Introduction: beginnings, periods and problems

Beginnings possess an implicit power to produce meaning. The beginning of an argument declares more than just a point of departure. It is less an innocent first place, and more the disclosure of an attitude of mind, a consciousness of understanding. A beginning anticipates the ensuing argument to a terminus that is in some sense inferred at the very outset. Sometimes this is unproblematic and uninteresting. If we are writing the military history of the First World War, the end of the book is predetermined. At other times, a beginning raises more intriguing questions. A book on the origins of the First World War, conversely, does not possess a self-declared beginning. No precise event announced the opening of a route to war and it is impossible to say without contention that this or that episode lit the long fuse to August 1914. The author has, therefore, to construct a moment to appoint as the first step to war. Similarly, to nominate a certain set of years as designating, say, the Renaissance is to declare a historical problem by a process of naming. Where we begin, therefore, may serve to define the problem we address.[1]

To establish boundaries of beginnings and endings around historical periods may be regarded as a policing strategy. The practice of boundary setting involves the installation of a series of premises and assumptions which determine what follows. Where we start and where we end and how we get there do not lie implicit and latent in the matter of history itself, waiting only to be teased out by the skilled historian. Such matters are constructed by historians themselves as they order the material within certain categories and declare certain chronologies "periods." In this process, some things are suppressed, while others are privileged. It is sometimes thought that this allows historical statements only the status of fiction. Yet it is equally arguable that such artifices are enabling and empowering, for they do allow us to make historical statements that

[1] For a discussion of beginnings upon which I have drawn, see Edward Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (New York, 1975), pp. xi, xii, 7–13, 32.

illuminate a problem or a period. And since it is this latter claim that I would like to make for this book, it is as well for me to explain its beginnings and how they have conditioned the arguments it contains and the ending it declares.[2]

The idea of this book first took shape in the late 1980s when I was afforded the opportunity to read widely and eclectically out of my appointed "period" of nineteenth-century social and labor history. It is not very surprising, perhaps, that such a distancing led me to appreciate more acutely the difficulties that are presented by the assumptions that underpin nineteenth-century historiography. I had lived with nineteenth-century history for a very long time, of course, and I was mindful of its implicit posture as recording the moment when modern Britain was born. Yet for quite some time I had been equally aware of the sophisms necessary to sustain that position, of the qualifications that were required to bolster that framework. Ultimately, it seemed time to confront those issues if only for my own satisfaction. This book is the result.

It is a book which I would describe as both an engagement with the historiography of its chosen period and an argument about that period. The one led to the other. The book began as an encounter with the historiography of the nineteenth century and it ended with the persuasion that modern British history needed to be reperiodized. In contrast to the way in which British history is commonly conceived, I am concerned to collapse the nineteenth century into a wider period that stretches from the late seventeenth century to the late nineteenth century. The essential argument of this book is that more is to be understood about both the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries once the chronologies are flattened out. The substance of the book traces the common themes and content that frame the unity of the two centuries from the late 1600s.

The historiography of the nineteenth century has tended to assume a fundamentally unreflective stance toward the subject of its study: the nineteenth century itself. This is true of the foundational scholarship of the field which laid down its paradigmatic boundaries in the 1950s and 1960s.[3] It is equally true of revisionist attempts to disrupt those paradigms. It is, of course, undeniable that an extremely rich and varied scholarship exists about the Victorian age. The nineteenth century has never been short of talented historians to explore its many regions and

[2] See Hans Kellner, *Language and Historical Representation: Getting the Story Crooked* (Madison, WI, 1989), pp. 7, 60–63; Lloyd S. Kramer, "Literature, Criticism and the Historical Imagination: The Literary Challenge of Hayden White and Dominick LaCapra," in Lynn Hunt (ed.), *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley, 1989), pp. 97–128.

[3] For a survey and an argument about the conservative roots of a main division of that scholarship – social history – see Miles Taylor, "The Beginnings of Modern British Social History?," *History Workshop Journal*, 43 (Spring 1997), pp. 155–76.

domains. Yet there has been relatively little interest in "problematizing" the nineteenth century. This is all the more surprising because it requires only a limited probing to challenge in quite serious ways the foundations of nineteenth-century historiography.

A convenient place to begin is to note the frequent disjuncture between the broad assumptions and premises that guide the historiography and the narrative stories that are told of the component elements of the century. The explosion of subfields and their research over the past forty years, particularly in social history and its related areas, has widened and accentuated this gap.[4] The findings, arguments and direction of the specific monographic studies and the broad assumptions that continue to shape our thinking about the period are seldom brought together. Indeed, local research is commonly conducted within a global framework that is clearly at odds with its findings. It is generally true to say that the field of modern British history turns on the notion of an economic, political and social caesura at some time in the late eighteenth century. Yet this vision is dependent on the conception of the disjuncture of an "industrial revolution" that is itself increasingly discounted by specialists. Nevertheless, the way those outside economic history conceptualize the field remains unchanged.[5]

A tension between local and global ways of thinking about the nineteenth century is not confined to economic history alone. The origins of this tension flow, I believe, from another impulse of the historiography: the idea of the nineteenth century as the moment of modernity. The notion that the nineteenth century was the pivot of modern times pervades the scholarship. It is a fancy that inspires a tendency to focus the

[4] See Richard Price, "The Future of British Labour History," *International Review of Social History*, 36, 2 (1991), pp. 37–50.

[5] No other segment of British history contains such a bewildering variety of demarcations, perhaps reflecting this underlying conceptual confusion. Trevelyan opened his *British History in the Nineteenth Century* in 1782 and in the first edition ended in 1901. In later additions the story ran to 1919. Most politically oriented textbooks begin in 1815 and end in 1914. Eric Evans's *Forging of the Modern State: Early Industrial Britain 1783–1870* (London, 1983) opens in 1783 and ends in 1870 – though the very first sentence of the book is a quote from the 1760s. Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer in *The Great Arch: English State Formation as Cultural Revolution* (Oxford, 1985), on the other hand, see the modern state as essentially created by the year 1870. Asa Briggs's *The Age of Improvement 1783–1867* (London, 1959) opens in 1780 and ends in 1867; Harold Perkin's *Origins of Modern English Society 1780–1880* (London, 1969), too, begins in 1780 but closes in 1880. G. M. Young's nineteenth century in *Portrait of an Age* (2nd edn., London, 1953) extended from 1810 to c. 1880, although it was different elsewhere, most notably in his *Early Victorian England 1830–1865* (2 vols., London, 1934). Recent publications such as the Penguin Social History also follow this variegated pattern. Roy Porter's *English Society in the Eighteenth Century* opens in 1688 (everyone seems to be agreed on this for the eighteenth century) and ends with the Peace of Amiens in 1802 and, when it appears, Gatrell's volume will extend to 1870.

history of the nineteenth century through the lens of the twentieth century. A notorious example would be the history of social policy, which has often been written as the origins of the welfare state. Likewise, for a long time the political history of the nineteenth century was framed as an ineluctable move toward the democratic state of the twentieth century once the concession of reform was granted in 1832. Historical study, of course, has always tended to drift between, on the one hand, allowing contemporary concerns to drive its agenda and, on the other hand, faithfully recapturing the animating forces of past time. The line between anachronism and antiquarianism is a thin one, and the historiography of the nineteenth century has frequently teetered along its path.

The habit of treating the nineteenth century as if it were prefigurative of the twentieth century is a proclivity that has its origins in Victorian times. The idea that the early nineteenth century was the moment of modernity, the turning point from the "old" world to the "new" is not an invention of historians.[6] It was an invention of the early Victorian intelligentsia. The notion of transition was a commonplace among the early and mid-Victorian intellectual elite. Thomas Arnold spoke of the first train passing Rugby as meaning the end of feudality; William Cobbett spoke of the chains of connection in society as being ruptured by such forces as the enclosure movement; and John Stuart Mill defined the character of the age as the struggle between the forces of change and the resistance of the "old" institutional arrangements. Such reflections constructed a view of society that was integrated into the interpretations of twentieth-century historians.[7]

Historians have too readily accepted the governing notions of the Victorians themselves as describing the appropriate historical categories of the period. The principles and assumptions of Victorian liberalism have tended to find confirmation and replication in twentieth-century historiography. The most important shared value in the writing of Victorian history, therefore, has been its subordination to the assumptions of the Victorians themselves. This was particularly true of literature that established the main lines of interpretation of the period. G. M. Young's

[6] This was always closely connected with the idea of an "industrial revolution," the descriptive purpose of which originally was to draw the parallel between political revolutions on the Continent with technical innovation in sectors like cotton spinning: D. C. Coleman, *Myth, History and the Industrial Revolution* (London, 1992), pp. 3–8.

[7] Walter Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind* (New Haven, 1957), pp. 1–4; Richard Price, "Historiography, Narrative and the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of British Studies*, 35 (April 1996), pp. 224–26; John Stuart Mill, "The Spirit of the Age," in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. Ann P. Robson and John M. Robson (Toronto and London, 1986), vol. XXIII, pp. 228–31, 238–53.

elegantly drawn portrait of the mid-Victorian age was mounted on the two very Victorian stays of Evangelicalism and Benthamism. Victorian keywords frequently established the organizing categories for historians' accounts. Asa Briggs's masterly study, *The Age of Improvement*, for example, took as its starting point the Victorian conceit that their age *was* one of improvement. The dangers of borrowing organizing concepts from Victorian sources are not unknown. Yet, to my knowledge, there has been no sustained discussion of the implications of these dangers or how they can be avoided.[8]

Writing the history of the nineteenth century within the framework of the transition to modernity was the mission of the Whig interpretation of history. Before the late nineteenth century, Whig history was just another version of British history. It became the national history only in the late nineteenth century. At that particular moment, when mass democracy threatened to disrupt the boundaries of political convention, and mass education, among other things, promised to undermine the bases of social authority, the Whig interpretation of historical change offered a comforting context for the transition to a democratic state. The bias of the Whig interpretation of the past had always been to emphasize the successful balance between past, present and future in British political culture. Well into the middle of the nineteenth century the accent in Whig historiography was the continuity between the traditions of civic humanism and the ancient constitution. By the late nineteenth century, however, this balance had shifted to emphasize change as the key theme of British history. It was, perhaps, J. R. Seeley who first contextualized the themes of the nineteenth century through a positivist conception of progress and development. Seeley saw movement in history lying in the growth and expansion of the material forces of the state and empire.[9]

[8] Young, *Portrait of an Age*, p. 77. A revival of interest in Young's view of history can be detected among revisionist historians. As the title suggests, F. M. L. Thompson's *Rise of Respectable Society* (London, 1988) takes the Victorian notion of "respectability" as its very own organizing principle. For similar borrowings in intellectual history, see Frank M. Turner, *Contesting Cultural Authority* (Cambridge, 1993), p. xi. Asa Briggs, for example, in *Age of Improvement*, pp. 3–4, warned against historical borrowing, but the book ends up emphasizing the "commanding themes" recommended by the Victorians. At a different level, Keith Robbins's *Nineteenth-Century Britain: England, Scotland and Wales. The Making of a Nation* (Oxford, 1989) is unpersuasive because its title implies that the "nation" was made for the first time then, but fails to ask what was peculiar about British identity in the nineteenth century as compared to that before or (for that matter) afterwards.

[9] See Richard Price, "Historiography, Narrative and the Nineteenth Century," pp. 221–27; J. W. Burrow, *A Liberal Descent: Victorian Historians and the English Past* (Cambridge, 1981), pp. 286–98; J. R. Seeley, *The Expansion of England* (2nd edn., London, 1895), pp. 1–19.

Seeley's interpretation of history projected a modernist conception of change, a conception that imagined historical development as a species of organic growth. This has been the way twentieth-century historians have tended to read the nineteenth century. It is for this reason that accounts of the nineteenth century tend to take for granted the motif of change as the key descriptor. Later historians had to face a truth that Seeley could safely ignore, however: that any model of change also had to allow for the encumbrances of the past that littered the landscape of Victorian Britain. It was always clear, for example, that in spite of modernizing forces, or the struggles of transition, the conventions of the past retained a prominent presence over wide swathes of society and remained powerfully resistant to the forces of the present. A historical framework that privileged change, that saw change as a movement from lower to higher forms, or even as a passage from "then" to "now," needed to account for the persistence of features, institutions, even social groups that hardly fit a steady move toward the modern world of the twentieth century.

Urbanization and the growth of manufacturing, for example, did not mean that the local power of the Northern bourgeoisie was projected into a national presence. However successful they may have been locally in displacing the earlier, county-based elites, the commanding heights of economic, social and political power continued to be occupied with an obstinate tenacity by traditional social groups. The enduring power and influence of the landed elite stood against the main direction of assumed change over the period. Likewise, the continued importance of small-scale manufacture in the economy needed to be reconciled with the accepted trend to industrial bigness. Similarly, it was necessary to account for the resilience of older forms of popular culture in the face of the civilizing pressures of rational recreation.

Such well-known aspects of Victorian Britain contradict what was perceived as the main current of the history of Britain since the industrial revolution. Explaining them became, therefore, a major preoccupation of the historiography. Thus, an interpretive instability was installed in the field as, on the one hand, historians wrote about the nineteenth century as if it prefigured the twentieth and as, on the other hand, they struggled to account for those aspects that clearly did not fit this model. The device commonly used to reconcile this contradiction was the concept of "survivals."[10]

The notion of "survivals" was first developed by ethnographers in the late nineteenth century. It was used to explain the remnants of earlier

[10] Thus, see for example George Kitson Clark, *The Making of Victorian England* (Oxford, 1962); Perkin, *Origins of Modern English Society*.

social formations left behind in the course of evolutionary social development.[11] It is a notion that proceeds from a positivist view of social formations as progressing along various scales of growth and improvement. In the conventional historical literature on the nineteenth century, historians tended to find "survivals" particularly among the top and the bottom social strata of society. It was easy, therefore, to conceptualize them as the remains of an "old society" which the nineteenth century struggled generally successfully to transcend. Harold Perkin's *Origins of Modern English Society*, published in 1969, was a book that illustrated the power of this kind of framework.

Perkin's work was a serious attempt to reconcile the presence of sociopolitical continuities within the paradigmatic framework of transformation and change. His account revolved around the process of class accommodation and stabilization. Between 1815 and the 1840s, various "ideals" competed to be the defining ideology of the nation, a process Perkin termed the battle for the mind. The mainstream of historical evolution in Perkin's narrative was represented by the "entrepreneurial" ideal of the middle classes which drew support from renegade members of the lower and upper classes and was interpreted and humanized by the floating class of intellectuals. Only the "aristocratic" ideal which represented a revitalized paternalism really put up much of a contest against the ascendant "entrepreneurial" ideal. Ultimately, of course, paternalism had no future and by the early nineteenth century it had succumbed to the superior arguments of the entrepreneurial idea. This victory was a particularly neat solution to the difficulty of nineteenth-century "survivals." It removed the "problem" of a continued aristocratic presence in government, for example, because the aristocrats could be seen to speak the language and follow the policies of the entrepreneurial middle class.

In imagining Victorian England as a site of battle between the forces of civilized progress represented by the middle class and the uncivilized past represented by sections of the plebeians and patricians, Perkin was well within conventional historiographical boundaries. Perkin's account was serious and scholarly. Not all accounts had the qualities that Perkin brought to bear, however. More commonly, the weakness of the conceptual framework lay just beneath the surface of the historical accounts. Thus, "survivals" could be treated as the scars that marked Victorian society's recent emergence "from the animalism and brutality of primitive society." The past was an "unlawful" time of dog fights, public

[11] On the concept of survivals, see Robert Nisbet, "Ethnocentrism and the Comparative Method," in A. R. Desai, *Essays on the Modernization of Underdeveloped Societies* (Bombay, 1971), pp. 109–11.

hangings, pillories and the like. Victorian society was distinguished by the coming of "order."[12]

Yet "survivals" do not necessarily betoken deviation from a progressive norm. They might disclose a counternarrative that also provides an authentic description of the society. After all, evidence of survivals littered the landscape of Victorian society. The last public hanging took place in 1868, and skimmingtons,[13] dog fights and other rude practices were far from unknown in early and mid-Victorian England. What is truly interesting about this conception of the nineteenth century as having finally escaped from the "old" society, however, is the commentary it contains about the eighteenth century.

Two competing views of the eighteenth century are on offer from historians of the eighteenth century. One view presents the eighteenth century as an *ancien régime* where the themes of tradition were dominant; another view argues for the leading role of bourgeois culture of the middling classes. The former perspective proposes a "long eighteenth century" in which an Anglican aristocracy retained its grip on politics and society until 1832. The alternative perspective on the eighteenth century is that of a period of vibrant growth and expansion where urban centers provided the sites for middle-class identity and consciousness to be "made" and its political, social and cultural programs projected into society.[14]

Each of these views of the eighteenth century challenges the typical assumptions that underlie nineteenth-century historiography. Neither view is compatible with the conception of the nineteenth century as the

[12] For representative examples of both the recognition of continuities and their treatment as anachronistic survivals, see G. Kitson Clark, *Making of Victorian England*, pp. 59–63, 206–10, 277, from whom these quotes are taken; G. Kitson Clark, *An Expanding Society: Britain 1830–1900* (Cambridge, 1967), pp. 10, 12–13, 18, 20, 28. The notion of an "old society" is central to the analytical schema of Perkin's *Origins of Modern English Society*.

[13] Skimmingtons were demonstrations of popular disapproval of individual moral behavior usually associated with cases of adultery. The offender(s) would be subject to raucous clamor – loud music, it was called – by a crowd gathered specifically for the purpose.

[14] For the *ancien régime* interpretation of the period, see, of course, J. C. D. Clark, *English Society 1688–1832: Ideology, Social Structure and Political Practice During the Ancien Régime* (Cambridge, 1985), and J. C. D. Clark, *Revolution and Rebellion: State and Society in England in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Cambridge, 1986). For the more widely accepted interpretation of the eighteenth century as a middle-class century, see Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England 1727–1783* (Oxford, 1989), and Langford, *Public Life and the Propertied Englishman 1689–1798: The Ford Lectures Delivered in the University of Oxford* (Oxford, 1991); Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and J. H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (Bloomington, 1982); Roy Porter and John Brewer (eds.), *Consumption and the World of Goods* (London, 1993); Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1832* (New Haven, 1992). Eighteenth-century historians have not given much thought to this issue, either, although some, like J. C. D. Clark, have been more willing to confront the conceptual assumptions of their historiography than most nineteenth-century historians.

hinge of modernity. Equally, neither supports more recent tendencies in nineteenth-century scholarship to treat the century as merely another variant of a ''traditional'' society. A long eighteenth century casts doubt on the transformations of the early nineteenth century, and a modernized eighteenth century diminishes both the modernity and the traditionalism of the nineteenth century. Yet why do we need to plump for either an aristocratic or a bourgeois eighteenth century? Is it necessary to favor a nineteenth century of continuity or an eighteenth century of change? The answer to those questions according to the argument of this book is that we do not, and, furthermore, that a more encompassing interpretation of both centuries is possible.

Although the dominant tone of nineteenth-century historiography has been to privilege the paradigm of change, undercurrents of doubt have always existed. The centrality of gradualism to economic change was the main narrative line of the best economic history of the pre-Second World War period.[15] One of the most sophisticated presentations of an alternative conception of British history that rested on the great arch of continuity was made by Perry Anderson in the 1960s during the celebrated ''peculiarities of the English'' debate between Anderson, Tom Nairn and Edward Thompson.[16] The brilliant forensic and intellectual talents of Edward Thompson effectively closed off the openings suggested by Anderson and Nairn, yet it is not clear that this scored a gain for historical knowledge. More recently, the alternative paradigm of continuity has attained a prominent influence in economic history where ingenious reworkings of existing statistical series seemed to provide it with a solid empirical footing. At the same time, a revitalized version of continuity as the central organizing principle of the historical material flowed into political and social history on the tide of post-structuralist philosophy.

Post-structuralism confronted British social history in the guise of a theory of representation that placed language at the center of our understanding of social processes. As such, post-structuralism posed a direct challenge to the positivist foundations of most of the traditional historiography. In brief, the main consequence of post-modernist thinking has been to provide theoretical support for the revisionist emphasis on continuity as the consistent theme to nineteenth-century history. Traditional

[15] J. H. Clapham's three-volume *Economic History of Modern Britain* (Cambridge, 1926–37) projected a nuanced view of economic change in this period. The same was also true of the works of E. Lipson, such as *The Economic History of England* (1st edn., London, 1931), vol. III.

[16] Perry Anderson, ''The Origins of the Present Crisis,'' in Perry Anderson and Robin Blackburn, *Towards Socialism* (Ithaca, 1966), pp. 11–52; E. P. Thompson, ''The Peculiarities of the English,'' in Ralph Miliband and John Saville (eds.), *The Socialist Register* (London, 1965), pp. 311–62.

historiography treated the popular radicalism of the late nineteenth century, for example, as fundamentally different from the radicalism of the early nineteenth century. Revisionist scholarship (not all of which was theoretically self-conscious) began to emphasize the continuities that ran through popular political movements during the century. Similarly, whereas the older historiography treated social relations as inherently conflictual, revisionism highlighted the unproblematic nature of elite authority, particularly over the "long" eighteenth century to 1832. One way of understanding the drift of revisionist history in this field is to say that it has inverted the main themes of positivist-based history of the nineteenth century. Revisionism has tended to turn the "survivals" of the past into the defining elements of nineteenth-century history. The logic of revisionism, for example, is to treat middle-class power as the anomaly in the nineteenth century, and landowning power as the norm; class as the deviation, crossclass solidarity as the standard.[17]

My own beginning for this book, then, lay in a contemplation of these various and contradictory themes in the historiography. The problem they presented, of course, could be resolved by selecting one or other as capturing a meaningful narrative of the nineteenth century. Yet I was not inclined to choose between the broad alternative conceptual approaches and emphases that were on offer. Nor was I inclined to try and reconcile their different approaches. I no more wanted to dismiss class conflict than I did the tendencies that made for class cooperation, for example. Although the notion of an "industrial revolution" in the late eighteenth century was increasingly problematic, the fact of economic change and growth still required explanation. I did not want to opt for an eighteenth century that was either an age of aristocracy *or* populated by the "commercial and polite" middle classes any more than I wanted to privilege the landowning elite *or* the urban bourgeoisie in the nineteenth century. Binary opposites belong in mother boards, not in history.

The difficulty, it appeared to me, originated in the place the nineteenth century was imagined to occupy in the chronology of British history. It

[17] J. C. D. Clark, *English Society*, reduces radicalism to the disaffected, very minor sects of Protestant dissent. For an emphasis upon continuities in popular politics and social relations, see, for example, Eugenio Biagini and Alastair Reid (eds.), *Currents of Radicalism: Popular Radicalism, Organized Labour and Party Politics in Britain 1850–1914* (Cambridge, 1991); Eugenio Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform: Popular Liberalism in the Age of Gladstone 1860–1880* (Cambridge, 1992); Patrick Joyce, *Democratic Subjects: The Self and the Social in Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1994). For a critique of these trends, see Richard Price, "Languages of Revisionism: Historians and Popular Politics in Nineteenth-Century Britain," *Journal of Social History*, 30, 1 (Fall 1996), pp. 229–51. For the conservative implications of this revisionism, see David Mayfield and Susan Thorne, "Social History and Its Discontents: Gareth Stedman Jones and the Politics of Language," *Social History*, 17, 2 (May 1992), pp. 165–88.