Victorian society drew its legitimizing political and social authority from five elements:

1. Aristocracy and the elite business class
2. Church of England and the Nonconformist religions
3. “Public” [elite private] schools & the universities fed by them
4. Rising professions
5. Central government

The ranking indicated above probably reflects, in rough terms, the relative degree of influence each element had in shaping the deep-seated values of Victorian culture. But each element was key in its own way.

The aristocracy and the new business elite were rather disharmonious social and cultural forces that “balanced” each other even as both exercised a massive degree of power. On the one hand, the aristocracy with its attendant customs, representing nearly 1000 years of entrenched and comforting tradition, was profoundly important, not least for the stability and security it gave to the realm. On the other hand, the new elite business and industrial nouveau riche, while they undermined stability and many traditional values, had an equally profound impact on the evolution of Victorian culture. The power of these complementary forces was, even if often invisible, was enormous.

The Church of England (the Anglican Church) was a far more powerful (and official) religious force than anything we Americans experience, with the possible exception of the current political power of the American “Christian Right Wing,” whatever its incarnation (Graham/Robinson/Falwell acolytes, “tea party,” Fox News devotees, etc.). The British dissenting (Nonconformist) religions—Methodist, Congregationalist, and other “sects”—were also very important as shaping social forces. Traditionally, the Church(es) had played a huge role in the legal, social, and educational “regulation” of the poor, although that role was weakened significantly in the wake of the dislocations brought by the Industrial Revolution and its resulting urbanization. Catholics and Jews were distinctly déclassé and even “outcasts” during part of Victoria’s reign—but they also represented significant religious subcultures.

The public schools (which were actually expensive private “prep” schools by American definitions) were the “training ground” for the aristocracy and the elite middle class, and were indirectly the guarantor of the kingdom’s religious/spiritual mores. These schools
instilled and sustained Britain’s “classical” social and moral values and its elitist sense of itself as the rightful leader (and ruler) of the world. As such, the impact of public schools on Victorian culture was pervasive and deceptively powerful; the British owed what they thought of as “character” to the conditioning delivered by these schools (and Oxford and Cambridge universities, into which they funneled students). And of course, needless to say, these schools also provided the realm with much of its vital base of knowledge and skills, whether in the secular or religious spheres.

The modernization of British society in the nineteenth century created or brought to the fore a number of new commercial and technical professions, in addition to strengthening the importance of many of the “old professions,” such as the law and the military. The powerful new industrial economy and the expansion of the British Empire all over the world necessitated the development of a more modern governmental bureaucracy, in addition to scores of new business and technical professions. Not least among these new (or radically transformed) professions was the public press. The role of newspapers and magazines expanded massively in the nineteenth century with the invention of mass-reproduction technology. The impact of these new “rising professions” and the infrastructure they brought with them was in many respects as cultural as it was economic and political.

The central government—Parliament and the Queen—while not as culturally influential as some of the other components of Victorian society, was, of course, vital and decisive to the direction the kingdom took, both politically and socially. In the beginning of the century, government was considered by many to be a “diversion” or “game” for the wealthy, if not an intrusive nuisance. Such attitudes rarely die (no matter what the country or historical period), but as the nineteenth century progressed, the increasing complexity of society—and not least the social horrors (and embarrassment) wrought by failure of local political and business leaders to act responsibly—necessitated an increasing role for the central government, an unavoidable evolution (however often resisted) in an increasingly complex and interconnected modern world. For that matter, Queen Victoria herself, a much-beloved figure, was an icon whose significance increased (or at least became of more obligatory concern) with each passing decade of her reign, even as she became less physically capable and more temperamentally reclusive. While her role in political policy was relatively minor, her impact on the moral tone and collective pride of the Age was immense.

The relatively stable, hierarchical British social, religious, and educational structures and traditions were probably considerably more instrumental than the economic and political ones in defining the British character and world view, as well as in determining why Britain was largely able to avoid the revolutions and massive political and economic dislocations that were gripping the rest of Europe in the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, it is also true that British society and culture at this time can likely only be adequately understood in the context of the economic changes (such as rising
professions) and political permutations (of central-government philosophy) which helped shape and alter them. So before discussing the arguably more foundational social and cultural elements of the Victorian Age, we should probably first focus on the economic and political elements.

**Economic Revolution**

The late eighteenth century was an age of expansion, marking the shift from a quasi-feudal to a modern industrial culture. The population in Western Europe nearly tripled from the late eighteenth through the nineteenth century, a rate of growth unprecedented up to that time. Simultaneously, the Industrial Revolution caused a gradual (sometimes not so gradual) mass migration of people, particularly the rural poor, from the countryside to the industrial cities, and in the process created radical realignments in British culture. Nineteenth-century culture was ill-prepared for the consequences of either the population explosion or the sudden cramming into the cities of people who were not used to nor knowledgeable about urban life. The root causes of such change may have been economic, but the resulting changes had profound social ramifications.

The “Enclosure Acts” in Great Britain indirectly contributed to the exodus of much of the rural population. This legislation turned large communal tracts of land, which had accommodated many tenant farmers, into fenced-in units of private property that could not provide an adequate livelihood for multiple families (and were in any case not affordable for most individual families). The enclosure acts, however, did accommodate perfectly the rising merchant class, which wanted to own country estates in order to establish their social status as “country gentlemen” (and, not incidentally, profit from rents and enforced cheap peasant labor). In 1750, 60% of all land was unenclosed. By 1820, almost no land remained unenclosed. As an indication of the central role such estates played in the culture, between 1827 and 1830 almost 15% of all criminal convictions were made under the provincial Game Codes, despite the fact that by far the greatest concentrations of people were in the cities.

But of course, as has been suggested, there was an even more basic reason (besides social displacement) why people moved from the country to the city: the Industrial Revolution wiped out the livelihood of many rural families. While Great Britain as a whole was becoming the “world’s factory, money market, and carrier,” rural family-based economies were rapidly eroding, no longer able to compete with the industrial mass-production technology of the cities. Home spinning, for example, by which the family’s women had helped support the family’s economic survival, became nearly extinct. (Between 1786 and 1832 the price of a unit of yarn dropped—due to mass-produced, division-of-labor efficiencies—from 38 shillings to 3 shillings, while the production/manufacturing costs remained relatively constant.) Unable to compete with urban mechanical mass production, most rural families, in order to survive, were forced to move to large cities, where they took jobs in factories as individual laborers. In the first fifty years of the nineteenth century the population of London almost tripled—and
at a time when there was little effective sanitation control or even rudimentary city planning to manage the incoming hordes of new residents.

Moreover, while life on the farm tended to encourage group (family) activities and mutual support, the fundamental ethos of the Industrial Revolution was individualism; value became a function of individual competition and the individual consumer’s resultant buying power. This shift in cultural emphasis was one of the most significant by-products of the shift from a largely communal agricultural base to a predominantly individualistic urban economy. It also brought about a significant transformation in the nature and relational dynamics of the traditional family unit. Whereas rural life often encouraged mutual interdependence—family members routinely needing to help each other with the farming activities—in urban factories jobs went to individuals, not families, and each family member (both adult and child) had no choice but to establish a largely independent means of financial support, to become his/her own “breadwinner.”

The shift to a “democratic” cash-nexus economy (where individual buying power defined the self in volatile markets) weakened the hierarchical authority of the family (where children were dependent upon and could be protected and gradually nurtured by their parents).

This social “fracturing” and volatility was accentuated by the presumably “objective” and “dispassionate” operation of the industrial “free market,” which was in reality anything but objective or disinterested and was hardly “free” in the toll it took on the poor and lower-middle class. When there were insufficient jobs for every member of the family, those left unemployed were forced to survive in whatever ways they could. Children who could not find (or endure) work in the factories (or as chimney sweeps) often turned to crime, often apprenticed as pickpockets by a burgeoning underworld. Many poor women found prostitution to be the only practical way to survive, as well as the only way to avoid punitive “workhouses,” which were set up to punish the unemployed, or debtors’ prison (the new business-class lobby ensured incarceration—often indefinitely—for any debt over £20). Ironically, illegal prostitution often paid much more—and was in many cases even less demeaning and brutalizing—that lawful factory work. Such circumstances led Karl Marx (1818–83), among others, to describe capitalism as essentially an “alienation of labor” that was simultaneously also an alienation from one’s own identity and humanity.

Marx notwithstanding, a number of key late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century thinkers provided powerful philosophical grounding for the idea that the Industrial Revolution (and the predominately capitalist ideology underpinning it) was a logical application and manifestation of enlightened human reason. Among the most influential of these thinkers were Adam Smith, Jeremy Bentham, Thomas Malthus, and David Ricardo.

Adam Smith (1723-90) was one of the first champions of laissez faire economics. He
argued that the best way to promote the welfare of all was to maximize self-interest through unfettered competition in a “free market.” It was an ideology that in fact bespoke an unwavering faith in and support of the ruling class, who naturally were an inherently greater position to influence competition and maximize opportunities for their own self-interest. Although Smith did warn of the dangers of unceasing conflict and the narrow selfishness of human motives, he argued that “the invisible hand” of a beneficent Providence promoted a harmony of interests (and Providence, as Calvin and others had assured us, self-evidently favored the “elect” wealthy class, who would not be wealthy if they were not also virtuous). In fact, Adam Smith’s writings heavily influenced the thinking of Karl Marx (particularly their emphasis on mathematically logical systemic effects), even though Marx, of course, did not attribute capitalism to divine will, and he saw vastly more conflict than harmony in its operation.

Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) made Adam Smith’s assumptions the foundation for an even more comprehensive moral and political philosophy, which dominated much of the nineteenth century. Assuming Smith’s economic principles to be absolute, ahistorical “laws of nature”—and therefore immune to the vicissitudes of historical change—Bentham constructed a philosophy which implied that “free market” capitalism was, in effect, the operation of “natural law.” For Bentham, just as nature was explained by the laws of physics, so human behavior could be explained scientifically by reference to the two primary motives of pleasure and pain. In his *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789), Bentham argued that fundamental to the nature and activity of individuals is their personal assessment of relative pleasure and pain, which defined for them that pleasure is good (and conversely pain is bad), an assessment that predominated over any larger social interest. By “naturally” choosing what gives the most pleasure and the least pain, the individual pursues (and should pursue) rational self-interest, and in the process constructs a “utilitarian” calculus of moral value, albeit a somewhat hedonistic one. Bentham believed that taken in the aggregate (combining the self-interest of each individual in a society), this individualistic egoism collectively and inevitably resulted in what is good for the majority of society.

Bentham focused solely on individual desire, because he believed that the nature of a person can be adequately described without mention of social relationships—the idea of “social relation” being a superfluous “fictitious entity” (though necessary for “convenience of discourse”) since “community” was in reality but “the sum of the interests of the several members who compose it.” Thus, for Bentham, the litmus test for “every action whatsoever” was the principle of personal utility, whether an action promotes or opposes individual happiness. Logically, any action that does not maximize the greatest happiness (for example, an act of pure ascetic sacrifice) is, by definition, morally wrong. Consequently, according to Bentham, a truly moral society is simply one that lets rational self-interest and individual competition run their course free of artificial, impeding regulation (whether social or governmental). If unrestrained (that is, in religious parlance, unadulterated and uncorrupted), rigid individual self-interest could
only result, naturally and logically, in “the greatest good for the greatest number.” Alas, however, the actual experience of people throughout the nineteenth century did not validate Benthamite theories, and toward the end of the century there was overwhelming sentiment for providing more institutional checks and balances on “market forces” and establishing necessary, more humane social “safety nets.”

Social and economic ideologies that privileged various forms of “rational” individualism naturally encouraged the replacement of “soft,” “irrational” community charity with the hard logic of “reason,” often in ways that can only be described as stubbornly ruthless. Radically new Poor Laws were passed in the early 1830s to supplant the old Poor Laws, a decentralized system of poor relief that had been in practice for two hundred years, by largely abolishing traditional charitable “allowances” and replacing them with a system of “workhouses,” which incarcerated the jobless in work camps. Under such a system family members were strictly segregated by sex and permitted virtually no contact with each other. It was thought that by making the “jobless” experience as onerous as possible the workhouses provided a powerful “incentive” for individuals to accept any form of work (however demeaning) in order to avoid the additional punitive consequences of being jobless. Not coincidentally, the workhouses also provided yet another source of artificially cheap labor for a capitalist economic system.

Thomas Malthus (1766-1834), like Smith and Bentham, was an advocate of laissez-faire political economy (and so an implicit opponent of governmental “perverting” interference), although for much more pessimistic reasons. He originally wrote his famous Essay on the Principle of Population (1798) in order to explode Enlightenment notions that human society could be perfected through the proper exercise of human reason, a theory that was still current despite the disappointments of the French Revolution and was espoused by thinkers like William Godwin (1756-1836), the husband of Mary Wollstonecraft and the father of Frankenstein author Mary Shelley. Malthus’s treatise explained that while natural resources increase arithmetically, the population increases geometrically. Consequently, population growth will sooner or later outstrip available resources, and the inevitable result of such disastrous shortfalls will be (must be) a “correction” by famine, disease, or war. The view that poverty and famine were natural and inevitable was, needless to say, not popular among social reformers, who saw human “reason” proceeding differently and who believed that proper social structures could eliminate all human ills.

However, Malthus’s was a less alarming theory to the rising business class. His pessimistic critique, which might seem to undermine optimistically “rational” views of industrial capitalism, was nonetheless used to justify the virtues of the Industrial Revolution (and laissez-faire capitalism), in that Malthus argued that famine and poverty were but God’s way of preventing human laziness. In Chapter Five of his book Malthus attacked the old Poor-Laws system of charitable relief on the grounds that,
while such laws might alleviate short-term suffering, they caused greater suffering in the end and did nothing to address the irresponsibility of the lower classes. Famine and poverty were inevitable, but not for the practitioners of Benthamite utilitarian economics; on the contrary, they were the logical and just punishment of those who did not follow the principles of laissez-faire capitalism. It was a conclusion with which industrialists were of course happy to concur, such theories being in their economic self-interest; Malthus’s view was an argument supporting punitive workhouses (and, by implication, unfettered competition) and further evidence that capitalism was the road to both economic and social health. Not surprisingly, perhaps, Malthus’s theories influenced Charles Darwin (1809-82), when he developed similar theories regarding Natural Selection, and social Darwinian doctrines of the “survival of the fittest.”

David Ricardo (1772-1823), an English banker, complemented Malthus’s fatalism with his theory of “the iron law of wages,” which held that by “natural law” the wages of laborers could never ultimately keep pace with the costs of living. Ricardo argued in The Principles of Political Economy and Taxation (1817) that in “the natural advance of society” wages will have a tendency to fall, by the laws of supply and demand, towards the bare minimum level that the owner needs to pay in order to keep the worker functioning. Any rise in wages is immediately offset by an increase in the cost of the goods the worker produces (necessitated by the worker’s increased wages). However, the cost of goods also rises for reasons other than increased wages—costs which are not passed on in wage increases. Thus the laborer is always “doubly affected” by a rise in prices, even to the point of potentially being “totally deprived of subsistence.” Factory owners, of course, found this theory self-evidently attractive. The natural “laws” by which a laborer’s wages are regulated provide, as Ricardo acidly noted, for “the happiness” of the rest of society (the ruling class), and therefore, “like all other contracts, wages should be left to the fair and free competition of the market, and should never be controlled by the interference of the legislature.” It was Ricardo’s theory, in part, that influenced Marx to conclude that it would be impossible for workers to gain from capitalism in the long run.

Benthamite Utilitarianism, in some form or another, was the dominate economic/political philosophy in Britain during the early to mid nineteenth century, despite the fact that its logical “free-market” calculation of the “greatest good for the greatest number” often consigned large segments of Victorian society to some rather gruesome (if economically rational) consequences. Indeed, since Benthamite principles considered governmental city planning an intrusive hamstringing of free enterprise, there were no worker-safety or building regulations, nor any sanitation laws, for most of the first half of the nineteenth century. The first Public Health Act (and Board of Health) was not established until 1848. Indeed, there was no public water supply (i.e., piped water), nor health standards regarding the water supply, until approximately 1850. London did not build sewers until 1855. Consequently, disease epidemics were all too common. So it was hardly surprising that increased industrialization was accompanied by a dramatic
increase in the death rate. The average death rate in Britain was 20.7 per 1000 people in 1831; only a decade later, it had risen 50%—to 30.8 per 1000 people. Fully 1/3 of all people who entered a hospital during Victorian times died there.

We can grasp the depth of the deprivation the working classes suffered by considering what Victorian politicians judged to be adequate ameliorating legislation. The Factory Act of 1833, for example, was thought to be providing sufficient “relief” by outlawing the employment of children in factories—but only for children under 9 years old. The Factory Acts also set a work limitation of 9 hours per day for children under 13 and of 12 hours per day for children 13–18. Conditions improved slightly in 1844, when Parliament limited the number of hours women could be employed to 12 hours per day, and again in 1847, when the “Ten Hours” Factory Act restricted working hours to 10 hours per day for women and for children 13–18. Through all this incrementally minuscule “relief” for working women and children, there remained no restriction whatever on the working hours for men. Statutorily mandated working conditions and sanitary requirements did not finally improve significantly until 1867 and 1878. (In case Americans are tempted to feel self-righteously superior in this regard, we should remember that similar legislation was not enacted in the United States until several decades later—in fact, not until the twentieth century).

Moreover, in order to ensure the continuation of unfettered free enterprise, various free-trade laws and Combination Acts prohibited workers from joining together (i.e., forming unions) to improve their lot. Workers resisted anyway, but usually with brutal consequences. In 1819, government soldiers fired on a political meeting of workers in Manchester in what became known as the Peterloo Massacre. Laborers dubbed “Luddites” rioted regularly, burning factories and destroying the machines that they saw as the means for their exploitation. In 1834, a group of six Dorset laborers, known as the “Tolpuddle Martyrs,” were arrested and deported forever for even attempting to form a trade union. For approximately a decade dating from the mid-1830s, the Chartist Movement (a conglomeration of protest movements) agitated for economic and political reform, but with only modest success. Throughout the century, workers routinely staged illegal strikes in protest of poor working conditions, in spite of the fact that in the early part of the century they were often maimed or killed for doing so.

Perhaps no summary of Victorian political economy would be complete without a brief mention of its most basic and practical component, its system of currency. The basic units of the nineteenth-century British currency system were as follows, in descending order of value:

- guinea = 21 shillings
- sovereign (slang: quid) = 20 shillings (i.e., 1 pound [£1], or 240 pence)
- half sovereign = 10 shillings (120 pence)
**British currency was reconfigured in the mid-twentieth century, moving to the decimal system, but some of the terminology remained the same or similar nevertheless.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Currency Name (slang)</th>
<th>Value in Shillings (Pence)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>crown (slang: bull)</td>
<td>5 shillings (60 pence)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>half crown</td>
<td>2½ shillings (30 pence)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>florin</td>
<td>2 shillings (24 pence)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shilling (slang: bob, hog)</td>
<td>12 pence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sixpence (slang: tanner, bender)</td>
<td>6 pence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>groat</td>
<td>4 pence</td>
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<tr>
<td>threepence (slang: thruppence)</td>
<td>3 pence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>twopence (slang: tuppence)</td>
<td>2 pence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>penny (slang: copper)</td>
<td>1 pence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>halfpenny (slang: ha’pence)</td>
<td>½ pence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>farthing</td>
<td>¼ pence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>half farthing</td>
<td>⅛ pence</td>
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</tbody>
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It is by no means a simple matter to convert the value of money in Victorian times into today’s terms. A strict mathematical conversion of pounds to dollars, even adjusted for inflation, is highly misleading, because it does not account for a vastly different (and much lower) tax rate and taxing structure. Probably the most pragmatic way to approach what a conversion rate would be is to think in terms of practical “buying power.” In those broader terms, £1 in Victorian times would equal approximately $200 (American) today.

**Social Structure and Values**

As important as economics was in Victorian times, it was not as paramount as the bedrock social, religious, and educational structures and values, which mitigated enormously the cultural impact of even the rather massive economic dislocations of the nineteenth century. Indeed, ironically, the Industrial Revolution, which was a prime reason for the utter dominance of the British Empire and its values in the nineteenth century, was in key respects antithetical to what actually defined British character in the Victorian Period.

As a general rule, most Victorians (like Britons of most other eras) were motivated and sustained less by individual achievements than by pride in, and the security of, tradition and cultural institutions. They believed in the stability and continuity provided by the lessons of history, and they distrusted “revolutionary” notions that had not been empirically tested by the crucible of lived experience. While they naturally valued individual distinction (not to mention distinctiveness, being famous for their many eccentrics), the Victorians tended to put community and custom first—embodied, not least, by home and family—ahead of individual pursuits. While one might express the individualist perspective in a formulation something like “I cannot help society until I first succeed myself,” the Victorian perspective would be more aptly expressed as “I
cannot succeed unless all are able to succeed.” Just as it was a privileging of the “greater good” that drew Britons initially to Bentham’s philosophy of “the greatest good for the greatest number,” so it was also this need to serve the greater good that eventually led Victorians to turn away from the more ruthless social consequences of Benthamite *laissez-faire*, “each-man-for-himself” principles. The extreme value placed on the greater whole, on honor, nobility, self-effacement—even above individual achievements, and certainly above financial success—may be what most differentiates the traditional British/Victorian value system from the commonly recognized American one.

In point of fact, there was a certain bifurcation in how Victorians defined “success” in life. They generally measured it by two separate properties, class and money, which were *NOT* thought to be coincident (unlike the customary American assumption). On the one hand, Victorians defined true character by *Class*—not merely one’s social class, but all those characteristics that made one “classy”: educational/intellectual refinement, good manners, a sense of fine style, the “right” friends, good breeding, etc. It was assumed that well-bred behavior should be the natural consequence of elite bloodlines, but “good breeding” still needed to be exhibited. It was believed, for instance, that true gentlemen (and ladies) revealed their nobility (natural “good breeding”) not by material wealth but by their ability to be “at ease” in any situation, and also by their propensity to treat everyone, even the lowliest person, with appropriate decorum and respect.

Of course, it was one of the ironies of modern, industrial, upwardly mobile Victorian (capitalist) society that often those who had acquired a lot of money lacked classiness and sometimes high-class individuals lacked money. But in the end, Victorians gave clear priority to “breeding” over cash. It was indicative of the great value Victorians placed on a kind of “spiritual” merit that, under their cultural mores, a person could be virtually penniless and still be thought a gentleman (or a lady). But the contrary was not the case: one could be extraordinarily rich, but if the person did not demonstrate “good breeding,” s/he was still judged to be a clod, a “loser,” and an effective outcast in fashionable Society.

Victorians understood, on the other hand, that lamentably class was not infinitely self-sustaining. Although and money were generally treated as separate and distinct properties, much of what defined one as “classy”—fine clothing, elegant furnishings, a host of servants, the ability to entertain befitting one’s station—certainly required considerable money (or at least considerable credit until “ready money” became available). It was an unavoidable fact that in order to maintain oneself in fashionable society, one had to not only have “class” but also be able to *exhibit* it tangibly—not least in the ability to participate in (and reciprocate) extraordinarily lavish entertaining—both during the summer London social “Season” but also at one’s country estate(s) during the “off” season. That took money as well as position.
In order to ensure that the “cash nexus” would not erase the paramount value of “breeding,” Victorian society established and maintained a strict taxonomic division between the genteel world and the world of “trade”: “gentlemen” were socially defined as those who do not have to work to earn a living (they live off an inheritance, or investments, or possibly even a kind of almost endless credit as a function of their station and prestige). No gentleman spent his days “making money.” Like the ancient Greeks and Romans, true “citizens” attended to higher, more spiritually nourishing pursuits than quotidian survival. “Tradesmen,” on the other hand—even if very “swanky” tycoons of industry or high finance—were by definition “vulgar,” until proven otherwise beyond all doubt (such proof usually requiring almost “infinite” evidence).

The cliché that Great Britain has always been a much more rigid, “class society” than the United States is, in modern times at least, probably more fiction than reality—in many respects, 21st-century USA has even greater wealth disparity (and social divides) between the upper class and its lower classes than Britain, or certainly modern industrialized Europe. But it is true that Victorian society (not unlike 19th-century America) was a rigidly hierarchical, class system—and for the most part, for all its presumed post-Industrial-Revolution upward mobility, not in the least democratic. And, moreover, odd as it may seem to outsiders, that was exactly the way all classes of the society (upper, middle, and lower) wanted it.

Part of the ideology of “class” was that nobility operated by a kind of “natural law,” and the elite upper classes were naturally born to rule and to set the standard, in both gentility and political leadership, for the rest of society. The middle and lower classes readily accepted upper-class superiority, in no small part because in everyday life and certainly in social situations the upper classes behaved in a manner so much more refined and stylish than anyone else. The lower classes generally admired aristocrats, and the middle class generally aspired to be aristocrats (“natural law” notwithstanding)—not merely to “get the perks” of being invited into the best society, but also because in so many respects aristocrats seemed quite demonstrably to be the best human beings. At least that was the culture’s mythology (the actual behavior of the upper classes often fell considerably short of the mythic standard).

As a consequence, in the Victorian Age the upper classes, which constituted less than 2% of the population, carried enormous sway, culturally as well as politically and economically. Furthermore, the upper and middle classes, which together constituted less than 1/3 of the population, succeeded in ruling (and establishing the rules for) the remaining bottom 2/3 of the country, the “great unwashed” lower classes (who were literally, in many cases, exactly that).

Because of their complexity, it is necessary to examine in some detail the taxonomy of the three basic classes that comprised Victorian society—the aristocracy, the “middle class,” and the lower classes. Each of the three classes was in effect subdivided into
distinct tiers.

I. The Upper Classes (the “aristocracy” and “gentry”), which were only 2% of the total population, itself consisted of three basic tiers:

(a) **Landed aristocracy**, the “Great Proprietors,” consisting of the top 300–400 families in the kingdom—which was a truly minuscule portion of the general population and in fact comprised only 1½% of the entire upper class itself. The “landed aristocracy” almost always held titled ranks (Duke, Marquis, Earl, Viscount, or Baron), which were passed on to their children (including, for the eldest son, a seat in the House of Lords). Their landed estates exceeded 10,000 acres, and they had an annual disposable income of approximately £10,000 (or the equivalent of about $2 million in today’s money). In addition to their country estate(s), they invariably owned a mansion or large house in London.

(b) **Gentry**, consisting of approximately 3000 families—which also was a tiny portion of the general population and in fact comprised only 11% of the upper class itself. The “gentry” held lesser titles, such as Baronet or Knight, which were not passed down to their children. Their landed estate(s) ranged from 1000 to 10,000 acres in size, and they had an annual disposable income between £1000 and £10,000 (or the equivalent today of between $200,000 and $2 million). In addition to their (relatively modest) country estate, they probably owned a house in London.

(c) **Borderline Gentry**, and/or Independent Gentlemen—which comprised approximately 88% of the upper class and ranged along a very wide spectrum in terms of the amount of wealth possessed, from being very comfortable to (in rare cases) being nearly penniless. These families were headed by the sons of the titled gentry (thus with no inherited title) or the sons of very wealthy businessmen. They held estates up to 1000 acres in size, and most of them had an annual disposable income between £700 and £1000 (or the equivalent today of roughly $150,000–$200,000). In addition to a modest country estate, they owned either a townhouse or a nice apartment in London, or took arranged lodgings in a prestigious hotel and their gentlemen’s club(s).

The upper-class “peerage”—those who held titles—were ranked, as follows, in descending order:

1. **Inherited Titles** (were addressed as “Lord” or “Lady,” followed by their first name, as in “Lord Edward” or “Lady Margaret”):
   - Duke/Duchess
   - Marquis/Marchioness
   - Earl/Countess
Viscount/Viscountess (addressed also as the “Honorable”)
Baron/Baroness (addressed also as the “Honorable”)
The eldest son bore a secondary title, until the death of his father, whereupon he rose to the greater title (and assumed his seat in the powerful House of Lords). The younger sons and daughters did not inherit their parent’s title.

(2) Lesser Titles (addressed as “Sir” or “Lady”/“Dame,” followed by their first name, as in “Sir Winston” or “Lady Gwendolyn”):
- Baronet (which is inherited)
- Knight (which is not inherited)
The sons and daughters of those who held lesser titles were addressed as “Lord” or “Lady,” followed by their last name (“Lord Bennington” or “Lady Symington”).

The British class system was much more complex than is usually understood, with extensive “codes” and elaborate, complicated customs, certainly for the upper classes, but also to a degree for the middle classes. Upper-class children were drilled from birth, with the aid of a virtual “army” of servants, in how to behavior, the meticulous details that made up “good breeding.” But, indeed, many social “handbooks” were also produced, in order that the young would be sure to learn the rules and any neophyte could avoid embarrassing gaffes. Such elaborate customs and rituals were, in fact, one of the means by which one could immediately differentiate a “gentleman” or “lady” from the uninitiated (and vulgar) “hoi polloi”—or for that matter, the middle-class person of “good character” from the riff-raff of the lower classes. Indeed, it would be very difficult to overestimate how important these codes of conduct were for establishing and maintaining one’s proper place in Victorian society.

Nor can we likely overestimate the importance, or the magnitude, of inheriting the estate of an Victorian aristocratic family (or of the upper gentry). With that inheritance often came enormous political and social power. It would be roughly equivalent today to inheriting a large, prestigious corporation—except that one would not have a team of top-level executives to run it and would have nearly absolute power over it and its employees, which would have been the equivalent of a small army (or even a rather sizable army, depending on the size of the estate). So important was the aristocracy to the health of British culture and the sustenance of the British Empire that the children of aristocratic families—even those who would not inherit the family title as first born—were invariably indoctrinated and drilled (sometimes oppressively) on their “sacred duty,” the immense importance of doing their part to maintain the family’s status in society (and Britain’s “proper” place in the world). And it is indicative of the immense power of these families that they had available to them, outside inheritance and well beyond the “handbooks” for personal behavior, almost “guaranteed” patronage career paths for success in the form of leadership positions either in government, the
The social and political power of the aristocracy was very significant during Victorian times, but its political power had been diminished measurably beginning in 1832, shortly before Victoria’s reign, by a piece of landmark legislation known as The Great Reform Bill. The Reform Bill, which radically altered the basic structure of political power in Britain and marked a watershed in British culture, extended the vote (and related power) beyond the aristocracy, although only to the new upper-middle class—the nouveau-riche industrialists. Prior to the height of the Industrial Revolution, Britain had long been fueled by aristocratic patronage and a version (albeit an often corrupt version) of noblesse oblige. Even as late as 1847, over 80 seats in Parliament were apportioned as the direct spoils of aristocratic patronage—being effectively “empty” seats known as “rotten boroughs.” The Great Reform Bill was passed only under enormous duress (in the face of demonstrations by ad-hoc militiamen protesting corrupt aristocratic power) and only after King William IV threatened to dilute the aristocracy by creating a great many additional “peers.” It turned out the aristocracy preferred to lose a measure of political power than to lose social prestige through dilution of their “class” exclusivity.

Although the Great Reform Bill was actually very modest as tangible reform—after all, it only extended the vote to the very rich, and voting was still not by secret ballot (and would not be until 1872)—it was nevertheless extremely important symbolically. By enfranchising the new moneyed class, which was created as a direct result of economic (industrial) revolution, the aristocracy officially acknowledged that British culture could not avoid “democratic” modernity, however lurching and tentative was its entry into it. The very limited nature of this “Great Reform,” however, also indicates just how much nineteenth-century Britain valued historical tradition and elitist order (and conversely, feared revolution and “vulgar” uncontrollable democracy).

II. The Middle Classes, though in the “middle” of the class hierarchy, constituted only 32% of the total population (and shrunk to only 25% by the end of the century). As with the aristocracy, the annual disposable income of the middle classes varied immensely, ranging from approximately £150 to about £1000 (or the equivalent in today’s money of approximately $30,000–$200,000); and, of course, members of the middle class could also have “non-disposable” assets, such as property or capital held in “the funds” (stocks and mutual funds). However, in general, the middle classes possessed less wealth, often much less, than is the case today. The middle classes were comprised of three basic groupings:

(a) The Old Professions—barristers, clergymen, military officers, etc.—which carried significant social prestige, though never as much as the aristocracy.
(b) **High Commerce**—bankers, higher-level businessmen and merchants, etc.

(c) **Industry**—industrialists, other businessmen, etc.

The average disposable income of the most successful members of the middle class, normally the professionals and well-off merchants, was approximately £800 to £1000 (or the equivalent of about $160,000–$200,000 in today’s money). For the modestly successful, the average disposable income ranged from approximately £300 to £800 (or the equivalent of about $60,000–$160,000). But members of the “respectable” middle class could also be quite poor. Many lived hand-to-mouth, in genteel poverty, on the margins of the lower class, earning approximately £150 per year (or $30,000), with little or no security.

Ironically, although everyone would have liked to emulate the aristocracy—at least in their elite status, self-confident poise, and luxuriously stylish lives—it was actually the middle class that established the traits and defined the qualities that came to be considered “the Victorian character.”

There were three traits or qualities in particular, growing predominantly from the ethos of the *middle classes*, that ended up defining what came to be considered the “Victorian character”:

1. An allegiance to maintaining a life of **Strict Morality**.
2. A steadfast belief in the virtue of **Hard Work**.
3. A reverence for the **Home**, which was the anchor of their lives.

To be thought not only a strong and capable nation but also a people of basically good “character” was of obvious benefit to a world-ruling British Empire, and it was logical that establishing a sense of national public morality, a “proper moral tone,” would most appropriately become the duty of the Victorian middle classes. The brutality, uncertainties, and utter deprivation of lower-class life made it impractical for the lower classes to place a high priority on morality; one attends to morality, philosophy, recreational arts, and other relatively nuanced matters only after securing vital needs and no longer having to be obsessed with basic survival. The lower classes often had to break the law just to survive, and naturally casual sex (and other “free” activities) were often more or less the only forms of entertainment (or release) they could afford. At the other end of the social spectrum, the upper classes were equally ill suited to champion public morality. They had established a long tradition of being able to live above the norm (even making laws unto themselves), and any “character” that could be shared by the “public” masses would cut against their sense of elitism and privilege. For that matter, far from morally righteous, the carrying on illicit love affairs had long been an upper-class obligation and test of status, even if part of that obligation was to be very discreet in the practice of them. We should not forget that large segments of the upper and lower classes did live lives of admirable virtue and behaved with admirable
integrity. However, it was the Victorian middle classes that made morality itself—not luxury or survival—one of the chief measures of success in life. The middle class became well known for doing so, and indeed, not infrequently they did so with smug, cruel, and ostentatiously uncharitable zeal.

For Victorians, morality was logically connected to an effective “work ethic,” to the economic productivity so practically necessary in a successful society. Here too it generally fell to the middle class to define such traits for Victorian culture. By definition, the upper classes, composed mostly of “gentlemen” and “ladies” of leisure, could hardly be expected to develop the country’s “work ethic”—indeed, in British parlance the technical definition of a “gentleman” was a man who specifically did not have to work for a living. While the upper classes were presumably bred to success and refinements, it was expected that the middle and lower classes had to work hard to succeed and develop good character. And, in fact, middle- and lower-class Victorians worked extraordinarily hard by almost any standard, certainly by today’s standards.

The children of the upper classes were more or less guaranteed a respectable and relatively comfortable place in society (as well as in “fashionable Society” or “High Society,” although that was less guaranteed). On the other hand, the children of the middle class had to “make their way.” Some did so by inheriting the “family business”—that is, benefitting from the financial mobility which the Age’s new wealth afforded. Most, however, had to “make it” through one or more of three other well-understood options:

1. **Patronage**—attaching oneself to some element of upper-class life that was directed toward government, business, the military, the Church, one of the professions, or even, more rarely, High Society (as an accepted “hanger-on”).

2. **Education**—for all its reliance on class, in many respects the Victorian Age was a meritocracy, and education was very highly esteemed. By obtaining a fine education, one opened as many doors, if not quite as securely, as by aristocratic or wealthy-business patronage.

3. **Marrying Well** (usually upwardly)—“Marrying well” was particularly vital for women, who were shut out of business and the professions for most of the Age, but it was also very true for men.

Without doubt, for the middle classes patronage, education, and marriage were thought to necessitate diligent “hard work” every bit as much as a specific salaried or waged vocation—most particularly the act of marrying. Shrewd, middle-class young men could certainly change their lifestyle radically by marrying well—into money and/or a secure and comfortable class position. That was equally true for middle-class daughters, except for them the stakes were much higher and the options much narrower. The reality facing them was brutally stark and polar: they either married well and became good mothers, or they became virtual outcasts in society.
Victorian marriage was generally as much a matter of business as of love, which in essence made women property as well as companions and lovers. The husband took over (by legal, even sometimes explicit, contract) the financial responsibility for his wife (formerly someone’s daughter), aided by her dowry and any other wealth, which was by law transferred to him. Conversely, an unmarried daughter was a significant, continuing financial burden to her family (doubly a financially unrecoverable one, since by remaining unmarried she could not extend the family’s heritage through her children, even indirectly). Consequently, there developed an entire, multi-faceted “industry” (including but hardly limited to ubiquitous “handbooks”) directed toward teaching girls the proper behavior (and highly complicated social protocols) that would enable them to marry well, bear and raise children, and run a family household. On the other hand, if they failed to marry (becoming a “spinster”), or did not become a mother, then even enormously intelligent, otherwise accomplished women—those who had forged their way into one of the professions, against all odds—were considered outright failures. By “lacking” the sufficient fundamental femininity possessed by wives and mothers, they had failed themselves, their families, and the nation; if they had sufficient femininity, they would have been chosen as wives and become “productive” mothers. The Victorian middle-class logic that linked marriage to virtuous work was thus reinforced with a vengeance.

Unfortunately for middle-class women, the demographics and overall structure of Victorian culture did very little to make the “work” of getting married easy. In the first place, as a matter of basic probability, young women faced daunting odds. For virtually the entire nineteenth century, because of numerous wars and innumerable health hazards in the “outside” world, women significantly outnumbered men in Britain. Secondly, the “business” side of marriage routinely caused delicate complications. Even if the woman’s family were able to accumulate an appropriate dowry—a formidable task in itself, especially if the family was not wealthy or there were several daughters—the man’s family might choose not to accept the dowry or might require a “better” offer that was beyond the means of the woman’s family. Not least, the laws of primogeniture, cultural mores, and the difficulty of achieving financial independence in an uncertain world often forced men of the upper and middle classes to postpone marriage until they were well into their thirties and beyond. Yet women were no less duty-bound to become wives and especially mothers. Therefore, if a woman did not marry by the time she was 25 or so, she was considered to be in grave danger of becoming unmarryable—“property” of dubious value, not only because there would be fewer ticks left on her “biological clock,” but also because by being still unmarried at such an “advanced” age she would have already proven herself “lacking,” unwanted by anyone else.

As if all that were not enough of a handicap, elevated middle-class morality standards and particularly the sexual “double standard” operated brutally to the disadvantage of middle-class women. In order to remain even “eligible” to marry, women were required
to be respectable virgins and stay otherwise “pure” as well (at least to the public’s knowledge). Men, on the other hand, had no such requirement; indeed, society fully expected them to be “wild” (it was in their nature—another Victorian “natural law”). Indeed, in order to accommodate the “uncontrollable” urges of men who were financially unable to marry for many years, the culture sanctioned a vast network of prostitution brothels, which were officially illegal but unofficially encouraged and even monitored by urban government. Of course, needless to say, Victorian morality effectively foreclosed that option for middle-class women, although a small number (along with countless lower-class women) fell into it, if hardly by choice.

In actual fact, prostitutes (and “kept women”) were not the only “loose” Victorian women. While a great many young women were profoundly ignorant about things sexual, Victorian “prudery” has been much exaggerated. Not a few Victorian women, even unmarried girls, enjoyed sex with gusto, to the point where far more women than ever admitted to it placed their entire social future perilously in the hands of their fiancés. Certainly the fiancé would be condemned as “not a gentlemen,” if he ever exposed his betrothed’s indiscretions (which did not even have to involve actual sexual contact). On the other hand, he could survive the scandal, whereas the “exposed” woman would be ruined for respectable society—and, moreover, would likely be unable to marry anyone else if for some reason her fiancé did not go through with the marriage.

As draconian as these sexual mores now seem, they had their purpose. They were remarkably (and understandably) effective in regulating Victorian society, maintaining Victorian standards of morality, ensuring social stability, and, not least, preserving and continuing a family’s wealth, reputation, and heritage. In all their various permutations, the Victorian middle-class ethos of “hard work” was sutured to and synergistically reinforced its ethos of strict morality. And a failure in one sphere became a failure in the other, related one. If British Victorianism has indeed been passed down across national boundaries and many decades after its historical termination, it may be because the Victorians developed and enforced a cultural mythology perhaps as powerful and enduring as the world has even seen.

Finally, the benefits of a “virtuous” character and hard work were in no small part equally buttressed by the enormous importance the middle class invested in the Home; it was the family’s “castle”-fortress and haven. The physical realities of Victorian society were often so brutal, and the means of escaping them so limited, that it was logical that the Victorian middle class would create for themselves and revere an institutional “safe haven” from the outside world—the Home. In some respects, the rituals surrounding the middle-class home rivaled the rigorous order of the customs of High Society. Certainly, the home was the institution through which the culture exercised global order and regulated everyday behavior. The upper classes could not be expected to develop such a cultural totem. In the first place, they resided in their family homes relatively rarely—children were sent away to boarding schools, the men lived routinely at their
gentlemen’s clubs, and both parents were visiting resorts or other estates for much of the year. Indeed, during the social “Season” they were obliged to be away attending a ball or dinner—sometimes more than one—every night! Moreover, home for them was often a literal, not just a metaphorical, castle (or more than one), which was too large and inhabited by too many disparate servants to acquire symbolic value as a “haven.” Of course, at the other end of the scale, the ramshackle homes of the lower classes could hardly qualify as havens.

Perhaps in part because of all the obstacles that it faced, the Victorian middle class did not grow in size over the course of Victoria’s reign, economic expectations notwithstanding, any more than it is growing today. On the contrary, then as now, increasing numbers of people from the middle class tumbled into the lower classes. Despite the enormous wealth created and sustained during the Age, relatively little of it ended up being distributed equitably. The income of the middle class represented approximately 60% of Britain’s total wealth in the early part of the Victorian Period, but by Victoria’s death, that portion had dropped to approximately 35%.

In this respect, the Victorian Age tended to prove Marx’s predictions about the ultimate effects of capitalism—that it progressed toward monopolies, concentrating the wealth in fewer and fewer hands and dropping more and more of those who do not rise to the upper class into the lower classes. By the end of the Victorian Age, while an equal number of people as before still thought of themselves as “middle class,” fewer of them were able to live the accustomed middle-class lifestyle.

III.  The Lower Classes, which constituted over 66% of the total population (and grew to 73% by the end of the century), were comprised of four main groupings:

(a) **Artisans and Skilled Workers**—which comprised approximately 15% of the working class. These relatively fortunate workers customarily served a 7-year apprenticeship. They usually had some education. A few belonged to the lower tier of the new, rising, middle-class professions and could make over £100 (or close to the $30,000 made annually by the marginal members of the middle class). However, the majority of artisans, even though they were skilled workers, were not well paid at all, very much less than skilled workers today. They ordinarily made between £15 and £90 per year (approximately $3000–$18,000 in today’s buying power).

(b) **Industrial Workers, Agricultural Workers, and Domestic Servants**—which comprised most of the working class, including child labor. They had little or no education. They made annually less than £50 (or $10,000), often much less. Domestic labor was a huge industry, since all but the lowest margins of the middle class had servants. There was a clear “pecking order” (and graduated earning power) among domestic
workers, as follows, in descending order:

- Butler, principle chef, steward, managing housekeeper—£40–50 (approximately $8,000–$10,000) per year
- Footman—£15–20 (approximately $3,000–$4,000)
- Cook—£14–20 (approximately $2,800–$4,000)
- Lady’s maid—£12–15 (approximately $2,400–$3,000), plus room & board, and cast-offs
- Upper housemaid—£12–20 (approximately $2,400–$4,000), plus room & board, & allowances
- Maid—£6–10 (approximately $1200–$2000), plus room & board

Needless to say, domestic servants always hoped for (and the best of them received) occasional *noblesse oblige* in addition—a small bonus, hand-me-down clothes from the family, leftover food, etc.—but they were not entitled to, nor could expect, them. Theft was always possible, but at almost prohibitive risk; if caught, they would almost certainly be sacked and be unable to receive references (ruin for a domestic). Hence, most domestics were honest and loyal.

(c) **Unemployed Poor and the Destitute** — This group barely survived (and usually did not for very long), subsisting mostly from charity.

(d) **Criminals, the Underworld** — Many in this group “earned” more than the lawful workers of the lower classes.

**Religion**

Religion (including people’s obsession with its possible demise) was a key force in Victorian culture. It served to buttress significantly, and was in turn buttressed by, the core Victorian middle-class cultural mythologies; and as is normally the case in national cultures, religion provided, despite its numerous controversies, considerable stability to Victorian society, synergistically anchored by those mythologies. Certainly, like everything else, religion was significantly affected by the Industrial Revolution in numerous respects. Perhaps most fundamentally, the ethos of individualism, arising out of Benthamite Utilitarianism, had the ultimate effect of fracturing religious faith into a myriad of squabbling sects and undercutting in the process (by overturning the old Poor-Laws’ system of Parish charity) the Church’s tangible social mission, which had long been the “safety net” for the poor. At the same time, the enormity of industry-driven overcrowding and population dislocations was vitiating the God-is-Love education that the church-related charity schools had been providing, replacing it with the alternative economic “religion”—the undeniable “certainty” of the purported “natural laws” of capitalism in general and the laissez-faire principles of Benthamite thinkers in particular. On another front, the authority of religion also suffered under the emerging nineteenth-century New Science, of which Darwin is the most visible emblem but which
spanned many different disciplines and was vastly influential in medicine and other areas. What had once been secure and absolute articles of faith were now the subject of endless debate and discord. The Church’s power in British society was thus reduced, its hegemony giving way to alternative, scientific explanations of life. Despite all of this, religion remained a substantial influence in Victorian culture, fed by middle-class cultural myths and sustained pragmatically by the local rectors, who on a daily and weekly basis invoked religion’s social and moral authority.

The mainstream religious fixture of the Victorian Age was the **Church of England** (the Anglican Church). A majority, albeit a bare majority, of all churchgoers were Anglicans. The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church (its doctrinal formulary) and the Book of Common Prayer provided explicit dogmatic instruction and yet were sufficiently flexible (i.e., hazy enough) to allow within the “umbrella” Anglican Church a variety of thought and practice, ranging from Anglo-Catholic down to Calvinism. As a result, although remaining a single institution, the (Anglican) Church of England informally “divided” over time into three basic camps: High Church, Broad Church, and Low Church.

“High Church” was the convenient and most comprehensive label for the “Catholic” side of the Church of England, which emphasized the role of tradition, sacraments, ritual, and authority. High Churchmen pressed for changes such as ritual chanting of services, wearing of full vestments, and elaborate redecoration of churches. They also stressed the importance of living in spiritual fellowships and establishing monastic communities that ministered to the spiritual and social needs of their flock. The High Church (known as “Anglo-Catholic”) division of the Anglican Church was given great impetus in the 1830s by the “Tractarians” of the Oxford Movement—John Keble (1792–1866), Richard Hurrell Froude (1803–36), Edward Pusey (1800–82), as well as Cardinal John Henry Newman (1801–90) before his conversion to Catholicism. The Tractarian movement was named after Newman’s inspirational series of *Tracts for the Times* (1833-41). Tract No. 90 even contended that the basic tenets of the Church of England did not conflict with Roman Catholicism.

At the other end, the **Low Church** division of the Anglican Church of England, the Evangelical party, opposed the High-Church element as unwarranted clericalism tending to dreaded “popery.” The Evangelical party emphasized, instead, the spiritual transformation of the individual by conversion. It was the strong reforming element within the Church, and as such it probably served as the most significant religious base of what we now call “Victorian morality.” It saw its primary interest in the moral improvement of the lower classes, which it sometimes carried out in patronizing fashion and whose subtextual hidden agenda was to try to deflect emerging revolutionary tendencies among the masses. Although it was a strong and vital faction within the Anglican Church in the early part of the century, the Evangelical party soon hardened into rigid dogmatism, giving itself over to exclusive Bible-limited tenets and a special
quasi-Calvinist cant.

“Broad Church” was the term, popularized in an *Edinburgh Review* article in 1853, for the movement in the Church of England that de-emphasized the doctrinal and ecclesiastical issues that separated the other major parties, High Church and Evangelical. Broad Churchmen (often called “Latitudinarians”) stressed the national and inclusive character of the church and were open to advances in modern thought, particularly biblical criticism. One of its biggest champions was Thomas Arnold (1795–1842), famed headmaster of Rugby and Matthew Arnold’s father. Also highly influential was F. D. Maurice (1805–72) and Charles Kingsley (1819–75), who founded the Christian Socialism movement, and the biblical and classical scholar Benjamin Jowett (1817–93). The “Broad Church” movement culminated with its attack on biblical literalism. Never an organized party and denounced by some as rationalist and “neologist,” the Broad Church movement faded rapidly after 1860 or so, yet its flexibility and inclusiveness made it the majority faction of the Anglican Church during much of the early and middle Victorian period.

The Church of England (the Anglican Church) was organized as a three-tiered hierarchy—the provinces, the dioceses, and the parishes. The leaders of the Church, at all levels, were very powerful. Candidates for these powerful positions were preselected, based on property and patronage. Many of them, especially at the upper levels, qualified by having attended the public schools and gone on to Oxford or Cambridge.

**Province**—There were only two provinces, that of the Archbishop of Canterbury (who oversaw 22 sees or bishoprics) and that of the Archbishop of York (who oversaw 4 sees or bishoprics). The Archbishop of Canterbury received a phenomenal income, by Victorian standards, of approximately £27,000 per year (or about $6.5 million in today’s buying power).

**Diocese**—There were 26 dioceses or sees, each ruled by a bishop. The bishops had absolute power over the ordained (and the ordaining of) clergy. Their power and income was on a level with the aristocracy. Their average annual disposable income was approximately £4000 (or nearly $1 million).

**Parish**—Each diocese could have many parishes, depending on its size. Although under the authority of the bishop, the parishes were governed by the vestry, a group of church members who managed the Church’s temporal affairs (the vestry levied taxes until 1868). Under the new Poor Law of 1834, “livings” could be distributed to churchmen in the parish in one of two ways:

1. a patron (usually an aristocrat or a university) bestowed a “living” on a parson, who was called a *rector* if he was entitled to the sole income, or called a *vicar* if (rather more commonly) he was *required to share* the income with the
a “living” was sold to the parson, a member of the gentry, who could be an absentee incumbent, engaging a curate as his agent, or he could administer the parish “living” personally, in which case he was called a priest if he was “High Church” or a minister or clergyman if he was Evangelical.

Supported by endowments of land and tithes (eventually changed to a fixed payment), the clergy as a class was wealthy and interlocked with the gentry in dominating the countryside. However, especially at the beginning of the nineteenth century, this wealth was unequally distributed, most of the lower clergy being poor incumbents or underpaid curates. The system of patronage ensured that for the most part social and political connection, rather than devotion or talent, determined who would get the better posts. The standard of devotion was raised slowly by the Evangelical party of the Church.

Outside the Church of England were various Nonconformist religious movements. These Nonconformist movements were formidable forces in Victorian culture, but since they were outside the Church of England, they were also largely outside the main power tracks of society, though for part of the Victorian Age the more extreme groups did have some limited political and civil rights. The largest Nonconformist sects were the Methodists (constituting approximately 50% of the Nonconformist congregations), the Congregationalists, and the Baptists. But there were also many smaller groups: Quakers, Unitarians, Plymouth Brethren, Latter-Day Saints (Mormons), Seventh-Day Adventists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Christian Scientists, etc. The Nonconformist religions can be separated into two basic categories: the Evangelicals (not the same as Anglican Evangelicals), which though outside the Church of England were still somewhat respectable, and the Dissenters, who were so “extreme” as to be considered by most of society as simply “beyond the pale.”

The roots of Evangelicalism lay in the Puritanism of the 17th century, and its revival was a reaction to the cold moralistic rationalism that had supplanted it in the 18th century. The conversion of John Wesley (1703–91) is considered to have marked the beginning of the Evangelical movement, although Methodism was hardly the only product of the Evangelical revival. What distinguished Evangelicalism from Puritanism was Evangelicalism’s emphasis on personal experience rather than formal doctrines or institutions, personal duty and responsibility rather than ritualized “corporate” religion, and the experience of conversion—often distilled as consciousness of sin, an awakening to grace, and the overriding commitment to Christ. Evangelical Protestantism was characterized by moral earnestness, rigorous standards of conduct, frequent examination of conscience, Bible reading, private prayer, and family prayers. It also tended to believe in the literal truth of the Bible.
The Evangelical movement (whether inside or outside the Church of England) was the single most powerful religious influence on the moral life of the Victorian Age. Through its many outlets, Evangelicalism was able to reach (and become the religious expression of) the middle classes and to influence even the upper classes. Crossing denominational lines, Evangelicals often worked together in the many volunteer projects of the nineteenth century—Bible societies, religious tract societies, missionary and philanthropic societies. They possessed a reformist social conscience but were guided always by conservative moral restraint. They were largely responsible for the conservative morals of the period—most notably, infamous Victorian “prudery.”

While the Dissenters and smaller “extreme” sects were definitely déclassé, some religions were distinctly marginalized, the most notable and significant being Roman Catholicism and Judaism. At the beginning of the nineteenth century the Roman Catholic church in Britain was a small, feeble, unobtrusive group, numbering about 100,000, which had been shaped by two centuries of persecution and restriction. The Roman authorities treated England as a missionary country, with mission stations instead of parishes and vicars-apostolic instead of diocesan bishops. However, the Catholic Church underwent a tremendous revival during the century. Beginning in 1845, significant numbers of High Church Anglicans, led by John Henry Newman, became convinced that the only true seat of ecclesiastical authority was in Rome. In addition, the Irish potato famine of the 1840s sent several hundred thousand emigrants to Britain, which provided the English Catholic church with the critical bulk it needed, although mostly from the lower classes.

Judaism was much more problematical. In 1850 only about 20,000 Jews (90% of which were native Britishers) resided in London with an even smaller number in the rest of Great Britain. Although Catholics were “emancipated” in 1829, Jews continued to be denied civil and political rights, and did not have residential mobility (being effectively consigned to Jewish ghettos). They could not hold a seat in Parliament, matriculate at either Oxford or Cambridge, or serve in the military; and they had only limited access to the bar. However, beginning in the 1870s, there was very significant immigration from the Continent, and by 1890, Jews had been given full civil and political rights, although they continued to be stigmatized and were routinely described as “English people of the Jewish persuasion.”

**Education**

It is an indication of the astonishing rigor and dedication to “right living” routinely exhibited by the Victorian middle class (and passed on to the rest of Victorian society) that a vast majority of the population could read and write, even though only about 1% of all Victorians received any significant formal institutional schooling, having to be painstakingly educated in the home.

Education was a very highly prized commodity in Victorian Britain, even though most
people—except for those in the upper classes—were forced to acquire it on their own, not by formal means. There was no “free public education system” in the modern sense. Elementary education was provided primarily by religiously affiliated educational societies and paid for by parents and charitable subscribers. Indeed, nothing approximating a universal national system of education existed until the Education Act of 1870, which ostensibly mandated “compulsory” primary education until the age of 11 in England and Wales. However, even then a fee of 1p ($1) per day was established for the schooling, which precluded attendance for many children. Only in 1880 was elementary education made truly compulsory (although then only for all children ages 7-10). It was a symptom of an extreme ideology of individualism and the general disdain and disregard for the lower (and lower-middle) classes that political and economic leaders made little serious effort to provide education, except to the elite classes, until late in the century.

By far the most important educational institutions in Victorian Britain were the so-called “public schools”—public in the sense of being legally available to those who wanted to pay for what was offered (just as “pubs” were short for “public houses”). “Public Schools” were in fact fee-paying institutions, usually boarding schools for the elite. (The designation originated to describe several boys’ grammar foundations established by endowment as charitable trusts.) Although historically the public schools were characterized by poor academic and moral standards, they had always had social prestige. During the Victorian period they reformed themselves into highly controlled communities, often with fine academic credentials. Although each public school was proud of its unique character, they all shared certain common traits, such as a religious tone (compulsory chapel playing an important role), a focus on classical literature, and a dedication to athleticism. The reality was it was difficult to rise very far in Victorian Society, or to achieve significant political success, without having attended a “public school.”

It was clearly to the public schools [i.e., the elite private “prep” schools] that the Age looked for its future, and they were considered absolutely vital to the maintenance of Victorian culture and the British Empire. The implicit mission of the public schools was to teach character, that is, to put the stamp of class on Britain’s youth. The curriculum was dominated by the classics; until the 1860s, over three-quarters of class time was spent on Latin and Greek, and although “modern” subjects were added at most schools, the classics were always what was overwhelmingly emphasized. Sports and other athletic team competitions were also an integral part of public-school life. Spirited games were thought to build moral character, manliness, and esprit de corps. The Duke of Wellington, who had defeated Napoleon at Waterloo, was even reported to have proclaimed, “The Battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton” (the quote was actually fabricated by a Frenchman and attributed to Wellington, but no doubt he would have agreed with it). In fact, many public-school boys entered military or colonial service.
The elite public school system had developed from three strands. First on the scene were the preeminent nine old grammar foundations: Charterhouse, Eton, Harrow, Merchant Taylor’s, Rugby, St. Paul’s, Shrewsbury, Westminster, and Winchester. Second came other old endowed grammar schools, such as Repton, Sherborne, and Uppingham, which were largely transformed, usually by ambitious young headmasters, in more or less the image of the prestigious schools. Finally, “new” endowed foundations were established to meet the increasing middle-class demand—such as Marlborough (1843), which catered to the sons of clergy, and Epsom (1855), which catered to the sons of physicians.

The sons of the upper classes (and some of the middle class) obtained education usually in well-laid-out distinct stages—first through private tutors, then primary “preparatory” schools, following by being sent to one of the elite “public” schools (Eton, Harrow, Rugby, Winchester, Westminster, etc.), and finally to Oxford University or Cambridge University (each which were, and are still, divided into exclusive “colleges”—Magdalen, Queens, Brasenose, Oriel, Balliol, etc.). Apart from their very early years, most upper-class sons (and occasionally daughters) spent almost their entire youth “away from home,” except for holidays and intercessions. The middle class sought, and often succeeded, in placing their (male) children in—having them selected for—the prestigious public [i.e., expensive private] schools that had been formerly attended only by the upper classes. They first enrolled them in what we now call elitist “prep schools” (e.g., Eton, Harrow, Rugby, Winchester, Westminster, etc.—the English equivalents of an Andover or Hill), at considerable cost, then hoped to have them matriculate to Oxford or Cambridge.

Females, even the daughters of the aristocracy, were not permitted to attend the public schools, and so access to “higher education” came only very slowly for them and in frustrating increments. No university admitted women until mid-century, and even then women could not receive a degree (degrees were not generally available to them until late into the century). The University of London first permitted women to take examinations for a degree in 1868; a year later, a women’s residence was established at Cambridge, which eventually became Girton College. Cambridge first allowed women to take honors exams in 1881; but it was not until 1893 that Oxford permitted women to attend lectures without being chaperoned. The first group of women medical students was admitted at Edinburgh, but they were ultimately not permitted to finish the required courses.

In addition to the elite “public schools,” there were, in fact, hundreds of private schools and academies, all of which were of vastly inferior quality. Some had been founded by religious Dissenters for the education of their own children, but the majority were “proprietary” schools run for profit by an individual. Some introduced science and other curricular innovation, preparing boys for particular occupations, but most were small, short-lived, and lacking in funds and vision. Those children of the middle class who did not go to one of the public schools, and the more fortunate among the lower classes,
went to “town schools,” private schools (which were not in the least exclusive or prestigious), or old charity foundations. The quality of these schools varied wildly, and the instruction was routinely substandard. None of these schools even vaguely approached the quality of the public schools and were by any measure much inferior to them. The few schools available for girls were mostly small, proprietary boarding schools. A limited number of day schools taught girls up to the age of 14, but generally the curriculum was more elementary than secondary. Many girls of the middle classes (and almost all from the lower classes) received no formal education at all. Those who were lucky enough to be educated were taught by governesses or by their parents.

Daughters of the upper classes (and upper-middle classes) were routinely educated at home by private tutors, often governesses, but almost always less formally than their brothers. They were sometimes also sent to exclusive “charm schools”—proprietary boarding schools, either in distant locations or in local fashionable neighborhoods—that emphasized “female accomplishments” like music and drawing, as well (of course) as the “codes” of social comportment, including how to court and be courted. Daughters did not generally receive education for nearly as long a total period of time as the sons. But that education very often included an obligatory, chaperoned “grand tour” or extended stay on the Continent, learning and absorbing the artistic culture of Europe’s great past, albeit not often with much rigor.

The vast majority of the working class received no education at all, or very little. If they did happen to attend school, they were schools run by the Church of England, which controlled 90% of all elementary schools before 1870, and attendance was voluntary and highly erratic. All ages were lumped together, and instruction was usually conducted by the “monitor system,” by which the older children taught the younger children. Private charities also established “ragged schools,” which were loosely confederated under the Ragged School Union by the Earl of Shaftesbury (Anthony Ashley Cooper, 1801–85) in 1844, to provide to poor, “ragged” children very basic education, mostly vocational training, and religious instruction. By mid-century, there were 110 ragged schools in London alone, but they quickly disbanded after the Education Act of 1870 started England on the road to universal compulsory education.

Among the working classes, most adults who could read had no more than two or three years of schooling. Over the course of the century, a number of adult education opportunities were established: Bible study groups, Owenite “Halls of Science,” mechanics’ institutes, adult night schools, working men’s and working women’s “colleges” (with little relation to what Americans call “college”), and a variety of other projects, including (at the end of the century) university extension classes. Most of these opportunities were created by various self-help, Evangelical, or reformist factions of the middle class, which hoped to impose “order” on the lower classes and develop a work force more suited to a complex society. There was always some tension between these middle-class benefactors, who saw education as a moral good in itself, and the more
radical workers’ self-improvement groups, which tended to want practical skills.

It may seem very odd, and paradoxical, that a nation that so valued knowledge, industry, self-improvement, and general progress would have done so little to ensure its people (or even decent portion of its people) access to quality education. But in a sense, it was quintessentially logical. For the Victorians also valued the “wisdom” they saw issuing from tested traditions and from already-demonstrated “merit,” which was obligated to prove itself repeatedly and empirically, both in everyday comportment and over time. It was difficult to refute the view, held by most people, that government by an aristocratic elite had worked astonishingly well for Britain, both socially and politically, particularly compared with the rest of the world. The prevailing sense was that from the larger perspective of history the British emphasis on “breeding” had clearly proven itself on the world stage. Virtually every era in the country’s history had produced remarkable leaders and undeniable heroism, which had prevented a tiny island from ever being conquered by a foreign power, at least since the unification of the kingdom in 1066. Moreover, where most other nations had been ravaged by revolution or civil war, British rule by an educated elite and “wise” traditions had avoided revolution, and England’s only Civil War (in the mid-17th century) was the result of fanatical and philistine “democracy” that had overthrown aristocratic moderation.

Indeed, Britain’s conscious veneration of the civilized past—its embedded desire “to make the best ideas prevail” and to instill in its youth always “an order of ideas which are universal, certain, permanent”—had led to the creation of some of the finest literature, art, and science in the world. Over the course of no fewer than four centuries, British ingenuity, grit, wisdom, and character had brought the realm to a place where now its Empire spanned more territory than any other in human history, and its culture, both economic and artistic, was the equal of any in the world. And much of the civilized world appeared quick to agree with that assessment.

Consequently, in the eyes of most Victorian leaders (and much of the citizenry), it seemed silly and downright risky to dump the elitist tradition of public-school indoctrination and open up Victorian culture to untested and largely uncontrollable “democracy” involving the middle and lower classes. It flew in the face of national pride as well as common sense and historical experience. Such a gamble would even impugn the legitimacy of the Empire and could well destroy it (inciting calls for rule by the majority). Nor was such change desired even by the rising middle class, who admired the elite public schools and were gaining admission to them. The rapid changes wrought by the Industrial Revolution were causing enough uncertainly and dislocation.

To the middle classes and even most of the lower class the case was simple and fairly unequivocal. Certainty was good. Absolute truths were good. Elitism was good. After all, even “democratic” America envied and was ostentatiously eager to imitate most things British; and on the other hand, most British found close to nothing to admire
about American democracy, which had led to civil war, social chaos, and political corruption, all without resolving racial animosities, class divisions, and deepening regional prejudices. Moreover, the American “democratic” approach to education had only watered down education, undermined true merit, and fostered widening mediocrity and cultural vulgarity—at least compared with British results from elitist management. Why should Britain want to turn over its government and its culture to the “under-classes,” which were distinguished almost wholly by their unmeasured greed, awesome crudity, and boorish philistine vulgarity—in short, by an utter lack of class? Consequently, most Victorian leaders could see little reason to change the exclusive public school system and government by long-established traditions—and many reasons not to. Yes, Great Britain was elitist and was governed by monarchy, but it was a compassionate, educated, and judicious “constitutional” monarchy, not a tyrannical realm of ceaseless, callous, dictatorial oppression. Or so the mainstream ruling discourse proclaimed and most Victorians believed.

However, as was the case with Benthamite utilitarian individualism, so too with Britain’s traditionally restrictive approach to political and educational access, Victorian society gradually (though with increasing rapidity) moved away from its rather hyper-conservative elitist status quo. It chose instead, albeit in fits and starts (carrying into the 20th century), the increased compassion and greater equity of a more accessible, if much “messier,” form of democracy. As the 19th century ran its course, Victorians ultimately legalized and encouraged labor unions, opened advanced education to women and the lower classes, provided increased job opportunities for both, enacted marriage and property laws more favorable to women, redistributed wealth through greater taxation on the upper classes, and generally embraced socialism and the “welfare state” (albeit a decidedly capitalist form of it).

This momentous cultural shift was certainly compelled in part by the increasing (and increasingly intolerable) moral discomfort Victorians felt, as well as by the stark mathematics of class divisions (2–15% of the population being “haves” and some 85–98% being largely “have-nots”). But it was just as surely also impelled by the lessons drawn from the enormous amount of extraordinary (and sometimes provocative) literature and art being produced during the Victorian Age by an unprecedented number of superb writers and artists. In no small measure the large social, political, and cultural changes that transpired over the course of the Victorian Period were assisted greatly by the very elitism, moral righteousness, and exclusive educational system they transformed. As it happened, ironically or not, almost all of these writers and artists were highly educated (in the tradition of the classics) and most of them were from the more privileged classes, many having even attended Oxford or Cambridge.