

The Making of Modern Britain

Andrew Marr

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MODERN BRITAIN**

MACMILLAN



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Preface

This new book comes both before and after. I wrote it after my *History of Modern Britain*, which ran from the austerity years at the end of the Second World War to the current time – from Grey to Brown. Here, I describe the near half-century before that. Those forty-five years, short enough, were crammed, almost modern, and tragic. They include the Edwardian age, which was one of the most interesting periods in all British history, both world wars, and the wild roller-coaster ride of the twenties and thirties. This was the time when modern Britain was born. We had been one thing – an empire – and became another – a democracy. At the time few people realized how incompatible the two things are. We moved from living in Britannia, with her king-emperors and grand landed aristocracy, a place where most people could not vote, and found ourselves in Britain, a northern welfare state in the shadow of the United States. On the way, millions of people struggled with the dilemma of how to live a good life. It was a time of new technologies, political uproar and fights about class and sex. It was a time of fools and visionaries and heroes – sometimes, as in the case of Winston Churchill, whose spirit stalks these pages, all of them wrapped up in a single life.

Looking back, we learn to see ourselves more sharply. Our forebears were living on the lip of the future, just as we are. Their illusions about what was to come should make us, right now, a little humble. They were tough, passionate and young, however ancient they seem now. They worried about sleaze, told bad jokes, liked films and fatty foods, and occasionally rose to greatness when tested by terrible times. Inevitably, the two world wars overshadow much of the life around them. In recent years both have been reassessed, quite roughly. For many the Great War was converted from a significant national triumph to an inhuman and pointless disaster. Some say that by paving the way for Lenin, Stalin and Hitler, it was one of the great failures of humankind. The Second World War is now being almost as radically reassessed. Did

we really have to fight it? Would Hitler not have softened into a non-genocidal if autocratic leader had Britain done a deal in 1940? Perhaps there would have been no Holocaust, the Empire would have slowly evolved into a federation of democracies and, because the United States would have stayed away, there would have been no Cold War, with its threat of global annihilation, either? Since Britannia's role in the opening stages of both world conflicts was pivotal, these are clearly huge questions about the role of the British in modern times.

No one can be sure about the lost futures that vanished with paths not taken. But the Kaiser's German empire was an expansionist military regime, with little real parliamentary safeguard, which was intent on dominating Europe. It offered an alternative version of modernity, a powerful autocratic one, which came very close to triumphing. The future for Europeans would not have been either peaceful or democratic had the German armies broken through in 1914, or in 1918. Certainly, the fate of the colonized around the world would not have been pleasanter. Had Britain succumbed in 1940 to the Nazi offer – keep your empire and we will keep Europe – then there is no evidence that Hitler would have renounced his obsessive desire to sweep Jewry from Europe. Nor is there much evidence that he would have kept his word. He would have been in a better position to defeat Stalin, it is true; yet a longer, even bloodier conflict would surely have followed, since a total German invasion of European and Asian Russia seems impossible. Atomic weaponry would have become real inside Germany, at least as quickly (probably more quickly) as it did at Los Alamos.

And the British? Linked to a fading imperial past but without the markets or industry to sustain or protect the old glory, we would have crumbled into a vassal state, one act of appeasement followed by another, as Churchill predicted. There would have been no Atlantic alliance and America would have gone her own way, probably forced to accept a world divided into zones of influence – Nazi, Russian, Japanese and so on. For all the horrors of the past century, this does not seem an appetizing alternative. So, for this writer, the wars for the protection of democracy were real conflicts, which could not have been side-stepped and which, once begun, had to be won.

My last book described what I called with only some journalistic flippancy the defeat of politics by shopping. That is, the ideologies were trounced by consumerist materialism. It takes a lot of politics, of course,

to set up and maintain a market-dominated and market-mimicking way of life. It was not inevitable; there were other roads not taken. This book describes what happened before the triumph of the market, or 'shopping', when it seemed the world would be shaped by politics. It was no paradise. If these were the decades when modern Britain was born, it was a bloody and painful birth. The people whose blood was spilt and who experienced the pain looked different from us, smelt different and thought differently. But in the majority of cases they were our close relatives. Their idealism, their mistakes, even their hobbies and entertainments, have plenty to teach us still.

Like the previous book, this one accompanies a BBC2 television series. In both cases, I wrote the book first, relying on my own research – and so the mistakes really are mine. Then, working with friends and colleagues, we reshaped the material to form the documentaries. The films and the book are not the same, however. There are many stories, judgments and characters in these pages that do not appear on screen; and there are a few points covered in the TV series that are not described here, usually because they were highlighted by one of the directors or researchers. But this was written as a book, not as something to accompany something else. My only guiding principle is that I have kept in what is most important, and what interested me most. The last few years have been grim ones for patriotic people in Britain, when our politics have seemed embarrassing and we have almost drowned in a dirty puddle of mutual recrimination. The past was not so totally different; what we need most is perspective. My dream is that by returning to our not-so-distant history, I might remind readers why, with all its faults, this is a lucky place to be living in, and one we can be quietly proud of.

Andrew Marr

June 2009

Part One

LIVING IN THE FUTURE

1900–1914

Don't worry, darlin'
No baby, don't you fret
We're livin' in the future,
And none of this has happened yet

Bruce Springsteen,
'Livin' in the Future', 2007

Edwardians: the Shock of the Familiar

They are very far, and strangely near. Almost nobody is still alive who remembers Edwardian Britain. To that extent, it has become proper history. Its rigid class distinctions, its imperial pride, its strange ideas – from theosophy to racial purity – are the vivid coral of a lost world. Few of us would feel at home there for any length of time. Every town had places where the children were literally shoeless and where people were withering (not growing fatter) from malnutrition. The smells of the town included human excrement and unwashed bodies, along with tobacco, beer, coal smoke and the rich reek of horse. Child prostitutes were readily available on busy streets. The largest single group of the employed were not factory workers but domestic servants. Every middle-class household had a maid, or maids, a cook, and often a gardener or groom. Class distinction was not an abstract thing, but present in most houses, standing quietly in the room.

Today we still read one another instantly by clothing. A Barbour jacket means one thing, a hoodie another. Everyone can spot a cheap suit bought for that first job. But in Edwardian Britain the distinctions of dress were sharper and harsher. A shopkeeper's assistant without a tail-coat could not stroll along the seafront promenade on a Sunday. An aristocrat seen wearing a coloured tie with a morning coat was angrily rebuked by his monarch. Respectable women always wore hats and gloves when outdoors. Gaiters, top hats with ribbons, pantaloons, three-inch boiled collars all sent messages, meaning drayman, bishop, suffragist and 'masher'. For the poor there was no state welfare, just charity relief or the threat of the dreaded work-house. Union flags billowed above the buildings. Race destiny was accepted by nearly everyone. We have a state. They had an empire.

The streets were crowded, as they are now, and noisy. But the omnibuses were horse-drawn, the carts and hansom cabs likewise, and the noise was of hooves, neighing, whips and cursing. Bicycling was popular and there were a few cars, regarded with amusement or suspicion as they passed, driven by people dressed, in the words of one observer, like 'a cross between an overgrown goat and a doormat'. The first fatal accident involving a pedestrian and a car is generally reckoned to have happened in the Lower Shoreham Road in Hove, Sussex. The car was doing a dangerous 8 m.p.h. Crime was, by today's standards, remarkably low. Yet anyone could walk into one of numerous shops and buy a revolver. The fashionable Webley-Green could be had blued or in nickel plate, with an ivory or mother-of-pearl handle. Edwardian Britain was an armed country, even after the Pistols Act of 1903 thoughtfully banned sales of handguns to people under eighteen or 'drunken or insane'. In the 'Tottenham Outrage' of 1909, police chasing a gang simply picked up four pistols from passers-by for the pursuit; other armed citizens joined in. Regional accents were much stronger, suspicion of foreigners much more intense. As George Orwell noted later, Chinamen were sinister and funny too; Africans simple-minded; Indians loyal, or alternatively treacherous. There was music everywhere, but it was live and not recorded, tinkling out of pubs or being lustily sung in the open air. Yet the air of the cities, at least, was rarely open. Thick palls hung over industrial Yorkshire, the Clyde and London. When the 1906 Liberal government won its landslide victory and the new cabinet ministers were summoned to see the King, they could not find their way back from Buckingham Palace in the fog and had to feel past rows of horses with their hands.

Yet in so many other ways, Edwardian Britain confronts us with the shock of the entirely familiar. If you walk through most British town centres and look only in front then, yes, the Edwardians and Victorians have gone. The old specialist shops with tradesmen's bicycles outside and the freshly scrubbed steps have been replaced by large glass chain-store frontages and a glut of metal, parked or crawling cars. But raise your gaze by a few degrees and often you find they are still with us. There are the elaborate brickwork upper storeys, fake turrets, old chimneys, faded shop signs, dates, spires and elaborate windows, evidence that these buildings were originally

erected by craftsmen before the First World War. When they first went up, on wooden scaffolding ringing to the sound of Irish voices, the people who moved in were, like us, fascinated by celebrity gossip which they devoured in cheap newspapers and the popular magazines. They ate fish and chips and drank quite a lot, even by our standards. Though sex outside marriage and illegitimate children were matters to be ashamed of, there was plenty of sexual tension in the air. The upper classes and working classes behaved in ways that horrified the middle, who followed awful murders, worried about the unruly young and argued about divorce, state pensions, socialism and unemployment much as we do. In the new luxury variety halls and huge theatres, working-class culture had seized the imagination of the middle classes too, with sentimental songs, magicians, dancers, entertainers, infuriatingly hummable tunes and bad jokes – very much as happened when television culture arrived sixty years later. They were also great club-formers, creating endless leagues and associations, including many of today's football and other sporting clubs.

As now, the middle classes looked to science to make life easier, and to save the world from possible calamities ahead. In the first *Illustrated London News* of 1901, various eminent scientists were asked to give their predictions about the new century. Sir Norman Lockyer explains that studying sunspots will enable people to forecast the weather, tackling 'famines in India, and droughts in Australia' long in advance. Sir W. H. Preece, co-inventor of the wireless telegraph, thinks that 'the people of 2000 will smile at our achievements as we smile at those of 1800' but warns that wireless communications have no further to go and is dubious about whether man will really fly through the air. Sir John Wolfe Barry, the engineer of Tower Bridge, believes we will see wave power and hydro-electric power in the twentieth century; though he also predicts 'moving platforms' above and below the streets to ease congestion. Sir William Crookes suspects telephones will become popular, and is interested in 'radium' as a new source of energy – predictions which he rather spoils by suggesting that all London will be covered by a large glass lid to deal with the weather. Sir Henry Roscoe, president of the Chemical Society, believes the 'annihilation of distance' cannot be carried much further in the twentieth century: 'The Atlantic voyage, for instance,

which we can now accomplish in five days, is not likely to be reduced to one.'

If the scientists were hit and miss about the future, the political visionaries were mostly miss. There was a general assumption, which extended to self-proclaimed radicals and liberals, that the Empire would continue to be huge while government would be small. Income tax had shot up, because of the Boer War, to the unseemly figure of a shilling in the pound – that is, 5 per cent. The war had increased public spending as a percentage of national income to nearly 15 per cent. It would fall towards 10 per cent until the First World War sent it rocketing to levels closer to those of the 1970s. The reformed and quite efficient civil service stood at around 116,000 (500,000 now, despite computers) though it would double in size in the Edwardian period. The House of Lords was still the cockpit of aristocracy and the prime minister sat there, not in the Commons – though Lord Salisbury would be the last British leader to do that. The richest peers lived on a scale barely comprehensible even after the age of hedge-fund managers and internet moguls. They had hundreds of personal servants. One had a private army, another a large private orchestra which travelled abroad with him. At Chatsworth, 300 torchbearers stood on the main avenue to welcome royal visitors. In London, the great ducal town houses were more like the palaces of lesser continental monarchs. Yet the wealth of the industrialists and financiers had eaten deeply into the landed gentry, diluting the old aristocrats. Their handbook, *Debrett's Peerage*, was vastly swollen by new baronets. In the Commons, the party of the left, the Liberals, was still dominated by aristocrats or by commoners who had done so well they sounded like aristocrats. There were barely any working-class MPs.

The greatest crisis at the start of the century was the South African War, in which a struggling British army was trying to exert imperial domination over small Dutch-speaking republics. At home it uncorked a fizz of patriotism, with city workers queuing to sign up as volunteers, noblemen financing their own detachments, and all kinds of adverts taking on a military theme. Drab khaki (the word comes from an Indian one for dust), which had replaced easy-to-hit scarlet as the British army's field colour, was being worn by fashionable women. When the isolated town of Mafeking was eventually

relieved, the scenes of rejoicing were so exuberant that ‘mafficking’ became a word meaning, roughly speaking, to go wild in public. When Winston Churchill escaped from Boer captivity, the papers had a field day and the music halls satirized the bumptious young man. Yet all this enthusiasm could not hide the fact that Britain fought ineffectively at first, and then only achieved her victory by brutal new strategies, which made other Europeans shiver with detestation.

Early on, the heavily laden and cumbersome British forces found themselves outsmarted and at times cut to ribbons by Boers who knew the land, understood the value of digging trenches, and could attack in fast-moving formations they called commandos. This was as shocking for the Empire as Viet Cong guerrilla successes would be for the United States later. Eventually, under Lord Kitchener, the entire area of fighting was divided up with barbed wire fences and blockhouses, and Boer farms were burned to the ground in order to deny these early guerrillas food and shelter. The Boer women and children were homeless and were transported to badly run camps, soon called concentration camps. There, in conditions of squalor, 26,000 Boers died, most of them children. France, America, Austria and Germany expressed their horror. A brave woman, Emily Hobhouse, the daughter of a Cornish vicar, travelled to South Africa to investigate conditions there and returned to tell the British public about the flies, malnutrition and typhoid, what she described as ‘wholesale cruelty’ and ‘murder to the children’. She enlisted political support and is only one of many radical and feisty women who set the tone of Edwardian Britain. This was a land still bestriding much of the world, but angrily self-questioning at home. And it was a well-informed nation too.

In newspapers and magazines of the day the quantity of foreign news – from the Empire, but also from the United States, continental Europe and Russia – is staggering. Not needing passports, emigrants were flooding out of British ports to Australia, Canada and South Africa. A cascade of talented Britons, fed up with class distinction, grimy towns and lack of opportunity, was flowing into America. In the other direction, refugees from Czarist pogroms or Latin poverty were coming into Britain, mainly to London but also to manufacturing cities and the great ports. There were large German colonies in

Bradford and Manchester, Italian merchants and Polish-Jewish areas. For the lucky rich it was a great age of travel and adventure. The better off set out by motor yacht or train to spend months on the Côte d'Azur, at one of the German spas or in Venice. Sporting aristocrats were busy slaughtering antelope, bison and tigers further afield: a whole dedicated class of civil servants and administrators were running the greatest imperial possession, India. With Britain controlling a quarter of the world and the world's peoples, the planet seemed open and pliant. Literate people, and most were, may well have been better informed than people today, in the age of the internet and twenty-four-hour news. They were probably more interested, because in other ways Abroad was menacing. The German threat was rising, but the danger of invasion by the French had been discussed just as fervently. America was regarded as a hugely wealthy and energetic but politically unimportant power.

Our world is visible, struggling to be born, in one of the most vivid, teeming, fast-changing, exhilarating periods in British history. London was the world's largest city, a global capital which lured anarchists and revolutionaries on the run, millionaires from America and countless poor migrants from Poland, Ireland and Italy. The speed of technological change was at least as disorientating as it is now. It was not simply cars and motorcycles and soon the first aircraft, but also impossibly large and fast ships, ocean liners and new Dreadnought battleships, so expensive they changed how Britons were taxed, as well as the new telegraph systems, electric lights and, bobbing on a distant skyline, Germany's magnificent Zeppelins. Yet the upper classes and their middle-class copy-cats were still insisting on the primary importance of a classical education. More people read ancient Greek and Latin than German or French, though thrusting and ambitious youngsters were opting for science and engineering as the new frontier.

What were these people like? Still photographs of the Edwardians, like photographs of the Victorians, chemically paint just the wrong picture. For they are still. To ensure a likeness, sitters are caught in a rictus or trance, their faces frozen and serious. They seem impossibly stern, or sometimes merely vacant, whereas we know from the written record that this was a jokey, argumentative age. The jerky energy of early film is more useful. What about 'the

arts'? Are they a way into the reality of Edwardian life? This was a great age of story-telling. The Edwardians lived in the shadow of the great Victorian novelists – though both Meredith and Thomas Hardy survived into the twentieth century, the latter with his greatest period as a poet still ahead of him. But in the ripping yarn, the Edwardians were and are unsurpassed. This decade and a half saw Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles* and some of Sherlock Holmes's greatest cases. It was when John Buchan published *Prester John* and was working on *The Thirty-Nine Steps*; when Joseph Conrad's great sea adventures and his anarchist thriller *The Secret Agent* appeared, and the hilarious, acid-drenched stories of Saki; when H. G. Wells's finest novels were written, after his invention of modern science fiction; when Kipling was at his most famous if not at his finest. These were the years of *The Wind in the Willows*, *Peter Pan* and *The Railway Children*, which would spawn further wonderful decades of English children's stories, so that a golden glow settled on our memory of Edwardian life that has never quite been tarnished by the facts. Today an academic priesthood divides these story-tellers into a hierarchy of seriousness, but it did not seem so then, when Henry James helped Kipling at his wedding, and Conrad dedicated books to Wells. Many of their stories appeared in the teeming magazines and journals of the age such as the *Strand* and the *Illustrated London News*. The country needed entertainment. There was no broadcasting. As a result, the Edwardians had richer internal lives than most of us today; their writers will appear throughout what follows.

Something similar can be said about the graphic arts and architecture. The Edwardians were a riotously consumerist lot, just like us. Photography was not yet available on a large scale, or in colour. So advertising and illustration depended heavily on drawing and painting. And at illustration, the Edwardians were also unsurpassed. Alfred Munnings, the Victorian miller's son from Suffolk whose horse and gypsy paintings would make him rich, got his first break doing advertising posters, notably for Caley's chocolate factory. William Nicholson and James Pryde, two gloriously talented artists encouraged by Whistler, set up J. & W. Beggarstaff making posters for the theatres, woodcuts and adverts for Rowntree's cocoa. Everywhere there was drawing, from the political caricatures of *Spy* to the *Punch*

work of G. D. Armour and Phil May, the latter one of the greatest geniuses of simple line drawing ever. In general Edwardian artists drew far better than artists are able to now. They were properly trained and specialized in bold, striking and often funny designs. The cities were brightly decorated, spangled with colour and wit. In grand painting, for the richest patrons, Britain was under the spell of an American, John Singer Sargent, whose technical skill and bravura still leave the observer breathless today. He had the same sort of status that Van Dyck, another incomer, once enjoyed. Below him there were confident artists such as Philip de Laszlo, who has not lasted well, and William Orpen, who has. As the decade advanced, so did the march of post-impressionist painting, then Fauve and cubist influences, as well as the Scottish Colourists. The history of art inevitably celebrates the new, but British Edwardian art was much richer than follow-the-French.

A similar flash confidence ripples out of many Edwardian public buildings. Town councils, major companies and government officials picked a bewildering number of styles, from ornate Dutch gothic to Venice-in-brick, English-cottage-on-steroids to Loire-by-gaslight. But with steel frameworks they created large, stone- and brick-fronted structures of complexity, grace and sometimes humour, which are much more enjoyable than the peevish, meaner buildings which followed between the wars. Their style was less heavy than that of the encrusted Victorians, but showed an innocent enjoyment of decoration which the theorists and minimalists would later banish. Just as Sargent's portraits show grand financiers or title-loaded aristocrats who smile back with wholly human self-mockery, so the best Edwardian buildings have the scale of an imperial age while somehow managing to avoid pomposity. One way of gauging quality in buildings is to ask how many of a certain age are later torn down and replaced. In general, we have elected to keep Edwardian buildings, including the first really popular generation of semi-detached houses, well made with 'arts and crafts' influences that flow back to the Victorians.

So, Edwardian Britannia touches modern Britain repeatedly. They were struggling with small wars abroad. They were convulsed by new technologies: the motor car, the aircraft, the motion-picture camera and the undersea telegraph cable, rather than biotechnology,

digital platforms and the web. They were deeply engaged in the wider world yet sentimental about family and home, highly patriotic yet also sceptical about politicians, obsessed with crime stories and jostling each other in crowded city centres yet remarkably law abiding. They were divided by class and income and united by common prejudices and jokes which baffled outsiders. This was a roaring, unstable, fast-changing time but highly self-critical, too. Edwardian Britain was unfair and strange in many ways. But the Edwardians were evolving fast. The past is not a foreign country.

The Great Paperweight Is Lifted

Queen Victoria had died in bed, holding a crucifix. If there to ward off evil spirits, it was not powerful enough. She was being supported from behind by the Emperor of Germany, Wilhelm II, her dangerous grandson, his arm by her pillow. Immediately after she had gone, Kaiser Bill reflected: 'She has been a very great woman. Just think of it; she remembers George III and now we are in the twentieth century.'¹ Cousin Willy, as the family called him, would do his bit to ensure that it became the bloodiest century in human history. Nor was his history accurate. Though Victoria was alive when George III died, and so provided a kind of human bridge to the age of Nelson and Samuel Johnson, she was just eight months old at the time. Still, the length of her reign had been extraordinary. It made her death, coming so soon after the start of the new century, and though hardly a surprise, one of those moments which sent a shudder of awe through most of the world.

In the year of her birth, 1819, Europe had still been adjusting to the aftermath of Waterloo, British cavalry massacred eleven protestors in Manchester, Keats was writing 'Ode to a Nightingale' and Beethoven was beginning his great *Missa Solemnis*. In the midst of all this, the pregnancy of the wife of old King George's fourth son, the fat, garlicky, sadistic and fifty-year-old Duke of Kent – 'the greatest rascal left unhung' in the summing-up of one contemporary – was of significance for only one reason. Though the British crown would pass to the atrocious Prince Regent, later George IV, there was then a problem: of fifty-six grandchildren, not one was legitimate. To

ensure that his child would become Queen one day, the Duke and his heavily pregnant wife, who had been living in Germany, careered across France with borrowed money in a nine-coach convoy of doctors, dogs, songbirds, maids, footmen and cooks, so that the girl was born in London – ‘plump as a partridge’ – as she would remain. Her uncle, soon to become George IV, hated the very idea of her and when her father died of pneumonia in Sidmouth, Devon, the outlook for the baby and her German-speaking mother had been bleak. But he mellowed. Victoria remembered his grease-painted face and wig. The next king, the cheerful old William, tried quite hard to get her outlandish name changed for the day she ascended the throne.

Had he had his way, the name he wanted, she would have been Queen Elizabeth II. Instead, she became Queen Victoria at the age of twenty in 1837 and her name became familiar to everyone who speaks English. She was a politically active, opinionated and talented woman, who not only spoke German, French and some Italian, but later learned Hindustani too. She survived periodic outbreaks of republicanism, several assassination attempts and the death of her adored German husband, Albert, though this threw her into a decades-long gloom, earning her the dismissive moniker the Widow of Windsor. Earlier, she had been an earthy creature, who gobbled her food and had a loud laugh, particularly when her first prime minister, Lord Melbourne, was teasingly scandalizing her with his cynical stories. But slowly, as the wilder Britain of the 1840s gave way to the more ponderous, self-important imperium of the later nineteenth century, she too became a solemn, heavy-lidded presence. This is how she is remembered, a kind of fat, white queen bee, gorged on the royal jelly of imperial pride by buzzing flatterers such as Disraeli and surrounded by sleepy-eyed progeny.

Yet the nearly sixty-four years of her reign had seen Britain changed from a country ruled by a few mainly aristocratic families, still dominated by the values of landowners and protected by oak-sided sailing ships, to the centre of a global empire and an industrial urban nation in which workers had become voters. Waves of political reform in 1832, 1867 and 1884 had brought successive groups of men – property-owning, then ‘respectable middle class’, then working class – into the franchise. No women, yet, of course: the only woman in the land with any real political power was Victoria herself. She

was well aware of the hideous conditions of industrial Britain. As a girl, she had travelled through the mining country of the Midlands, noting in 1832, the year of the first great Reform Act, that ‘men, women, children, country and houses are all black . . . The grass is quite blasted and black. Just now I saw an extraordinary building flaming with fire. The country continues black, engines flaming, coals in abundance, everywhere smoking and burning coal heaps, intermingled with wretched huts and carts and little ragged children.’ Blake, Engels or Orwell could hardly have put it better. But ‘democracy’ was seen as an enemy by the Palace and most of her titled ministers, a menacing, mysterious force that could not be wholly resisted but must somehow be tamed. When she became queen, politics was mainly conducted among a few families, behind closed doors, on handwritten notes and in self-consciously classical speeches in the Commons and Lords. When she died, political rows were being fought out among titled renegades, self-made men from the Midlands and uppity lawyers with a talent for rough talking, at raucous public meetings or through newspaper columns.

By then the vast gap between how Britain saw herself, and how she really was – the chasm in which twentieth-century life would be lived – was already clear to anyone with eyes to see. Vast fleets of ironclad battleships, the clatter of lancers and hussars, the giant public celebrations, jubilees and durbars, could not hide the massive embarrassment of the British army being humiliated by the sharp-shooting Dutch farmers of South Africa. In the Foreign Office by the light of gas lamps, aristocratic young men with beautiful Greek were worriedly studying German and Russian plans to drive south through the Muslim Middle East towards India itself. That great scattering of white settlers in Africa, Canada, Australia and New Zealand might have produced satisfactory washes of pink colouring on the map, but it was a thin scatter: in 1900 there were already fewer white people in the British Empire (54 million) than in Germany (56.3 million)² and far fewer than in the United States, which had a population of 75 million. The onetime workshop of the world was struggling too with high tariff walls overseas and old-fashioned industries. When Victoria died, Britain was importing huge quantities of German and American steel, and trying to plug the difference by digging and selling more of the coal on which these islands partially sat, hardly

the sign of advanced industrial success. The shipyards were still ahead, but not always in technology. Four years before the Queen's death her son Bertie, the Prince of Wales, had retired from his favourite sport of yacht racing at Cowes. His nephew the Kaiser had beaten Bertie's *Britannia* with his new boat, and had taken to parading the latest ships of the German navy off the Isle of Wight at the same time. Bertie complained that 'Willy is a bully' and retired in a huff. In the same year the Blue Riband for Atlantic crossing times had been lost for the first time to the German liner *Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse*, followed by the *Deutschland* in 1900. Everywhere one looked, from Gottfried Daimler's new high-speed internal combustion engine to the new electric trams, British ingenuity was failing and falling back.

So there was a grey undercurrent of melancholy and uncertainty when the Queen, in her lead-lined coffin, with a photograph and lock of John Brown's hair by her, was finally taken to Portsmouth. The Countess of Denbigh watched the Royal Naval fleet and the visiting German warships give salute after salute as the Royal Yacht *Alberta* passed. By 3 p.m. the blue sky was fading and 'a wonderful golden pink appeared in the sky and the smoke rose slowly from the guns . . . like the purple hangings ordered by the King'. She observed 'the white *Alberta* looking very small and frail next the towering battleships. We could see the motionless figures standing round the white pall which, with the crown and orb and sceptre, lay upon the coffin. Solemnly and slowly it glided over the calm blue water . . . giving one a strange choke, and a catch in one's heart.'³ Days on, after a massive military commemoration in London which involved more men than set off in 1914 as the British Expeditionary Force to France, the Queen was finally taken to the Royal Chapel at Windsor – but because of faulty equipment (a broken trace), her horse-drawn final journey had to be completed by sailors hauling her home using the communication cord from a train, hurriedly removed for the purpose. This was hailed as a great sentimental British moment. Whatever it was, it certainly wasn't Prussian, or American, efficiency.

L. F. Austin, editor of the *Illustrated London News*, thought that when the old century had ended 'nobody was heart-stricken, for the world does not grieve over an imperceptible point of time. But at

the end of the Victorian era, who is not conscious of a great blank?' The very words to 'God Save the King' would, he thought, sound odd, 'a phrase so strange upon our lips that it almost makes a stranger of him. Within the last few days, I have heard men murmuring "the king" as if they were groping in their memories for some ancient and unfamiliar charm.'⁴ Yet others were already impatient and keen for change. Beatrice Webb, co-founder with her husband Sidney of the Fabian Society, Britain's successful socialist think-tank, wrote to a friend a few days later with bitter irony: 'We are at last free of the funeral. It has been a true national "wake", a real debauch of sentiment and loyalty – and a most impressive demonstration of the whole people in favour of the monarchical principle. The streets are still black with the multitudes in mourning, from the great ladies in their carriages to the flower girls, who are furnished with rags of crêpe. The King is hugely popular . . . as for the German Emperor, we all adore him!'

The science-fiction writer H. G. Wells felt frank relief. He thought the old Queen had been like 'a great paperweight' and, now that she was removed, he expected all kinds of new ideas to blow around. So they would – though, as we shall see, they were not always good ones. Henry James, the expatriate American novelist and exquisite snob, thought 'Bertie', the new king, 'a vulgarian' and believed Victoria had died after being sickened and humiliated by the Boer War: 'I mourn the safe, motherly old middle-class queen who held the nation warm under the folds of her big, hideous Scotch-plaid shawl.' He admitted to feeling her death deeply and predicted that 'the wild waters are upon us now'.⁵ Young Winston Churchill heard the news in snowy Winnipeg, where he was raising cash on a lecture tour. His father had clashed with Bertie in the past and Churchill showed no trace of sentiment in a letter to his mother: 'I am curious to know about the King. Will it entirely revolutionize his way of life? Will he sell his horses and scatter his Jews [a reference to Bertie's financial friends] or will Reuben Sassoon be enshrined among the crown jewels and other regalia? . . . Will the Keppel [Bertie's mistress] be appointed 1st Lady of the Bedchamber?'⁶ And the vulgarian himself? Judging by the speed with which he destroyed many treasured statues of Brown, cleared out her photographs and papers, sold her beloved house, Osborne, and tramped

around his new palaces in a trail of cigar smoke, he was not in a sentimental mood. Bertie had been a Victorian, he felt, for quite long enough.

The Chocolate Warrior

Saturday 7 July 1900 was a warm, sticky day in the narrow back streets of York. By first light, there were already plenty of people out and about. One of them was a quiet, soberly dressed man discreetly holding a notebook, standing in the shadows, watching the door of a small, dirty pub, one of fourteen nearby. Shortly after 6 a.m., people were already rattling the door of the pub, though it was slow to open this morning. Everyone who entered, and everyone who left, was noted down in the little book. In all, 550 people went in, including 113 children. After twelve hours of standing, the watcher scribbled down: 'Between 5 and 6 p.m., a woman was ejected. A row immediately ensued, the woman using language unfit for human ears. As usual, a crowd of children were keenly enjoying the scene, which lasted for about three quarters of an hour.' Just over a week later, on Sunday 15 July, the investigator was back. Even on the Sabbath, in an area with its share of Irish Catholics, all the small shops were open, doing a brisk business, particularly the fried-fish shops. Most of the women standing gossiping in the streets were in '*déshabillé*', which in this context probably means open shirts, without hats. 'Children simply swarm . . . In the evening there were several wordy battles between women neighbours, the language being very bad . . . Between seven and eight, three men endeavoured to hold a gospel meeting, but retired after singing a hymn and giving a short address; the people apparently took no notice, but continued their conversations.' And the notetaker slipped sadly away.

What was happening in York as the old Queen lay ill would play its part in explaining why her son and grandson never faced the kind of revolutionary upheaval that ousted their cousins Czar Nicholas and Kaiser Bill. A large, mustachioed man in his late twenties had become outraged at the conditions of the poor. Benjamin Seebohm Rowntree, of mixed Danish and Yorkshire descent, was no kind of

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