age of Equipoise*, and which, conventionally at least, became one of the standard treatments of its period. It is likely that much of the impact of the book was felt obliquely and indirectly, more in the habit of mind with which historians approached the Victorians, and in the place allotted to the mid-Victorian period in general interpretations of

the reign, than in specific and acknowledged debts. Hence even Asa Briggs, whose seminal reinterpretations of the Victorians in the 1950s and early 1960s were much influenced by Burn's early thoughts on mid-Victorian equipoise, makes no formal acknowledgement of the fact in his various studies of Victorianism.²⁷

Indeed, it is difficult to know precisely what might be expected to be the impact of the book. It is noticeable for example that among the welter of praise which Burn received on the book's publication in 1964, the reviewers collectively displayed considerable uncertainty about the contribution it might be said to make. Beyond the general tributes, they clearly found it difficult to pin down the significance of Burn's arguments. 'Enormously rewarding and stimulating', concluded David Owen, the doyen of American historians of the Victorian period.²⁸ But his difficulty, and that of all the reviewers, came in pinning down the exact nature of this reward and stimulation. Some reviewers gave particular praise to Burn's dissection of 'selective Victorianism', 'a classic of witty precautionary reading'.²⁹ Others chose to highlight the extent to which Burn disposed of the notion of the period as one of individualism and individual liberty, or at least established that 'Laissez-faire itself was enforced by a great structure of coercion'.³⁰ But others sought refuge in suggestions of relatively narrow significances, as in John Roach's judgement that it was 'primarily a study of power and authority in Victorian society, rather too much dominated by the debates of administrative historians',³¹ or the idea that the book operated more successfully as a series of essays than as a general interpretation of a period, that 'it open[ed] up many more lines of enquiry than the author can fully deal with'.³² And lurking behind the comments of many reviewers was the impression that in much of the book there was little that was particularly new or original, that, as Asa Briggs put it, 'much of what Professor Burn says on these general themes has become commonplace in recent years'.³³

Part of the problem lay in the prolonged genesis of the book, for many of its key ideas had been floated by Burn during the late 1940s and early 1950s in a series of papers, lectures and articles, most importantly 'The Age of Equipoise: England, 1848-1868', first delivered to the Conference of Anglo-American Historians in July 1949, and subsequently published in *The Nineteenth Century and After*.³⁴ Through the 1950s and early 1960s Burn's ideas, often taken and developed by Briggs, Kitson Clark and others, seeped slowly into the consciousness of Victorianists. So much so that in 1963 one literary critic could describe the mid-Victorian decades as that era 'which historians increasingly have called "the age of compromise" or the "age of equipoise"'.³⁵

At the time Burn was commencing his rethinking, interpretations of mid-Victorian Britain were overwhelmingly dominated by perceptions of a fundamental watershed around the time of the Great Exhibition in which the country passed from the troubled 1840s to the unthreatened 1850s. In his *Portrait* Young had remarked that ‘fear abated, hatred subsided, pride remained’,³⁶ and in his 1951 article ‘Mid-Victorianism’ he conjures up halcyon years of compromise between *laissez-faire* and state intervention, perfect confidence in Parliament, unchallenged belief in individual improvement, ‘wonderful receptiveness, tireless energy’, ‘an unchallenged success’ in material things, and (quoting *The Times*) “‘a degree of general contentment to which neither we nor any other nation we know of ever attained before’”.³⁷ Contemporary historical treatments, such as the chapter on mid-Victorianism in David Thomson’s *England in the Nineteenth Century* (1950) and literary treatments, including Graham Hough’s *The Last Romantics* (1949), concurred in presenting an essentially untroubled era never far from Trevelyan’s ‘complacency and coxsureness’,³⁸ shaped by values of industriousness, tolerance, self-reliance and self-help, secure in its belief in the benevolence of progress, a society whose prophets were themselves a sign of the assuredness and confidence which made such self-criticism possible. It was still all too easy for analysis to drift into Stracheyite characterizations of smug, self-satisfied hypocrites.³⁹ It is important that hindsight should not lead us to underestimate the persistence of these frames. The second edition of Llewellyn Woodward’s volume in the Oxford History of Britain, *The Age of Reform*, published in 1961, retained its uncomplicated Whiggish picture of the mid-Victorian period characterized by a single vector of improvement.⁴⁰ As Burn himself remarked in 1964,

It is difficult for any of us, and especially for the older of us, to rid our minds of the picture of a country where Cotton was King, where industrialization had made agriculture obsolescent, and where Bright and Cobden, backed by what are vaguely but respectfully called the middle-classes, were the dominating figures.⁴¹

Burn’s achievement was to play an important part in the dismantling of such unitary and Whiggish visions. Although *The Age of Equipoise* contained much that was absent or only slightly alluded to in his earlier essays, the dozen or more articles he published between the end of the Second World War and the early 1950s did go a long way towards outlining his ideas on the nature of Victorian, and especially mid-Victorian, Britain. They established his sense of the ‘depth and intensity’ of the period which underpinned his later attack on ‘selective Victorianism’: ‘the mid-Victorian scene’, he argued, ‘was too complex, too heterogenous [*sic*] in its structure, for description by any one simplifying

adjective'.⁴² They clearly expressed the extent to which the much-vaunted material success of the mid-Victorians was a creation of nostalgia: the working classes were only an accident away from misery, the middle classes were under constant pressure to keep up appearances, while 'the preoccupation of the mid-Victorian parliaments with bankruptcy law tells its own tales'.⁴³ They enunciated the degree to which the watershed of the 1840s, although bringing a real change in temper, had to be kept in perspective: the reforms of the 1830s and 1840s could not be said to have effected any wholesale shifting of social or political power: the middle-classes were rebuffed, despite the lessons sometimes drawn from the repeal of the Corn Laws, and 'the aristocracy was able to retain possession of the controls'.⁴⁴ Although Leeds and Sheffield were integral to any discussion of mid-Victorian England, notwithstanding them,

mid-Victorian England was *not* the frontier society it might so easily have been. The state was still weak, and politics confused, but the frontier areas were humanised and disciplined and civilised by the adaptation of old institutions and the development of new.⁴⁵

By the time of the appearance of *The Age of Equipoise* in early 1964, such arguments had obtained quite wide currency. The book was preceded by the publication of many of the classics of the emerging Victorian Studies canon, Houghton's *Victorian Frame of Mind*, Briggs's *Victorian People* and *The Age of Improvement*, and George Kitson Clark's *The Making of Victorian England*. But if the readers of the book in the mid-1960s found the ideas encapsulated in the label the 'age of equipoise' unsurprising, they needed to remember, as indeed Briggs reminded them in his own review, that they were 'far less taken for granted when he first coined the phrase to describe the period'.⁴⁶ Burn's article had clearly been one of the central influences on Briggs as he was writing the key essays of *Victorian People* (especially 'Samuel Smiles and Self-Help', and 'Trollope, Bagehot and the English Constitution'), and this is apparent also in his extraordinarily prescient and influential *Age of Improvement*.⁴⁷ For Briggs, Trollope and Bagehot 'expressed more clearly than any other writers the equipoise of mid-Victorian England'. If Kitson Clark's *Making* eventually adopted different modulations from Burn's, his influence was acknowledged at the outset, and implicit in the recognition of the new task of revisionism with which the book began.⁴⁸ For an article in a relatively unfashionable general-interest review, Burn's essay appears to have been widely read, and cited more frequently than might have been expected, both before and after the publication of *The Age of Equipoise*: for example, by Houghton in *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, Olive Anderson in her *A Liberal State at*

War (1967), F.B. Smith in *Disraelian Conservatism and Social Reform* (1967) and by Michael Thompson in his *English Landed Society in the Nineteenth Century* (1963).⁴⁹

It may be the extent to which *The Age of Equipoise* was thus in many respects rounding off a historiographical revolution rather than opening up new lines of enquiry that helps explain how surprisingly difficult it is to find explicit traces of Burn's impact on subsequent scholarship. Whatever the reason, it must be said that the recognizable impact of the book on the scholarship of the Victorian period after 1964 has been extraordinarily limited. This is not to say that it has not been much cited. Indeed, it has been mined mercilessly. A systematic survey would almost certainly reveal that it has been less often invoked than not only Young, but also Briggs's *Age of Improvement*, and his *Victorian People* and *Victorian Cities* volumes; but the range of contexts in which reference to *The Age of Equipoise* pops up is still impressive. Quite often it seems to have served as a useful repository of contemporary comment and incident.⁵⁰ But in other instances a more telling influence is apparent in a reliance on Burn's perceptive observations and judgements. This use was particularly common amongst literary scholars, and for a while *The Age of Equipoise* was relatively widely used in literary circles as an important 'background' text.⁵¹ As late as the mid-1980s it was extensively quarried in Joseph Kestner's *Protest and Reform* (1985). But it was also frequently worked by historians: hence David Cannadine's appeal both in his *Lords and Landlords* and in his *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy* to Burn's observation that 'the Duke of Omnium and the small squire were half a world apart',⁵² or Frank Prochaska's summons of Burn's comment that the dependent daughter was 'that fundamental prop of the Victorian home'.⁵³ The vein is far from exhausted: Theodore K. Hoppen's recent volume in the new Oxford History of Britain, *The Mid-Victorian Generation. Britain 1846-86* (1998), as well as borrowing Burn's subtitle ('A study of the mid-Victorian generation'), cites Burn's specific observations and judgements on numerous occasions.⁵⁴

It is possible to discern some influence on general surveys of the period. There is little doubt that Burn played a part in the re-conceptualization of Victorian periodicity from the binary split between 'early' and 'late' which had been the dominant mode of the interwar years, to the tripartite division of early, mid- and late which became orthodox from the 1960s onwards (although this division was clearly articulated by Thomson in 1950).⁵⁵ He contributed to the extent to which it became commonplace to reject *laissez-faire* labels, and to present the period as one of 'quiet consolidation' legislatively. In

comments such as Derek Beales's suggestion in his 1969 text that in the mid-Victorian period 'Spontaneity and heedlessness have gone. So Victorian Britain disciplined herself', we have unmistakable echoes of Burn.⁵⁶ The idea of 'equilibrium' was widely deployed. Citation of Burn was, at least for a while, apparently *de rigeur* for texts surveying the Victorian period.

Yet, on closer inspection, much of the complexity of Burn's position had failed to register. The mid-Victorian period was still characterized by many historians as anti-reforming, increasingly prosperous, moderate, consensual. It was still possible to invoke Burn, but also to argue, as Hamish Fraser did in 1974, that

It is hard not to see the third quarter of the nineteenth century as, in so many ways, a lacuna in British history. The very confidence in itself which permeates society gives the period a uniqueness. The middle classes, above all, had reason to feel confident that at last they were coming into their own, though all levels of society were touched by it. It was a confidence built on stability ... Gone was the trepidation of the 1840s. Yet to come was the self-doubt of the 1880s. For three decades one can see 'Victorianism' at its high noon.⁵⁷

Literary scholars were rarely so uncircumspect, but for many of them, too, 'the age of equipoise' became a formulation which validated a view of an essentially untroubled and settled period, a period, as Patrick Brantlinger portrayed it, 'of relative social stability and security' characterized by the cult of progress, a 'surge of industrial expansion and relative prosperity', and hostility to reform, or as Roger Henckle put it, 'good times – of peace, prosperity, stability and assurance, that the social historian W.L. Burn characterises as the Age of Equipoise'.⁵⁸

At the level of specialist studies, such fragility of influence is even more apparent. In some cases this may be understandable, though not necessarily justifiable. From the outset, perhaps prompted too easily by his omission of the planned chapters on politics, although also reflecting their preference for presenting cut flowers rather than rooted plants, historians of politics, both national and local, appear to have rejected the book as even a framing device for their analyses.⁵⁹ Unsurprisingly, historians of foreign policy, even of imperial expansion, continued to write internalist accounts of diplomatic manoeuvrings which made little effort to position themselves in any broader interpretative frame.

In other cases, however, the extent to which *The Age of Equipoise* is excised from the debate is less easily explained. Social and cultural studies of aspects of the mid-Victorian period which were published in the later 1960s and early 1970s, when one might expect its influence to