

ROUTLEDGE



# **A SOCIAL HISTORY OF ENGLAND 1851-1990**

François Bédarida

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of  
England  
1851–1990



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. . . this scepter'd isle, . . .  
This fortress built by Nature for herself  
Against infection and the hand of war,  
This happy breed of men, this little world,  
This precious stone set in the silver sea,  
Which serves it in the office of a wall, . . .  
Against the envy of less happier lands;  
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England, .

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *Richard II*

This is a letter of hate. It is for you, my  
countrymen. I mean those men of my  
country who have defiled it. . . . You are  
its murderers . . . I carry a knife in my  
heart for every one of you. Macmillan,  
and you, Gaitskill, you particularly . . . .  
Till then, damn you, England. You're  
rotting now, and quite soon you'll  
disappear. My hate will outrun you yet  
. . . I wish it could be eternal. . . .

JOHN OSBORNE, *Letter to Tribune*, 1961



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## *Preface*

Je cherche à déchiffrer le plus indéchiffrable  
des peuples, le plus moral, le moins familial,  
le plus mobile, le plus adapté, le plus franc et  
le plus hypocrite. Où est le principe?

Elie Halévy'

To many people an enterprise such as the writing of this book would appear to present an impossible challenge. No one is more aware of this than the author. By its content and by its intent the book purports not only to describe the evolution of modern English society in its broad patterns, but to provide a critical assessment of this evolution, in order to interpret and explain the history of the nation. An arduous task in any circumstances, but especially so for a foreigner, for it must seem utterly presumptuous.

The social make-up, the attitudes and behaviour, the psychology of the English people during these one hundred and twenty-five years provide such a tangle of data, fleeting and contradictory at the same time, that the task may seem hopeless. As soon as one tries to analyse the true nature of the islanders, it vanishes; and in contact with it one constantly has the feeling that it cannot be grasped. This impression has indeed been shared by all those who have sought to penetrate the nation's secret. Even Baron von Bülow, when he was Prussian envoy in London, used to say to his compatriots who asked him his views on the country: 'After spending three weeks in England, I was quite ready to write a book about

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it; after three months I thought the task would be difficult; and now that I've lived here three years, I find it impossible.'<sup>2</sup> About forty years later, the radical novelist Jules Vallès echoed this sentiment when he confessed on his first visit to the English capital: 'After a three weeks' stay in London I became aware that, to be able to talk about England, a stay of ten years would be necessary.'<sup>3</sup>

The British too have felt puzzled when trying to characterize and understand their own civilization. Asking himself in 1940 what constituted the particular nature of the English nation, and how it differed from other nations, George Orwell concluded: 'Yes, there is something distinctive and recognisable in English civilisation. It is a culture as individual as that of Spain. It is somehow bound up with solid breakfasts and gloomy Sundays, smoky towns and winding roads, green fields and red pillar-boxes. It has a flavour of its own.' But such peculiar features, Orwell rightly went on, cannot be properly understood outside the historical setting:

It is continuous, it stretches into the future and the past, there is something in it that persists as in a living creature. What can the England of 1940 have in common with the England of 1840? But then, what have you in common with the child of five whose photograph your mother keeps on the mantelpiece? Nothing, except that you happen to be the same person. And above all it is *your* civilisation, it is *you*.<sup>4</sup>

So it is easy to understand why foreign observers have often hesitated before launching into mastering the labyrinth without Ariadne's thread – even, and indeed above all, when they have wished to be solicitous and sympathetic to the object of their study. For the more scrupulous they are, the more they feel condemned to look in from outside. Thus Elie Halévy, in the introduction to his great *History of the English People in the Nineteenth Century*, admitted his foolhardiness at once and confessed his fears in these terms:

Frenchmen, I am undertaking a history of England. I am attempting the study of a people to whom I am foreign alike by birth and by education. Despite copious readings, visits to London and to the provinces, and frequent intercourse with different circles of English society, I have nevertheless been obliged to learn with great difficulty, and in a manner that would seem necessarily artificial, a multitude of things which even an uneducated Englishman knows, so to speak, by instinct. I fully realize all this. Nevertheless I am firmly convinced that the risks I have taken were risks well worth the taking.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed a historian must surmount these obstacles and difficulties. In

his own defence Halévy mentioned the 'useful faculty of astonishment' which a foreigner, looking from the outside, preserves towards the subject of his study. It is undeniable that such an approach encourages a critical mind and the will to ask questions and explain. Moreover, following the lead of another clever student of English politics and society, Jacques Bardoux, one can add another argument: 'Distance allows one to observe calmly and to judge dispassionately. Space is as important as time in giving perspective. A channel, when one wants to scrutinise and understand, is as valuable as a century. It ensures, or it ought to ensure, clarity of vision and calmness of judgment.'<sup>6</sup>

For my part, it is in this spirit that I have undertaken this work. It is for the reader to decide how good a job has been done.

Let me now try, at whatever risk, to make a list of the key problems which we have made a point of emphasizing in the pages to come. It will at least be a first step towards clarifying the field of investigation, and a way of tracing out in broad strokes the framework of our study.

(1) The history of England shows a national continuity. A territorial continuity, first of all, thanks to the rampart of the sea, but above all a political continuity. Comparison with all the other great nations of continental Europe is instructive on this point. Why did England escape not only revolutions, bloody violence and attempts at totalitarianism, but also internal upsets, civil discord and drastic changes of regimes and institutions?

(2) In a society of such clear-cut class distinctions, where social mobility has not been as real as some have made out, how has the ruling oligarchy – aristocratic at first, and later bourgeois – succeeded in keeping its influence as well as its prestige, and all this with the full acquiescence of the masses?

(3) How can one explain the fact that the working class – as powerful in numbers as in organization – fought so vigorously and doggedly, and yet so often accepted compromise when its loyalty to the representative system gave it such a key numerical advantage?

(4) How far was power democratized? Who ruled the country a century ago? Who rules today? Exactly how much power did the State have throughout this period? Was it as feeble (at least up to 1914) as has been maintained? How was the link between State, capitalism and the Establishment preserved?

(5) An unusual balance was kept between the individual and the collective, between liberty and constraint, between individualism and the pressure of the consensus. What were the elements which made up this equilibrium? How were the aspirations to individual independence ('the freeborn Englishman') reconciled with a community spirit (itself

reinforced by the pressure of conformity)? In this area, what role was played by religious beliefs?

(6) How did an imperial vocation and the dynamism of an expansionist society settle into the national consciousness? And, when the time came for England to give up her world role, how did she make the change from pride to humility? Under what conditions did the shift take place towards a new model of society limited to a medium-sized island and above all jealous of 'the quality of life'?

(7) What really changed between 1851 and 1975, either in social structure or in the public mind? How did England adapt, by its internal and external development, to the new conditions of the contemporary world – economic, political, intellectual and spiritual? What part was played in this process by religion and the decline of religion, by ideologies and scales of value? And what happened to the consensus of the old days?

Of course this book can only bring partial answers and very modest offerings of interpretation to questions of such wide scope. We would feel well satisfied if the pages that follow helped to open up certain paths of investigation and shed some beams of light on an area that is wrapped in obscurity.

Let us, however, confess to one ambition. I would wish through this work to help get rid of some traditional clichés, to which people refer as if they were gospel. Let us put an end to pseudo-explanations deriving from the 'national character' of the British! How often their 'taste for compromise', their 'sporting spirit in politics', their 'golden mean', their 'pragmatism', their inveterate 'traditionalism' and other stereotypes are invoked! As if these concepts explained everything by dint of repetition, when of course their first characteristic is to explain nothing at all. They also absolve one from asking the real questions, such as why tradition prevailed at one juncture and not at another, why such and such compromise or reform or pressure group won the day and not others. So much repetitive parrot-talk. . . . It behoves us therefore to cast aside all easy and misleading catch-phrases and to press on to *real* analyses by uncovering the *real* forces at work – structures, classes, hierarchies, ethical codes, ideologies, sacred and profane beliefs. There we shall find solid ground for explanations, far from conventional views and superficial clichés. After all, was it not the method followed by our illustrious predecessors, all those French pioneers in the discovery of England who gave us analytical models that were rigorous, profound and penetrating, and whose names were Alexis de Tocqueville, Léon Faucher, Hippolyte Taine, Emile Boutmy, Moïsei Ostrogorski, Paul Mantoux, André Siegfried, André Philip, and of course, greatest of all, Elie Halévy?

Two clarifications to end up with, so as to explain and justify my limits, both in space and time. First of all, I have deliberately chosen to speak of

'English' society. Not that I underestimate the role played by Scotsmen, Welshmen and Irishmen in the development of the kingdom, but until recently, among the British as well as among foreigners the word 'England' certainly had a generic meaning.<sup>7</sup> The best proof is that, up to the nineteenth century, neither the Scots nor the Irish hesitated to use the word to describe the United Kingdom. Even in the twentieth century Bonar Law, though he was half Scottish and half Canadian by birth, had no qualms about calling himself 'Prime Minister of England'. Also, on great historic occasions it is the word 'England' that has always prevailed, from Nelson at Trafalgar ('England expects every man to do his duty') up to Leo Amery shouting the famous plea to Arthur Greenwood, the Opposition spokesman, in the dramatic Commons debate of 2 September 1939 – 'Speak for England!'. The truth is that no term is satisfactory, for even 'Great Britain' is defective, as it excludes Northern Ireland.

In all events I have centred the book on England, but where the destinies of the Scots and the Welsh and even the Irish follow on the destiny of the English, their history has been taken into account. Elsewhere I have left them out, preferring to concentrate on the major partner rather than to let my attention be distracted by particular details. In the same way the Empire has been left out of our field of study, except where its existence affected the national consciousness.

As for the period covered, the choice of 1851 was an obvious one, for the mid-century represented a turning-point for England, when economic conditions were reversed and social stability re-established. From that moment the triumphs of Victorianism could impose itself freely. After the endless storms of the period 1815–50 during which they nearly lost the helm of the storm-tossed ship, the governing classes felt sudden relief that no tidal wave had wrecked the vessel, and they entered calmer waters. Now the 'SS England' could with pride and assurance sail forward with the wind behind her. On the other hand, 1975 seems to mark no visible break in the historical evolution of English society. This being so I would like to look on my description of the years 1955–75 as being tentative, waiting to be completed and indeed revised in the light of future events. For my part I will take refuge behind the authority of Daniel Defoe who, two hundred and fifty years ago, in the preface to his *Tour* made this excellent comment:

After all that has been said by others, or can be said here, no description of Great Britain can be what we call a finished account, as no clothes can be made to fit a growing child; no picture carry the likeness of a living face; the size of one, and the countenance of the other always altering with time: so no account of a kingdom thus daily altering its countenance can be perfect. . . .<sup>8</sup>





**I** *The Power  
and the Glory:  
1851–80*



# 1 *Industrialism triumphant*

## **The festival of work and industry**

1 May 1851. Extraordinary excitement in London. Around Hyde Park the atmosphere is festive. A motley crowd gathers in the spring sunshine – respectable citizens in top hats, working men in cloth caps, tradesmen in their Sunday best, foreigners from all over Europe. Smart turn-outs pass by, and soon high society and all the celebrities are there. Suddenly a party makes its way through the vast assemblage amid loud cheers – it's the Queen! In great state Victoria, accompanied by Prince Albert, arrives at this splendid show which England has put on – the Great Exhibition of London. Silver trumpets sound out under the vault of the Crystal Palace. A solemn prayer invokes 'the ties of peace and friendship among nations', and the sovereign slowly tours the stands of the Exhibition amid the palm-trees and the flowers and the unfurled flags of all nations to the continuous applause of the crowds.

In a letter to her uncle King Leopold of Belgium written the day after this memorable ceremony, Queen Victoria was proudly able to describe 1 May 1851 as 'the greatest day in our history', adding that it was 'the most beautiful and imposing and touching spectacle ever seen'.<sup>1</sup> And Palmerston echoed her feelings: 'a glorious day for England' – words that well conveyed the general feeling of national success. Thanks to the technical progress and creative energy displayed at the Exhibition, the whole country felt itself raised to the forefront of humanity and imbued by Providence with a mission to lead mankind on its way. Was this the

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pinnacle of the Victorian era? Yes certainly, but even more it was one of the great moments of English history. For to grasp the full significance of the Great Exhibition, the very first of the universal exhibitions (it lasted from May to October 1851 and welcomed 6 million visitors), it is not enough to regard it, for all its brilliance, simply as a display of material progress in England. Certainly it showed off the superiority of England's enterprise, in terms of manufactured goods, trade and capital, as well as the professional ability of her engineers, designers and workpeople. But its importance went much further. For the country which gave birth to the Industrial Revolution, 1851 marked a celebration as well as a turning point.

On the one hand the Great Exhibition celebrated Great Britain's entry into the era of the industrial society. Machinery and town life from now on assumed more importance than the old agrarian civilization. John Bull, the latter-day Prometheus, had won from nature the secret of power, steam taking the place of fire. This time, however, instead of defying the Creator, the might of man remained subservient to Him. The justification of technology, repeated loud and often, was its work for the progress of the species. Thus, hardly had the industrial system made its appearance in the life of the country than it assumed a hallowed role and became closely bound up with morality.

On the other hand the 'Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations', to give its correct title, coincided with the start of a phase of great economic prosperity and social peace. What a contrast there was between the 1840s and the 1850s! Ten years of chaos and conflict, dominated by fear and famine (the 'Hungry Forties') were to be followed by ten years of prosperity and confidence, studded with a thousand marvels (the 'Fabulous Fifties'). The prime reason for the Exhibition's success was that it took place in a tranquil atmosphere – peaceful competition between nations abroad and renewed social harmony at home.

From now on the prosperous classes could breathe freely. For the popular outbreaks of yesterday had never ceased to haunt them – Peterloo, 'Captain Swing', the Bristol riots, and just recently the Chartist marches. With these in mind on the eve of the Great Exhibition the pessimists foresaw the worst excesses – pilfering, brawls, even riots. Wouldn't the display of such treasures excite the worst instincts of the mob? Wouldn't criminals from the underworld emerge to take advantage of the occasion? True, the Government took precautions on the opening day. Whole regiments of Hussars and Dragoons, and battalions of Fusiliers were brought in from the provinces to bivouac in the suburbs. Batteries of artillery were kept in reserve in the Tower of London. Several Guards' battalions were massed inside Hyde Park as well as some cavalry. Finally 6,000 policemen were mobilized. However no incident disturbed law and

order either that day or at any time during the Exhibition. When the lamps were finally extinguished, the nation was proud to learn that in six months not a flower had been picked!

The attitude of the masses caused surprise at first, but people soon felt reassured and comforted. The social scene had indeed changed. Instead of a Theatre of Cruelty, it was a Theatre of Harmony that held the stage. Had England finally achieved lasting social peace? For twenty years an endless chorus of complaint about pauperism had made itself heard against a backcloth of proletarian squalor, but from 1851 onwards the tune was to change. With one voice everyone sang the praises of hard work and industrial success, and compliments for the workers were the order of the day. Hardly a word was breathed about the 'dangerous classes'; they had now disappeared from the scene. In their place the 'labouring classes' took the limelight. Wasn't it touching to contemplate 'the fustian jackets and unshorn chins of England' enjoying a peaceful picnic on the grass in Hyde Park instead of dreaming of how to overthrow society, when the outward signs of triumphant Capitalism were laid out a few feet away from them?

One must recognize that the Exhibition profited from a combination of favourable circumstances. While general confidence resulted from the strong economic recovery which began in 1851, most of the great battles which used to divide the nation into rival camps had now ceased to rage. With free trade in force since 1846, Chartism in retreat, Irish agitation broken by the failure of the Young Ireland movement, and the tragedy of the Great Famine, classes and parties no longer had the same motives to oppose each other. Somewhat to their surprise but with considerable self-satisfaction Englishmen woke up to the fact that they were almost the only people in Europe to have escaped the disturbing revolutions of 1848. Inevitably the *Zeitgeist* also underwent a profound change. Now was the time for science, the arts, and peace. People were ready to listen attentively to official spokesmen, such as the organizers of the Exhibition, when they affirmed that the future did not lie in Utopian demands or in fratricidal quarrels, but that progress and welfare depended above all on individual effort and on peace, both national and international.

The Exhibition itself was a stupendous festival of technology. The organizers wanted to present a whole panorama of human activity, and to that end divided the exhibits into four sections: raw materials, machinery, manufactured goods and fine arts. But of course the achievements of *homo britannicus*, creator of the first industrial society, were entitled to pride of place. Of the 14,000 exhibitors, 7,400 represented Great Britain and her colonies, and 6,600 the rest of the world. It was a triumph for the Age of the Machine. On every side the primacy of metal and coal asserted itself. People like Ruskin might mourn in vain the transformation of old

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England into 'a land of the Iron Mask'.<sup>2</sup> The island had indeed been transformed, as Michelet said, into 'a mass of coal and iron'. The machine reigned supreme. The crowds gaped in admiration at the locomotives, at the models of metal bridges, hydraulic presses, giant lenses for lighthouses, the latest refinements in machine-tools devised by the pioneers in precision engineering (Whitworth, Fairbairn, Armstrong) and the great Nasmyth steam hammer that was able at one moment to come down with the full weight of its 500 tons and at another to crack delicately the shell of an egg. There were machines of every sort – for threshing corn, for crushing sugar cane, for making soda water, for folding envelopes, for rolling cigarettes, and so on.

To technical objectives were added aesthetic and moral ambitions. What the organizers wanted was to unite the useful, the beautiful and the good. On entering the show the visitor was greeted by two symbolic figures: on one side a giant statue of Richard Coeur de Lion, national hero and perfect knight, the personification of courage, and on the other, an enormous block of coal weighting 24 tons, representing power! Some exhibits aimed to unite industry and art, others sought above all to speak to the imagination, from the dazzling 'Crystal Fountain', a transparent structure 10 metres high in the centre of the Exhibition, to the fabulous Crown diamond, the Koh-i-Noor.

Yet, amid all these achievements of the technological age, the most spectacular success was the very building which housed the whole show, the famous Crystal Palace. It was an edifice of staggering dimensions – 520 metres long (three times the length of St Paul's Cathedral), 125 metres wide with a display capacity of 9,000 square metres in which there was plenty of room to arrange the 109,000 exhibits.<sup>3</sup> Withal the building was light and airy, thanks to its construction of metal and glass. A building of genius devised by an amateur self-made man, the former gardener Paxton, the Crystal Palace was a remarkable combination of the classical canons of taste – symmetry and simplicity of design – and the functionalism of modern construction methods. Conceived as a cathedral of industry and designed in the form of a Latin cross with a wide transept, this gigantic temple of glass was at once admired for its imposing beauty. It was greeted with a chorus of praise, accompanied by an abundance of religious parallels. Some saw 'the greatest temple ever built for the arts of peace'. For a German visitor it was the sanctuary of *Weltkultur*. A Frenchman wrote that the old dream of Babel had come to pass, but instead of a mixture of tongues, 'the fusion of interests and minds has been achieved'.<sup>4</sup> An American admirer saw in the Great Exhibition the apocalyptic vision of the New Jerusalem that had appeared to St John on Patmos.<sup>5</sup> Others in more pagan vein talked of a magician's palace.

At the dawn of the new half-century the country was bathed in opti-

mism. There was a firm belief that the year 1851 prefigured an age of peace, progress and universal happiness. The nation was inspired by a grandiose vision of man's power, a power capable of mastering matter without falling into materialism, since his activity was constantly referred to the Almighty. Just as the entrepreneurs and manufacturers at the Exhibition were proud of having achieved a synthesis of beauty and function, so it was asserted that there was no difficulty in reconciling dominion over Nature with surrender to God. Progress and the Bible were not incompatible. The future seemed to belong to those who, like the British, knew how to combine the hand of God with the right arm of Man. In fact all these half-scientific homilies should be interpreted as so much quasi-religious worship of the genius of industry. This was well expressed by the popular poet and song-writer Mackay in the verses set to music by Henry Russell:

Gather, ye Nations, gather! From forge, and mine, and mill!  
Come, Science and Invention; Come, Industry and Skill!  
Come with your woven wonders, the blossoms of the loom,  
That rival Nature's fairest flowers in all but their perfume.  
Come with your brass and iron, your silver and your gold  
And arts that change the face of earth, unknown to men of old.  
Gather, ye Nations, gather! From ev'ry clime and soil,  
The New Confederation, the Jubilee of toil.<sup>6</sup>

There is another lesson to be drawn from the Great Exhibition if you take it as the symbol of an emergent industrial system. The triumph of the machine launched the era of the masses. Some acute minds understood it at the time, and the Great Exhibition gave a foretaste of that era on the material as well as the human level. Everything was multiplied both in manufacture and in selling. Development progressed rapidly, from the making of one object, or possibly a hundred, to a thousand and then a million. Who had ever imagined standardization on such a scale as to produce 300,000 plates of glass to build the Crystal Palace, all of identical shape and size, or the sale on the refreshment stand of a million bottles of soda-water, lemonade and ginger beer, all manufactured by the house of Schweppes? In the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, a French visitor to the Exhibition commented subtly on England's success in adapting herself to the necessities of mass consumption, while France continued to specialize in producing for the luxury market: 'It is very odd. An aristocratic country like England is successful at supplying the people, whereas France, a democratic country, is only good at producing goods for the aristocracy!'<sup>7</sup>

On the human level too, quantity was the dominant theme. The railways and technical improvements meant that crowds of people could come together in a way that had never before been seen. In this respect



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the Great Exhibition was a huge popular festival – a real party for the people. It was the opposite of the splendid displays at Versailles or Windsor which were reserved for a small privileged circle. This was a democratic show laid on for the inquisitive masses gathered together in festive mood. It was not simply a deliberate (and successful) attempt on the part of Prince Albert, the chief organizer of the enterprise, to build a bridge between the monarchy and the machine, between the court and the labouring masses. For at the same time it managed to unite all classes, especially the workers, in their admiration for the industrial system, and this integrated the whole nation into the structure of a 'liberal' society. That was the political significance of the Exhibition. It conferred a smiling appearance on a dominating Capitalism and adorned it with every creative virtue. The trading economy, now launched on its triumphant career, could ignore the odd signs of revolt that cropped up here and there, and could concentrate on drawing the maximum profit from the successes of industrialism.

So it was from sound knowledge that one of the most influential celebrators of progress and the liberal destiny of England, the great Whig historian Macaulay, asserted that 1851 'will long be remembered as a singularly happy year of peace, plenty, good feeling, innocent pleasure, national glory of the best and purest sort'.<sup>8</sup> Who then showed concern for the other side of the coin? Who paid attention to the victims – the multitude of the crushed and the oppressed? Who noticed that in that same year, in the heart of Africa, the soldiers of Her Majesty were engaged in bloody battles to annex the country of the Kaffirs to the Empire and turn poor black peasants off their lands? Who felt indignant that on Christmas Day 1851 it was necessary to organize a charity gathering in the heart of London, at Leicester Square, so that 10,000 poor families of the district could have a bit of roast beef and plum pudding washed down with a cup of tea?

### Unlimited growth

'With Steam and the Bible the English traverse the globe' was the proud boast of one of the Great Exhibition guides.<sup>9</sup> Indeed the growth of the economy seemed miraculous. The national income was multiplied by eight in the course of the century, while the population only went up by four. A doubling of the income per head occurred in the second half of the century. The great 'Victorian prosperity' began in 1851 under the influence of the world rise in prices, and it went on until 1873. Even the difficult times after that date did not halt this dynamic progress. In the thirty years between 1851 and 1881 the national product rose from £523 million (£25 per inhabitant) to £1,051 million (£35 per inhabitant).<sup>10</sup>

Each key sector showed an advance. Exports? They were £55 million in 1840–9; they went up to £100 million in 1850–9, to £160 million in 1860–9 and to £218 million in 1870–9. Railways? 6,000 miles had already been built by 1850; in 1870 the total had reached 14,000 miles. Cotton? Imports of raw cotton (the best gauge of textile activity) increased in weight from 300 million lbs in 1830–9 to 800 million in 1850–9, to 1,250 million in 1870–9. The merchant fleet? The tonnage of British shipping plying the world was 3.6 million in 1850; it was 6.6 million in 1880, of which 40 per cent was steam against less than 5 per cent in 1850. Metals? The production of cast iron rose from 2 million tons in 1850 to 6 million in 1875.<sup>11</sup> In all directions it was a breathless, almost intoxicating race for growth and profit. Coalmines, foundries, blast furnaces, shipyards, cotton mills, woollen mills, linen and jute factories, arsenals, cement works, cutlery workshops, makers of shoes, precision instruments and furniture, all competed with each other to produce goods more and more cheaply and exported them to the four corners of the earth. Hence the proud feeling of success, smugly expressed by the inventor of the term 'Victorian'. 'The Englishman lives . . . to move and to struggle, to conquer and to build; to visit all seas, to diffuse the genius of his character over all nations. Industry, Protestantism, Liberty, seem born of the Teutonic race – that race to whom God has committed the conservation as well as the spread of Truth and on whom mainly depend the civilization and progress of the world.'<sup>12</sup>

These were the external signs of growth. We must now analyse its effects so that we can try to extract an answer to the question – why was England supreme? For the key result of that growth from a macro-economic point of view, was England's dominant position in the world, a position which was only reinforced by the advances of the period 1850–75. In the middle of the century the country entered what Walter Rostow has described as the 'mature' stage, that is to say that it was now able to produce beyond the key 'take-off' sectors by applying techniques of management and accumulated investments to a wide variety of economic activities. As a nation on the move Great Britain was continuously able to extend her resources and strengthen her leading position. That is why she was variously called 'the Workshop of the World', 'the Industry State' and even 'the Fuel State'.

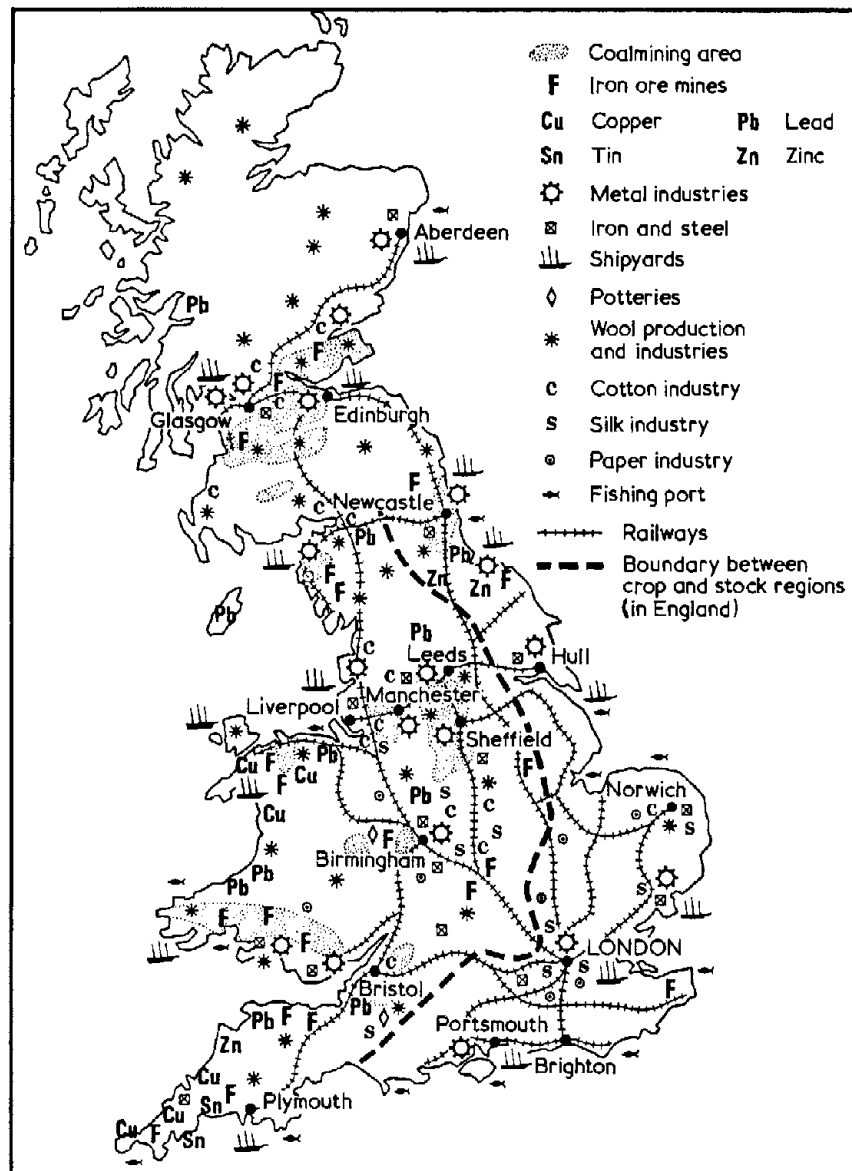
Thanks to the alliance of industry and commerce, to entrepreneurial skill and tenacity, to individual enterprise and the collective guarantees of *Pax Britannica*, England drew advantage from a whole range of economic stimuli. Sure of herself and of the blessing of heaven, she not only outstripped all other nations including the most highly industrialized, but it was often she who stimulated their development. In 1860 England produced nearly 60 per cent of the coal and steel in the world, more than

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50 per cent of the cast iron and nearly 50 per cent of the cotton goods. In 1870 the United Kingdom produced one third of the world output of manufactured goods, and the national income per inhabitant was higher than in any other country. The French, although relatively rich, achieved only 60 per cent of the average individual income of the English. To illustrate this supremacy one can simply quote individual cases; for instance the railway construction magnate Thomas Brassey who, in twenty-five years, built 7,000 kilometres of line over four continents. The great bankers of the City competed in power with crowned heads, whom Disraeli described admiringly as 'mighty moneylenders whose *fiat* sometimes held in balance the destinies of kings and empires'.<sup>13</sup> Among the key-points of European development it was the London-Birmingham-Manchester axis that held the lead without serious rival. In his book *L'Europe sans rivages*, F. Perroux powerfully evoked the extraordinary thrust of British trade which, with the support of the City of London, permeated the arteries and circulation of world commerce, continuously extended its bounds of influence, centralized information and banking facilities, and fixed prices that were expressed in a dominant currency, i.e. sterling, which was everyone's favourite. Such was the supreme power and leadership of a nation which 'living rather grandly, having worked hard and possessing immense strength, . . . could address the world'.<sup>14</sup>

We must now try to understand the overall reasons for this growth and progress: what are the factors that explain English supremacy at this time? One must hark back to the past to answer this question. For it is beyond doubt that the English in the middle of the nineteenth century continued to draw full benefit from the series of advantages which had made their country the cradle of the Industrial Revolution. Only they were not simply content to hang on to those trumps they held in their hands at the outset. The combination of a multiplying and accelerating upward growth gave the British economy an even faster impetus and rhythm than any other, and placed her in a leading position ahead of all competitors.

The list of advantages enjoyed by prosperous Albion is a long one: a remarkable abundance of natural resources thanks to a sub-soil rich in coal and iron-ore, many waterways, a climate favourable to textile fibres, surrounding seas at the cross-roads of the world's trade-routes; a strong current of innovation that encouraged advanced techniques with high productivity, supported by well-qualified engineers, technicians and workmen; a trade network of proven value with vast foreign markets spread over five continents, and a colonial empire both rich and extensive, all served by a merchant fleet without rival in number and variety of vessels; a vast accumulation of capital and profitable investments; ample



Map 1. Economic geography of Great Britain in 1851

The demarcation line (taken from Caird) separates the pastures from the arable lands in England – the stock-raising areas (with high rents) in the west, and the lands under cultivation in the east.

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funds for export, and the stimulus of successive booms in railways and steel making; high quality equipment, secure markets, a highly sophisticated financial system that reached out in all directions, resulting in the ability to produce coal, iron and cotton goods more cheaply than elsewhere; the alliance of a highly productive agriculture with an expanding industry; a rising birth-rate leading to a home demand in constant growth; a social structure that was flexible and fairly mobile; in the political sphere the combination of individual enterprise and a powerful state which, while leaving free play to competition, cleverly mixed intervention with *laissez-faire*, brought indirect support to everything that advanced British interests over the world, lent parliamentary weight to ruling economic interests and assisted, politically and diplomatically, individual wealth and world power; a human capital characterized by superior technical know-how; an educational system which encouraged experiment, innovation and adaptability; an unshakeable belief in the merits of competition; the pressure of a collective moral conviction which, not content with upsetting all the barriers opposing growth, exalted individual initiative, idealized riches, and praised as cardinal virtues saving, work, mobility and creative energy; the unforced connivance of protestantism and capitalist development which, from the Quakers to the Anglicans, forged a link between the religious spirit and the will to grow, and combined spiritual strivings with a taste for profit; and finally there was the success that bred more success and the confidence that inspired greater confidence. These were the multifarious constituents that made up the economic pre-eminence of Great Britain. It would however be illusory to try and discover among these constituents a special single variable or even to look for a hierarchy of diverse factors. The secret of English progress was in the web of interrelated forces, and their influence in the world cannot be measured by simply calculating the weight of each element. And that is what astounded the world.

### **Malthus forgotten**

The boom in births was no less spectacular than the boom in wealth. Demographic growth and economic growth were closely matched. They affected and helped each other along in a variety of ways. The population of Great Britain, having doubled in the first half of the century, almost doubled again in the second half. The census in fact registered 20.8 million inhabitants in 1851 (as opposed to 10.5 million in 1801) and 37 million in 1901. If one looks at the three 'nations' of the island, one sees that England has the lion's share with 16.9 million souls in 1851 (against 8.3 million in 1801) and 30.8 million in 1901. The Welsh, who numbered half a million at the end of the eighteenth century, reached 1 million in

1851 and 1.7 million in 1901. Here the population explosion was accompanied by a remarkable geographical concentration, for by 1901 half the population were living in the county of Glamorgan. The latter had more inhabitants than the other eleven Welsh counties put together, whereas in 1851 it contained only 10 per cent of the total. In Scotland, where emigration had a greater effect and where the population also tended to concentrate in one region, the Lowlands, the number of inhabitants increased at a slower rate. There were 2.9 million Scotsmen in 1851 (as opposed to 1.6 million in 1801) and 4.5 million in 1901 – an increase of 55 per cent compared with increases of 69 per cent in Wales and 82 per cent in England.

The rhythm of its increase kept Great Britain at the head of the European league. She maintained the ample lead she had won at the time of the population explosion. From 1851 to 1881 her annual rate of increase, which was around 1.3 per cent, put her at the head of Europe, equal to Holland and Denmark, well above Prussia, Belgium, Italy and Russia, and leaving France a long way behind. Having underlined demographic potency as a major trait of British society, one ought perhaps to spell out its elements. It was the coexistence of three characteristics which gave the population of England in the middle of the nineteenth century its particularly original make-up: a number of old persistent patterns dating from the pre-industrial demographic regime, a stabilization of the forces at work in the great flood of growth, and finally new migration movements heading overseas.

*Table 1* The age distribution of the population of England and Wales, 1821–1971

	1821	1851	1881	1911	1931	1951	1971
0–9 years	27.9	24.8	25.7	20.9	15.8	15.7	16.8
10–19 years	21.1	20.5	20.6	19.0	16.6	12.6	14.2
20–29 years	15.7	17.5	16.8	17.3	17.1	14.2	14.1
30–39 years	11.8	13.2	12.7	15.3	14.7	14.6	11.6
40–49 years	9.4	9.8	9.8	11.5	13.1	14.9	12.5
50–59 years	6.6	6.9	7.0	8.0	11.1	12.1	12.0
over 60 years	7.5	7.3	7.4	8.0	11.6	15.9	18.8
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Among the long-standing characteristics one must mention the preponderance of young age groups, the traditional structure of households and the general fertility. A young country (in 1871 four out of five Englishmen were under 45 and one out of two were under 21), England maintained an age pyramid until after 1880 which was very similar to the

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one that prevailed, according to Gregory King's estimates, at the end of the seventeenth century. There was the same proportion of young people and probably much the same proportion of elderly. There was little practice of birth control. As for the average size of households, far from showing a new style of family (i.e. smaller families instead of extended families), the works of Peter Laslett have shown a steady continuity from the seventeenth to the end of the nineteenth century – 4.7 persons per household in 1851, the same as the average between 1650 and 1750.<sup>15</sup> Contrary to what has often been thought, not only did industrialism and urbanization contribute nothing to a reduction in the size of households (in fact just the opposite, as the urban family in the nineteenth century tended to be a bit larger than the classic rural family) but indeed recent evidence shows that the composition of households simply followed the traditional model. Only a minority of households extended over three generations and included collateral relations (i.e. aunts, nephews cousins); most of the time they were 'nuclear' families, centred on two generations. Michael Anderson's detailed study of Preston, a typical industrial town in Lancashire, whose family size was noticeably larger than the national average (5.4 persons per household) still showed that three-quarters of the families consisted only of parents and children.<sup>16</sup>

In this great population explosion, which has been called the 'demographic revolution', everyone knows that the central mechanism was the variable effect of three factors: birth-rate, death-rate and marriage-rate. In mid-nineteenth-century England, one sees these factors becoming relatively stable. Between 1840 and 1880 the curves on the graph hardly vary at all. Hence the numerical expansion was both strong and regular.

After the slow decline in the first third of the century the death-rate seems to have reached a plateau at around 22–3 per '000. No doubt the plateau tilts downwards a little, but until 1875 there is no decisive alteration to be seen. Neither public health nor medical science brought about a spectacular change. Infant mortality did not vary. Another proof of stability was the insignificant change in life expectancy. While in 1841 it was 40 years for men and 42 years for women, it increased by only one or two points in the course of the next thirty years and only just reached 44 years and 48 years at the end of the century. On the marriage side, i.e. marriage-rate and average age of marriage, the fluctuations were insignificant. Finally the birth-rate kept up its high level with splendid regularity, for the five-year averages remained consistently between 35 and 36 per '000 up to 1875.

The result of all this was that the demographic factors, which more or less stabilized just before the mid-century, remained unaltered until 1880 and resulted in a remarkable increase in numbers. Around that date

300,000 new souls were added to the population of Great Britain every year. The main reason for this was the large gap between the number of births and the number of deaths – three births for every two deaths. For one birth followed another pell-mell. In the public mind the traditional picture of the family reigned supreme. The large family was the rule. Wasn't it the law of nature? For example in the cohort of marriages celebrated between 1861 and 1869, amounting to a million and a half couples, an average of 6.2 children was produced.<sup>17</sup> At this time more than one family out of six consisted of 10 children or more. On the other hand only one out of eight families had 1 or 2 children.

Fertility, vitality, activity – the social side of life echoed the biological. This outpouring of young human beings required new horizons and a field of expansion broader than an island with a rising population could offer. The national territory was not enough. Energy and ambition sought fresh territories overseas in which to work. There was, of course a long tradition of distant trade and pioneer colonization, but there was a change of scale in the middle of the nineteenth century. Emigration, occurring in successive waves (1851–4, 1863–6, 1869–74, 1880–4) became a prodigious phenomenon.

Up until 1840 the flow of departures had stayed at a modest level; and emigrants had been recruited mostly from the Celtic lands. From then onwards there was a distinct change. Emigration absorbed at least one third of the excess of births over deaths. And it was now England's turn, after Scotland and Ireland, to become an important source of leavers. It is certainly difficult to arrive at an accurate number of people who left their native land for good, because many returned and the statistics do not distinguish between the different subjects of the United Kingdom. Nevertheless we can reckon that the number of English and Scots who left between 1850 and 1880 to people the new Anglo-Saxon lands came to more than 3 million. If the currents of emigration (in which a distinct preponderance of males must be noted – three out of five) had their ups and downs of intensity, they showed a striking regularity in their destinations. Two-thirds of emigrants started life again in the United States, one-fifth in Australia and New Zealand, one-tenth in Canada. Around 1875–80 we see a new current, albeit a very small one, towards South Africa. The preference for America persisted steadily until 1895. The change only came about in the last years of the century, when quite quickly the share of the United States dropped to half of the total and then declined further, to the advantage of Canada and South Africa. So all over the world there sprang up Anglo-Saxon homes where myriad links were kept up with the motherland in the spheres of finance and exchange, of sentiment and institutions, of religion and culture, and of language and civilization.



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At the same time emigration appeared as a remedy for pauperism and economic difficulties. It offered a safety-valve to the threat of social breakdown. It provided an outlet which channelled both the despair of the unemployed and the appetite of those who looked for profitable ventures; and in addition it accorded a special means of spreading English influence throughout the world and of making the human capital of the nation bear fruit – ‘the best affair of business in which the capital of an old and wealthy country can engage’ said John Stuart Mill.<sup>18</sup> In his *Notes on England*, Taine recounts with admiration a meeting with two young people, born into a family of twelve children, who are getting ready to leave for New Zealand to be sheep farmers: ‘Impossible to describe their energy, their ardour, their decisiveness . . . one feels a superabundance of energy and activity, an overflowing of animal spirits.’ He concludes: ‘Here is a fine way of entering life. Many risks are taken, the world is wide open, and one skims off the cream.’<sup>19</sup>

For side by side with the hunger that drove the surplus mouths overseas there existed a well-to-do emigration, less numerous but very active. This was the emigration of managers who went out to Egypt, to India, to the Rio de la Plata or to China. In the four corners of the globe you came across these pioneers, on the Colorado as well as on the Yangtse, in Lagos or Beirut, in Winnipeg or Singapore. For some of them expatriation was only temporary. They intended to come back home after a few years, their fortunes made, or at least having accumulated a modest pile. For others it was a departure for good, sometimes cheerful, sometimes endured with resignation and that sadness which one sees in the faces of Ford Madox Brown’s painting, ‘The Last of England’.

Creative energy was thus abounding everywhere, abroad as well as at home. Growth gave rise to enterprise, which in its turn bred confidence for further ventures. Travel, which for some meant a voyage as far as the Antipodes, became the symbol of a society of movement, adventure and expansion.

### **On the urban front**

As the first country to arrive at an industrial civilization, England was also the first to experience a predominantly urban way of life – the one that was to become the lot of all the advanced nations. Her peculiar experience was to arrive at this stage very early and at the same time on a massive scale. Indeed it was around 1845 that the traditional town-country pattern was reversed. The long domination of the country then came to an end, and the predominance of towns started. Once this tendency had got under way, the imbalance in favour of towns very rapidly asserted itself. The urban population, which just formed the

majority in 1851, was very far ahead 40 years later, when three Englishmen out of four were townsmen. In less than half a century England became an urban nation. But in this leap forward the change was not simply numerical. The transformation was even more one of the quality of life than of mere numbers. In the course of this urbanization a new visual scene emerged together with a new system of social relations and a new lifestyle – in brief a new civilization came into being.

*Table 2 Urban and rural populations in England and Wales in the nineteenth century<sup>20</sup>*

<i>Urban and rural populations as a percentage of the total population</i>									
	1801	1841	1851	1861	1871	1881	1891	1901	1911
<b>THE POPULATION LIVING IN TOWNS</b>									
of over 100,000 inhabitants	11.0	20.7	24.8	28.8	32.6	36.2	39.4	43.6	43.8
of 50,000 – 100,000 inhabitants	3.5	5.5	5.9	6.1	5.6	7.3	8.6	7.5	8.0
of 20,000 – 50,000 inhabitants	4.8	6.8	7.0	7.4	9.6	9.4	9.2	9.9	10.4
of 10,000 – 20,000 inhabitants	4.7	5.3	6.4	6.6	6.6	6.6	7.1	8.1	7.9
of 2,500 – 10,000 inhabitants	9.8	10.0	9.9	9.8	10.8	10.5	10.2	8.9	8.8
<b>TOTAL URBAN POPULATION</b>	<b>33.8</b>	<b>48.3</b>	<b>54.0</b>	<b>58.7</b>	<b>65.2</b>	<b>70.0</b>	<b>74.5</b>	<b>78.0</b>	<b>78.9</b>
<b>TOTAL RURAL POPULATION</b>	<b>76.2</b>	<b>51.7</b>	<b>46.0</b>	<b>41.3</b>	<b>34.8</b>	<b>30.0</b>	<b>25.5</b>	<b>22.0</b>	<b>21.1</b>
No. of towns with over 100,000 inhabitants	1	7	106	13	17	20	24	33	36
No. of towns with 20,000 – 100,000 inhabitants	16	48	55	66	88	108	118	141	165

The urban front now developed three special characteristics – fast rhythm of growth, new types of living quarters and a new ordering of space. To take growth first, the rate was so remarkable that one can only talk of galloping urbanization, and the figures bear this out eloquently. Table 2 shows on the one hand the spectacular rise of the urban population (in absolute terms it tripled between 1850 and 1900), and on the other hand the supremacy of the large towns in the expansion.

Side by side with the large towns whose wealth dated from the beginning of the Industrial Revolution (between 1851 and 1901 Manchester grew from 340,000 inhabitants to 650,000, and its huge suburb, Salford, from 65,000 to 220,000; the Liverpool area went up from 400,000 to 700,000, the Birmingham area from 230,000 to 760,000; in Scotland, Glasgow leapt from 360,000 to 920,000) one can see the swift rise of towns of second rank, which assumed the role of regional capitals. In the second half of the century Leeds increased from 170,000 to 430,000, Sheffield from 135,000 to more than 400,000, Newcastle from 90,000 to 250,000 and Hull from 85,000 to 240,000. Others held their old positions, e.g. Bristol with 330,000 inhabitants in 1901 as against 140,000 half a century earlier. Among the fastest growing towns we should mention Leicester, in the

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Midlands, (60,000 souls in 1850, 210,000 in 1901) where new engineering industries joined the traditional hosiery activity; Stoke-on-Trent in the heart of the Potteries, up from 65,000 to 215,000; and the textile centres of Nottingham and Derby. Some towns rose up out of nothing. Coal created Cardiff, ironworks Middlesbrough and Barrow-in-Furness, the railways Crewe and Swindon.

Throughout the country, apart from the extreme north of England and Scotland, there was one prevalent type of habitation: that of the individual house. The 1851 census remarks on this subject that 'the possession of an entire house is strongly desired by every Englishman, for it throws a sharp, well-defined circle round his family and hearth – the shrine of his sorrows, joy, and meditations.'<sup>21</sup> This indicates a profound longing for domestic independence, expressed even by humble folk in the well-known saying 'my home is my castle'. Of course living quarters of this kind tended to give rise to an individualist mentality, without lessening in working-class areas a lively spirit of solidarity and mutual help among families.

Houses varied considerably in size and comfort according to the social class and income of the occupants. In middle-class areas one found terrace houses next to each other all along a street, or detached houses standing in their own large gardens. The latter style was favoured by the more prosperous families, being a vision of the aristocratic country house on a small scale. A more economic solution was often adopted in the lower levels of the middle class – pairs of 'semi-detached' houses joined together and separated from their neighbours. The spacious Victorian terrace houses, usually built in the classical style with a profusion of columns, balconies and stucco facings but occasionally displaying the Hanseatic, Flemish or Tudor mode, were nearly always built with an identical interior plan. The distribution of rooms was an exact reflection of the orders of society. The lower classes, i.e. the servants, for their day-time work occupied the basement ('below stairs') where the kitchen, the pantry and the servants' hall were situated, and in the evening they went up to the third or fourth floors to sleep. The ground floor and the first two floors were the domain of the masters. The dining-room and an occasional room were usually on the ground-floor; the drawing-room, where the lady of the house presided, was on the first floor; and the bedrooms of the parents and children on the second floor.

In the poorer quarters, i.e. in most of the town, the workers' dwellings also followed a more or less fixed plan. They nearly always consisted of small two-floor brick houses, aligned in terraces and separated from the next row at the back by a small yard or a bit of garden. These houses sometimes had two rooms on each floor, but more often a single room or

'one up, one down'. From the end of the eighteenth century onwards, it also often happened that the builders took to backing houses one against the other to save ground. This 'back-to-back' technique was a calamity denounced by all experts in hygiene, which is why from 1850 onwards most local authorities ruled out the system, but the back-to-backs took a long time to disappear. In Nottingham for example, around 1850, there were 8,000 such houses, i.e. two-thirds of the dwellings in the town. The scourge of urban squalor was not confined to this type of construction. Slums resulted from overcrowding, itself the product of poverty and high rents, and from 'jerry-building', a cut-price way of building on badly drained soil with no solid foundations and using materials of poor quality. The result was that whole districts were made up of hovels without air or water, and without sanitation beyond a common sewer. Rubbish and filth gathered in these fetid cess-pits, and encouraged vermin and epidemics of every kind. Urban misery reached the depths of degradation.

Property speculation played an important role in the development of towns. First it was a fruitful sector for investment because of rapid expansion. The return on building was a regular 6 per cent. At the same time the fast growth of the towns gave a boost to ground values which continued to be high and on the increase even up to our own times. However, quite apart from the effect of rising land values, the spatial layout and the Victorian urban scene are above all explained by the system of land ownership and the methods of building development. The ground landlords often possessed vast estates. When a landlord decided to parcel out all or part of his property, he usually got in touch with a 'speculative builder' who took charge of the development.

There were two consequences to this. First of all, the uniform appearance of urban houses in England – mass-produced, all the houses in the same street or the same district resemble one another in design and size. The resulting impression is one of monotony which strikes all foreigners. Bernstein recalls in his memoirs that Marx, who was very short-sighted, regularly entered the wrong house when he came back to his district of Kentish Town from the British Museum.<sup>22</sup> Secondly the landlord, whether he was a private individual or an institution, usually imposed a general scheme for the construction of the houses and the street lay-out, together with a mass of specifications, so that, paradoxically, private initiative tempered the natural anarchy of urban development. It is therefore, a mistake to suppose that Victorian towns were simply the products of chance. At the estate level they were not without plan or direction. *Laissez-faire* and the profit motive were joined together to produce a certain degree of control. It would be more sensible to talk of a mosaic of small enterprises rubbing shoulders with one another, a

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curious mixture of order in detail and chaos in the general plan. Victorian town development was thus tempered by a degree of private planning which took over some of the traditions of the aristocratic urbanism of the classic period. In the end, towards the close of the century, public authority planning started to assert itself.

This form of 'mosaic' development inevitably led to each district, and even each street in a town, acquiring a special character, and so gave rise to social segregation. Even before it was built one could see the destiny fixed for an area, and in a social system as strictly defined and hierarchical as Victorian England, the differentiation became mandatory. It is well known that every town reflects in its layout and architecture the society from which it springs. In Great Britain's case the methods of town development as well as the prevalence of horizontal construction led to an urban geography that underlined social divisions more than in any other country. Far from bringing different social groups together, the British town contributed to isolation, not to say apartheid. There was indeed a contradiction here with the ambitions of society which aimed, as we shall see, at a closing of the ranks round a political and moral consensus. On the contrary, urban life led to local loyalty – to the neighbourhood, to the street, to the group of houses or the district – and to the strengthening of class distinctions. As against this the extreme diversity of the towns – large conurbations like Manchester, Birmingham or Glasgow, medium-sized industrial cities like Halifax, Huddersfield or Barrow-in-Furness, small peaceful towns like York or Oxford, resorts like Brighton or Scarborough, etc. – led to a host of regional and local nuances.

### London

Standing apart, in a class by itself, was the capital – the 'Metropolis'. It was an enormous mass which by its extent and the number of its inhabitants and buildings far outstripped all other towns in the world, without a possible rival. London seemed to be the incarnation of the Industrial Age. Its population passed the million mark when the century was just two years old. It was the first town since the fall of Rome to reach this total. In 1851 there were 2.4 million Londoners; in 1881 there were 3.8 million, and for the whole conurbation of Greater London the total was even 4,750,000. It was at the turn of the century that the town itself, i.e. the County of London, reached its maximum of 4.5 million according to the census of 1901, while Greater London, whose growth was no less spectacular, counted 6.6 million inhabitants. This ocean of houses stretching as far as the eye could reach induced a feeling of immensity that almost overwhelmed the beholder – a source of fear as well as of admiration. The vision that constantly sprang to the minds of the Victorians was that of the

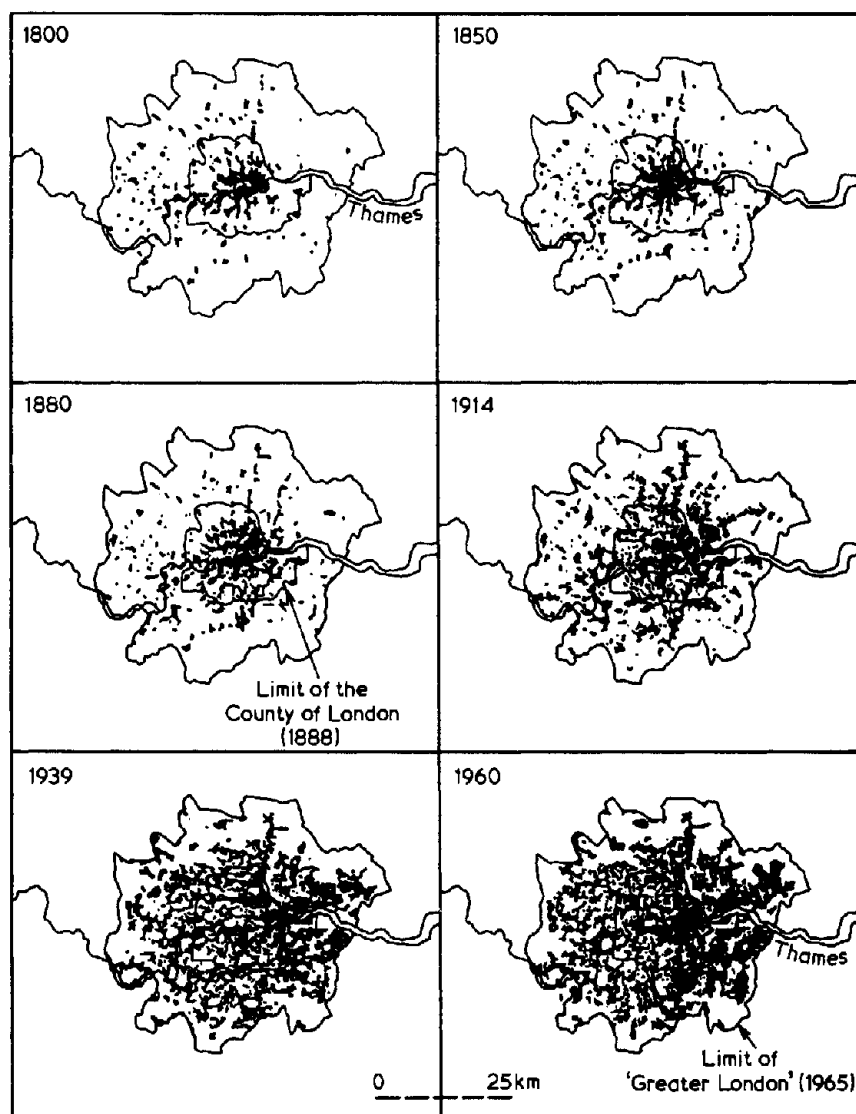
great cities of antiquity, such as Tyre, Nineveh, Palmyra, and, above all, Babylon. Byron's phrase 'the modern Babylon' became the standard way to express, depending on the context, the grandeur, the power, the wealth, the vice or the corruption of this monster city. When Ozanam visited London for the 1851 Exhibition, he saw there, after Rome and Paris, 'the third capital of modern civilization'. Most Englishmen, being less eclectic and more jingoist, soon set up their own clichés and described their capital as 'the centre-point of the civilized world', 'the wonderful centre of the world's trade', or, alluding to the gigantic concentration of wealth 'the Golden City'. London was represented as the microcosm of the universe, 'the World City'.

However, the concentration was so vast and so diverse, so fragmented and contrasted, that it was difficult to form a concrete idea of the whole. Mayhew, the most famous researcher of the mid-century, had the notion of trying an ascent in a balloon above the giant town. From that special vantage-point he observed in fascination the 'Leviathan metropolis with a dense canopy of smoke hanging over it'. But even from there it was impossible, he reported, 'to tell where the monster city began or ended, for the buildings stretched not only to the horizon on either side, but far away into the distance . . . where the town seemed to blend into the sky'. He went into ecstasies at the sight of 'this vast bricken mass of churches and hospitals, banks and prisons, palaces and workhouses, docks and refuges for the destitute, parks and squares, and courts and alleys, which make up London'. Indeed the observer was struck less by the quantities of houses than by the countless mass of human beings of all conditions, assembled in this small area where the threads of millions of human destinies crossed each other. At this level social analysis, as so often happened in that moralizing age, was coloured by ethical considerations of the good and bad results of such a concentration of humanity, a 'strange conglomeration of vice, avarice and low cunning, of noble aspirations and humble heroism'. From his balloon the journalist, comparing his airy position to that of an 'angel's view' takes to meditating on this 'huge town where perhaps there is more virtue and more iniquity, more wealth and more want, brought together in one dense focus than in any other part of the earth'.<sup>23</sup>

The area of the town continued to spread like an oil patch advancing by capillarity, with some fingers shooting out along the axes of the main roads and railways. In its gradual advance the town engulfed ancient villages, market gardens and pastures, driving farms and their fields ever further out. Urbanization took over whole tracts of land in its progress. Private estates, often of considerable acreage, were suddenly given over to development. In this way the fashionable new districts of Kensington and Paddington, extending the West End further west, were constructed,

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while to the north substantial houses sprang up in St John's Wood, Hampstead and Islington. On the east side and on the flat lands south of the Thames, the working-class quarters predominated with their long monotonous lines of small grey houses. The East End grew towards Mile End, Poplar and Hackney, while on the south bank of the river the spaces between the ancient boroughs of Southwark and Greenwich were filled



Map 2. The growth of London<sup>24</sup>

in with housing, and new districts such as Battersea and Camberwell developed at the same pace. Further south, near the first line of Surrey hills, the solid suburbs rose up amid greenery, with their comfortable detached villas in the middle of large shady gardens.

What was completely new from the mid-century onwards was the movement of the population away from the central districts. The zone most affected was the City and its adjacent areas. While the City's population from 1801 to 1851 was very stable with an almost constant figure of 130,000 inhabitants (which gave a considerable density – over 1,000 people per acre on average, and in certain areas up to nearly 2,000), it suffered a rapid decline in the second half of the century as a result of the building of railway stations and even more of the growth of warehouses and office blocks. In 1881 there were no more than 51,000 inhabitants, in 1901 27,000. The City started to live on a double rhythm – a diminishing night population and a day population of growing numbers and frenzied activity. A 'day census' revealed the daytime presence of 170,000 people in 1866 and 300,000 in 1891.<sup>25</sup> A similar pattern developed in other parts of the historic heart of London – the Strand, Holborn, Soho. In all, between 1851 and 1881, the central districts lost 135,000 people, and towards the end of the century the process was even more rapid. So began a special division of urban space which in the twentieth century was to lead to a contrast between business centres and residential areas, as well as to daily migrations that became both more numerous and longer in distance. However, in the second half of the nineteenth century, these daily journeys were on a small scale – they amounted to less than 50,000 in 1854.<sup>26</sup> Only the well-to-do, i.e. those who had the means to use the omnibus, the train or better still the personal vehicle, could allow themselves to live at a certain distance from their work. All the rest, and particularly the workmen who travelled on foot, were forced to find lodgings near their place of work, with all that this entailed for popular housing – overcrowding, high rents and the spread of slums.

Two phenomena dominated the organization of collective living in London: the total absence of municipal government at town level, and the violence of urban contrasts. London was a huge sprawl without unity, broken up into a multitude of small autonomous districts – civil parishes governed by vestries, unrepresentative and without effective powers. The capital suffered from its division between the City on the one hand, administered by its 'Corporation', a closed oligarchy of businessmen with age-old prestige, and on the other the chaos, not to say anarchy, of a mass of small local authorities, entangled, inefficient and often corrupt – the 'Bumbledom' denounced by Dickens. Until 1888 no remedy was applied to the scandalous under-administration and under-equipment of the world's largest town; for the only reform ever voted (The Metropolis



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Management Act of 1855 creating the Metropolitan Board of Works) confined itself to correcting the worst abuses relating to drainage and traffic.

*Laissez-faire* likewise triumphed in the social sphere. Hence the astonishing contrasts which surprised every visitor. Firstly there were the contrasts between districts. The town was in effect made up of various towns. So it took in the City, world centre of finance and trade, Westminster, the headquarters of the government and heart of the Empire, the industrial zones of the centre and the East End (where garments, shoes, jewels, furniture, silk and timber were made up, and where boats, vehicles, precision instruments, etc. were manufactured) and the south whose specialities were machine-tools, tanning, fire-arms and so on. Beyond London Bridge started the Docks, an immense and very active port, the first in the world. To these wharves and warehouses ships would steam, carrying cargoes from the four corners of the globe: tea, ivory, spices, wine, wood, furs, grain and coal. There was a ceaseless movement of ships on the Thames, an everchanging scene which the brush of Whistler immortalized around 1860 in a series of watercolours. 'A wonderful medley of masts, sails and rigging', remarked Baudelaire, 'a chaos of fog, furnaces and gushing smoke – the profound and complicated poetry of a vast capital.'<sup>27</sup>

Another contrast, and a much more violent one, was the marked difference between opulence and poverty, which went far beyond the standard antithesis of West End and East End. The lines of social hierarchy were drawn with great precision. In 1851, only one Londoner in twenty-five belonged to the 'upper-class', while the 'lower classes', of which the vast majority were manual workers, formed more than four-fifths of the population. In the fine houses of the aristocracy of Belgravia and Mayfair there were parties and a social life of exceptional brilliance, especially in 'the Season', while every day, in Hyde Park, Rotten Row provided an elegant meeting-place for the gentlemen and ladies of society when mounted on horseback. Yet, not a mile from these glamorous scenes where money flowed like water, there were thousands of human beings squatting in filth and misery. Apart from the pockets of poverty which were dotted about the wealthy districts, there were whole areas delivered over to the poor, nearly all the East End and the area that bordered the Thames on the south. Yet, to counter current romantic visions of 'the mysteries of London', we must carefully distinguish between two categories of population. On the one hand there was the majority made up of workmen and small tradespeople who, in spite of conditions that were difficult and often sombre, did manage to make some sort of a living and had no contact with the world of crime. On the other, there was the underworld, whose size and influence has often