



Asa Briggs. *The Age of Improvement, 1783-1867.* Harlow: Longman, 2000. ix + 486 pp. \$40.80 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-36959-7.

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The Age of Asa

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Asa Briggs is, by a long stretch, the most prolific historian of his generation and, by common assent, the man who put nineteenth-century British history – particularly the history of the Victorian era – on the academic map. In a publishing career that has lasted well over fifty years, he has produced dozens of works, and sales of some of his most well-known must place him somewhere between G. M. Trevelyan and A. J. P. Taylor in the income league of popular historians. Briggs has written histories of Victorian portrait photography, Nobel prize-winners, Victorian music, steam, the Channel Isles in wartime, and the *fin-de-siècle*. There have been editions of Cobbett, Dickens, Halevy, Mayhew, Morley, Morris, Owen, Punch, Shaw, Smiles, Tollemache and Trollope. There have been the big commissioned histories, such as those of the city of Birmingham, the BBC, the Leverhulme Trust, John Lewis, Longmans, and Marks and Spencer, and the smaller ones for more discerning palates – for example, the Haut Brion vineyard, and Victoria Wine.

There have been radio and TV spin-offs, compilations, illustrated histories, dictionaries and encyclopaedias. Above all, there has been Asa Briggs's contribution to Victorian studies. Here lies his best-known work – the trilogy of *Victorian People* (1954), *Victorian Cities* (1963) and *Victorian Things* (1988), his pioneering collection of essays on Chartism (1959), his Historical Association pamphlet on the 1851 exhibition, and last, but hardly least, his *Age of Improvement* (1959) [published in

the United States as *The Making of Modern England, 1783-1867: The Age of Improvement*, ed.], now republished by Longmans in a revised paperback edition. Asa Briggs is now in the twilight of his career. He was made a peer in 1976, he has been the subject of a festschrift (1990), and an edition of his collected essays has appeared (3 volumes, 1985-91). Most fittingly at next year's centenary conference at the Science Museum in London, when hundreds of specialists from around the world will gather to "locate the Victorians," it is Asa Briggs who has top billing as guest speaker.

What is perhaps most remarkable about Briggs's writing on nineteenth-century British history is the speed with which he turned out his main works. Nine years separate *Victorian People* and *Victorian Cities*, by general agreement, the two most important works in his Victorian trilogy. And squeezed in between 1954 and 1963 were not only the original *Age of Improvement* and *Chartist Studies*, but also his full-length study of Seebohm Rowntree, influential journal articles on cholera and "middle-class consciousness," and the first volume of *Essays in Labour History*, co-edited with John Saville, a book which gave a great fillip to the historical study of the labour movement in Britain.

The later 1950s were, in other words, a golden age for Asa Briggs. And whereas Victorian biography and urban history, studies of Chartism and much else have moved on since then, the jewel in Briggs's crown, *The Age of Improvement*, remains to a large extent untarnished. Continuing textbooks for the period there are aplenty, but

few are as comprehensive. They are either too absorbed in their theme, as might be said of E.P. Thompson's *Making of the English Working Class* (1963) or Harold Perkin's *Origins of Modern English Society* (1969); or too narrow in their conception of history, for example Norman Gash's rather top-down *Aristocracy and People* (1979) or Michael Bentley's *Politics without Democracy* (1984), the title of which says it all. The most successful rival to Briggs's *Age of Improvement* has been a book very similar in tone and coverage, namely Eric Evans's *The Forging of the Modern State* (1983). No wonder Longmans, who publish both Evans and Briggs, are in a celebratory mood, and have thought it fit to republish *The Age of Improvement* for the 275th anniversary of the founding of the firm. How does Asa's *Age* look some forty years later?

The simple answer is: not very different. Do not be fooled by appearances. *The Age of Improvement* now comes in a "silver edition" cover. According to the publisher it is "thoroughly revised and updated throughout," and the author confirms that the new edition "takes account of all the many changes in historical scholarship since the 1960s" (p. vii). But luminous grey would be a better description of both dustjacket and contents, for the 2000 edition of the book is to all intents and purposes exactly the same as the 1959 version. There has been some reworking of the prose. Women, for example, get one new paragraph. There has been some cosmetic updating of the footnotes to incorporate work published in more recent decades, although this appears to have been done without due care and attention. Several names of historians and titles of books are erroneous – J.B. Conacher's "The Aberdeen Condition" (p. 363n) is perhaps the most amusing howler. And the bibliography has been updated to include standard works from the 1960s and early 1970s, but very little of the important political, social and cultural history of the last twenty years.

One of the few recent authors to get a mention is Roy Jenkins (pp. 461-2), another Oxford peer, whose biography of Gladstone is recommended twice in the same paragraph. More seriously, Briggs either ignores or dismisses some of the most significant developments in later eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British historiography. Econometricians such as Crafts are dismissed for "taking the drama out of the 1780s" (p. 23n). The complete inversion of the demographic history of the period produced by Wrigley, Schofield and others is missed – Briggs clings to the notion that falling mortality rates lay behind population growth in the eighteenth century (p. 28). Porritt and Namier remain Briggs's guide to the unreformed House of Commons, notwithstanding all the

revisionism produced by not one but two generations of historians of electoral behaviour (pp. 87-9).

And there is more. On Britain (as opposed to England), Chartism, Peel, the impact of empire, and Anglican (rather than low-church) religion, a more thorough briefing in recent historical work would have forced Briggs to reconsider some of his original judgements. Enough said. It would be easy to continue to list the ways in which this new edition is not the "thoroughly revised and updated" book announced by the publisher. But that is beside the point. For what is most striking about *The Age of Improvement* after forty years is not its vulnerability, which is hardly surprising for a book published in the same year as the opening of Britain's first motorway or the launch of America's first atomic submarine, but its venerability. Students should still be encouraged to buy this work for what Briggs got right in the first place, not for where he has gone wrong since.

In the first place in the book combines political, economic and social history without any of the patronising *de haut en bas* tone of his own generation or the conceptual anxieties of later generations. Briggs once described social history as "economic history with the politics put in" and throughout the book he manages with admirable felicity to blend a sensible analysis of economic change, social structure and fiscal and monetary issues with an account of public policy and party politics. There is a balanced thumb-nail sketch of the industrial revolution, and a sound account of war-time finance under Pitt (ch. 3) and peace-time finance under Huskisson (ch. 4). Well-grounded in provincial history from his work on Birmingham, Briggs gets the measure of the actual national impact of Whig social reforms in the 1830s and 1840s (pp. 232-41).

For a historian who did not use archival sources his account of the high politics of the reform acts of 1832 and 1867 is sure-footed (chs. 5 and 10). On foreign policy he proves farsighted, situating Canning and Palmerston's manoeuvring within Paul Kennedy-like economic constraints (ch. 7). Elsewhere he emphasises the quiet off-stage Victorian revolution in government which, in a piecemeal fashion, really refashioned British society after 1850 (pp. 357-73). And he manages to capture much of the mid-nineteenth intellectual torment over religion and science (pp. 411-26). In short, read after three decades of scholarship in which political, intellectual and social history have all gone down their separate roads, Briggs's account does help to rebuild some of the bridges.

Secondly, Briggs's chosen periodisation of British his-

tory – taking us from the advent of industrial Britain under Pitt in the 1780s through to Disraeli’s leap in the dark in 1867 – is one which is now coming back into vogue. Many historians would now trace the roots of early Victorian Britain back into the late eighteenth century, when the combined effects of imperial problems in India, Ireland and America, revolution in France and war in Europe, and population growth and the rise of commerce at home, all placed the Protestant constitution under severe strain, the consequences of which were still being felt in the 1830s and 1840s. The new emphasis on continuity in nineteenth-century British history is perfectly compatible with the chronology offered by Briggs. Briggs was similarly prescient in his choice of hero for his book, namely William Pitt the younger. Briggs states that Pitt’s first ministry “laid the foundations of nineteenth century England” (p. 65), he refers to the “Pittite coalition which governed between 1794 and 1830” (p. 174), and he sees Peel in the 1840s as inheriting Pitt’s mantle of the above-party politics of national revival (p. 295). The current anti-Whig and anti-whiggish tone of Victorian political history – for example Jonathan Parry’s *Rise and Fall of Liberal Government in Victorian Britain* (1993) or Philip Harling’s *The Waning of Old Corruption* (1996) – fits neatly with Briggs’s admittedly less sophisticated emphasis on Pitt the wonderful.

Finally, there is Briggs’s theme of “improvement,” that is the belief in progress alongside the concern for social and economic “balance” which were the hallmarks of late eighteenth and nineteenth century sensibilities, at least until the 1860s. From a literary or linguistic perspective, Briggs’s account of the notion of ‘improvement’, set

out in his opening chapter, is rather woolly and imprecise, perhaps surprisingly so for someone who proved so innovative in deconstructing the languages of class avant la lettre. But again, by alerting readers to the emergence and spread of the idea of moral, spiritual and political amelioration in the half-century after 1780, Briggs was ahead of his time. Had he attended the recent Past and Present conference in Oxford, England on “Rethinking the age of reform, 1780-1850” – which focused on many of these issues – he would no doubt have been left with a wry smile of satisfaction.

So even without “improvement” Asa Briggs’s *Age of Improvement* remains an accessible, straightforward and perceptive introduction to late Hanoverian and early Victorian British history. It should not be taken as the last word on the subject, incorporating an old master’s new thoughts on the period. Rather it is the first word on the subject, which happens to have proved remarkably enduring. This is partly because in the years which have intervened between the first publication and the millennium, Victorian historiography has become over-specialised, and the nineteenth century itself has become compressed by the ever-expanding long eighteenth-century and the backward reach of the short twentieth century. More than ever we need a modern Briggs for a new history of the nineteenth century. But until she or he arrives the age of Asa will remain intact.

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