

Donald Read: *England 1868-1914. The Age of urban Democracy.*

Chapter 1

Introduction: 'The revolution of our times'

1

The chronological mid-point of Queen Victoria's long reign fell in 1869 – more than thirty years on the throne, over thirty still to pass. Of course, the Victorians did not know that the reign still had so much time to run. But long before its ending they were to become aware that the lengthening span of years from the queen's accession in 1837 possessed a unity only through the accident of her longevity. At the time of her Golden and Diamond Jubilees in 1887 and 1897 the great changes which had taken place since the start of the reign were frequently described. Lord Salisbury remarked as prime minister in 1897 how Queen Victoria had 'bridged over that great interval which separates old England from new England'. This transition from the 'old' to the 'new' had been not only continuous but also accelerating, so that each Victorian generation seemed to be the more separated from its predecessor. Society, industry, agriculture, religion, ideas, politics - everything seemed to be in flux. James Baldwin Brown, a leading Congregationalist minister, tried in *First Principles of Ecclesiastical Truth* (1871) to measure 'the revolution of our times'. Society (he wrote) seemed to be seeking a new basis 'instead of expanding on the old bases. Compare the throng of things which now press upon you daily, the crowd of interests which demand attention, and force themselves into the council chamber of your thoughts, with the narrower circle of pursuits, pleasures and ideas which occupied our fathers little more than a generation ago'. 'The real power of the revolution,' continued Brown, was mental more than material. 'The submission of every thing and every method to the free judgement of reason, by the menstrum which a free Press, a free Platform, and a free Parliament supply.' Certainly, the power of traditional authority in church and state had been receding since the seventeenth century. Now it was being rapidly displaced by the power of inquiry, observation, and opinion. In intellectual and scientific fields the numbers engaged were still small; but the interested audience was growing fast. And the public opinion which could influence political decisions was becoming larger with every year.

Yet where was all this leading? Belief in progress, in 'improvement', had waxed strong during the first half of the reign, 'age after age, making nicer music from finer chords'. But confidence seemed to be weakening by the late 1860s. 'We shall "improve" still faster than we have done for the last thirty years. And how much better shall we be for it at the end?' (*Leeds Mercury*, 25. 8. 1869). Uncertainty was increasingly to characterize the whole period from 1868 to the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. 'It is the year of grace 1868,' wrote Anthony Trollope, the novelist, in the March number of *St. Paul's* magazine; 'the roar of our machinery, the din of our revolutions, echoes through the solar system; can we not, then, make up our minds whether our progress is a reality and a gain, or a delusion and a mistake?'

As foreign economic and political competition intensified, the relative decline of British power was to become indisputable. The victory of the Federal forces in the American Civil War (1861-5) had left the United States ready at last to exploit its huge potential in men and resources. Bismarck was working through the 1860s to unify Germany, and the German Empire was proclaimed in 1871 after the swift collapse of the French Second Empire during the Franco-Prussian War. Imperial Germany was to prove a much stronger rival than Imperial France. It was rightly recognized as the end of an era when Lord Palmerston – the veteran protagonist of a confident foreign policy – had died in 1865. The Second Reform Act, which almost doubled the electorate, followed in 1867; and the Education Act, which opened the way for national elementary education, was passed in 1870. In 1871 appeared Charles Darwin's *The Descent of Man*, which reinforced the impact already made upon old scientific and religious ideas by his *Origin of Species* (1859). Walter Pater's *Renaissance* was published in 1873, the herald of 'aestheticism' in England. And finally, the 'great depression' – which was to last a generation – threatened agriculture and industry from the mid 1870s.

Thomas Hardy, the novelist, claimed in *The Return of the Native* (1878) that concern had begun to show itself not only in the thoughts of contemporaries but even in their faces. 'People already feel that a man who lives without disturbing a curve of feature, or setting mark of mental concern upon himself, is too far from modern perceptiveness to be a modern type.' The steam-engine word 'pressure' began to be much used to describe disorder both in institutions and in individual lives. In 1875 appeared *Social Pressure* by Sir Arthur Helps, and W. R. Greg's article in the *Contemporary Review* for March on 'Life at High Pressure.' Greg quoted statistics from the *British Medical Journal* which showed how the number of deaths from heart disease among men aged between twenty and forty-five had risen from 0.553 per 1,000 per year in 1851-5 to 0.709 in 1866-70. The faces in Gustave Doré's famous drawings for London (1872) were certainly animated and urban, very different from the round and comfortable visage of traditional John Bull. In 1866 the editor of *Punch* asked his leading artist 'to modernize the John Bull he draws'.¹ A more representative Englishman was now 'the man on the top of a Clapham omnibus'. But was this new town type less healthy in body and more volatile in temperament than old farmer Bull? England was changing and so perhaps were Englishmen, as the second half of Victoria's reign began.

Notes

1. R. G. G. Price, *History of Punch* (1957), pp. 107, 119.