



PROJECT MUSE®

When Did the Victorian Age Begin? Reflections on Richard Price's British Society 1680-1880

Joanna Innes

Journal of Victorian Culture, Volume 11, Number 1, Spring 2006 , pp. 147-154 (Article)

Published by Edinburgh University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jvc.2006.0009>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/199786>

mass production and efficiency. Price's interpretation has implications for Victorianists across the disciplines. We have therefore invited two historians, Joanna Innes and Timothy Alborn, and a literary scholar, Francis O'Gorman, to respond to the challenging agenda that Price has put forward. In the next number (11.2), we will continue the discussion of periodization by debating the question 'When did the Victorian period end?'

* * *

When did the Victorian Age begin? Reflections on Richard Price's *British Society 1680-1880*

Joanna Innes

At the start of the current reign, a certain amount of play was made of the notion that the nation was entering a new 'Elizabethan' age, though that adjective has not retained currency. By contrast, both 'Georgian' and 'Victorian' periods were not commonly so named at the start, but came to be widely described in this way. The adjective 'Georgian' had little if any currency while the Georges lived – though shortly after the death of the last George, in 1832-4, a series of biographical sketches of luminaries of the 'Georgian Age' were published under that title. The adjective 'Victorian' does not seem to have attained general currency until the Queen had reigned for several decades. The dynasticization and monarchization of historical time seem to be products of the later nineteenth-century historical imagination: of the ways in which English history was then parcelled up and served out. ('Tudor' and 'Stuart' eras were also first widely so called in these years).

During the eighteenth century and early nineteenth centuries, the history of England was often not periodized – rather, it was presented as having unfolded relatively seamlessly since post-Roman records began, or as having been gradually shaped by such long-term trends as the 'rise of commerce' or the 'progress of politeness'. When it was periodized, this was sometimes with reference to major constitutional events (which might correspond to dynastic changes): thus, 'since the Revolution' (of 1688). Certain major cultural epochs were recognized, having broader European as well as local significance: thus, since the 'revival of learning' ('since the Renaissance', as people later said); similarly there was reference to 'since the Reformation'. In the course of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, historians began more confidently to demarcate stylistic eras: perceptions of the 'Gothic' past sharpened, and sub-eras within the Gothic were distinguished;

'Georgian' and 'Victorian' era-names seem to have their roots partly in perceptions of stylistic distinctiveness, particularly in relation to architectural style. The 'century' potentially sliced through these historical constructions – though of course a 'century' *need* not begin and end in multiples of a hundred since the presumed birth of Christ. In the course of the eighteenth century, both in Europe generally and in Britain particularly, the 'century' variously conceived came into vogue. As Paul Langford has noted, within print culture there appears to have been much consciousness of and comment upon the passage from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century: the 'new century' was seen as in some sense the beginning of a new era; the eighteenth century, or 'the last century' quickly acquired a patina of age, an aura of quaintness.

The fact that, at the commencement of the 'Victorian era', though contemporaries organized their ideas about historical time in various ways, they did not commonly use the name of the monarch to do so, should free us from any compulsion to organize our ideas on that basis. As it happened, the start of Victoria's reign roughly corresponded with certain other changes, significant in other systems of periodization, which in due course no doubt helped to make the notion of Victorianism make sense. Contemporaries *did* see the passage of the Reform Act of 1832 as a major historical event, separating what came to be termed the 'unreformed' from the 'reformed' era. The multiplication of railways from the 1830s made the Victorian Age also the Railway Age. The decade also saw notable changes in women's dress, with the growth in popularity of shinier fabrics and fuller skirts – are our mental images of a distinctive Victorian era not partly conditioned by that fact?

During the last generation, the concept of a 'long eighteenth century', of an era stretching from 'Restoration to Reform' has come into fashion among British historians. This partly reflects the buoyancy of a body of scholarship which has the middle and later decades of the eighteenth century as its imaginative focus. From that perspective, the chronology employed by John Millar in his early nineteenth-century *An Historical View of the English Government* (eds of 1812, 1818) has much appeal. Accounts of the period can effectively be organized (as Millar organized his) on the one hand, around a story about the working through of the constitutional, governmental, political and religious implications of the Revolution settlement; on the other hand, around a story about the proliferation of consumer goods ('luxury'); and the diffusion and modulation of an ethos of 'politeness', as promoted in 1711-12 by Addison and Steele's *Spectator*. The idea of a 'long eighteenth century', so conceived, and of a 'Victorian era' are, potentially at least, complementary. In so far as graduate consciousness is now commonly

shaped by seminars organized on this basis, and mature scholars operate within professional networks similarly defined, this periodization has effectively been institutionalized, and will not be easy to dislodge.

Should it be dislodged? Certainly prevailing wisdom deserves some vigorous shaking. It seems to me good for the profession to re-periodize its historical vision every generation or so. Slices of time marginalized by dominant conceptions will often prove to hold within themselves the seeds of an alternative understanding. Shift focus, and we are confronted with developments that don't fit well within existing narratives. New questions are suggested, new research agendas stretch out before us, new narratives suggest themselves, and come gradually first to condition, then in turn to constrain our understanding.

Richard Price, in his *British Society 1680-1880*, has made one of the boldest of recent efforts to shake up dominant periodizations, offering us a vision of a 'long eighteenth century' that stretches further forwards than even the most imperialistic of eighteenth-century historians had previously dared to suggest. Victorianists have resisted annexation: Miles Taylor, in the *London Review of Books*, put up a notably stout early defence. As a historian whose imagination has been nurtured in the eighteenth century, now advancing at my own steadier pace into the early nineteenth century, I don't find my defensive instincts piqued in quite the same way. Rather, an unintended imperialist, I find myself curiously surveying the distant prospect. Is this a territory too far? Is it likely that it can in practice be absorbed and defended? Let me sketch out, as I see them, first, how Price's scheme works, secondly, its merits and limitations.

Price's account unfolds thematically, starting with the structure of the economy, then proceeding through economic policy to politics, and then on again to social hierarchies and social relations. Even so bare a sketch reveals something about the terms in which this analysis is conceived. This periodization rests upon a set of propositions about structures, about the ways in which life over these years was organized and reproduced. A glance at Price's conclusion shows us that these are, moreover, punctuated structures: they do not simply evolve organically into other shapes, rather an 'era' comes to an 'end' (Price is notably more interested in what he argues to be the relatively sheer end than in the beginning of his story, whose sheerness or otherwise is not discussed).

As a structural-punctuated history, Price's is distinct from two other kinds of historical account to which his is nonetheless akin. It's distinct from experiential-punctuated histories, which stress the effects of great

events on human consciousness, searing people's imaginations and changing the nature of the problems they see themselves as having to grapple with: the kinds of history which stress the effects of Civil War or Glorious Revolution or French Revolution or Reform Bill – or, more idiosyncratically, in Linda Colley's case, the 1707 Anglo-Scottish parliamentary union. Unlike the historians who tell these kinds of story, Price is concerned with structures which operate (as we used to say) 'behind the backs' of human beings. His form of account is also related to but distinct from structural-evolutionary histories – like the hunting/herding/agriculture/commerce story told by Adam Smith and other Enlightenment thinkers, or the one-class society/class society/managerial society story expounded by Harold Perkin, or the various structural-evolutionary stories of English constitutional development, like Stubbs' or Maitland's. Price's history is closer kin to Marxist histories, to models in which socio-economic structures are periodically toppled by revolutions – though it's not quite like them either, since revolutions are more clearly 'great events' wrought by human actors, even if not human actors capable of making their history just as they please. More than it resembles classic Marxism, Price's scheme in fact recalls Althusserian Marxism (he does at one point speak of 'social formations') – though it's distinguished from *that* not least by having a prominent governmental/policy dimension, perhaps marking the effect of that era in the 1980s when historical sociologists urged us all to 'bring the state back in'. As a historian not much younger than Price, I had my own imagination shaped by much the same sequence of historiographical epochs, so a scheme of this nature has a certain immediate familiarity and appeal to me: the world looks a bit like this to me too, at least enough for me to orient myself. This isn't a very fashionable way to see the world, now, though. Histories which stress experience – or, more severely, ways in which contemporaries more or less consciously chose to represent their worlds – are instead in vogue: experiential-chaotic histories, one might say. To those used to imagining the past thus, Price's vision will seem alien: he notes in his Introduction that some readers of his manuscript had that response.

Even the reader prepared, at least provisionally, to test the merits of Price's form of structural approach might hesitate at the punctuation points proposed. The idea that the 1880s or thereabouts marked some sort of turning point is not novel – but to propose that the changes of those years marked the end of an era which began in the 1680s might strike one as a startling proposition. In fact, however, several existing historiographies treating particular strands in the broader pattern of development offer something like that periodization. Price's account

derives in large part, as he himself states, from a course of reading that he put himself through: his account is more novel as synthesis than as the sum of its parts.

In detail, Price proposes that 'British society' throughout this period had the following characteristics: firstly, it was sustained by an 'economy of manufactures' – a series of regional specializations in relatively low-productivity manufacturing processes; also by state-sponsored 'commercial imperialism', serving among other things to vent these manufactures. It was subject to an intrusive, centrally directed fiscal policy based above all on indirect taxation, and was overseen and regulated by a 'localist state', in which responsibility for maintaining the social and economic infrastructure was largely devolved on to local authorities. It sustained a 'voluntarist public sphere', embodied in a lively associational culture – a seedbed of sociability but also of moralising impulse. It was shaped by a political culture in which parliament, both actually and symbolically a key decision-making body, instantiated the *promise* of popular empowerment – though it was never conceded by governing groups that all should have the vote, with the consequence that the boundaries between inclusion and exclusion were always contestable, and contested, usually within the framework of a political discourse in which 'liberty', 'property' and 'independence' were key terms, though likewise contested in their meanings. Finally, Price suggests that this society's character was shaped by the continuing presence of a substantial landed class (the centuries that lay between the abolition of wardship and the agricultural depression were indeed, *par excellence*, the age of great estates). This served to ensure the survival of a 'paternalistic' *style* in the exercise of social authority, despite the challenges to that style presented, on the one hand, by dynamic middle classes, and on the other hand, by rowdy lower classes.

I think there's much to say for these propositions, and am tempted to add others. For example, one could argue that, throughout this period, there was – surprisingly unremarked by Price – an uneasy balance of power between Established Church, Dissent and Catholicism, the three being consistently so ranked, but relations between them, equally consistently, being unstable and subject to negotiation. These inter-denominational tensions strongly coloured not only religious, but also of course, political life. Additionally, one could observe that, intellectually, this was the era of 'natural theology', of a particular set of ways of forging links between empiricism and metaphysics; a Baconian/Newtonian era, into which Darwinism can be subsumed – a mindset out of which historicism grew, but which both positivism and idealism challenged.

Finally, and more pragmatically, this was an era of continuity in the ways in which the political establishment sought to govern 'these islands'. That is to say through the crown-in-parliament – initially, through separate parliaments, then through unions of parliaments. This arrangement, in the Irish case, never really bedded down and by the end of the nineteenth century was in crisis – though the terminal point of 1880 admittedly works less well in this case. (Given that Price claims to be talking about *British* society, he's surprisingly uninterested in the relations between multiple kingdoms.)

Asserting continuities through this period seems to me reasonable. Yet – given especially the inevitable arbitrariness of the break points (many of which could be shuffled a few decades or even more in either direction) – what's the point of all this? What's achieved by it? Is more achieved than simply to direct the attention of readers to certain themes already embedded in historical writing that they might otherwise have overlooked? It seems to me that Price's approach does have a clear point, and it's one to which he recurrently draws his readers' attention – though readers might fail to notice its central significance. Paradoxical as it might seem, given that his account most manifestly stresses continuities, Price is above all concerned to provide us with a way of thinking about *change*, an approach which avoids the problems he sees as marking other approaches to describing and explaining change. What he's resisting, by means of his punctuated structures, is the kind of gradualist teleology in which economy, state and society inevitably and more or less constantly become more 'modern' – and a common variant of this, in which there is a constant tug-of-war between the forces of modernity and the forces of tradition. Those ways of thinking about the historical process have their roots in the nineteenth century. It was during that century that modern notions of 'tradition', 'conservatism' and 'progressiveness' were substantially formed. It was in that era, moreover, that attitudes to this supposed tug-of-war came to be conceptualized as primary determinants of political identity, itself envisaged as a matter of positioning along a spectrum leading from right to left. The rootedness of this conceptual scheme in the nineteenth century perhaps makes that approach to understanding the period particularly hard to shrug off – even, arguably, makes it one we *should not* shrug off. Yet, in the twenty-first century, the power of that vision is surely waning; its limitations as a way of understanding both present and past are evident.

What Price offers in place of such teleologies is an account in which change takes the form of variation within persisting parameters. He proposes, in effect, that we should see those who lived through his

period as having faced certain roughly persistent problems, and as having responded to these with a relatively limited repertoire of solutions. Thus, how could the competing imperatives of centre and locality best be balanced? How could the *menu peuple* be incorporated into the political system without being given power? It's in this light that we can understand what at first sight might seem to be the most perverse and wilful element of his analysis: his refusal to recognize the 1840s as a turning point in economic policy, at the same time that he concedes that it was a period of important change, when laissez-faire economics almost entirely won the day at the level of theory, as well as one marked by significant shifts in practice. Price can however concede all this without abandoning his deeper story of continuity – can argue indeed that his perspective has advantages. As he tells it, a persistent problem throughout the whole of his period was how to make fiscal policy serve the needs of manufactures and commerce. Protection and free-trade, again throughout the period, were identified as the two main policy options: at all times, both were available, both had their advocates, and both were in certain ways implemented. The early nineteenth century saw the 'free trade' option more commonly chosen – but this ideal was never fully implemented in practice, and there continued to be vigorous protectionist lobbies – facts all too often played down, Price argues, in more teleologically conceived accounts.

Like Price, I think a narrative of tradition and change has in many ways limited our ability to understand the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. I welcome his efforts to encourage us to find alternative ways of conceptualising them. I share his view that an approach which identifies enduring structures and problematics, within which people make varying choices, has much to offer – not least for the particular kind of combination of determinism and under-determinism to which it gives access. As I've noted already, I also see much merit in the particular structures and problematics that he proposes.

And yet, every solution has its own problems. Price's model of punctuated structures may give us some help in conceptualising change *within* the epoch – but leaves us with the problem of explaining ruptures. Price doesn't labour at this conceptual task as vigorously as his advocacy of the model seems to require. Ruptures come about, he tells us, when the existing repertoire of responses plainly fails to meet the needs of the time. Well, maybe, but this is a metaphor that needs grounding in much more hard analysis and argumentation if it's to be more than a form of words. I suspect Price's inattention to this issue reflects his lack of investment in this feature of his model: the ruptures are a by-product of the story of continuity, not things he's certain he

wants to affirm in their own right. So perhaps we should get rid of them, and work with a more complex geological metaphor, in which there *are* persistent structures, or strata; but the strata may tail off, as well as break, and if they break, though several strata may break at the same point, the rupture will not necessarily cut through the entire structure.

Even geology may be an inappropriate metaphor for our purposes – for these are, in the end, geologies of the mind: *a way*, but not the only useful way of organising our perception of the world. If we employ Price's structures, we can I think hope to gain useful insights – but we'll obscure others from view. Thus, we'll tend to lose the insights we might gain if we thought of early eighteenth-century Britons as having continued to wrestle with problems that had confronted all their post-Reformation predecessors, and as having at their disposal to deal with these a fairly persistent repertoire of possible responses. Or indeed, from those we might gain if we thought of people of that era and beyond as having continued to struggle with problems that had faced their predecessors ever since the institutionalization of parliament and of magistrate-led local government, in the fourteenth century. Or, indeed, from insights we might gain if we took the 'reforms' of the 1830s as having in their own way *answered* certain long-standing problems, and changed the terms of the problems which succeeding generations faced (an approach which would among other things have the effect of affirming the novelty of 'the Victorian era').

Perhaps a kaleidoscope is the better image. We won't see anything at all if we keep just spinning the kaleidoscope, but let's not forget that (in the terms of this image) it *is* a kaleidoscope, and can always be turned.

(Somerville College, Oxford)

Were the Victorians ever Modern?

Timothy Alborn

To get into the proper spirit for reading Richard Price's *British Society*, it helps to bear in mind J.A. Hobson's quip concerning the 'mental consistency' of the British people, who had, he claimed, 'developed a curious ... aptitude for entertaining incompatible and often self-contradictory ideas and motives'. Far from thinking this trait 'highly dangerous', as Hobson deemed it, Price defies a whole series of dichotomies on his way to presenting the period from 1680-1880 as an internally coherent transition between a clearly premodern Tudor-Stuart era and a decidedly modern long twentieth century. The key