

Silent Revolution and the Making of Victorian England

Herbert Schlossberg

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The Victorian England of tinted memory—a proud, prosperous nation committed to piety in the home, long hours in the workplace and enlightened rule throughout the empire—has long since lost its luster. The dutiful Victoria may draw praise, but we know too much of the music hall, the gin palace and the sexual choreography of the weekend house party. We know that the worlds of Oscar Wilde, high-living swells and child prostitution were as real as those of William Morris, Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Yet no valid assessment of Victorian England can neglect the force and effects of evangelism, calling for personal conversion and Christian action. Evangelism powerfully affected the lives of millions and the policies and progress of the nation.

In this highly detailed major study, Schlossberg argues forcefully that in large measure the fertile ground for evangelism was seeded long before Victoria's accession in 1837. He demonstrates that though seventeenth century Puritanism had given way to increasingly undisciplined, ungodly and licentious laxity in the eighteenth century, charismatic preachers such as Wesley and Whitefield were winning large followings, laying solid foundations for an evangelical revival.

Schlossberg deftly handles the growth of sects within the movement and the stimulus to revitalization that evangelical Christianity brought to the now apprehensive Anglican ("established") church. His analyses of the development and roles of Methodists, the Clapham Group, Dissenters, Unitarians and others, as well as the established church, High Churchmen and Tractarians, is clear despite substantial detail. The book's driving energy is fueled by Schlossberg's vivid and focused presentation of such religious movers and shakers as Wesley, Wilberforce, Hannah More, Macaulay, Newman, Keble, Arnold, Coleridge, Carlyle and Lord Shaftesbury (to name only the best known) in their ambitions, energies, hopes and disappointments; in their letters, journals and unguarded asides. Many were known for their achievements in politics, education, art or literature, but their Christian faith unmistakably shaped their work in these fields.

The author amply demonstrates that the evangelical movement, with its eighteenth century roots, delivered an imperative for change to Victorian England. Directly or indirectly, it brought about Sunday schools, literacy programs, limitations on child labor, religious toleration, improved sanitation and the temperance movement. Readers will owe Schlossberg gratitude for his scholarly yet accessible narrative and his comprehensive bibliography in which the most recent historians rub shoulders with classic commentators such as G. M. Young, Cobbett and Arnold.

PETER SKINNER (May / June 2000)

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