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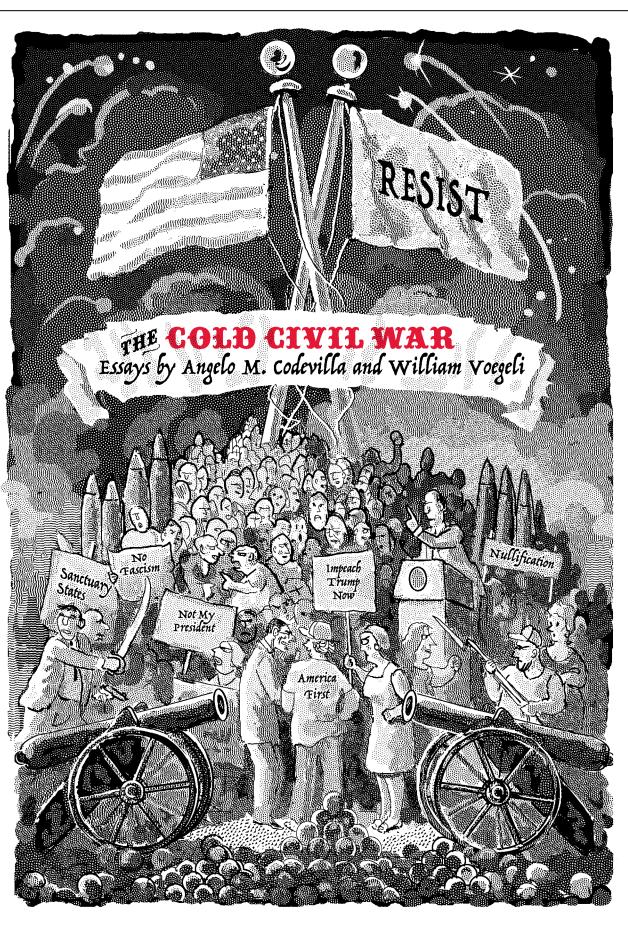
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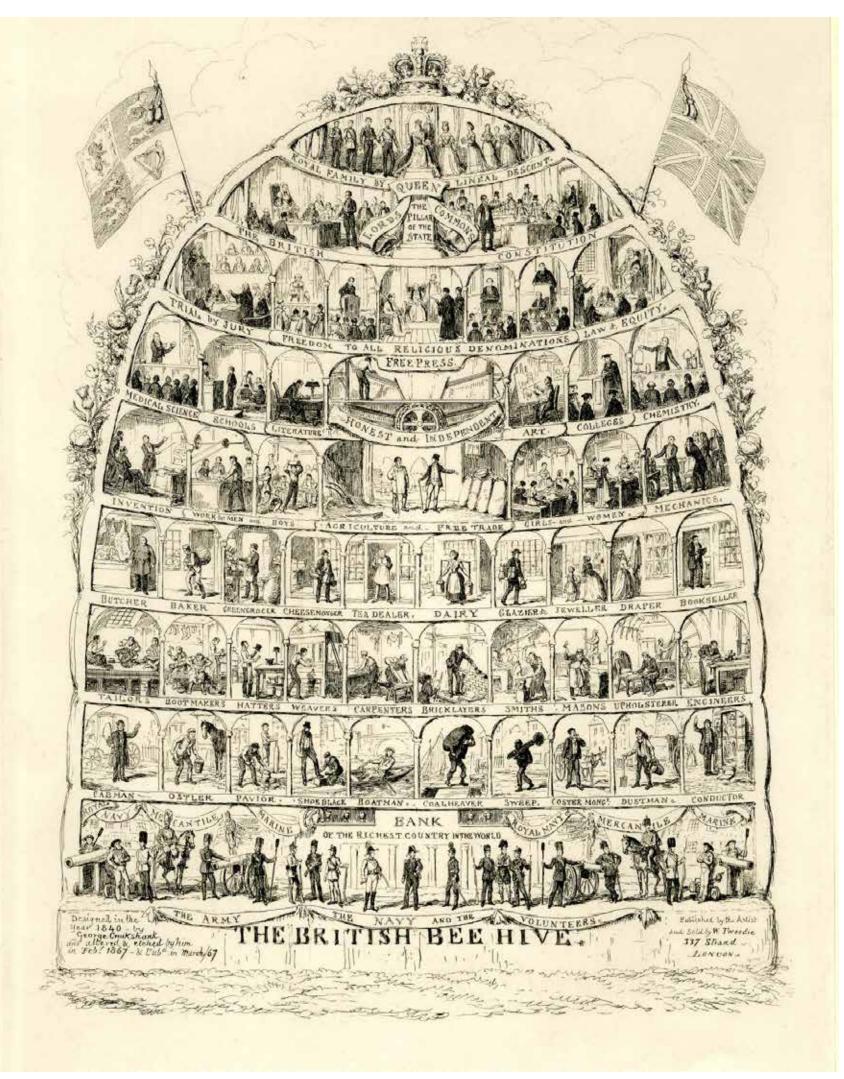
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GEORGE CRUIKSHANK: The British Beehive. The British Museum

Book Review by Michael Auslin

When the Sun Never Set

High Minds: The Victorians and the Birth of Modern Britain, by Simon Heffer. Random House, 896 pages, out-of-print

Heyday: The 1850s and the Dawn of the Golden Age, by Ben Wilson. Basic Books, 496 pages, \$32.50

AVING BEEN SPARED THE WORST traumas of the Continent, the Unit-Led Kingdom may seem immune to the unrestrained passions of modernity a land of bucolic villages, gracious country houses, and refined urban squares. In 1842, however, Great Britain seemed to be on the verge of a revolution as convulsive as the French one 53 years earlier. Economic weakness, food shortages, and worker unrest over the past decade had culminated in the Chartist movement, which demanded universal male suffrage and other sweeping reforms. Riots and disruptions plagued the new reign of Victoria, who had come to the throne as a teenager in 1837. How long could the young queen hold on to her throne?

The gathering storm dissipated, however, with shocking suddenness. So complete was the turnaround that the historian G.M. Young claimed in his classic *Victorian England: Portrait of an Age* (1936), that the wise would choose the 1850s in which to be young. Britain's transformation from a premodern, fractious, underdeveloped nation into a colossus that shaped the modern world is a story of reform, innovation, and daring. Above all, it turned on translating ideas into physical reality.

Thanks to Charles Dickens and Sherlock Holmes, with a dash of Mary Poppins thrown in, the Victorian Era (from 1837 to the Queen's death in 1901) remains as familiar to us as nearly any period of history, American or otherwise. It is perhaps surpassed in general popularity only by ancient Rome. Like its distant forebear, it remains a perennial favorite of novels, movies, and television shows today, in addition to serious works of history. Rome of the Caesars and Britain of the Raj and Royal Navy are linked in our minds for a simple reason: before the towering position of post-1945 America, these were the two great world empires, the undisputed heavyweights of their epochs. Just as fundamentally, each shaped its own era so profoundly as to affect political, economic, military, and cultural forms around the world for centuries afterwards.

N HIGH MINDS: THE VICTORIANS AND the Birth of Modern Britain and Heyday: The 1850s and the Dawn of the Global Age, Simon Heffer and Ben Wilson, respectively, argue that the mid-19th century saw the emergence not simply of the most advanced nation-state up to that time but of modern life itself. (In the U.K. the subtitle of Wilson's book is Britain and the Birth of the Modern World.) Whether throughout the decades from 1840 to 1880 covered by High Minds, or during the pivotal decade examined in Heyday, the departure from all that had come before was epochal, though historians perhaps draw the contrast more starkly than did those who actually navigated the changes.

The period's central symbolic moment was certainly the Great Exhibition of 1851 and its transcendent Crystal Palace. For the six months the Exhibition ran in Hyde Park, the Crystal Palace was a physical manifestation of the most advanced combination of design and technology. By drawing in the arts and mechanics of mankind, Great Britain became the cynosure of the world, shaping and deliberately globalizing the very concept of modernity.

Heffer, who has written biographies of Thomas Carlyle and Conservative M.P. Enoch Powell, shows that the Great Exhibition was not an isolated event, fondly remembered long after the Crystal Palace was dismantled and moved. Instead, the rationalizing impulse behind it affected ever broader spheres of British life. The most direct consequence was "Albertopolis," the complex of museums and schools still standing in South Kensington, anchored by the Royal Albert Hall and the bronze statue of the prince consort in Kensington Gardens. The Exhibition's celebration of mind represented the transition from the 18th-century Enlightenment, dominated by individual experimenters and thinkers, to the Victorian industrialization of scientific inquiry and endeavor.

The bonds that linked science, the arts, education, and markets were not solely domestic. What created the modern world was precisely the global nature of these endeavors—their replicability, to put it in scientific

terms. Though Great Britain was the center, urban or regional nodes formed a worldwide network. Wilson, who has written previously on the British Navy and on Georgian England, shows that from Melbourne to Newfoundland, a set of shared socioeconomic practices emerged long before anyone used our century's ubiquitous term, "globalization."

THAT IS THE "MODERN," THOUGH? For both of these authors, it is the rational application of mind to matter on an increasingly large scale. Heffer tells a story of ideas: a progressive, self-interested yet altruistic community of educators, industrialists, and politicians brought their countrymen into the light. Matthew Arnold, John Stuart Mill, William Gladstone, Charles Darwin, Florence Nightingale, and a host of others were practical idealists, ordering their world from their thoughts. Unquestionably, their efforts made Britain a safer, healthier, more humane place. British elites' sense of responsibility during the first four decades of Victoria's reign is not diminished by the fact that politics was often a sordid affair. The collective though decentralized effort reflected the conviction that there were no limits to the improvements in the human condition that could be secured by rationally analyzing concrete problems. This is a modern Whig version of history: progress is always possible, no matter how difficult or frustrated.

High Minds, then, sits squarely in the revisionist school of Victorian history, emphasizing not the Dickensian squalor of the era but rather the slow spread of sweetness and light. Beginning with Young's reinterpretation of the period, and carried forward by authors including the recently-deceased Asa Briggs, it has celebrated the "sociology of virtue," described by Gertrude Himmelfarb in The Roads to Modernity (2004), her comparative study of the British, French, and American Enlightenments. Perfecting society—whether through education, better health and sanitation, expansion of the franchise, basic civil rights for women and religious minorities, philanthropy,





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or architecture—became the *raison d'etre* of two generations of upper-class Britons.

Perhaps readers should be satisfied to understand the stirring transformation inside the British Isles themselves, but Heffer's restricted domestic focus does leave one feeling a bit marooned. The world beyond Britain's shores makes almost no appearance in his study, nor do we understand how London's adventures abroad may or may not have influenced the thinking of those at home. (A notable exception is his brief discussion of I.S. Mill's focus on French education.)

Such a criticism though, cannot detract from the power of Heffer's portraits: the brilliant, but reactionary Thomas Carlyle, left behind as political reform garnered support from liberal and conservative alike; or the other-worldly John Ruskin, critic extraordinaire who also failed to move with the times. Not surprisingly, Thomas Arnold and his son Matthew appear as seminal influences on their respective generations, and as pure examples of the intellectual life lived to the fullest. Perhaps the most affecting sketch is that of Arthur Hugh Clough, widely recognized as the most brilliant thinker in that extraordinary constellation, who never lived up to his promise and died a young, broken man, cursed by living in a time when the country's universities afforded religious dissenters little accommodation.

Great minds may be harder to keep pure in the realm of politics, and Heffer's hatred for Benjamin Disraeli is jarring. The Conservative prime minister can do no right in Heffer's eyes, though just why his plans to let local or voluntary organizations play a large role implementing economic and social reforms set by broader national policy were so wicked goes unexplained. By contrast, Heffer treats Gladstone, Disraeli's great rival, as the "highest mind" of the era, despite his personal demons and messianic self-regard.

There likely has never been a time where the state refrained from imposing its will on those subject to its rule, but as Heffer notes, it was during the Victorian period that it became accepted in Great Britain for government to intervene in citizens' lives far more directly. Much of that intervention, such as slum clearing and universal education, was desperately needed. But 150 years on we know all too well the dangers of an increasingly rationalized state bureaucracy, equipped with ever greater power over and detailed knowledge about the people whose lives it sets out to improve. Did the Victorians strike a balance that we later lost, or were they the beginning of a slippery slope? Heffer is agnostic, celebrating the work of volunteers

and philanthropists as much as bureaucrats, yet leaving the impression that a little more government is never a bad thing.

Like Sherlock Holmes with a magnifying glass, Heffer painstakingly decodes minor intellectual exchanges or bureaucratic debates. By contrast, in *Heyday*, Wilson gallops across the entire world at an exhausting pace, seeking to show how "think global, act local" defined the mid-19th century long before Madison Avenue figured out how to appeal to conscience-stricken, wealthy Americans.

Moreover, whereas High Minds rarely looks past Britain's shores, Heyday is a global history of a moment, one that created what the novelist Thomas Hardy called a "precipice in time." In the 1850s the concepts of progress and regeneration dominated global trends. Much of the world was transformed, organized, invaded, or reformed by the spread of free trade and ever widening, ever accelerating communications, from telegraphs to railways. Man's conquest of time and space created the modern world, and the modern mind, insatiably demanding instant information over the enclosed copper wires that now encircled the planet.

There is in Wilson's world much less thinking than in Heffer's, but almost a surfeit of doing. The changes that transform the 1850s appear as forces of nature, sprung less from the minds of men than from primal sources of energy waiting to be unleashed. Though the United Kingdom sits at the center of a global web of finance, technology, and information, it also appears almost passive at times, clearly the mover but just as much the moved.

Technology sweeps away old barriers and reaches distant realms, but it is the concomitant emergence of a truly global market that unites this world. The famous photograph of Earth taken by Apollo 8 on Christmas Eve 1968 could do no more to create a shared sense of planetary envelopment than had already been accomplished by Paul Julius Reuter's time-demolishing news service or the lightning-fast clipper ships. Those living through the 1850s knew, according to Wilson, that theirs was a time perhaps unique in history, after which there could be no returning to old models. The explosion of urban nodes in the global trading network, from Yokohama to Melbourne, and Nicaragua to Nebraska, helped unleash an unprecedented movement of peoples around the globe, and an equally unprecedented movement of raw materials and finished products, raising living standards wherever the market took hold.

Wilson's is not a simple story of progress, however. He shares the modern historian's

preoccupation with damages inflicted around the world by the West. Globalization's costs feature prominently in *Heyday*, from the geopolitical fallout of the Crimean War, to the Indian Rebellion of 1857, and the unnecessary second Opium War (or Arrow War) with China in 1858-60. Looming over all was the American Civil War, which transformed global politics forever by abolishing slavery. Decoupling American cotton fields from the British market, however, spurred the development of cotton production in Egypt, India, and other regions, thereby sparking even more tenant and slave labor.

Finance, too, became global, for good and ill. Wilson shows that much of America's phenomenal growth was underwritten with British bonds and investment. The 1857 financial crisis, bursting out of excess investment in the American Midwest, unnerved those who now saw their fortunes both made and undone by events halfway around the world. Judiciously reporting the implications, Wilson is agnostic about the growth of global capital and the risks of an ever more interdependent world.

Though emphasizing abstractions and historical forces, men (and some women) populate *Heyday*. There is the long-forgotten, possibly deranged William Walker, the American who proclaimed himself president of the Republic of Lower California in Baja, and took over Nicaragua in 1856. James Bruce, the earl of Elgin, is the British representative who forced

both treaties and war on Qing China, and also signed Britain's 1858 treaty with Japan. By deftly pairing Japanese radical reformer Yoshida Shōin with Italian Giuseppe Garibaldi, Wilson shows how the modernizing moment in the 1850s led to a global movement for national regeneration, thereby forever reshaping global geopolitics.

But above all hangs the sense of nature unrestrained, of men taking advantage of opportunities created in this world of speed. The speed endured, however, but the optimism did not. Wilson laments the brevity of this period, when the opening of the Great Exhibition heralded trade, growth, and internationalism. By the early 1870s protectionism had returned, the 1873 depression shaking the global financial system. New, more virulent nationalisms were gathering strength, culminating in the titanic struggle for mastery that commenced 13 years after Queen Victoria's death.

the mid-19th century. The global market now reaches every nook and cranny of the planet, while the nation-states forged during those decades, from Japan to Italy, Germany to the United States, continue to play an outsized role, and occasionally a dominant one. Perhaps most importantly, the rationalizing impulse of the Victorian era, carried on from the Enlightenment, survived every disruption and geopolitical catastrophe

that followed the end of the high tide of optimism, itself perhaps most poignantly captured in the epochal 11th edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, the subject of Denis Boyles's *Everything Explained That Is Explainable* (reviewed in the Winter 2016/17 CRB). It appeared just three years before the Great War demolished so much of the world created by the Victorians.

Both Simon Heffer and Ben Wilson, in these fine books, are thus tinged by a sense of impeding sadness, as the world that Great Britain helped create would soon pass it by. For Wilson this is an explicit claim, perhaps one too strongly pursued, given London's dominance of the global scene for another half-century after the traumatic 1860s. Yet there is no doubt that Great Britain midwifed a modern world it was destined to bestride, if only for a limited time.

What is left, though, should not be discounted. London remains perhaps the world's most popular city, British culture is still extraordinarily resonant, and the optimism that suffused the high minds of the Victorian era still inspires those who seek to order the world. As an image of the best that can be thought and done, Victorian Britain secured its place in the pantheon of great civilizations.

Michael Auslin is a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, and the author of The End of the Asian Century: War, Stagnation, and the Risks to the World's Most Dynamic Region (Yale University Press).

