**Victorian Britain 1837-1901**

**historical period covering the reign of Queen Victoria**

Victoria, Queen of England, who came to the throne in 1837 and died in 1901, is one of the few monarchs in history to give her name both to an adjective, Victorian, and to a noun, Victorianism. Historians speak too of a “Victorian age”. Her reign was the longest in English history, and went through different phases. She herself celebrated two jubilees, the Golden in 1887 and, ten years later, the Diamond, a new way of describing a rare event, a 60-years jubilee. For her, however, if not for her people, the biggest break of her reign came in 1861, when her husband, Albert, born in Coburg, Germany, died of typhoid. She immediately went into seclusion, a grieving widow who worshipped his memory, emerging reluctantly but ultimately in imperial majesty. In 1867 she was proclaimed Empress of India, and her Diamond Jubilee was an imperial as well as a national event. A new, greatly enlarged British Empire spanned the continents, and more than a fifth of the world’s population were claimed as the Queen’s subjects. Meanwhile, through her marriage to Albert, her first cousin, she had acquired a network of European connections. The marriages of their nine children linked the British royal house to German, Russian, Danish, Greek, and Romanian royal families. Her impressive funeral was as much of a European event as her Diamond Jubilee had been an imperial event, with the German Emperor William II (the Kaiser), her grandson, forming as prominent a figure as her son and heir, Edward VII. There was a sense not only in London but in all the capitals of the world that an age had come to an end, a stronger sense than there had been when the 19th century itself drew to a close.

Interpretations of the long reign of Victoria and of the longer century to which she belonged—she was born, like Albert, in 1819—have varied substantially according, above all, to time and place, but also according to the standpoint both of individual politicians and historians. There have been many vantage points during and after the reign and many interpreters. Both “Victorian” and “Victorianism” became labels of distaste—or worse—as well as of pride: indeed, they already were before Victoria died. The century itself, which went through as many phases as there were in her reign, could be described as “wonderful” or “wasteful”, and for some historians its problems were more striking than its achievements.

From two 20th-century British prime ministers, both Conservatives there were strongly contrasting judgements. Harold Macmillan considered the Victorian age as an interruption in Britain’s history; Margaret Thatcher, praising what she thought of as “Victorian values”, believed that these were “the values when our country became great”. The first new 20th-century prime minister, Arthur James Balfour (later Earl), also a Conservative, born in the 19th-century year of revolutions, 1848, confessed that the middle years of the Victorian age, its “high noon” between at one end the building of the Crystal Palace and the Great Exhibition (1851) which was housed in it, and at the other end the second Reform Act of 1867, extending the vote to a sizeable section of the urban working classes, did not “greatly appeal to him”. He preferred to look back, he said, to the long wars against Napoleon, from George Eliot to Jane Austen, from the painter Sir Edwin Landseer, painter of the great deer The Monarch of the Glen, to Sir Joshua Reynolds, Founder-President of the Royal Academy in 1768, from the poet Alfred Lord Tennyson to William Wordsworth, Lord Byron, and John Keats.

By the end of that war and in the decade that followed, the Victorians were out of fashion, and Lytton Strachey, born in 1880, wrote wittily but astringently about them, including the Queen herself, in Eminent Victorians (1918) and Queen Victoria (1921). He, in turn, was to go out of fashion, and soon after the end of World War II there were many signs of a Victorian revival. Victorian houses, which H. G. Wells, a critical Victorian, forecast that no one would ever want to live in, themselves became fashionable soon after he died in 1946. Two years later, a knowledgeable and sensitive literary critic, Humphry House, author of The Dickens World (1941), gave a remarkable broadcast called “Are the Victorians coming back?” and another critic, Basil Willey, observed that there were many 20th-century “displaced persons” who wanted to get back into the Victorian age to seek there for a stability and a confidence which the 20th century had lost.

There never was great stability in the Victorian age. Indeed, the Victorians were like late-20th-century people in at least one respect: they had to cope with unprecedented change. No two decades were the same, and the change affected ways of living and working as much as ways of thinking and feeling. They were divided in their reactions to it, individually and collectively. The most penetrating historian of Victorian England, G. M. Young, himself a Victorian survivor, writing of what he called his favourite decade, the 1860s, began one of his many essays with the question, “If you fell asleep and woke up in the 1860s what would you discover?”, to which he gave the proper answer that it all depended on where you woke up. Victorian society was, for all the change that was taking place, a stratified, hierarchical society with a great gap between rich and poor. There were big regional differences too, the biggest of them between North and South. Young’s most stimulating book on the Victorians, difficult to read because it has as many allusions in it as insights, was written before World War II. It was called Victorian England, Portrait of an Age (1936), and though the portrait has aged it still catches all the light and colour of the age that it is describing.

Whatever the subsequent—or earlier—interpretations of the reign or the century may be, those that set out to provide a portrait or to produce a synthesis have to take account not only of a long-living Queen and her relationship with her subjects, or in the case of the century of a calendar of recorded events, but with a number of great themes, each of which is associated with change and which requires interpretation. They are all interconnected.

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