THE VICTORIAN AGE

1830-1901

AIM: What effect did Britain have on the world during the Age of Victoria?



Do Now:
Put them in order:

- French Revolution
- Industrial Revolution
- Congress of Vienna
- Napoleonic Age
- The World in 1750


THE EARLY VICTORIAN PERIOD
(1837 to 1850)

• The early Victorian period is marked by two major non-literary events: first, public railways expanded on an unprecedented scale; and second, the British parliament passed a reform bill in 1832 that (at least to some degree) redistributed voting rights to reflect growing population in newly industrializing centers like Manchester and Liverpool.

• The 1832 Reform Bill marked, for many Victorians, the beginning of a new age of political power unlike they had ever experienced.

• The 1830s and 1840s became known as the "Time of Troubles" largely because industrialization was producing such rapid change on such a profound scale; industrialization had a cascading effect in as much as it caused many other social "troubles."

• Working conditions were deplorable for the majority of people, including women and children, who worked in mines and factories.

• A group called the Chartists organized themselves to fight for workers' rights. The organization fell apart by 1848 but their efforts set the stage for real and meaningful reform.

•Another group called “The Luddites” were against machines taking away their jobs, so they would break into factories at night and break the machines. This term is use today and refers to anyone not accepting the use of technology or progress.

• One of the most important reforms of the early Victorian period came with the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846. These laws imposed high tariffs on imported wheat and grains. And while the tariffs meant good profits for England's own agricultural producers, it also meant prohibitively high prices, especially on basic food items like bread, for the vast majority of the population.

• The literature of this time period often focused on the plight of the poor and the new urban reality of industrial England. Many writers commented on what had emerged as the two Englands: that of the wealthy (by far the minority) and that of the poor (by far the majority).


THE MID VICTORIAN PERIOD
(1851 to 1879)

•The mid-Victorian era was somewhat less tumultuous than was the earlier Victorian period as the relationship between industry and government began to work itself out. However, the time was still one of great poverty and difficulty for many, even as England as a whole began to enjoy greater prosperity.

•A number of acts of Parliament curbed the worst abuses of laissez-faire industry, like child labor and dangerous working conditions.

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•The 1850s were to many a time of optimism, with the promise of prosperity from industry seemingly so close. So too was England proud of its science and technology, as is evidenced by the Crystal Palace, centerpiece of the Great Exhibition of 1851.

•The Crystal Palace was designed using modern architectural principles and materials, and its role in the Great Exhibition was to showcase English "progress" made possible by science and industry.

- The mid-Victorian period was also a time when the British empire truly expanded around the globe (Australia, Canada, and India, for example)—all part and parcel of the prosperity made possible by the industrial revolution.

- In England itself, debates about religion grew in intensity. By the mid-Victorian period the Church of England had evolved into three factions: a Low (or Evangelical) Church, a Broad Church, and a High Church. Each had their share of proponents and detractors.

- As a primary driver behind the industrial revolution, rationalist thought destabilized religious beliefs. Groups like the utilitarian "Benthamites" came to see traditional religion as little more than outmoded superstition.

- New discoveries in the sciences also led to a new mode of reading the Bible: Higher Criticism approached the Bible not as a divine and infallible text but rather as an historically produced set of documents that reflected the prejudices and limitations of their human writers.

- Among other scientific works of the time Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871) seemed to challenge all previous thinking about creation and man's special role in the world. As popular readers understood Darwin, man was just one among many creatures who existed as a product of a long evolutionary history.

- The mid-Victorian period would ultimately see often contrary forces—like the promise of progress yet the emptiness of long-held beliefs—that would come to a head during the final decades of the Victorian era and that would eventually be its undoing.


THE LATE VICTORIAN PERIOD
(1880 to 1901)

For many, the late-Victorian period was merely an extension, at least on the surface, of the affluence of the preceding years.

For many others, though, the late-Victorian period became a time to fundamentally question—and challenge—the assumptions and practices that had made such affluence possible. It became a time to hold England to account for the way in which it had generated wealth for so few on the backs of so many, both at home and throughout the empire.

Home-rule for Ireland became an increasingly controversial topic of debate.

In 1867 a second Reform Bill passed, extending voting rights even further to some working-class citizens.

The political writings of authors like Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels empowered the working class to imagine itself in control of the industry that it made possible.

The final decade of the Victorian period marked a high point, both of English industry and imperial control, and of challenges to that industry and imperialism.

Even while British empire-building continued with great energy in Africa and India, in England many were starting to see the beginning of the end of the era.

Gone was trust in Victorian propriety and morality. Instead, many writers struck a "fin de siècle" (or end-of-century) pose: a weary sophistication with the optimism of forward progress when the limits of that progress seemed all too near in sight.

With the benefit of hindsight we can see the 1890s as a transitional phase between the optimism and promise of the Victorian period and the Modernist movement, during which artists began to challenge just how genuine that optimism and promise had been in the first place.