

THE YEAR THAT SHAPED THE VICTORIAN AGE

What was special about 1845 and why does it deserve particular scrutiny? In his much-anticipated new book, one of the leading authorities on the Victorian age argues that this was the critical year in a decade that witnessed revolution on continental Europe, the threat of mass insurrection at home and radical developments in railway transport, communications, religion, literature and the arts. The effects of the new poor law now became visible in the workhouses; a potato blight started in Ireland, heralding the Great Famine; and the Church of England was rocked to its foundations by John Henry Newman's conversion to Roman Catholicism. What Victorian England became was moulded, says Michael Wheeler, in the crucible of 1845. Exploring pivotal correspondence, together with pamphlets, articles and cartoons, the author tells the riveting story of a seismic epoch through the lives, loves and letters of leading contemporaneous figures.

Michael Wheeler is a leading cultural historian of the Victorian age. His books with Cambridge University Press include the prize-winning *Heaven, Hell and the Victorians* (1994), *Ruskin's God* (1999), *The Old Enemies* (2006) and *St John and the Victorians* (2011). His most recent work is *The Athenaeum* (2020). He has lectured in eighteen countries outside the United Kingdom.

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THE YEAR THAT SHAPED THE VICTORIAN AGE

LIVES, LOVES AND LETTERS
OF 1845

MICHAEL WHEELER

Visiting Professor
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To Chris and Greg

That prodigious year of excitement and disaster ...

—John Forster, *Life of Charles Dickens*

I am glad to find that several pens are in motion.

—Gladstone to Manning, 18 January 1845

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PREFACE

In my book *The Old Enemies* (Cambridge University Press) I described 1845 as ‘a year of religious crises’. Later, when looking at broader trends that year, I was surprised by the sustained intensity of crises that also arose in three other areas of national life: Ireland, the ‘Condition of England’ and the railways. Deep concern about each of these areas stimulated the writing of open letters to the newspapers and of hastily prepared pamphlets, many of which took the form of open ‘letters’ addressed to a well-known figure or to a real or fictitious ‘friend’. Equally surprising was the fact that so many leading members of the Victorian pantheon underwent formative changes in their lives, or significant changes of heart and mind, in 1845. They include Sir Robert Peel, William Ewart Gladstone, Elizabeth Barrett, Robert Browning, Jane Welsh Carlyle, Thomas Carlyle, John Henry Newman and John Ruskin. It was in their private letters that these individuals most vividly articulated and communicated a sense of crisis or transition in their own lives and in the life of the nation. And these letters were exchanged faster than ever before, thanks to a communication revolution effected by the introduction of the uniform penny post in 1840 and the expansion of the railway network. By focusing upon private and open letters of 1845, this book offers a fresh portrait of the early Victorian age.

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I begin with a section on three public scandals. The opening of letters to and from the nationalist exile Giuseppe Mazzini and others was the subject of long and acrimonious debates in the House of Commons. Sir James Graham, the Tory home secretary, knew that he would always be remembered as the man who opened Mazzini's mail, and also that of Thomas Slingsby Duncombe, the Radical MP who led the attack against him. The emphasis in Chapter 1 falls upon private and open letters that feature in or illuminate these debates on covert letter-opening by the Post Office. Two individuals whose views on railway speculators were influential in 1845 play leading roles in Chapter 2, which begins with John Thaddeus Delane, editor of *The Times*, and ends with Charles Dickens and his brief editorship of the *Daily News*, which was launched in the railway interest. Two kinds of crash associated with the burgeoning railway system dominated the news. First, there were the frequent accidents on the track, which terrified passengers, infuriated commentators and inspired eyewitnesses to write letters to the editor of *The Times*. Second, John Leech's *Punch* cartoon, 'The Railway Juggernaut of 1845', with its widow clutching bags of money by way of tribute to the false god 'Speculation', crystallizes a widely shared concern that the railway mania would lead to personal financial catastrophes and a crash in the market. Meanwhile, paupers in the Andover workhouse were so malnourished that they gnawed the foul bones they were set to crush for fertiliser. Public outrage was fuelled by open letters to the press, and much of the evidence presented to subsequent inquiries turned upon official and private letters. In Chapter 3 some of the impassioned

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open letters to *The Times* on the poor law by the Hon. and Revd Sydney Godolphin Osborne and others are presented as outstanding examples of the kind and as key documents in the history of the ‘Condition of England Question’.

In sharp contrast to these open letters, designed to influence public opinion, the intimate letters examined in Part II are privately addressed to one other person and are expressive of heightened emotion. On 10 January 1845 Robert Browning opened a life-changing correspondence with Elizabeth Barrett that would lead to friendship, then to love and eventually to marriage, on 12 September 1846, and a secret journey to Italy a week later. Chapter 4 considers the relationship between the composition, delivery and receipt of the letters of 1845 and the hopes, delays and frustrations, the self-revelations and emotional transitions they convey.

John Ruskin spent seven months of 1845 in Italy, carrying out research in preparation for the second volume of *Modern Painters*, the book that had already made him famous. The emphasis in Chapter 5 is not upon his letters as travel writing or as indices of his intellectual journey, but rather upon their intrinsic qualities as communications between a son and his father that, though written abroad and taking nine or ten days to arrive, sustain the intimacy of a connection between two difficult and complex personalities who have a ‘strong desire to be speaking’ to one another.

Viewed bibliographically, Thomas Carlyle’s edition of *Oliver Cromwell’s Letters and Speeches* serenely take its place in a list of publications by the most influential writer of his age. Viewed biographically, however, the making of

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this edition contributed to a troubled situation in his domestic life, as revealed in his private correspondence and that of his wife, Jane Welsh Carlyle, famed as a gifted literary hostess and a pre-eminent letter-writer. In Chapter 6 we see Carlyle corresponding with individuals who owned Cromwell letters while also writing intimate notes to the society hostess Lady Harriet Baring, at whose shrine he worshipped like a courtly lover. Jane Carlyle shared her agonies of jealousy and confusion with a cousin, and informed John Forster that her husband was ‘too much occupied with *the Dead* just now to bestow a moment on the Living’.

The established Church of England went through a series of crises in 1845, two of which are the subject of Part III, ‘Oxford Movements’. Chapter 7 considers the clash between the authorities of Oxford University and the Revd William George Ward, whose ‘Romanizing’ ideas were far more radical than those of the founding figures in the Oxford Movement, which was itself highly controversial. The chapter focuses on the almost daily exchange of private letters between key individuals during the crisis surrounding Ward’s ‘degradation’ (removal of degrees), enabling anxieties to be expressed and church party tactics worked out; and, second, on the hasty writing of pamphlets, often in the form of open letters. Chapter 8 examines John Henry Newman’s private letters to friends and members of his family as he turned his face ‘Romeward’. (He converted in October 1845.) The authoritative voice that had captivated a generation of undergraduates in sermons delivered in the university church, later printed in huge numbers, now faltered, as Newman expressed his deepest anxieties about a move

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that would convulse his many disciples and threaten the unity of the Church of England.

Part IV considers three sides of the polygon that is ‘the Irish Question’ in early Victorian politics. Peel proposed to increase and make permanent the Protestant state’s grant to St Patrick’s College, Maynooth, near Dublin, for the training of Roman Catholic priests. Heated and prolonged public debate ensued. Gladstone, who was one of Peel’s ministers, had opposed the grant in principle in his first major publication and yet was later to vote for the legislation after his resignation from the cabinet. Chapter 9 charts Gladstone’s tortuous political and spiritual journey, using his private correspondence with his wife, his cabinet colleagues and his fellow high Anglicans. In response to the acute problem of poverty in Ireland, then part of the United Kingdom, *The Times* sent its own ‘Commissioner’, the English barrister and journalist Thomas Campbell Foster, to report extensively on ‘The Condition of the People of Ireland’ in a long sequence of open letters to the editor. Chapter 10 examines Foster’s eyewitness accounts of poverty and the mismanagement of land, and his running commentary on these subjects. His description of Daniel O’Connell’s own tenantry at Derrynane permanently tarnished the ‘Liberator’s’ name. In the autumn of 1845, as news of a potato blight came in from various parts of Great Britain and Ireland, the prospect of famine in the ‘second island’ began to loom. By December, Peel was convinced that his government would have to save Ireland by abolishing the Corn Laws, that shibboleth of the Tory landed class. Having failed to take his cabinet with him, he stepped aside, only to be reinstated by the queen when Lord

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John Russell failed to form a Whig ministry. Six months later the Corn Laws were abolished and the Tories were out of office. Chapter 11 examines the private political letters exchanged between Peel and Sir James Graham, Richard Cobden and John Bright of the Anti-Corn Law League, and other leading players, on the brink of the ‘great hunger’ in Ireland and the eventual resignation of a prime minister.

The short Afterword considers parallels between the early Victorian age and our own, the most significant of which is that between the communication revolutions of the 1840s and the turn of the twenty-first century, between the uniform penny post and electronic mail.

I am grateful to the British Library, Gladstone’s Library, Hawarden and the National Library of Scotland for permission to quote from MSS in their collections. Also to the staffs of these libraries and of the London Library (who posted books during lockdowns) and the library of the Athenæum, for their assistance. At Cambridge I would like to thank Bethany Thomas, George Laver, Sarah Starkey, Vinithan Sedumadhavan and Stephanie Sakson for their kindness and professionalism.

I have incurred many personal debts, especially to the dedicatees, my friends Professor Chris Walsh and Greg Gardner, both of whom read draft chapters as I went along, and to others with whom I discussed various aspects of the project, including Daniel Brown, Professor David Brown, the Revd Martin Coppen, the Revd Peter Francis, the Revd Terry Hemming, Dr Roger Knight, Mike Shaw and my darling wife Susan Woodhead.

TEXTUAL NOTE

Quotations from manuscript letters contain the following symbols: ^ ^ indicates superscript insertion; < > indicates a cancellation; / > / indicates a word superimposed upon another or the original retraced so as to alter it. In manuscript letters, ellipses as shown appear in the original whereas ellipses in square brackets indicate where I am skipping a passage. Ellipses in other quoted text indicate that I am skipping a passage. Underlining in the original is set in italics, unless otherwise stated.

ABBREVIATIONS

Add MS	Additional Manuscript, British Library
<i>Hansard</i>	<i>Hansard's Parliamentary Debates</i> , 3rd series, Hansard, 1844–45
MP	Member of Parliament
n.d.	no date listed
n.p.	no publisher listed
ODNB	<i>Oxford Dictionary of National Biography</i> (online)
OED	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i> (online)
p.p.	privately printed