THE VICTORIAN AGE IN POLITICS, WAR AND DIPLOMACY

I

If my definition confines the Victorian Age to politics, to arms, and to diplomacy it is not only because limitation leads to clearness. It is because in these three departments there is, I believe, less revision to be done by posterity than elsewhere. In the realms of culture and art for instance some of the Victorian gods have sunk into demigods or been degraded to the condition of mere mortal men. To mention a few names at random, Lord Lytton and Lord Leighton have suffered the doom of too much applause, and figures like Matthew Arnold

and Swinburne, George Eliot and even Tennyson are noticeably diminished in size. In philosophy there is the same tale. Herbert Spencer has vanished beneath a horizon towards which Stuart Mill is slowly sinking. Even in science, where the greatest results were achieved, the discoveries acclaimed in the Victorian Age are not always regarded as final. To take one instance, while the *Origin of Species* was overthrowing political, religious and scientific conceptions everywhere, an obscure monk was meditating among his peas and his beehives in a forgotten abbey in Czecho-Slovakia. The theories of Abbot Mendel, published in an obscure journal—and not appreciated by the world until 1900, are perhaps to-day as penetrating and vital as those of Darwin. And that is a significant comment on the complacency of the Victorian Era, and on its profound belief that its great men, or at least those

whom it thought its great men, had solved all problems and revealed all secrets worth knowing.

II

About the leaders of culture, of science and of thought then in this age opinions still waver, and there are verdicts which may yet be reversed. But warriors, statesmen and diplomats are brought to rough and practical tests in their own time, and are therefore more easily assayed by posterity. Among parliamentarians (reckoning Lord Palmerston and Lord Salisbury as diplomats) four at least were in the first rank. At the beginning of the reign Sir Robert Peel marshalled a dazzling array of talents to atone for a lack of genius. Towards its close Joseph Chamberlain displayed an imagination and energy which are not easily paralleled in our history. In Gladstone the Victorian age found, in the opinion of

a still living statesman, the first of all Parliamentarians. And, whether we follow the dazzling intricacies of his policy in his biography, or merely gaze with the poet on 'the arcane face of the much-wrinkled Jew,' we shall not deny the authentic marks of genius to Disraeli.

Milton's account of the debate of fiends in hell, under the presidency of Satan, is said to have trained the Elder Pitt for his work in the Commons. You, more fortunate than he, can view (not I hope in a presidential capacity) every turn of fence in that famed series of oratorical duels between Gladstone and Disraeli and compare them with those in which the younger Pitt engaged with Fox and Canning with Brougham. A cursory reading of these speeches will in each case assign the palm to the most literary efforts—to those of Pitt, Canning and Disraeli. But a more careful study will reveal in the less adorned words of

their rivals some of that debating superiority which renders an argument irresistible for one moment of time and unreadable for the rest of eternity.

There were great men indeed in the Victorian Age, yet the movements were greater than the men, which means that the common man, the man in the counting-house or in the shop, was the greatest man of all. Institutions, laws, ideas, movements obeyed his behest or were moulded in his image. It was the age of an emancipated and emancipating middle-class, a precise age, a complacent age, which sincerely depreciated all preceding ages. A poet has pictured a great writer (whose name I suppress because he was also a historian) as the Emperor of this bourgeois Olympus, satirising other times in comparison with his own, 'pointing out how much things had improved since the days when the gods were unbreeched savages, content with

a monotonous diet of ambrosia, and drinking doubtful nectar in place of [Victorian] Madeira[1].' To-day at least we cannot think that the London of the Great Exhibition of 1851 had a conspicuous superiority over the Queen of the Adriatic or the City of the Violet Crown.

III

Of all political developments—except one—the greatest was in that of the prestige of the sovereign. Everyone knows I think that Queen Victoria adopted the title of Empress after a reign of forty years. Does anyone know that George the Third refused to accept it after reigning the same period? Here is the evidence in a diplomatic despatch of Canning's in 1825. 'His late Majesty George III was advised at the time of the Union with Ireland in compensation for His Majesty's abandonment, then

1 Francis Thompson (1902), *Works*, III. 223.

voluntarily made of the Title of King of France, which had been so long annexed to the Crown of England, to assume the title of Emperor of the British and Hanoverian Dominions; but His late Majesty felt that His true dignity consisted in His being known to Europe and the World, by the appropriated and undisputed style belonging to the British Crown[1].' Is it not evident that when Queen Victoria accepted what George the Third had refused, she was displaying a type of monarchy more self-confident, more consciously splendid, and more definitely desirous, as Disraeli said, of operating on the minds and imaginations of her subjects, and particularly of her Oriental subjects?

But it was not only this carefully staged appeal that moved the hearts of subjects. Monarchy arose from its ashes

1 Stapleton's *Political Life of Canning* [1831], II. 361-2 *note*.

under Victoria. George the Fourth, chiefly through the scandals of his Royal Divorce Bill, had endangered his dynasty as well as his throne. On his death, *The Times* criticised the late monarch, adding that they had 'not floated down the putrid stream of flattery.' Peel exclaimed that he did not think the Monarchy could last more than five or six years. William the Fourth indeed did something to regain the lost popularity of the Monarchy, but Greville tells us how the young Queen appeared in public early in her reign on one occasion, and that no one raised a hat or a cheer. Can we imagine any such welcome to royalty as possible nowadays?

One reason of royal unpopularity was undoubtedly the active attempt of the third and fourth George to intervene personally in politics. A more subtle cause was the old Whig theory of the revolution which regarded resistance to

the Crown as a glorious duty in 1688 and desired to make the King of England as powerless as the Doge of Venice. This tradition of putting the sovereign in her place plainly inspired Lord Palmerston in his notorious struggle with the Crown. And Lord John Russell, whom Queen Victoria at length induced to dismiss Lord Palmerston, reminded that lady on a later occasion that revolution was the origin of the present form of Government and dynasty. The tradition of 1688, you see, died slowly and hard.

IV

An increase in the Empire has usually meant an increase in the popularity of the Crown. Certainly as dominions scatter and increase the only binding link is the broad gold circle of the Crown, and the only possible head is the crowned head. General Smuts pointed out that an elective ruler in a hetero-

geneous empire, comprising self-governing democracies, is an impossibility. A hereditary ruler prevents contested elections and represents in historic, visible and majestic strength the only permanent symbol of imperial unity.

During the first years of Victoria's reign the colonies were seething with unrest; Frenchmen were in revolt in Canada, Englishmen in Jamaica, Boers had seceded from Cape Colony, and mutinous convicts were being transported to Australia. New Zealand alone was tranquil perhaps because British settlement was just beginning there. During the next sixty years all except one of these turbulent democracies settled down quietly beneath the sway of the Crown, and the Home Government finally reduced that one to submission by the aid of all the others. The secret of harmony is to be found in Durham's famous report on Responsible Govern-