

VICTORIANS AT HOME AND AWAY

Janet and Peter Phillips

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THE VICTORIAN WORLD



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Volume 38

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JANET AND PETER PHILLIPS

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**This book is dedicated to our sons
DANIEL and JOSHUA**

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The late Munich comedian, Karl Vallentin — one of the greatest of the rare race of metaphysical clowns — once enacted the following scene: the curtain goes up and reveals darkness; and in this darkness is a solitary circle of light thrown by a street lamp. Vallentin, with his long-drawn and deeply worried face, walks round and round the circle of light, desperately looking for something. ‘What have you lost?’ a policeman asks who has entered the scene. ‘The key to my house.’ Upon which the policeman joins him in his search. They find nothing; and after a while he enquires: ‘Are you sure you lost it here?’ ‘No,’ says Vallentin, and pointing to a dark corner of the stage: ‘Over there.’ ‘Then why on earth are you looking for it here?’ ‘There is no light over there,’ says Vallentin.

History, maybe, is the circle of light. But the key we are looking for is likely to be in a place unilluminated by the street lamps.

—Erich Heller: ‘Oswald Spengler’
in *The Disinherited Mind*

‘Well, very long ago, on the spot where the Wild Wood waves now, before ever it had planted itself and grown up to what it now is, there was a city — a city of people, you know. Here, where we are standing, they lived, and walked, and talked, and slept, and carried on their business. Here they stabled their horses and feasted, from here they rode out to fight or drove out to trade. They were a powerful people, and rich, and great builders. They built to last, for they thought their city would last for ever.’

‘But what has become of them all?’ asked the Mole.

‘Who can tell?’ said the Badger. ‘People come — they stay for a while, they flourish, they build — and they go. It is their way. But we remain. There were badgers here, I’ve been told, long before that same city ever came to be. And now there are badgers here again. We are an enduring lot, and we may move out for a time, but we wait, and are patient, and back we come. And so it will ever be.’

— Mr Badger in Kenneth Grahame’s
Wind in the Willows (1908)

1

ETCETERAS

Etceteras are the you-and-mes of history. They are not Mr Badger's 'powerful people, and rich, and great builders'. They are his 'enduring lot' who wait and are patient and come back. They are the people and things that remain when the captains and the kings depart.

Victorian etceteras are people choosing the suburb in which to live, the style of their house, the furniture and pictures (or reproductions of pictures) to put in it, the knick-knacks to sit on the mantelpieces. They are people playing croquet on the lawn, singing songs in the drawing-room, listening to Papa or Mama reading aloud to the whole family the latest eagerly awaited instalment of Dickens, and saying family prayers before lighting their candles to go to bed. They are the people marvelling at the Crystal Palace in 1851 and the Queen's Diamond Jubilee in 1897. They are the soldiers of the Queen walking out in their scarlet uniforms catching the eyes of the girls. They are business offices, shops and railway stations; the excursions organised by Thomas Cook, the seaside hotels, football grounds, theatres, music-halls, concert-halls, the bandstands in winter disconsolately dripping rain from gutters and patiently waiting for summer to bring them back to life with guardsmen playing patriotic marches and tunes from Gilbert and Sullivan. They are the Bible, *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, books on etiquette, Mrs Beeton's *Household Management*, Bradshaw's *Monthly Guide to the Railways*. They are what makes ordinary life workable, comfortable and pleasant for the you-and-mes — the Mr,

Mrs. Master and Miss Badgers — of the Victorian age.

They do not appear in history's headlines. The best they can manage is low down on inside pages in small print. This is because most historians are attracted only by the sensational, the spectacular successes and failures of the past. The great eighteenth-century English historian of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, Edward Gibbon, said that 'History is little more than the register of the crimes, follies and misfortunes of mankind.' (Gibbon's dignified description would apply equally well to the *News of the World*.) A later outstanding Victorian English historian, Thomas Carlyle, offered another definition: 'History is nothing but the biography of great men.' Although their definitions differ, both agree that history is about dramatic happenings, the huge climaxes, the great adventures, what is *not* usual, and in this, they are typical of their kind. The ink of most historians is dyed with Romanticism or a kind of Gothicism. They may agree that 'happy is the country that has no history' but few, if any, would disagree that the historians of such a country would be unhappy, if only because they would be out of a job. With historians, as with journalists, no news is bad business.

Technical reasons join with personal motives to drive historians to high drama in history. It is the unusual that impels people to write the documents from which most historians compose history — memoirs, letters, diaries, statutes, newspaper reports, accounts of battles or elections or Bastilles falling. Only as extraordinary a person as Tsar Nicholas II could note in his diary on the day the Russian Revolution broke out that nothing important happened and the weather was good.

Then, too, a large part of the fascination which history holds for many people is vicarious rubbing of shoulders with the great, or pulling them down from their pedestals, or pronouncing of judgement on them in a lordly (even godlike) manner. Whatever the reasons for their going to history, many historians have an element of the frustrated dramatist in them.

Historians of the distant past were perhaps justified in ignoring etceteras and concentrating their studies on Top

People who, after all, did have all the power, wealth and education – and left almost all the written records. But, nowadays, little people are voters whom governments must court and businessmen serve. To appreciate the far-reaching consequences of the rise to importance of little people we need only to take the case of the motor car since World War Two. Only since then have cars been owned for pleasure and convenience by those who are not well-to-do. Cars, and car-owners, have multiplied time and again, and streets and roads have become overcrowded. New streets and roads have had to be built and old ones altered. Parking problems have become very complicated for the motorist and the urban authorities. Parking fees have become a rich source of funds for local authorities and a means of keeping rates down. New jobs have been created, old ones enlarged: town-planners, environmentalists, road engineers, traffic police, garage-owners, motor-mechanics, petrol-pump attendants, tourist agents, the AA and the RAC. Road accidents have exacted an ever-rising toll of millions of pounds every year to pay for hospitalising victims and for insurance premiums and claims for damaged or destroyed vehicles and people. Families who once took their annual holiday regularly at Margate or Skegness or Blackpool now take their car to the Lake District one year and on the Continent the next, with interesting effects on their mental horizons.

It was in the Victorian age that the monopoly of power, wealth and education possessed by the aristocracy and gentry was successfully challenged for the first time. An expanding middle class provided an important new group of consumers as well as aspirants to political power, economic wealth and social status. Workers in field and factory had, as yet, no part of power, wealth or social importance; nor were they consumers of any great importance, so Victorian *etceteras* tend not to be lower-class. The word 'Victorian' tends to summon up a middle-class image – if only because working-class people left comparatively few traces of their doings, especially outside working hours.

Victorian middle-class *etceteras* left abundant evidence: novels, buildings, clothes, newspapers, poems, paintings, railways, shop catalogues, railway timetables, music, football

scores, racing results, medical textbooks, gardening manuals, scientific textbooks, Gilbert and Sullivan programmes, weather forecasts, sermons, insurance policies, death notices. The artistic production — novels, paintings, plays, architecture, poems, music — is important to those interested in etceteras not because of its aesthetic quality but because it tells them something about the desires, fears, ideals, and the dos and don'ts of little people. The person interested in etceteras does not have to be anything of a genius; indeed, ignorance of artistic worth is no disadvantage at all. One can understand Tennyson's religious doubts without being able to judge the value of his poetry, or appreciate the antagonism against the aristocracy expressed in a Pre-Raphaelite painting without being at all capable of placing it in the artistic Football League table. Bad paintings, bad books, bad buildings may tell as much about commonplace life as good ones — in fact, they may tell more. Very few people are interested in high-class works of art.

This book is based on the assumption that most people in the past were neither fools nor villains. We cannot feel superior, holier-than-thou towards the past because we realise all too well that it will not be long before we, ourselves, belong to it, and we hope that we will not be rejected by the future for being so backward, ignorant and reactionary. If past people were neither fools nor villains, then it follows that they are likely to have had good reasons for doing what may seem to us (in very different circumstances) silly or wicked. Four commonplace illustrations will perhaps serve to show this. When Thomas Hughes, the author of *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, was a boarder at Rugby in the 1830s, all the boys drank beer with their meals. This was not due to stupidity or ignorance of the bad effects of alcohol. Beer was drunk because any running water (let alone pure running water) was rare even in London, and available water was unsafe to drink. No one willingly drank water except mixed with alcohol in some form or another, alcohol being a mild germ-killer. Without running water, making tea, coffee or cocoa was not practicable. Only after *Victorian* sanitary engineers laid water-pipes and purified the water could Tom Brown's grandchildren safely drink plain water. And only

then could school kitchens cope with making nearly a thousand cups of tea, coffee or cocoa every day.

Windows provide two more examples. Victorians are often mocked for obstinately keeping windows closed even in summer. In fact, they had good reasons for doing so. Not only did they fear the house fires which could (and did) result from sudden draughts and gusts of wind making candlelights flare unexpectedly. Also, in towns and cities, suburban streets were not asphalted or sealed in any way and traffic raised persistent clouds of dust in summer which drifted into rooms if windows were open. Again, Victorians were often criticised for their (apparently) obsessive fear of theft shown, for instance, by bars on ground-floor windows. The plain reason for this was that police were non-existent on the beat until late in the nineteenth century, and thieves were abundant where extreme poverty existed side by side with wealth. Dickens's novel, *Oliver Twist* (published in 1838), focuses on the criminal part of the population. Oliver is valuable to the thieves because he is small enough to be squeezed through an unbarred window (impassable to people of normal size) and open the back door.

Our final illustration concerns roads and cars. Much supercilious amusement may be had at the expense of the Victorians who seemed to block the progress of the motor car by imposing in 1878 a speed limit of 4 m.p.h. and making it illegal for mechanical vehicles to be on the roads unless a man walked in front with a red flag. In fact it was a very sensible law which was passed before the motor car was invented. Until the close of the century, mechanical vehicles on roads, such as steam traction engines used for ploughing and other farm work or steamrollers (invented in 1859), were large and terribly noisy. Horses meeting them took fright and bolted, endangering the life of riders and of those in the way. Making the vehicles go slowly and advertise their presence in advance with a red flag was a sensible safety precaution and enabled horse-riders or drivers to get a firm grip on the reins or dismount and hold the horse's head. In 1896 the Act was repealed, not because the horses (or their offspring) had become used to mechanical vehicles, but because practicable cars had been developed by the 1890s and a few

were on the road. So, in actual fact, Victorians showed commendable sense *and speed* in altering the law to suit the motor car and progress.

Perhaps putting oneself in the place of people in the past takes away the urge to put them in their place?

2

THE CRYSTAL PALACE

In England, May was notoriously an uncertain month for weather (and traditionally a bad one for marrying), but 1 May 1851 was fine. There was a light shower as the Queen and Prince Albert drove in their carriage up Constitution Hill on their way from Buckingham Palace to Hyde Park to open the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations. However, the rain only served to make the Exhibition Building's 900,000 square feet of glass sparkle and glitter the more in the sun, justifying its affectionate, unofficial name — the Crystal Palace.

It would have taken much more than a mere shower to damp the excitement of the huge expectant crowd. While 30,000 privileged people were congregated inside the huge Crystal Palace (its 18 acres of building could easily house them), over half a million less privileged thronged Hyde Park and Green Park. Many had spent the night in the park or in the streets just outside. The wealthier had come in their carriages and slept in them. They breakfasted comfortably with footmen setting out a picnic meal. Some celebrated the occasion by having wine for breakfast. The less wealthy brought makeshift tents or simply slept on the ground. They, too, spent much of the waiting time eating. Enterprising salesmen set up tables or went among the crowds, selling sandwiches, meat-pies, cakes, fruit and ginger beer. Milk was available (at greatly inflated prices) fresh from the cows which were pastured and milked about a quarter of a mile away, within mooing distance of the Crystal Palace, in the fields on the other side of what is now Kensington Road. All along the

roads leading to the parks men stood with trays selling shiny commemorative medals of the Crystal Palace. Street musicians played their instruments and sang songs. Acrobats picked up pennies by their agile tricks, and Artful Dodgers picked pockets.

The crowds fixed their eyes on the gaily coloured array of the flags of all the nations atop the roof of the Crystal Palace and waited for the signal that would show that the Queen had opened the Exhibition — the firing of a salute of guns on the north side of the Serpentine. Many were anxious to see whether all the glass would be shattered by the noise of the guns; the Prime Minister, Lord John Russell, had feared it would, and had tried to get the guns moved several miles away, to St James's Park. Lord John was wrong. Not a pane even cracked.

Once the glass had stood the test, other excitements demanded attention: there was all the entertainment of a day out, and a very special day at that. Some might catch glimpses of important people coming and going, perhaps even a sight of the Queen and the Prince as their carriage returned home down Rotten Row. Nobody but the 30,000 privileged could get into the Exhibition on May Day; but there was plenty of time. It was to remain open for 140 days until 12 October and more than six million admissions were recorded, including one child who was born on the premises. (The population of Great Britain in 1851 was nearly 21 million, 2¼ million living in London.) Some came several times. After May Day the Queen made 29 other visits before the Royal Family went to Scotland for their summer holiday at Balmoral. She came on 3, 7, 12, 14, 16, 17, 19, 20, 21, 22, 27, 29, 30 May; 2, 7, 16, 20, 21, 24, 26, 28 June; 2, 5, 9, 11, 15, 16, 17, 18 July. After all, her dear Albert was an inspiration and driving force behind the Exhibition. For Victoria, it was her beloved husband's Exhibition. It was *his* triumph.

It had been a dark, frosty, bitterly cold January morning in 1850 when the Prince set out to preside over the first meeting of the Commissioners for the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations, to take place some time in 1851. The government gave no financial support at all to the venture, and the Exhibition was not even held on

government property, but in one of the Royal parks — Hyde Park. In this inaction, government was upholding the prevailing principles of *laissez-faire*: that the role of government should be minimal, confining itself to the preservation of law and order and the defence of the country; that there should be no interference with trade and industry, these being controlled in the free market-place by the laws of supply and demand; and that taxation should be no more than was needed to pay the judge and jailer, the soldier and sailor.

All the money for the Exhibition was subscribed and the costs guaranteed by private persons. The Duke of Wellington — after the Queen, the best-known person in the land — headed the list of subscribers with a handsome sum. He had made his fortune in war; by 1814 a country grateful for his victories against the French had granted him £500,000 (equal to at least twenty times as much, 150 years later) and made him a Duke (*the* Duke, as he was ever after known) — and all that was before he had won Waterloo in the next year. In addition, grateful Spaniards had loaded him with presents of money, jewels, plate, paintings by Velazquez, Murillo and other great Spanish artists worth another fortune. Since then, he had almost literally beaten his sword into a ploughshare, studying the art of peace with almost as great success as he had studied the art of war. He had served as Prime Minister. Whether in office or not, he had used his great reputation to help bring about peace-making compromises and reforms in domestic affairs, such as giving the vote to Catholics in 1829. These reforms had offended his own principles, but he knew that their refusal would have brought the country to bitter violence or even civil war. So he counselled not battle, but moderation. It was a nice touch of fortune that the Exhibition opened on 1 May, the Duke's 82nd birthday. Before going to the opening, he was able to visit the Queen in the morning and receive his birthday wishes and presents; with him he took a birthday present for his godson, the Duke of Connaught, the Queen's seventh child and third son, born on the Duke's birthday a year before and named Arthur after him.

The old Duke's peaceable disposition ensured his admiration for the Exhibition. Its prime purpose, according to Prince