

DEVELOPMENT OF ENGLISH SOCIETY Edited by Dorothy Marshall

Janet Roebuck

# THE MAKING OF MODERN ENGLISH SOCIETY FROM 1850



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## The Making of Modern English Society from 1850

# *Development of English Society*

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*Dorothy Marshall*

Formerly Reader in History in the University of Wales

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# The Making of Modern English Society from 1850

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Routledge & Kegan Paul  
London, Melbourne and Henley

*First published in 1973  
by Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd  
39 Store Street, London WC1E 7DD,  
9 Park Street, Boston, Mass. 02108, USA,  
296 Beaconsfield Parade, Middle Park,  
Melbourne, 3206, Australia, and  
Broadway House, Newtown Road,  
Henley-on-Thames, Oxon RG9 1EN*

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005.

“To purchase your own copy of this or any of Taylor & Francis or Routledge’s collection of thousands of eBooks please go to [www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk](http://www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk).”

*Second edition 1982*

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ISBN 0-203-99247-4 Master e-book ISBN

*ISBN 0-7100-0415-X (Print Edition)*

## Series Editor's Preface

It is a truism that 'of the making of books there is no end' but, at least with regard to the study of history, there are two cogent reasons why this should be so. One is that each decade sees the examination of more and more source material as the increasing flood of research continues to rise. This in itself can necessitate the revision of older views and older certainties in the light of new knowledge. But even if no new material were available there would still be a need for new books because every generation asks its own questions and demands its own answers that make, or at least attempt to make, sense to contemporaries. The nineteenth-century student of history was concerned mainly with the world of politics, with the growth of the constitutional monarchy and of religious and personal freedom. Then with the turn of the century men began to ask different questions, questions concerned with the industrial society in which they lived, and Archdeacon Cunningham produced his pioneering work, *The Growth of English Industry and Commerce*. For the first decades of the twentieth century the emphasis was on economic rather than social developments, though to begin with there was no very clear distinction between them. As economic history became more technical there also emerged a growing interest on the part of the non-specialist public in the everyday life of their ancestors, and the success of G.M.Trevelyan's *Social History* demonstrated how widespread the appetite for this kind of information was. Meanwhile the growth of the welfare state incited more and more people to ask questions about the history of the society in which they lived. How, for instance, had the relationships between the various layers which comprised it altered over the centuries? How far was social structure determined by economic factors? To what extent did the distribution of wealth within a society determine its form of government, both national and local? To what extent were ways of thought and attitudes towards religion, social problems, changing as the structure of society changed? The questions are endless.

It would be presumptuous to suggest that this series on 'The Development of English Society' can even begin to answer them. Its aim is the much more modest one of sketching out the major ways in which English society, seen as an entity, has developed from the England of the Anglo-Saxons to the England of Elizabeth II. Each volume is a separate study of a period of significant change, as seen by a specialist on that period. Because each period presents different problems there can be no uniform pattern of treatment. Each author must make his or her own decisions as to where to place the emphasis in each phase of development. Nevertheless it is hoped that, taken as a whole, the series will provide some answers to the question 'How did we get from there to here?' This series is not therefore intended for specialists or to add to the volume of existing research; it is designed primarily for students whose courses, one hopes, will be enriched by a greater understanding of the main trends and developments in English society. It is intended to be a background book, not a textbook, and as such the series should appeal to that increasingly wide circle of readers who while not wanting to be bombarded by too much detail and too many facts, are interested in tracing back to its roots English society as we know it today.

The story of the development of English society after 1851 is one of great interest because of its relevance to modern problems but also of great complexity, because there are so many strands which must be woven into it. The task of the historian who attempts to delineate even its main features is a difficult one. There are too many threads to follow and too much evidence of every kind, often contradictory and biased, to be evaluated. The most that is possible within the compass of a volume of this size is to pick out and concentrate on the dominant threads that together make up the complicated fabric of modern English society. Even then there will be differences of opinion as to the selection. In her contribution to this series Dr Roebuck has laid her main emphasis on the development of an urban class society in which, under the pressure of two world wars, the state has played an increasing role and which has seen tremendous improvements, both material and cultural, in the standard of living of the great mass of the people. It may come as a surprise to many readers to realize how much has been accomplished in this field and how great the changes in English society have been since 1851.

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# Acknowledgments

The author and publishers wish to thank the following for kind permission to reproduce in this volume the works cited, or extracts from them:

Miss Sonia Brownell and Secker & Warburg for *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, ed. by S.Orwell and I.Angus.

Cambridge University Press for *Abstract of British Historical Statistics* by B.R.Mitchell and P.Deane.

Frank Cass & Company Ltd for *London Labour and the London Poor* by Henry Mayhew.

Chatto & Windus Ltd and Oxford University Press for *The Uses of Literacy* by Richard Hoggart.

Dobson Books and Doubleday & Company Inc. for *Bagehot's Historical Essays* ed. by Norman St-John Stevas.

Heinemann Educational Books Ltd and the Macmillan Company for *The Worker in an Affluent Society* by F.Zweig.

Macmillan, London and Basingstoke, and Harper & Row Publishers Inc. for *Winds of Change, 1914–1939* by Harold Macmillan.

The Executors of the Estate of Harold Owen, Chatto & Windus Ltd and New Directions Publishing Corporation for 'Dulce Et Decorum Est' by Wilfred Owen, from *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen*, ed. by C.Day Lewis.

Oxford University Press for 'Dipsychus' by A.H.Clough, from *The Poems of Arthur Hugh Clough*, ed. by Lowry, Norrington and Mulhauser,

Penguin Books Ltd for *New Grub Street* by George Gissing and *Sybil* by Benjamin Disraeli.

Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd and Humanities Press Inc. for *Family and Kinship in East London* by Michael Young and Peter Willmott.

Sidgwick & Jackson Ltd, Dodd, Mead & Company and McClelland & Stewart Ltd, Toronto, for 'Peace' by Rupert Brooke, from *The Collected Poems of Rupert Brooke*.

Thames & Hudson Ltd for *Taine's Notes on England*, trans. and ed. by E.Hyams.

University of Chicago Press for *The English Common Reader* by R.D.Altick.

The Estate of the late H.G.Wells and Dodd, Mead & Company for *Tono Bungay* by H.G.Wells.

# *Chapter 1*

## Introduction: the Changing Shape of Society

By 1850 the social effects of industrialism had crystallized out to produce a society which most contemporaries felt was basically sound and stable. It was very much a class society in which rigid social distinctions were still made on the basis of income and birth. Its upper layers, which enjoyed high incomes, high birth, or both, lived lives of solid comfort which contrasted sharply with the acute poverty of the mass of the people. England had achieved a precise balance of rural and urban forces but this balance, which helped sustain the apparently stable equilibrium between tradition and progress, was to be upset in the following century as the forces of industrialism and urbanism took over and dominated the shaping of society. In 1851, on the one hand, Hippolyte Taine, French writer, traveller and acute observer of mid-nineteenth-century England, declared that 'The whole countryside seems to be a fodder factory. The mere anteroom to a dairy or a slaughterhouse...' (*Notes*, 127). Agriculture was a prosperous occupation and a socially significant force because it sustained many traditional social forms and observances. On the other hand, England's face had by this time been pockmarked by the industrial towns, which could only be considered even tolerable by those subscribing to the opinion of some northern industrialists that 'where there's muck there's brass'. The balanced nature of English society at this time could be seen in the achievement, in 1851, of a rural/urban population balance with half the people living in the country and half in the towns.

The growth of towns over the previous half-century had involved the movement of vast numbers of people, not only from country to town but also from region to region. Late-eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century industrial processes were based on steam power and coal, and industrial towns therefore grew up on the coalfields of Wales, Northumberland and Durham, and on the flanks of the Pennines in Lancashire and Yorkshire. None of these areas had been very densely populated, or of great national or social importance, when the national economy and social structure was almost entirely grounded in agriculture. As industrialization progressed and the raw materials in these areas became more valuable, the population's centre of gravity shifted away from the farming districts of central and southern England and moved north and west towards the coalfields. Throughout the nineteenth century only London, for centuries a large and ever-growing trading, manufacturing, administrative and financial centre, and always the largest city in the nation, provided a real counterweight in the south. New towns and cities sprang up on the coalfields as industrialization took hold, and by the middle of the nineteenth century England was the most urbanized nation in the world. Because England was the pace-setter and because there were no real precedents for such rapid and widespread urban development, there was little effective planning involved in the early expansion of the industrial towns which evolved haphazardly according to the dictates of geography and profit. The social consequences of unplanned city growth were unknown and, inevitably, no steps were taken to avoid or solve the many problems involved until the 1830s and 1840s, and only a very few improvements had been effected by the 1850s.

Many black pictures have been painted of the abysmal conditions in which townsmen lived, but life in the country offered no really desirable alternative to working people. The conditions of the great bulk of the people, variously called the poor, the working, or the lower classes, had always been bleak, squalid and miserable, and they had always lived perilously close to the edge of survival. The poor agricultural labourer had as few personal possessions as his industrial counterpart; his house was just as poorly built and under-equipped, unconnected to water or sewer systems; his food and clothing were little better. Indeed, Disraeli's description of the small rural town of Marney in 1845 almost exactly followed the mid-nineteenth-century descriptions of living conditions in industrial towns.

Before the doors of [the crumbling cottages of the workers]... ran open drains full of animal and vegetable refuse, decomposing into disease, or sometimes in their imperfect course filling foul pits or spreading into stagnant pools, while a concentrated solution of every species of dissolving filth was allowed to soak through, and thoroughly impregnate, the walls and ground adjoining.

These wretched tenements seldom consisted of more than two rooms, in one of which the whole family, however numerous, were obliged to sleep, without distinction of age, or sex, or suffering. With water streaming down the walls, the light distinguished through the roof, with no hearth even in winter... (*Sybil*, 60.)

The miserable living conditions of poor families were bad enough in single households and small rural communities, but when these same conditions were multiplied by the thousand in large towns, the sum of their little evils proved to be much worse than simple addition or multiplication might suggest, and the factories added their foul contributions to the resultant mess.

The conditions of most industrial towns were so appalling that they seemed to many people to be a hell on earth. The smoke-belching factories crouched beside the foul canals and rivers which supplied the water for both factories and people, and also acted as the main sewer which was expected to carry off all kinds of refuse including industrial and human' excrement, dead dogs and cats, and the blood and bones of slaughterhouses. Around the factories clustered the small, mean, terraces of workers' houses which curved across hills and through valleys, the jutting ribs on the diseased bodies of these towns. Prosperous people lived as far out in the country as they could, emulating the aristocracy which clung to traditional country homes, and avoiding the stench and ugliness of the overcrowded industrial hives. By 1851 it had been recognized that the industrial towns presented many problems; government and private reports had been made on the nature of the problems, and some statutory powers provided for the improvement of any town which cared to use them. In the 1840s and 1850s some civic authorities began work on improvement schemes and opened the attack on urban anarchy, but improvement was slow. For example, in 1858 the stench of the Thames, never pleasant, was so bad as to force the Commons to adjourn. The real issue involved in urban improvement was not the foundation of an aesthetically pleasing urban civilization, but survival. The death rates in the nation (see [fig. 1](#)) and especially in the towns were appallingly high, and epidemic diseases such as cholera, typhus and typhoid stalked the townsman throughout his short life.

Pollution and environmental destruction, which came to be seen as serious problems in the middle of the twentieth century, were just as acute in the mid-nineteenth century as they were to be a century later. Indeed, by the standards of the mid-nineteenth century, the towns of the mid-twentieth were remarkably clean and pleasant. Early industrial towns were also appallingly noisy. The factories, mines and mills, with their massive machinery, great steam engines and shift-changing hooters and whistles, generated a great volume of sound, as did contemporary transport. The picture of a well-groomed, high-stepping horse pulling a hansom cab or carriage may have considerable appeal in retrospect, but in reality, when the horse was a

major carrier of goods and people, the picture was not so attractive. Few horses were high-stepping, matched thoroughbreds; in fact, most horses used for everyday transport or for carrying heavy loads were broken-down old hacks, one tottering step away from the knacker's yard and the glue factory. The clatter of hooves on cobblestones and granite 'sets', or blocks, made a tremendous din. Wooden paving blocks reduced the noise a little but they were slippery when wet and horses often fell, sometimes causing traffic jams. The noise was so disturbing that well-to-do people whose houses bordered busy roads tried to protect sick members of their households from it by spreading straw on the road to muffle the sound of hooves. Horse droppings made up much of the filth which accumulated on roads and benefited only the few poor people who were lucky enough to have a small patch of garden and found street sweepings a useful fertilizer.

The Victorians were enchanted by the railway, the symbol of industrialism rampant, and in a great burst of enthusiasm and investment covered the country with a closely packed network of lines, the very profusion of which would plague their heirs a century or so later. The train made people and goods more mobile, made possible a closer economic and social connection between town and country and region and region, and promoted the development of suburban sprawl. It also produced noise, smoke and dirt which added to the output of the factories and domestic fires and helped dictate the appearance of the people. The 'typical townsman', whatever his class, generally wore dark clothes because they were the only ones which would not look grimy and unkempt after a few hours' wear, and a hat was valuable protection from the steady downpour of grit, smoke and soot. The few scraps of light cloth which were allowed to protrude from the dark wrappings were so difficult and expensive to keep clean that contemporaries judged a man's social status by the cleanliness of his linen.

The wide gap between rich and poor was reflected by marked differences in their appearance. Only rich people, members of the upper and middle classes, could afford clean linen and elegant clothing, and, because their clothing was such a clear indicator of social status, most of them paid great attention to it. The majority of the people were too poor to buy either good clothes or cleanliness. Their clothing was coarse, of poor quality, generally ill-fitting and dirty. Some of them wore cast-off clothing which might have been clean and attractive before it left its original owner and began to sink down the social scale, getting dirtier and more ragged as it descended.

People for whom existence was a struggle spent, of necessity, little on clothing because most of their income was spent on food. They could barely afford shelter and such accommodation as they could find was generally in bad condition and poorly equipped. Water, when not drawn from a polluted nearby river or well, could be had only for short periods of time from a public standpipe in a courtyard or at the end of a street; and bathrooms were non-existent in poor houses whose only sanitary facilities were outdoor privies, which were generally shared by several families. Very many lower-class homes lacked even the basic pots and pans necessary for cooking the cheap and nourishing dishes which middle-class philanthropic ladies recommended for the poor. The diet of the majority of the people bore no resemblance to Mrs Beeton's stomach-stretchingly ample 'simple family meals' and consisted of food which merely filled bellies and had a satisfyingly strong taste. The diet of the lower classes consisted mainly of bread with a few flavourings. The small quantities of sugar and treacle, fats (a little butter, mainly meat drippings and suet), bacon, meat and cheese, tea, and pickles which the poor could afford helped make the bread more appetizing but usually were not large enough to have much nutritional value. The limited funds of working people allowed them to eat little or no fruit, few vegetables except potatoes, and little meat except bacon and sausage. The diet of the masses was neither very appetizing nor nutritious, and that of the poorest elements allowed little more than short-term, bare animal survival at a not very efficient level.

In the course of the following century the mass of the people came to enjoy a much higher standard of living, and the huge gap between the wealthy minority and the poor majority gradually closed. Many social changes were closely related to changes in the economy, whose shifts and fluctuations, both short- and long-range, were reflected in social movements. The long-range shift of the economy away from a concentration on heavy capital goods and exports towards a stress on consumer goods and the satisfaction of a domestic mass market played a major part in helping to raise living standards in the century after 1850. In general terms, in 1850 the British economy flourished by producing such basic materials as coal and iron and by manufacturing heavy equipment such as railway lines and rolling-stock, ships and steam engines, and cotton and woollen textiles for export. In the second half of the nineteenth century, new inventions and production techniques, many of which were developed by nations which were beginning to overtake Britain's lead in industrial innovation, began to change the direction of the economy. The competition from other nations, which was becoming acute by the First World War, and the stagnation of world trade which followed the disruption of the international economy caused by that war, forced Britain to adjust her economy to the new demands of rapid, assembly-line, mass production and sale. Essential to the success of the new economy was a large group of people who could afford to buy the many consumer goods it produced. The adjustments were not made consciously or as part of a programme to ensure economic survival but, as the economic pattern changed, the mass of the people had to become more prosperous because the established prosperous minority could not alone buy goods in the quantities necessary to ensure economic survival and continued expansion. By 1950 British economic prosperity depended, to a very large extent, on the production of such consumer goods as household and electrical equipment, textiles made from man-made fibres, and motor cars.

The problems involved in such major economic, technical and social changes drew the government into more and more sections of national life until the government itself became a major agent of social change. Just as the emergencies of the high death rate and the epidemic diseases of the early industrial towns had drawn national and local government into their planning and regulation, the emergencies of two world wars, economic crises, and increasing concern for social justice drew it into new areas. By the end of the nineteenth century the government was already involved in many of the forces which affect social development, such as primary education, the regulation of hours and conditions of work in many industries, and the establishment of minimum standards of sanitation and food purity. By the turn of the century, too, the poor masses were the enfranchised masses, the bulk of the electorate, and politicians were forced to respond more readily to their wishes, desires, needs and fears. Better mass education, more effective union action, the spread of socialist ideas and a change in the direction of thinking on social reform theory all increased the pressure on the government to put more effective and wider ranging social planning into operation (see [fig. 2](#)). Spurred on by two world wars, socialism, technical advances and acute economic problems, in the twentieth-century government interference in many of the processes of social development increased markedly. By the mid-twentieth century it was actively involved in economic planning, regional development, land use, housing regulation and building, higher education, health care, old age, sickness and unemployment benefits, transport and communications, and many other fields which helped determine the shape of society. The direct action of government was an agent of social change, as was the indirect action of the tax system which had to be established to raise the money to pay for increasing social services.

The presumed stability of the society of 1850 did not last long and the equilibrium of tradition and progress, rural and urban social forms, was soon upset. The momentum of the forces which had made Britain a half-urbanized nation by 1850 was sustained. By the turn of the century 80 per cent of the population was urban and the forces of change which sprang from industry, technology and town unquestionably dominated the processes of social development, even of the rural minority. The influence of tradition and a deferential



society long outlived the practical pressures which had spawned them, but as the pace of change accelerated their hold weakened ever more rapidly. Better transport and communications promoted more cultural and social uniformity across the nation; education and economic changes which opened up new occupations led to increasing social mobility; adjustments in the social functions of women intensified changes in the basic social unit, the family. Considering that so many changes took place so rapidly in the forces which change society, social change was surprisingly undramatic. There were no dawns of new millennia and no revolutions—the rate of social change simply accelerated as time passed and as more new forces were brought to bear on society. The quickening pace of social change was marked by two notable periods of acceleration, the two great wars of the twentieth century. In wartime the essence of current trends was distilled by the heat of national emergency, and the distillate, more potent than any peacetime product, boosted the rate of change.

The class structure changed slowly and although the same three basic social labels in use in the mid-nineteenth century were still being used a century later, they no longer meant the same things. In the mid-nineteenth century the aristocracy was still a powerful force, economically, politically and socially. As agriculture entered a chronic depression in the 1870s, the forces of tradition which preserved the aristocracy's pre-eminent social position were challenged by new materialistic forces, and as the promise of democracy was fulfilled by the limitation of the political power of the Lords in the early twentieth century, their power and significance waned. By the middle of the twentieth century aristocratic status no longer necessarily implied economic security and a life of leisure, and the aristocracy was of only limited social consequence because the majority of the people looked elsewhere for social leadership. The entrepreneurial, property-owning, prosperous middle class of the mid-nineteenth century, the class which had operated the mid-nineteenth-century industrial system, waned as the economic system on which its prosperity was founded ran into difficulties and was superseded by the new, more sophisticated and complex system. The First World War and the depression which followed severely damaged the already declining fortunes of smaller manufacturers and by the mid-twentieth century this old-middle class, as it may be called, was but a shadow of its former self and its control over the shaping of society was minimal. Moreover, between the mid-nineteenth century and the mid-twentieth a major change occurred in the social status of white-collar workers—professional men, clerks, administrators and paper-workers of all kinds. As the economic, governmental and social systems became more complex, the number of people who ran them increased. By the end of the nineteenth century this group, which was neither traditional middle class nor working class, was an important element in the social system and was already helping to determine the shape of society. In the twentieth century the number of people in this group increased rapidly, and by the middle of the century they had taken over a social position similar to that which the entrepreneurs had occupied in the mid-nineteenth century. This group was larger than the old-middle class had been, but it set many of the social patterns that the masses strove to emulate. Many people worked hard in the hope that this would enable them, or their children, to join its ranks, and it became, in effect, the new-middle class.

In the mid-nineteenth century the majority of working-class people, who made up the bulk of the population, were poor, inadequately housed and badly fed, and had a shorter life-expectancy than the upper classes. In the second half of the nineteenth century they began to feel some of the results of industrialism—real wages went up, diet improved, literacy rates rose, the franchise widened, unionism and socialism grew in strength. By the first decade of the twentieth century they had the power and self-confidence to bring enough pressure on the government to usher in a new era of social reform. The First World War strengthened their pride and self-confidence, and, although the Depression affected many of them badly, the twenties and thirties were good decades of rising living standards for the workers employed in the new industries. The Second World War and the establishment of the welfare state in the 1940s marked working-