CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-009-26885-1 — The Year That Shaped the Victorian Age
Michael Wheeler
Excerpt
More Information

Introduction

On 17 March 1845 Stephen Perry of St John's Wood, Middlesex, and Thomas Barnabas Daft, a Birmingham manufacturer, obtained a patent 'for Improvements in Springs to be applied to Girths, Belts and Bandages, and Improvements in the Manufacture of Elastic Bands'.[1] The rubber band was born. Three years earlier, the American chemist Thomas Goodyear had exhibited examples of cured rubber in London. Thomas Hancock of Marlborough, the 'father of rubber' in England, took out a provisional patent on a form of vulcanization in 1844. Although Hancock was to hold sixteen patents associated with the use of rubber by 1847, he omitted to include the manufacture of bands. Perry, who knew Hancock, seized his chance. This blend of invention, competition and entrepreneurism is typical of early Victorian business practice. It helped to make Birmingham the workshop of the world.

Invaluable though 'elastic bands' proved to be, Perry was not a hero of the kind that Samuel Smiles was to immortalize in the 1860s.[2] These were the titans of the industrial revolution, the civil engineers who designed and built the canals, harbours, turnpike roads, bridges, tunnels and railways that made up the modern infra-structure of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. On 26 July 1845 the SS *Great Britain*, designed by Isambard Kingdom Brunel, left Liverpool on the first

© in this web service Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-009-26885-1 — The Year That Shaped the Victorian Age
Michael Wheeler
Excerpt
More Information

transatlantic crossing by an iron-built steamship. Among the visitors who paid to look around the world's largest vessel on the day before it disembarked was a sceptical Jane Welsh Carlyle, who wrote home to her husband, Thomas, 'Well! I *did* the Great Britain. It is three hundred and twenty feet long and fifty feet broad – and all of iron – and has six sails – and one pays a shilling to see it – and it was *not* "a good joy." All these prodigious efforts for facillitating [*sic*] locomotion seem to me a highly questionable investment of human faculty – people need rather to be taught to sit still.'[3] Brunel's monster ship ran aground at Dundrum Bay in Ireland in 1846, due to a navigational error. After a long and somewhat chequered career, the vessel was eventually scuttled. The project to raise and restore her was led by late twentieth-century entrepreneurs, and she is now a museum ship in Bristol.

Triumph and disaster were frequent bedfellows in the heady days of early Victorian industrial history. On 3 May 1845 the opening of Brunel's Hungerford suspension bridge was celebrated in the *Illustrated London News*, now in its fourth successful year: the footbridge was 'a remarkable work of construction and mechanical skill'.[4] The same could not be said of the Yarmouth suspension bridge, which collapsed the previous day, when a large crowd gathered on the footbridge to witness a stunt in which a clown in a washing tub was drawn down the river drawn by four geese. Seventy-nine people died, most of them women and children. Characteristically, the *Illustrated London News* included graphic details of the state of the corpses in an article headed by a moralizing poem, the refrain of which reads, 'And such is Life! the

© in this web service Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-009-26885-1 — The Year That Shaped the Victorian Age
Michael Wheeler
Excerpt
More Information

brightest hour / Doth oft precede the tempest's gloom – / And in the march of Glory's pow'r, / Perhaps we're treading on the tomb!'[5] Two weeks later the paper again printed improving verse when marking Captain Sir John Franklin's departure from Greenhithe, on the fated voyage of discovery in HMS *Erebus* and HMS *Terror* that was to end in the icy wastes of the Canadian Arctic. There are dangerous times ahead, but our prayer shall be, 'after years you have perchance to roam / That science crown'd you safely seek your home!'[6]

Like this historic voyage, there was hope at the beginning of the year 1845. Consider two retrospects, the first from the *Annual Register* of 1846:

> The commencement of the year 1845 may be described as presenting, upon the whole, a more than usually tranquil and prosperous aspect of public affairs. The harvest of the preceding autumn had been a productive one, trade was brisk, the manufacturing class well employed, and the abundance of capital was testified, among other symptoms, by the unprecedented number of new railway undertakings, more than 200 schemes being prepared at the commencement of the session to apply for legislative powers. The revenue gave symptoms of continued advance … The spirit of political parties in England was more than usually calm.[7]

Second, *Punch*, in the introduction to its bound volume containing the year's weekly numbers: 'The year 1845 began very auspiciously. The harvest had been good, although the agriculturalists still complained loudly, and trade was generally prosperous. The Revenue had improved and the great increase of Railway undertakings gave evidence of the monetary conditions of the people.'[8]

© in this web service Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-009-26885-1 — The Year That Shaped the Victorian Age
Michael Wheeler
Excerpt
More Information

The theme of Britain's prosperity was taken up in the House of Commons on 4 February 1845, when the address that followed the Queen's Speech was seconded by one of the most powerful men in the country. Thomas Baring, a Tory politician and partner in the great merchant bank of Barings, specialized in foreign loans, including for railway construction. The *Annual Register* reported that Baring

> spoke in terms of great satisfaction on the flourishing prospects of the iron manufacture, and on the improved condition of the shipping interest. The cotton manufacture, and still more the woollen trade – the latter of which indicated an improved condition of the poorer classes – were also prosperous. The same was the case with the manufactures of flax, hemp and silk. Our imports and exports had both increased, as was evident from the Custom-house returns on tea, coffee, sugar and tobacco. This prosperity had acted on the finances of the country, which now appeared in a very satisfactory condition.[9]

On imports and exports, the *Companion to the Almanac* reported that in the calendar year 1844 Britain had a trade surplus of £58.3 million, an increase on the previous year of £6.4 million. The figure for 1845 was £59.8 million, a much smaller increase, which reflected the fact that this proved to be a difficult year.[10]

Those who opened their morning newspapers on New Year's Day 1845 knew that the picture was not entirely rosy. Readers of *The Times* were presented with a leading article that began positively enough, celebrating the fact that 1844 had been, 'beyond all recorded parallel, a year of successful peace', and that at home it had been 'marked by the absence of any serious political agitation'; the

© in this web service Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-009-26885-1 — The Year That Shaped the Victorian Age
Michael Wheeler
Excerpt
More Information

Anti–Corn Law League had been 'stroked down to civility, and almost to silence, by some concession and much prosperity'; and new legislation promised to 'impart to Ireland at last the duties and the blessings of the British rule'.[11] But the first leader ended with a reminder of the urgent 'Condition of England Question':

> Pity that there should be one dark spot to mar the prospect of this retrospect, and this still brighter future. But that one is too dark, too large to be hidden, and will be told. The nation thrives, but the people deteriorate. The Irish peasant and the English labourer have not seen this year [1844] any remission of their wretchedness. The sun of prosperity shines, but not for them. The departing year has left their condition *the* subject of the day.

Thomas Carlyle had struck the keynote of the decade in the opening words of *Past and Present* (1843):

> The condition of England, on which many pamphlets are now in the course of publication, and many thoughts unpublished are going on in every reflective head, is justly regarded as one of the most ominous, and withal one of the strangest, ever seen in this world. England is full of wealth, of multifarious produce, supply for human want in every kind; yet England is dying of inanition.[12]

The ominous nature of this yawning gulf between rich and poor was emphasized in an 1845 article, 'The New Year', in the *Illustrated London News*, which echoed the leader in *The Times*, published three days earlier:

> Peace and plenty are much, but they are not all; and, examining more closely, the brightness of the picture is not without shadows, and dark ones too. The external peace is not internal content; in the plenty all do not participate; and far down in the depths of society lie restless, unquiet and dangerous elements. To deal with these is becoming more and more the engrossing question.[13]

© in this web service Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-009-26885-1 — The Year That Shaped the Victorian Age
Michael Wheeler
Excerpt
More Information

On New Year's Day 1845 Benjamin Disraeli, a future Tory prime minister, started work on a novel that directly addressed this question. *Sybil; or, The Two Nations*, which was published in May, contains a graphic account of a union's secret initiation ceremony, in which Dandy Mick swears, 'in the presence of Almighty God', to fulfil the commands of the grand committee, 'such as the chastisement of Nobs, the assassination of oppressive and tyrannical masters, or the demolition of all mills, works and shops that shall be deemed by us incorrigible'.[14] And the novel's denouement follows a 'brutal riot' in which the heroine's father is shot dead and the despised Lord Marney 'literally stoned to death'.[15] Memories were stirred of bloody confrontations between rioters and the yeomanry that had occurred during periods of economic depression following victory at Waterloo. Disraeli was fascinated by Chartism, a working-class reform movement that was regarded with deep suspicion by householders and ratepayers, for whom it was one of the 'restless, unquiet and dangerous elements' that lay 'far down in the depths of society'.

As the *Times* leader put it so starkly, 'the people deteriorate'. The census of 1841 had shown that, out of a population of 18.7 million in Great Britain, professionals, civil servants and 'Other educated Persons following Miscellaneous Pursuits' totalled only 222,979.[16] 'The people' included 3.1 million individuals engaged in commerce, trade and manufacture; 1.5 million in agriculture; and 1.2 million in domestic service. Also listed were 761,868 labourers and 199,069 'alms-people'. The population of Ireland stood at about 8.5 million in 1845. In the years of famine that followed, around one million people

© in this web service Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-009-26885-1 — The Year That Shaped the Victorian Age
Michael Wheeler
Excerpt
More Information

died and another million emigrated. The Queen's Speech, delivered to parliament in person on 4 February 1845, ended with the twenty-five-year-old Victoria's 'earnest prayer that you may be enabled, under the superintending care and protection of Divine Providence, to strengthen the feelings of mutual confidence and good-will between different classes of my subjects, and to improve the condition of my people'.[17]

Historians of early Victorian Britain and Ireland have described the first full decade of the young queen's reign as the 'hungry forties', a period of acute suffering among the poor. Historians are also agreed that 1848 was the critical year in this decade, with revolutions breaking out across continental Europe, the threat of Chartist riots and mass insurrection at home, and radical developments in literature and the arts. In my view, however, it was three years earlier, in the crucible of 1845, that the most powerful nation on earth was first tested by the extreme challenges associated with rapid social change and experienced a series of crises: in the workhouses of the new poor law, where death was the poor man's friend; in parliament, where a failed harvest and potato blight in Ireland made Peel's abolition of the Corn Laws inevitable; in the established Church of England, which was rocked by the Maynooth grant and by John Henry Newman's conversion to Rome; and in the expanding railway system, where frequent accidents put lives at risk and 'railway mania' led to the ruin of many small investors. While acknowledging that history is not neatly parcelled up into calendar years and that some of these stories extend into the months that precede and follow 1845, I believe that Victorian England defined itself in response to these and other challenges in

© in this web service Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-009-26885-1 — The Year That Shaped the Victorian Age
Michael Wheeler
Excerpt
More Information

what Dickens's biographer, John Forster, described as 'that prodigious year of excitement and disaster'.[18]

* * *

Commentary on poverty, Ireland, the established church and the railways took many forms in 1845, ranging from speeches in parliament and political pamphlets to tracts and sermons, novels and poems, paintings and cartoons, essays in periodicals, articles in newspapers, open letters to newspaper editors and private correspondence. A communication revolution, effected by the rapid growth of the railway network and the introduction of the uniform penny post in 1840, was now in full swing: ideas and information were exchanged faster and more efficiently between 'educated Persons' than ever before. It is by reading their private letters that the modern reader is taken behind the scenes as the leading figures of the day play out their roles on the national stage.

What strikes the researcher in the major collections of Victorian manuscripts, housed mainly in the United Kingdom and the United States, is the sheer quantity of correspondence generated by prominent people from all walks of life in the early Victorian period. Hundreds of letters from and to writers and artists form the core of the great literary archives, most of which have collaborated with scholars in the publication of print editions of letters, and are now making digital images of their most important letters available online. National collections hold the letters of leading figures in public life. Although these figures had secretaries who either wrote their employers' letters to dictation or transcribed them in letter or copy books, senior professionals such as judges, generals,

© in this web service Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-009-26885-1 — The Year That Shaped the Victorian Age
Michael Wheeler
Excerpt
More Information

bishops and ministers of state, including prime ministers, generally wrote several letters each day, using a dip pen and inkstand while resting their paper – often a quarto sheet folded once – on a desk or table, or on a portable writing 'slope' or 'desk' when travelling. Reference was often made to such practicalities in correspondence, as when Dickens wrote to Forster from Lausanne, 'The ink stand is to be cleaned out to-night, and refilled, preparatory to execution. I trust I may shed a good deal of ink in the next fortnight.'[19] Progress with the early chapters of *Dombey and Son* was to be measured by the amount of ink that flowed in 1846. The number of dip pens wielded by a group of talented individuals working on a shared project was another measure of progress. In December 1845, with the first issue of the *Daily News* in prospect, Dickens announced in a letter that he had 'every reason to believe (knowing what pens will be at work)' that the newspaper would be 'extremely well written'.[20] When Oxford high churchmen were campaigning in defence of Ward and Newman, early in 1845, Gladstone wrote to his friend Henry Edward Manning, the future cardinal, 'I am glad to find that several pens are in motion.'[21]

In modern parlance, these prominent early Victorians often worked from home. The boundaries between private and public lives are often blurred, as personal letters, written with the same pen and at the same desk as official notes, offer direct access to inner thoughts and feelings relating to both spheres. Figures like Gladstone and Newman shared such thoughts and feelings with a close circle of trusted friends and allies, frequently enclosing the correspondence of others – the equivalent of forwarding an email or of adding an attachment – in order to

© in this web service Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-009-26885-1 — The Year That Shaped the Victorian Age
Michael Wheeler
Excerpt
More Information

expedite conversations within the group. It is estimated that 20,000 of Newman's letters are extant.[22] One of his correspondents, Bishop Samuel Wilberforce, averaged 6,430 letters per annum, according to his son Reginald, and on one occasion simultaneously dictated four letters to secretaries while writing a fifth himself.[23] In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, authors of the 'lives and letters' of such individuals often included reproductions of one or two original letters among their illustrations. Today such samples are available to readers on their screens, accessed by searching for 'autograph letter signed online', together with the name of the author. (When the handwriting is particularly difficult to decipher, as in the case of Isambard Kingdom Brunel, transcription computer programmes are coming to the rescue.)

Like other dynamos of the Faraday era, such as Dickens and Brunel, the architect Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin travelled widely and wrote letters en route. On Saturday 7 June 1845 he wrote to his colleague Charles Barry from the morning steamer between London and Ramsgate, countering a story in the press: he always made it clear that he was engaged by and for Barry, to 'carry into practical execution the minor details of the decorations' according to his designs for the new Palace of Westminster.[24] The following month he wrote from Ireland to his friend Revd John Rouse Bloxam, a member of Newman's high Anglican circle in Oxford: 'I am at present in Dublin where I have been sent by Government on the Manooth business. it is very probable that I shall execute the new buildings at the college – this will be a grand step towards the revival of ecclestical architure in Ireland.'[25] (Pugin's formal education was

© in this web service Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org