

Lecture One

The Victorian Paradox

Scope:

This lecture outlines the main themes of the course: Victorian Britain was a paradoxical society and one of extreme contrasts between wealth and poverty, morality and cynicism, creativity and constrict ion, imperial grandeur and domestic squalor, and collectivity and individualism. It was a society committed to the ideals of material and moral progress, industrial and commercial expansion, and worldwide free trade.

However, its vulnerability to fluctuations of the business cycle and to foreign competition entailed hardships for its majority, the poor and working classes, and severely unequal distribution of its benefits. It is a society still close enough to us to evoke our admiration in many ways, but also close enough to provoke our censure in many others. It is difficult not to admire many of its most brilliant characters but equally difficult not to condemn the moral narrowness and hard-heartedness they sometimes displayed.

Outline

- I. Victorian Britain (1837–1901) was a paradoxical society and one of extreme contrasts.
 - A. Very wealthy and very poor people lived side by side.
 - B. The society was immensely creative but burdened with a stifling social-class system.
 - C. Britain took pride in its worldwide empire but was unable to control its oldest and closest colony, Ireland.
 - D. It believed in its racial, religious, and civilizational superiority but could be brutally destructive and cynical, even going to war in 1839 to force opium on the reluctant Chinese.
 - E. Many of Britain's most brilliant intellectuals were Victorians, but they lived in an under-educated and still largely illiterate society.
- II. The Victorians believed, perhaps more strongly than any other British generation, in progress, in making the world better from year to year, both materially and morally. In many ways, they succeeded.
 - A. They built up Britain's worldwide empire.
 1. They ruled India with a small army and a talented group of administrators, first through the East India Company then, after 1857, directly.
 2. They turned Australia from a prison colony into a thriving colony of farmers and settlers.
- III. Along with its achievements, however, Victorian Britain had shortcomings and unsolvable problems.
 - A. Many Britons were very poor, and as growing numbers went to work in industry, they became vulnerable to periodic slumps, unemployment, and acute privation. Charity was insufficient to deal with the scale of British poverty. The alternative, the "workhouse," was bitterly hated and resented.
 - B. A sharply defined class system closed off avenues of opportunity to most talented members of the lower classes. Snobbery and class distinction were sources of friction and discontent.
 1. Class antagonism fueled the growth of the trade union movement, which in turn, gave birth to the Labour Party in the 1890s.
 3. They provided a steady flow of settlers to Canada, New Zealand, and South Africa and invented creative ways for these colonies to be self-governing while still connected to Britain.
 4. They dominated strategically important places around the world, including Gibraltar, Suez, and Aden, which safeguarded their imperial routeways.
- B. The Victorians made Britain the world's most powerful trading nation, building up the world's largest merchant navy and protecting it with the largest military navy.
- C. Britain made immense strides in industrialization, immediately before and during Victoria's reign.
 1. It was the first industrial capitalist nation, beginning with the mass production of cotton textiles, later industrializing mining, metallurgy, and other manufactures.
 2. It was the first country in the world to build a railway network, which speeded up the pace of economic life and made it possible for ordinary citizens to travel long distances for the first time.
 3. It pioneered in banking, insurance, and free-trade legislation.
- D. Victorian Britain moved toward a democratic political system but did not suffer the revolutionary upheavals that afflicted most of continental Europe in the same era.
 1. A series of Reform Acts, in 1832, 1867, and 1884, extended the vote to growing numbers of men (though not to women) in a variety of class positions.
 2. Victoria herself, and her husband, Prince Albert, restored the prestige of the monarchy, which had been damaged by her disreputable predecessors.
 3. Victorian politicians—including Peel, Palmerston, Gladstone, and Disraeli—were brilliant speakers and rank among the outstanding figures in the whole of British political history.

2. Members of the upper classes sought work in government, the army, the navy, and the church; "trade," the basis of Britain's power, was regarded as beneath their dignity.
- C. British industrialists did not maintain their lead over their rivals, notably in America and Germany.
 1. They failed to modernize equipment.
 2. They trained their sons to be gentlemen rather than businessmen.
 3. They relied on the colonies as a protected market that permitted them to remain inefficient.
- D. While taking pride in its far-flung empire, Britain was unable to deal satisfactorily with its closest colony, Ireland. The result was that the "Irish Question" hamstrung the work of British politicians, especially in the later Victorian era.
 1. Ireland was virtually an agricultural monoculture, the potato being its almost exclusive crop.
 2. Reliance on one crop led to disaster, when the potato blight struck Ireland in 1846, causing nationwide famine.
 3. Many Irish laborers fled to England and the United States.
 4. Catholicism was also a stumbling block to Home Rule: Irish Protestants opposed Home Rule, fearing they would suffer under Catholic domination.
 5. Legislation for Irish Home Rule passed through the House of Commons in 1893 but failed in the House of Lords.
- IV. Many colorful, larger-than-life figures lived and worked in Victorian Britain, and their work has resonance down to the present. Several of them will feature in this course.
 - A. Queen Victoria herself, a strong-willed, imperious figure, knew how to make the most of the monarch's remaining prerogatives.
 - B. Florence Nightingale, an even more determined and skillful worker behind the scenes, transformed nursing and public health in British life.
 - C. Isambard Kingdom Brunel, the genius-engineer, built Britain's most luxurious railway and the first steam-powered transatlantic ship.
 - D. Charles Darwin, the biologist, produced the great work *On the Origin of Species*, which revolutionized human understanding of the natural world.
 - E. Benjamin Disraeli was a Jewish outsider who became a Conservative Party prime minister, empowered the queen as empress of India, and learned to adapt conservatism to a mass electorate.
 - F. John Henry Newman, the brilliant Anglican churchman, shocked the nation by becoming a Roman Catholic in 1845 and went on to scandalize many of his new co-religionists by his intellectually adventurous ideas.

G. Charles Dickens, the novelist, serialized stories that enthralled readers in England, America, and later around the world and pointed out many of the worst injustices and follies of British life.

V. The Victorians' reputation declined sharply in the early twentieth century but has subsequently revived, in part.

- A. Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918) lampooned Victorian high-mindedness.
- B. Post-World War I modernists in art and architecture reacted against Victorian decorative complexity in favor of austere simplicity.
- C. Scattered champions of Victoriana, such as John Bejeman and L. S. Lowry, were the exception.
- D. British political changes after 1980 contributed to a recovery of the Victorians' better aspects.

VI. The course will follow a generally chronological pattern.

- A. We first glance back to earlier developments, particularly the Industrial Revolution.
- B. Lectures on such issues as the lives of women and servants, music, art, and architecture will be less rigorously chronological.

Essential Reading:

W. D. Rubinstein, *Britain's Century: A Political and Social History, 1815–1905*.

K. Theodore Hoppen, *The Mid-Victorian Generation, 1846–1886*.

Supplementary Reading:

Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians*.

Llewelyn Woodward, *The Age of Reform, 1815–1870*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Does Victorian Britain continue to fascinate the world because of its achievements or because of its strange internal contradictions?
2. What were the characteristics of "Victorianism"?