



The Victorians

A.N. Wilson

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The nineteenth century saw greater changes than any previous era: in the ways nations and societies were organized, in scientific knowledge, and in nonreligious intellectual development. The crucial players in this drama were the British, who invented both capitalism and imperialism and were incomparably the richest, most important investors in the developing world. In this sense, England's position has strong resemblances to America's in the late twentieth century.

As one of our most accomplished biographers and novelists, A. N. Wilson has a keen eye for a good story, and in this spectacular work he singles out those writers, statesmen, scientists, philosophers, and soldiers whose lives illuminate so grand and revolutionary a history: Darwin, Marx, Gladstone, Christina Rossetti, Gordon, Cardinal Newman, George Eliot, Kipling. Wilson's accomplishment in this book is to explain through these signature lives how Victorian England started a revolution that still hasn't ended.

The Victorians Details

Date : Published February 17th 2004 by W. W. Norton Company (first published 2002)

ISBN : 9780393325430

Author : A.N. Wilson

Format : Paperback 760 pages

Genre : History, Nonfiction, Historical, Victorian, Literature, 19th Century

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From Reader Review The Victorians for online ebook

Tanis says

I didn't actually finish this book, although it was very interesting and well written I just wasn't in the mood for a factual book.

Nick says

If you only ever read one book on the Victorians, this is the one to read. Wilson doesn't invent anything new; the categories are familiar. We start with the bad old England that Victoria inherited, work our way through the Chartists, Peel and the Corn Laws, the terrible 40s, the Italian influence, doubt, Mesmerism, Albert, the Great Exhibition, the Reform Bills, the Crimean War, Afghanistan, and on and on. Wilson is a wonderful storyteller, and he fills in the bare bones of history with lots of nice connections, curious biographies, and back stories. His history is people-based rather than movement-based or full of impersonal forces. And, of course, if you look at the Victorian era through that lens, there's plenty to amuse you, from Gladstone and his hypocrisy to Disraeli and his wit to the unwitting Freudianisms of Goblin Market to Charles Dodgson's creepy pictures of Alice Liddell, and so on virtually forever.

Wilson is an excellent writer with a novelist's eye for bringing history to life. Just don't look to this book for any fresh or systematic thinking about the Victorians. But there's plenty here to keep all but the most dedicated professional historian busy for a good long time. Read this in conjunction with Dickens or Thackeray or Eliot, and you'll soon have a rich, dense idea of the fabric and incident of Victorian life.

Christopher Sutch says

This is a very good read, is very well-researched, and provides a wealth of information on the Victorians and their social context. It was very hard to put down, despite its massive length. One of the problems Wilson has, though, is his annoying tendency to either misread or misunderstand Marx. This is due, I think, in large part because of his sympathy for more British forms of socialism (based in Robert Owens). It's clear Wilson has read Marx, and not just the _Communist Manifesto_. But despite his knowledge he continually mischaracterizes Marx's position, conflates Marxism with Leninism or, worse, says that certain things Marx could never have imagined when, in fact, those things form a fundamental part of Marxist theory. For example, Wilson claims that Marx could never have imagined that the aristocracy could have died out mainly because of the vast plethora of "suburban" citizens by the end of the nineteenth century. Actually, Marx himself predicted this: the aristocracy were a part of the feudal relations of production hanging on into the era of capitalist relations of production (that's who all those "suburbanites" were: petit-bourgeois or outright capitalists who would, according to Marx, eventually come to replace the remnants of the feudal aristocracy. Again, Wilson quite rightly castigates Kitchener's cruelty in spreading the Empire, but refuses to acknowledge that contemporary culture still bears responsibility for such crimes because we continue to benefit from them: Wilson would not have his position as a writer or as an academic if Britain had not accumulated so much wealth through its imperial atrocities. Wilson should continue to decry what was done in the past, but also needs to step up to the plate and admit the continuing benefit we all reap from that horrible period of history. Despite such disingenuousness, Wilson's book is a valuable reference work on the

Victorians and their time.

Eric Pape says

Well written and worth the time but I would have liked a little more about the lot of the common folk.

Steve says

I would of rated this higher, but the last third of the book was a chore to finish. It was like Wilson lost his focus (which, admittedly, is difficult given the broad subject), and started speculating more with various what-ifs. In a history book, a little bit of that can go a long way. In addition, the subject matter is so broad (the Victorians) that Wilson was obligated to cover areas I could care less about. As long as he was dealing with writers, artists, politicians, religion, military events, etc., I was ok. But when he got into philosophies (always a bore for me), economics (snooze), and other flotsam & jetsam, I could feel my eyes glazing over. There were also times Wilson would dutifully take up some subject like Jack the Ripper or Sherlock Holmes, and you would get a very surface level discussion. However, other times Wilson shines with discussions of Browning -- and his poetry, or Ruskin (and Pater), or Zola, or the back and forth between Newman and Charles Kingsley. (Refreshingly, he views Kingsley, who had a mildly kinky relationship with his wife, as the more straightforward Christian.) On the area of Christianity, and belief, you can't help but be aware of Wilson's own struggles. At the time of this book, Wilson apparently stopped believing, which, for all I know, may have been influenced by his up close research on those great minds who were swayed by the Age (and arguments) of Darwin. It doesn't mar the book, because he treats this subject with complete respect, according believers and non-believers equal time. But from what I hear, Wilson now believes again.

Stenwjohanson says

Where do you begin if you want to read a broad, deep, erudite overview of a large historical topic? Usually, it requires looking to older scholarship; "big" histories are rarely attempted by academics these days. Next stop is the unfairly maligned genre of "popular" history, which relies on the synthesis of secondary sources and is unburdened by the need for complete academic originality.

That was my dilemma when I first picked up A.N.Wilson's epic "The Victorians," almost at random. Wilson is a non-academic, but a reputable and excellent writer on a range of topics. On the surface, "The Victorians" relies on a straightforward framework, covering the era (one of the few with finite beginning and end dates) by decade from Victoria's coronation in 1837 to her death in 1901. But it also offers a teeming, dense substructure of cultural, intellectual and social interconnections beneath the hood.

Wilson's approach is both vertical and horizontal. He surveys the historical record but offers a continual stream of thematic cross-references over time, almost frenetically. "The Victorians" requires a great deal of attention to detail; as personages and ideas submerge and reappear, Wilson often makes minimal (or at best, oblique) reference to their original context. But that's a minor complaint about a book that is a rare tour de force.

Duncan says

A fascinating period of history. I like most of Wilson's work and this did not disappoint.

Aaron Eames says

An astoundingly comprehensive audit of the era; sprawling, expansive and imperial, touching all bases, cause célèbre (Chartism) to celebrated cause (The Boer War), succès de scandale (*On the Origin of Species*, perhaps) to successful scandal (The Fall of Parnell, perhaps). Wilson, elsewhere biographer of Darwin and Queen Victoria, emphasises personalities, those individuals whose lives, words and works mediate their period. His pen-portraits of key figures read like rigorously-researched private memoirs; his portrayal of Dizzy is biased enough to entertain and balanced enough to forgive, his Lewis Carroll is gentle yet just. Less a primer, more a full-blown guide.

Maryanne says

I decided to read this only one chapter per day so that I could really enjoy the wonderful writing and the bits that are not normally included in books about the Victorians. Glad to see my friend Dizzy came out well he was always my favourite, unlike the patronizing, sermonizing Gladstone. Nice to see the ladies of the time getting kudos too.... Maryanne Evans still remains one of my favourite authors along with Oscar Wilde. Well worth reading and just enjoying.

Paige says

I didn't finish this book although I did think it was decent. There is some really good information in here, but it was kind of slow going and I had a lot of other stuff going on. My main complaint is that Wilson assumes the reader already know a lot of the figures he's talking about. This would probably be the case if I was raised and went to school in England, but as an ignorant US citizen, I kept going, "Who? What's that??" And then I would have to consult Google and it was very disruptive to the reading experience. If he'd just inserted little dependent clauses, like "John Potatohands, the Queen's royal potato planter, was a man of letters," instead of just being like "John Potatohands was a man of letters," it would have helped me out a lot. It was a library book that I put down a while back, but soon after I picked it up again and started reading a chapter a day I ran out of renewals. I get the feeling that it is quite informative—I learned a lot in just the bit I read—and I would like to come back to it when I have more time/patience for its format and style.

Peter Ellwood says

An absorbing account of the Victorian era. I am so glad I resisted my quite strong inclination in the early part of the book – to abandon it as a load of grump. So much so that I wish he would go back and rewrite those

early chapters. If you are like me – persist, it does eventually repay the effort!

For me, the part dealing with the first ten years or so is in quite marked contrast to the remainder. Perhaps it is the actual content: perhaps the 1840s were a boring period, or perhaps they are so distant that all the interesting bits have somehow slipped away. Or perhaps it is because the balance of the book seems to be more towards political *history* in that section, and less towards a patchwork of interconnected cameos of Victoriana, which go to make up the much more interesting bulk of it.

Perhaps it was his prose: I don't find it all that engaging. For such a prolific writer it jolly well ought to be, but I didn't find it so. I have to admit to the attention span of a five year old these days, my days of reading books 100 pages at a time, are long gone. But all the same, it was irritating how many times I had to re-read a paragraph because my mind had wandered away from his unexciting delivery. My attention span might be awful, but I never had that problem with, say, Jan Morris' gorgeous accounts of comparable material. He has a bad habit of writing great long, baggy sentences, loaded down with qualifying clauses and phrases, and to leave the central point until the very end of his sentence. Thus, he wouldn't say that Victoria was the central character in his book; he would say that his book, complex and multi-layered though it might seem to anyone who has no familiarity with the period, can nonetheless be summed up as an attempt, whether successful or not is not for the writer to say of course, to delineate and analyse the life and times, and of course the influence and impact of the eponymous *Victoria*. You get my drift.

Second, often he somehow assumed that you knew all about the subject in hand, and didn't bother to explain it. For example, he talks about John Stewart Mill without really ever mentioning what his epoch-changing thinking was:

"Mills' first important work, A System of Logic, was published in 1843. It is a patient, even a somewhat laborious restating of the empiricist position - though Mill disliked the term empiricist, preferring to call himself an experimentalist".

Yes, but what was the empiricist position? No news. And in what way did Mills restate and/or reshape that empiricist position? We are left none the wiser.

There are lots of similar examples. He mentions the Corn Laws without saying what they were about. He refers to Chartism a lot in the relevant chapters on that decade – but never mentions what Chartism was; he barely explains Bentham's utilitarianism. And so on.

As time goes by and more personalities emerge he becomes somehow much more engaging (and more contentious):

"We shall see clearly enough in the next decade the kind of people the Victorians en masse were, with their wild enthusiasm for the Crimean War and their violent and vindictive attitude to the Indian Mutiny."

Well Mr Wilson, at least there's no mistaking where you stand!

Where he stands, quite often apparently, is to not like the Victorians very much. It's true that the tone lifts a little as he gets his teeth into the wider subject, but the approach of mild jeering is never far away. Another example, which also suggests he doesn't like contemporary Britain much better either:

"Yet war is a Pandora's box, even when fought over a distance of over a thousand miles. Palmerston's complacent belief in the love affair between the English and the aristocracy was,

like most things in England, only half true”.

All the same, as the last two examples also illustrate, it’s quite entertaining to read mild jeering sometimes, and for me, these passages rarely needed re-reading!

All the same, the penny slowly drops that he is not ultimately laying into either England or the English or even the Victorians. It is simply that his style of prose tends to use the language of full frontal attack as his default.

To pick one or two examples at random: Victoria was “probably illegitimate”, Havelock relieved Lucknow after the Indian mutiny, not after several failed attempts, but after “several botched attempts”, British imperialism owes itself – he says, with a completely straight face as far as one can see – to repressed homosexual longings on the part of our generals. Coo.

But all the same, it is somehow no real surprise, after more than 600 pages of grump, to see in his summing up that he sees Victorian Britain a bit along the lines of Churchill’s famous quote, that democracy is the *“worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time....”*

In terms of the content, then, I’d cheerfully give this four stars. It’s a fascinating patchwork picture by the end. It would have been scintillating if he could have expressed it a little more pithily.

DeAnna Knippling says

Hmmmm....for the best book about the Victorians I've read, it's not the first I'd recommend or the highest I've rated. I'd start with *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher*, unless you're already big into history.

This book is erudite, so much so that I missed a lot of things that the author assumed I knew, and the chapters jumped around in a way that I sometimes couldn't follow. Nevertheless, I feel like I have a good sense of who the Victorians were and how they changed over time: It's complicated.

If you're looking for a focus on the late Victorians, you should also start elsewhere; this has a much stronger focus on, say, the 1840s to the 1870s. Lots of politics and philosophy, and how those things became so nobly and tragically realized.

NOT light reading. Very toothsome.

Webcowgirl says

An excellent overview of a historical era I had much to learn about. Good foundation for steampunk lit. A bit too fragmented, though.

Caroline says

It's quite difficult to know how to describe this book. It's non-fiction, it's history, of course it's history, but somehow...not quite history as one might expect it. And yet if you asked me to put my finger on why this isn't a typical history book I think I would struggle. It's about a particular time and place; it's written in a chronological fashion; the usual suspects of Victorian history make an appearance; it focuses on politics, the monarchy, war, culture, literature, fashion, commerce. And yet somehow there is definitely something about this book that differs from a 'normal' history book.

I think perhaps it's the author. This is very much A.N. Wilson's personal take on the Victorians, history from one individual's perspective. By and large, with most history books, the author is all but invisible. He (or she) presents their version of history without interfering in the narrative: their presence is only really visible in the elements they choose to focus on, the things they include and the things they omit. Whilst that is just as much the case here, the author's presence is that much more tangible. I think that, added to Wilson's occasionally whimsical tone and authorial asides, somehow makes this history book feel less like history and more like one individual's musings on history.

It's an unexpected approach, but not an entirely unsuccessful one. It makes this book very much a mixed bag, an often enjoyable but occasionally rambling read, one that almost feels like it's stuffed just that little bit too full with anecdotes and snapshots and asides and marginalia. One could argue a little bit more structure and rigidity, a tightening of the focus, a trimming of some of the fat, might have improved it, but then it would probably have been just like every other book on the Victorians out there, and there's definitely something to be said for a novel approach.

Mark says

A very enjoyable thematic account of the Victorian age, which required work to master but was enormously rewarding once completed.
