Introduction

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ROUNDTABLE

Richard Price's *British Society 1680-1880*

Introduction

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When did the Victorian period begin and when did it end? Does the term 'Victorian' have any salience these days or does it represent a simple construction that we have used to lend coherence to a period that was far more complex than we realized? In this volume, *JVC* launches a debate on one of the central issues that affects all specialists in nineteenth-century studies: periodization. It used to be accepted that the early nineteenth century was a time of social, economic and political transformation. In the Victorian age and the fifty years that preceded it, we find (to adapt a title of the late Harold Perkin), the origins of modern British Society. In recent years such assumptions have been challenged in a profound way. A wave of revisionist writings in economic history has questioned the idea that an industrial revolution transformed Britain between 1780 and 1830. It has become more common to read of a 'long eighteenth century' that lasted (depending on who one reads) up to 1832 or 1848. The notion of the 'Victorian' age as a period of rupture that heralds the origins of modernity has now been called into question. Continuity rather than change appears to be the new order of thought. This makes for all sorts of possibilities in scholarship as new chronologies begin to emerge.

No book has been more important in pushing this debate along than Richard Price's *British Society 1680-1880: Dynamism, Containment and Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Price is a social historian who has written major works on empire, class and labour in Britain. He commenced his rethinking of the broader patterns of modern British history with an article titled, 'Does the Notion of Victorian Britain Make Sense?' This inquiry was subsequently broadened into the book under discussion, an ambitious work that rethinks the nature of historical change by pointing to the continuity of social and political forms from the late seventeenth century onwards. According to Price, it is only in the 1880s that we see a transition in which older ideals based around paternalism give way to a new world of

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?'

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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;