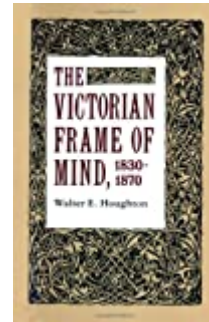




Walter E. Houghton. *The Victorian Frame of Mind 1830-1870*. New Haven: Oxford University Press, 1957. xvii + 430 pp. \$22.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-300-00122-8.



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Lewis on Houghton's *The Victorian Frame of Mind*

Note: This review is part of the H-Ideas Retrospective Reviews series. This series reviews books published during the twentieth century which have been deemed to be among the most important contributions to the field of intellectual history.

One of the best-known studies of the early and mid-Victorian mindset in Britain,[1] Houghton's book is a thorough and detailed study grounded in immense reading in primary sources. His fourteen chapters run the gamut of the emotional, intellectual and moral issues associated with the Victorian era. Houghton's basic attitude towards the period may best be summed up by three of his statements:

.... the tendency of the age (though mainly in the earlier decades) was towards extreme and unqualified positions. Many Victorians were "downright infidels or downright Christians, thorough Tories or thorough democrats. . ." (165).[2]

The ban on levity has the same origin (as Victorian prudery). Levity is what Queen Victoria found "not amusing." It is light treatment of serious things, especially sexual evil.(357)

Of all the criticisms brought against them by the Lytton Stracheys of the twentieth century, the Victorians would have pleaded guilty to only one. They would have defended or excused their optimism, their dogmatism, their appeal to force, their straight-laced morality, but they would have confessed to an unfortunate strain of hypocrisy.... One, they concealed or suppressed their true convictions and their natural tastes. They said the 'right' thing or did the 'right' thing: they sacrificed sincerity to propriety. Second, and worse, they pretended to be better than they were.... they talked noble sentiments and lived – quite otherwise. Finally, they refused to look at life candidly. They shut their eyes to whatever was ugly or unpleasant and pretended it didn't exist. (394-395)

The many topics covered by Houghton fit easily into at least one of the pigeonholes created by the above statements, and large sections of *The Victorian Frame of Mind*

are devoted to demonstrating how they fit.

Despite over forty years of continuous scholarship since the work first appeared, this overview remains vital and fresh, its scope and detail still providing an excellent introduction to the early to mid-Victorian mind for a graduate student or advanced undergraduate. Even scholars who feel strongly that the idea of “Victorianism” is something of a fallacy would benefit their students by assigning this work, giving them a good opponent to try and sharpen their theoretical arguments against.

Houghton perhaps spends more time linking Victorianism to a reaction towards the ages of the French Revolution and Regency than most contemporary specialty scholars (as opposed to historians writing in a more popular or general mold) would. In part, this is no doubt due to the twin trends of dismissing the Victorian era as something easily defined as a self-contained intellectual era and of spotting the beginnings of “Victorian” ideals in earlier periods, in both cases diminishing the idea of Victorianism as reaction against the perceived excesses of revolutionary fervor and Regency decadence.

From the current perspective, there are three areas where Houghton may be seen as weak, however. The first would be in not setting Victorianism in relationship with periods prior to the French Revolution. That British culture would have strong reactions against the ideals and actions of the Revolution, which the nation had fought against for some quarter of a century, is of course not surprising. However, British culture between the Glorious Revolution and the French Revolution was not a weak, amorphous one. Whatever effects earlier British culture, the Enlightenment (and other periods) in general had on the formation of the Victorian mind are left fundamentally unexplored as are the effects of the formation and partial loss of the first British Empire, and the effects of industrialization up through 1817. Again, Victorianism’s relationship with reaction against the ideals of the French Revolution and Regency decadence is the focus instead.

Secondly, this work is on the formation of the Vic-

torian period. How Victorianism may have functioned from the late 1860s through the start of its decline is basically ignored. In much the same way, most of the seeds which grew to overcome the Victorian mind are also left at best merely referred to, rather than explored in the context of Victorianism’s creation.

The third area, judging from today’s views, is perhaps most profound. As Houghton himself states in his preface: “The working class as such is not here under consideration.” (xvi) That admission at least allows him to be acquitted of not recognizing that, by any standards, his portrait of the society is incomplete. Yet the working class is merely the most obvious of the missing pieces of the early Victorian intellectual worldview; the lack of Scots, Welsh, Irish, and voices from deep in the country – and the overwhelmingly male-orientation of the sources – would no doubt strike the current generation of graduate students as being at least a trifle discordant.

In short, therefore, Houghton remains an excellent source for the advanced undergraduate and beyond trying to understand what is meant by “Victorianism” in Britain, and still a very useful reference for anyone working in the field. Its very specific scope would preclude its recommendation for anyone looking for a “down and dirty” quick reference guide to the period, but it may be useful as one of several textbooks for a class on nineteenth-century Britain, if other texts are selected to complement the areas Houghton left blank.[3]

Notes

[1]. As of March, 2000, this work is still in print (in paperback only) from Yale University Press.

[2]. Houghton is quoting from J. S. Mill, “Letters, 2” 360.

[3]. Houghton’s work has been discussed in this context on H-Albion.

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