

\* Queen Victoria (1815-1901)

## **COURS HD**

**Source: *The nineteenth Century*, Colin Matthew, Oxford University Press, 2000**

### **14) The working classes and "advancement"**

The British working classes (contemporaries usually used the plural) kept their own counsel and a careful distance. Increasingly from the 1860s the propertied classes in the cities moved away from mixed housing to newly built suburbs. Churches in the towns became much less mixed in their congregations. Though incomes rose and expectations of some element of leisure grew, even the more prosperous of the working classes lived on the edge of financial danger, with the pawn shop (= mont de piété) at the end of the week. Working hours remained long and work conditions often hazardous.

The propertied classes worried over the working classes' ability to 'cope', chiefly because their failure to do so would mean an end to the adequacy of self-help welfare, and bodies such as the Charity Organization Society (1869) tried to advise the 'undeserving poor' on how to become deserving and thus more eligible for charitable support. But the improvement of moral behavior (that is good household management) was a task well beyond a society whose educational provisions for the mass of the population were for much of the century rudimentary, and the swings of Victorian capitalism far outweighed any provisions that even a frugal and well-organized family could make. Because some members of the clergy in the 1840s still considered literacy as a dangerous encouragement to the reading of politically subversive newspapers, working-class literacy owed much to the Sunday schools, which members of that class themselves sustained. The move after 1850 to free and compulsory education ('elementary education' as it was called) through the provision of schools by school boards was painfully slow. But when it came in 1880 (only for children up to the age of ten until the 1890s) the working classes seem to have taken rapid advantage of it, accepting with little opposition what was a considerable change to a pattern of family life in which children largely contributed to increasing the family income.

### **15) Universities**

Children from working-class families could expect little change in their status unless they happened to find their way into one of the new expanding commercial sectors of the economy, such as banking, insurance, administration, or accountancy. Propertied families could progress to university, but this was, even among those classes, a rare step. In England, Oxford and Cambridge tried to maintain a monopoly of university education, with entry of Anglicans only. University College London emerged from a series of secular initiatives with London University providing degrees by examination (but not instruction) for candidates from affiliated bodies in the British Isles and, from 1850, in the empire. King's College, London, Lampeter, and Durham offered Anglican education less expensively than Oxbridge.

In 1815, there were about 500 new students each year at Oxford and Cambridge combined; by the 1850s this had risen to about 800; reform of these universities by Gladstone's 1854 Act and by his first government's abolition of religious tests (1871) led to a slightly less Anglican student body and to the numbers rising to about 1800 by 1900. The upper level of the civil service (= fonctionnariat) after 1854 in effect came only from the universities but graduates among Members of Parliament were only in a majority in two decades of the century, the 1830s and the 1840s. In the last third of the century, some provision for women was made at universities, and new universities began to be founded in the industrial cities.

Because most Victorians saw education as inherently related to religion, they found themselves constantly torn between the needs of the churches to instill their own varieties of Christian doctrine, the needs of an industrial society for more utilitarian teaching, and the needs of the various classes of society for schools reflecting the values of those classes. Religion and utility could with some difficulty be combined in schools, but the various classes of society could not.

### **16) The nineteenth century in perspective/conclusion**

Though the political narrative of change of government- Grey's ministry of 1830, Peel's of 1841, Gladstone's of 1868, Disraeli of 1874, Salisbury of 1886- provided a timeline much used by contemporaries and by 20<sup>th</sup> century historians, the passing of time and of controversy have diminished its use. The details of the political aspects of the Victorian era are joining those of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in distant, half-remembered complexity, though certain political landmarks remain significant points on the map.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century's hold over the environment of the UK - political, urban, cultural and economic - has remained remarkably enduring, and the 20<sup>th</sup> century 'modernized' less than it liked to think.

The Victorians had a high view of the world-role of the UK. The economy drove 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain and gave her the base for her distinctive role in world affairs. The definition of public life, and the Victorians' increasing tendency to make a sharp distinction between public and private life, made discussion of gender and the position of women an especially complex and revealing question, which has in recent years seemed of more significance than class to an understanding of the period. Victorian literacy, artistic, and intellectual culture reflected at a high level the ambivalence of the many facets of the century and have provided a more enduring base for worldwide interest in the British 19<sup>th</sup> century than political life.