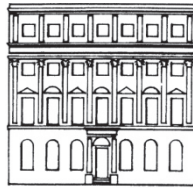


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David Cannadine:

Rewriting the British Nineteenth Century

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REWRITING THE BRITISH NINETEENTH CENTURY

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When I signed the contract to write what became *Victorious Century*, the nineteenth century was the one immediately before that which we were then in, so there has been a considerable increase in historical distance since that time.¹ I ask myself, and I fear reviewers may make the same point: why do we need another history of nineteenth-century Britain? After all, there is a long and illustrious pedigree of such books beginning, for the sake of argument, with Halévy's wonderfully incomplete multi-volume account,² and Trevelyan's more concise survey.³ And there are two very fine volumes which are still well worth reading in the original *Oxford History of England*, by Sir Llewellyn Woodward⁴ and Sir Robert Ensor.⁵ Then, of course, there are the two books by Asa Briggs⁶ and Donald Read⁷ in the Longman series, which cover the same period. We have contributions by Norman Gash⁸ and Edgar Feuchtwanger⁹ in the Arnold series, and there are the three more recent books, to which I shall return, in the *New Oxford History of England*, by Boyd Hilton,¹⁰ Theo Hoppen,¹¹ and

This lecture was delivered at the German Historical Institute London in June 2016. Footnotes have been added.

¹ In the meantime, this book has been published as David Cannadine, *Victorious Century: The United Kingdom, 1800–1906* (London, 2017).

² Élie Halévy, *History of the English People in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. E. I. Watkin, 6 vols. (London, 1949–52).

³ George Macaulay Trevelyan, *British History in the Nineteenth Century (1782–1901)* (New York, 1922).

⁴ Llewellyn Woodward, *The Age of Reform 1815–1870* (Oxford, 1938).

⁵ R. C. K. Ensor, *England 1870–1914* (Oxford, 1936).

⁶ Asa Briggs, *The Age of Improvement, 1783–1867* (London, 1959).

⁷ Donald Read, *England, 1868–1914: The Age of Urban Democracy* (London, 1979).

⁸ Norman Gash, *Aristocracy and People: Britain 1815–1865* (London, 1979).

⁹ E. J. Feuchtwanger, *Democracy and Empire: Britain 1865–1914* (London, 1985).

¹⁰ Boyd Hilton, *A Mad, Bad and Dangerous People? England 1783–1846* (Oxford, 2006).

¹¹ K. Theodore Hoppen, *The Mid-Victorian Generation, 1846–1886* (Oxford, 1998).

Geoffrey Searle.¹² There are also relatively recent single-volume attempts by Norman McCord,¹³ Bill Rubinstein,¹⁴ and Hugh Cunningham.¹⁵ There is a serious question in the light of this market, which cannot be said to be undersupplied with histories of nineteenth-century Britain: do we need any more? What is the case for having another go? I naturally have a vested interest in supposing that we do need another volume, as otherwise I would not have written one. And what case can I make for that? I hope my answers to these questions may be of some interest.

When I was starting out in my professional career, which was rather a long time ago, the nineteenth century was a very exciting period to be working on. During the 1950s and 1960s, scholars began to get into many of its archives for the first time, which helps explain why in the 1970s I became a historian of the nineteenth century myself. But I think it is fair to say that in recent decades, the nineteenth century has been overwhelmed and over-burdened by the spectacular weight of the erudition that has accumulated about it. The prodigious abundance of material that has been published on it over the last fifty years and more is almost unmasterable, and we are also now compelled to take account of the rise of what is termed 'four nations' history'. This means that we have to write the history of the nineteenth century either of Britain or of the United Kingdom, and need to pay more attention to Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. When Penguin asked me to become general editor of this new history of Britain in the 1990s, one of the points that they were particularly insistent on was that unlike the old *Penguin History of England*, this should, indeed, be the *Penguin History of Britain*, partly in response to the fact that in the 1990s devolution was in demand and on the political agenda in both Wales and Scotland.

We are all now additionally urged that we have to integrate the history of Britain and of the British Empire to a greater extent than ever before, but it is not easy to do so in practice. We are also constantly told that unlike in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, Britain's claims

¹² G. R. Searle, *A New England? Peace and War, 1886–1918* (Oxford, 2004).

¹³ Norman McCord, *British History 1815–1914* (Oxford, 2007).

¹⁴ W. D. Rubinstein, *Britain's Century: A Political and Social History* (London, 1998).

¹⁵ Hugh Cunningham, *The Challenge of Democracy: Britain 1832–1918* (London, 2001).

to great power pretensions are now over. With the handing back of Hong Kong to the Chinese in 1997, we finally needed to get over the imperial phase of British history and that, of course, was pre-eminently the nineteenth century. We are further instructed that we have to take account of the global history turn. We are all, these days, apparently supposed to be writing transnational history, and therefore, when we talk about Britain, we need to be thinking of its relations with the world, and, indeed, with the world beyond the British Empire. I am also struck by the thought that one of the relationships that tends to get left out, both in the discourse of the new imperial history and in the priorities of global history, is the history of Britain's strong and complex links with the rest of Europe. It seems to me that relations between the nation and the continent, especially in the nineteenth century, were actually of great significance, and, in particular, I want to say in this setting, between Britain and Germany. Yet the history of global Britain does not often appear to be comfortable with the history of Britain and Europe.

As this suggests, one of the challenges of writing a one-volume history of nineteenth-century Britain today is deciding what to leave out—which inevitably means leaving out a great deal. Another challenge is trying to devise an appropriate expositional structure, a point I will illustrate with reference to the three relatively recent *New Oxford History of England* volumes: Boyd Hilton on the years 1783 to 1846, Theo Hoppen on 1846 to 1886, and Geoff Searle on 1886 to 1918. As it happens, I know all three authors, I am certainly an admirer of them all, and in many ways of these books. When you set out to write a survey you begin to appreciate, more than you might have done before, what the merits and strengths are in other authors who have tried their hand at what is, in some ways, a similar task. The comments that I am about to make, although in some ways critical, are based on a general recognition that these are three very serious, significant, and important books.

What, then, are their strengths, interests, and weaknesses? It seems to me they are all quintessentially Oxford books, in that their main focus is still almost overwhelmingly *English* history. Boyd Hilton, unsurprisingly, is particularly strong on theology and politics. Theo Hoppen, as befits the fact that he is an outstanding historian of Ireland, is very good on Anglo-Irish relations. And Geoff Searle heroically took on the task of treating the late nineteenth and early

twentieth centuries, and the First World War as well. They are in some ways very different books. If you are a series editor, one of the things you worry about is that although each of the books might be rather good they do not really approach the topic or the problem in the same way. That is certainly true of these three authors. Hilton does not really have a clear, narrative structure; there is a lot of back and forth, toing and froing, and he never quite works out how to resolve the contradictions, paradoxes, and challenges of narrative versus analysis. Hoppen has many wonderful insights, but I think in the end his book is really a collection of brilliant essays. The material on entrepreneurial culture is terrifically good, and there is a wonderful chapter on the 'Celtic fringe'. But it does not quite hang together as a book. And Geoff Searle's account is a heroic attempt to give a comprehensive account of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but he gives the impression that he is rather overwhelmed by it, and the First World War is added on in a way that does not fully work. I also think that each of these books covers such a short span of time that they never develop a sense of dynamism and momentum, even though the periods which they cover were themselves very dynamic and very momentous.

All that said, I cannot deny that these three instalments represent both a provocation and a challenge to someone in my position. How could I accomplish in one volume the things I am criticizing them for having failed to achieve in three volumes? One answer is that I have been trying to do something different. There is no point in setting out to beat them at their own game because they are terribly good at it, for reasons I have already given. In my case, by contrast, I have attempted to write a book that is geographically wider ranging in terms of the four nations of the UK and the wider world, and covers a much longer period of time, and I have to do all that in a shorter compass. That is not an easy thing to do, as I have discovered. I have tried to sequence the chapters deliberately in a strictly chronological order, something which is rather unfashionable nowadays, and which the first two of the *New Oxford History* volumes do not do. But it seems to me that one needs to have some sense that history does occur in a sequence of events over time. Books that do not convey that, whatever else they may be doing very well, seem to be to be missing something that we historians are supposed to do. I am trying to write a narrative, chronological account of this extraordinarily

momentous century, doing more things in some ways, but less in others, and in a shorter compass than it took Boyd Hilton and Theo Hoppen and Geoff Searle three volumes to do.

In the light of all of that, let us turn to the book itself. It is called: *Victorious Century: The United Kingdom, 1800–1906*, which seems appropriate since, by various criteria—economic, social, and political—Britain was the most successful nation in the world for much of the nineteenth century. And it was certainly the UK’s century of global dominance; if the nineteenth century ‘belonged’ to one single nation, it ‘belonged’ to Britain. But this dominance and these successes, such as they were, often seem more convincing in retrospect than they did to contemporaries. A great deal of what was going on at that time, as distinct from what has been made of it later, was very fragile and often uncertain, and incomprehensible to those who had to live through it, much as we do not fully understand what is going on now. One thing I sought to do in the book is to convey the sense that how the British nineteenth century looks in retrospect, and how it seemed at the time, are not necessarily the same things. Britain was a successful economy and a successful society, but there were many vicissitudes along the way and people did not always think that the economy was working or that its society was stable. By various criteria, the United Kingdom was, for much of the nineteenth century, the greatest power in the world. Yet there were reverses and disasters, and in many ways its dominant global position was something of a fluke: Europe had not yet got its act together, at least not until the late nineteenth century, and the United States was riven by the Civil War, which meant that, between 1815 and 1870, Britain had no major international rivals. But once a unified Germany and a reunified United States came upon the scene, Britain’s global dominance seemed much less secure, and was not destined to last.

It is also fair to say that the beginning and ending dates are slightly unusual. I did not want to write another history of the nineteenth century bounded by the years 1815 to 1914 because so many other books have already done that, whereas I thought it would be rather interesting to try something else, and so my dates are 1800 to 1906. I chose the first one because it implies a different dynamic to the book than if you start in 1815, as I am beginning not with the Battle of Waterloo, but with the Act of Union with Ireland. And that, in turn, signals that if we are to make sense of nineteenth-century Britain, the

United Kingdom's relations with Ireland are absolutely crucial. And I wanted to end, not with the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, but with the disappearance of a certain vision of Tory England in 1905–6, and to convey the resulting Edwardian sense of both optimism and anxiety. This meant that I begin the book with an Act of Parliament and end it with a General Election, which also seems appropriate given the extraordinary continuity and prestige of the British constitution and the British parliament across so much of the nineteenth century, both domestically and internationally.

What does Britain's nineteenth-century history look like if it is treated in this way? What does this book actually do? There are eleven substantive chapters, and each of them is topped and tailed by a prologue and an epilogue. What I have done—and here I return to the point about how you devise the expository structure to help you accomplish what you are trying to do—is to begin and end each of the substantive chapters with a political episode or its equivalent, while the substance of each chapter consists of parallel narratives that deal with Britain and the world, the state of the nation, the vicissitudes of politics and culture, broadly conceived. But I have not made a fetish of these categories or ranked them rigidly in the same order in each chapter, as was the case with two volumes in an earlier series.¹⁶ Instead, I have mixed them up, sometimes putting politics as the first main section in some of the chapters, but in other cases giving greater emphasis to Britain's relations with the wider world, or to the domestic state of the nation. To the best of my knowledge, no one has tried this before, and I hope it works.

The book also tries to say something about how and why twentieth-century Britain was haunted by what was, in many ways, a misconceived notion of the country's nineteenth-century greatness, which it took to be permanent, immutable, and utterly robustly based. I have sought to show that nineteenth-century Britain was really none of those things at all. It might seem like that for later generations looking backwards, but it certainly was not like that for contemporaries living it forwards. During the First World War, Britain wanted another Nelson and another Trafalgar; but what it got was Jellicoe and Jutland. It also wanted another Wellington and another Waterloo; but what it got was Haig and the Somme. This is but one example of

¹⁶ Derek Beales, *Castlereagh to Gladstone, 1815–1885* (New York, 1969); Henry Pelling, *Modern Britain, 1885–1995* (New York, 1960).

the ways in which many twentieth-century Britons were disappointed in their efforts to live up to their nineteenth-century forebears. Yet the reality was that much of Britain's nineteenth century 'greatness' rested on insecure and transient foundations, and ever since, we have been compelled to recognize, or alternatively to deny, just how insecure and transient those foundations were. I hope my book will enable people living in Brexit Britain, and in the wider world beyond, to get the British nineteenth century in a better and more even-handed historical perspective. And in coming to better terms with that complex period in our national past, we may also come to better terms with where Britain is (or is not) now.

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