

The Middle Class

Altick, Richard D. *Victorian People and Ideas: A Companion for the Modern Reader of Victorian Literature*. W.W. Norton, 1973.

Below the gentry, and ambitious to join them, lay the middle class, whose expansion and rise to power was the great phenomenon of nineteenth-century social history. Pre-eminently, until then, the class of merchants, shopkeepers in a prosperous way of business, and professional men, it had been growing since Elizabethan days. The Protestant Reformation and the Puritan Revolution had both been middle-class movements, and much of the spirit behind them survived, with necessary modifications brought about by changed conditions, in the Victorian era.

The industrial revolution, beginning about the middle of the eighteenth century and gaining momentum as the century drew to a close, brought unprecedentedly numerous recruits, many of them of new breeds, to the middle class-- first the manufacturers and then those who served as supporting troops for the economy as it shifted from land to factory: commodity brokers, financiers, foreign traders, providers of consumer goods and services to an increasingly wealthy home market. Everyone of the many occupations associated with industrial capitalism required and rewarded the skills, shrewdness, and enterprise that had traditionally characterized the commercial middle class.

The class multiplied itself in the course of the nine-

teenth century, but no one knows how many times. Contemporary students of society never agreed, any more than the people involved did, on its upper and nether boundaries, which had never been very dear and which became increasingly indistinct as time went on. At one extreme, sufficient wealth and aggressiveness enabled men at the top of the middle class to insinuate themselves into the gentry, often to their subsequent secret discomfort as well as that of their new "equals." A rich banker or manufacturer might do so by purchasing a landed estate, the first requisite of gentility, from an impoverished gentleman-by-blood. Tennyson's grandfather, a successful provincial lawyer, strengthened his social position by that means, as had many similarly circumstanced men in the eighteenth century. At the other extreme, highly skilled artisans, independent and perhaps themselves employers of labor, clung to the lowest middle-class rung of the social ladder and looked hopefully upward. Middle-class values and appurtenances had a powerful attraction for the artisan class. The prospect of enjoying some of the physical comforts associated with middle-class life and, no less important, the feeling of status that those possessions brought with them, was the most effective upward stimulus the age knew. This was what had motivated Sir Roger Scatcherd, in Trollope's *Dr. Thorne*, to struggle from the humble position of stonemason to the superficially exalted one of landed proprietor, a climb that resulted only in disappointment and an addiction to brandy.

It was the middle-class orientation and code of values that lent the Victorian social climate its distinctive flavor. Its moral ideology, to be explored in some detail in Chapter V, embraced the values to which most Victorians, even including some aristocrats who could have afforded better ones, subscribed. In another sphere, in contrast to the traditionalism of the land-based Tories, this

commercially oriented society was the seat of liberalism, the duster of attitudes that were widely interpreted as most faithfully repre-

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senting, for better or worse, the temper of the new, forward-looking age.

Since the middle class regarded itself as the moral heart of Victorian society, a conviction assisted by the shift of the economic center of gravity in its direction, it took the understandable position that what was good for it was *ipso facto* good for the nation. This was dogma which, on the whole, was believed in as devoutly as even the existence of a Christian God or the sacredness of the British Constitution. The venerable aristocracy might disagree, but there was little it could do in the face of such self-assurance backed by figures.

As with all large social groups, the Victorian middle class was divided into numerous smaller bodies, according to income, occupation, education, and religion. (Again, there was no uniform national pattern: the distribution and nuances of distinction varied from region to region.) The term "middle class" covered a wide range of groups and sub-groups, from cotton brokers, brewers, and ironmasters to self-employed artisans who lived in the large permanent gray area where social ambiguity was most pronounced.

The breadth of the middle class as well as some of the distinctions of rank it maintained is well illustrated by the social origins of a number of Victorian authors. Newman's

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father was a partner in a London banking house, whereas Browning's was only a clerk in the Bank of England. Ruskin's father was a partner in a leading firm of wine importers. Both Carlyle and Hardy were builders' sons. George Meredith's grandfather was a successful Portsmouth naval tailor, but his father, after reverses, lapsed into the ignominious status of a journeyman in the trade, and as a consequence the novelist, who expertly anatomized social distinctions in several of his books, was always reticent about his family background, although he included much autobiography in *Evan Harrington*. William Morris' father was a businessman who struck it rich in shares of Cornish tin and copper mines. Thackeray was something of a special case: he belonged to the "nabobs," English families whose heads had acquired wealth and social standing as administrators, businessmen, professional men, or military officers in India and then returned home to form a closely knit social community of their own. Of all the major Victorian authors, Carlyle possibly excepted, Dickens' credentials were perhaps closest to the borderline of respectability, because his father was merely a pay clerk at naval stations.

In some groups-- doctors, clergymen, and teachers, for example-- there were superior and inferior grades, which depended on numerous factors such as family lineage, education, professional success, and the social standing of their clientele. A London society physician, such as Dr. Lydgate in *Middlemarch* eventually became, was separated by an almost unbridgeable gulf from the small provincial practitioners, such as Mr. Gambit the midwife, who had been his resentful former colleagues. An even wider abyss separated a classics master, B.A., M.A. Oxoniensis, at aristocratic Eton, and a slum-born London schoolteacher like Bradley Headstone in Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend*. The comparative ratings of various occupations shifted in the course of the era. Professional men

generally rose in status, with the establishment of organizations intended, among other things, to prescribe and enforce standards of preparation and ethical codes.

New professions, of unquestioned importance, had to be placed. Where did civil and mechanical engineers, actuaries, analytical chemists fit in-- above or below physicians (who by common consent were higher than dentists), above or below solicitors (who were lower than barristers)? The sheer gentility of an occupation elevated it above those closer to the streets: a lawyer's clerk necessarily assumed he was the superior of the publican who served him his beer, and a male assistant in a retail shop outranked a skilled wheelwright. Employers of labor, likewise, were a degree above self-employed craftsmen.

Certain occupations increased in size as the requirements of society changed. Commercial clerks, working for banks, railroads, insurance companies, and manufacturing concerns, came to comprise one of the largest middle-class groups. Civil servants, too, became much more numerous as government activities multiplied on both the national and local levels.

Religion made much difference in social standing. An Anglican mill owner ranked as far above a Nonconformist mill owner of identical income as a parson in his neo-Gothic church ranked above a Methodist minister saving souls in his brick and mortar chapel in a dreary Manchester slum. The worst social handicap an ambitious member of the middle class had to labor under was a double one-- being a Dissenter and earning one's money "in trade," that is, in any kind of commercial occupation producing or selling goods, especially at retail, as distinct from finance, foreign commerce, the professions, or moneyed leisure. It was a ticklish problem of current social values which is reflected, in all its

nuances and manifold personal consequences, in innumerable Victorian novels. Too close contact with money contaminated one; it was quite another matter to receive a large income through an intermediary such as an estate agent (the occupation of George Eliot's father) or a solicitor.

One reason why Dissenters formed so large and influential a segment of the commercial class-- they were certainly more numerous than Anglicans-- was that since the seventeenth century they had been more or less segregated from the main current of English life. Only in 1828 had the repeal of the Corporation and Test Acts (passed in 1661 and 1673 respectively) allowed Dissenters to hold public office, including seats in Parliament, without requiring an *ex post facto* dispensation through an annual Act of Indemnity passed for the purpose. Because until 1854-56 they could not take degrees at Oxford or Cambridge (until then, Oxford barred them from even matriculating), they were prevented from entering the learned and "gentlemanly" professions. The intelligence and prodigious energies of the non-Anglican members of the middle class therefore had to be channeled into materialistic pursuits; hence their historic identification with "trade."

Dissent was a socially stigmatized religion just as trade was a socially stigmatized pursuit. To be a Non-conformist when the best people for centuries had been Anglicans was, at the very least, in dubious taste. And to be a Methodist in particular was to be classed as an "enthusiast"-- a person of coarse religious manners bordering on fanaticism, a follower of field preachers, a constant Bible-quoter and participant in mass conversions. As a result, despite the gradual remission of their

disabilities, Dissenters, no matter how wealthy, formed a somewhat separate community throughout the nineteenth century. Association with ledger books, cash drawers, and chapels named Shiloh, Ebenezer, Bethel, or Zion made a man and his family socially suspect in the eyes of people conditioned to revere old values and churches named for Christian saints.

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How could the disadvantage of trade and Dissent be overcome? There were two ways, neither being wholly efficacious without the other. A man could, as we have seen, buy a landed estate and thus possess the physical evidence of gentility. Without land, one was nobody. But even a plethora of acres was not enough; it was migration to the Church of England that finally certified one's fitness to mingle in the best Victorian circles. Only communion at the Anglican altar could remove the taint of having earned one's fortune in trade.

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