

## Review Article

### *Edwardian Retrospect*

In his Introduction to *Eminent Victorians* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1929), Lytton Strachey used the image of a fisherman dipping a bucket into the sea to sample its contents as an explanation of his method of depicting the Victorian Age. He justified his limited examples by asserting that the mass of material to hand could be comprehended by even the most fastidious historian only through typical cases. He then went on to find in the biographies of four personalities specific objections to the time of his boyhood and to the social strictures under which he, and all England, then suffered.

The strength of Strachey's method was that it permitted the traits of an individual to stand for aspects of society as a whole, and that when challenged on a particular point the author could claim that it applied to the individual exclusively but that the remainder of the portrait was of the society as well. The book's argument is subtle; always implied is the belief that strong passions, covered by a shield of hypocrisy, governed the lives and actions of prominent and respectable people—people who were revered by their age as models of liberalism, humanitarianism, and religious conviction. To maintain the consistency of this argument, Strachey used a simple but effective structure — four portraits of famous figures, connected by their eccentricities rather than by any historical pattern. They are viewed exclusively from the standpoint of biography with no apparent attempt to trace historical correspondences or interrelations. The result is a cutting portrait of sixty years of Victorian society, always with the unstated proposition "These be your gods, O Israel!"

The recent book of Professor Samuel Hynes\* has not been so successful in attempting much the same sort of analysis from different sources of the period from 1900 to 1914. In the work of Professor Hynes, the reader has come to expect a certain standard of scholarship which is simply not present in this book, and it is primarily for this reason that the following objections are raised. Arthur Warwick, writing from an historical viewpoint (*Victorian Studies*, vol. XII, no. 4, June 1969, pp. 471-2) finds matters of literature and biography satisfactory but is disappointed with the lack of historical perspective

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\**The Edwardian Turn of Mind*. Princeton: Princeton University Press [Toronto: Saunders of Toronto], 1968. Pp. xiv, 427. \$9.75.

and the inadequate marshalling of materials. After accepting Professor Warwick's opinions on matters historical, this review questions a satisfactory handling of facts and background in the portraits that Hynes presents of people and literary movements of Edwardian times.

The primary objection to this book by Professor Hynes is that while the title promises a major study of the period, none is forthcoming. Like R. J. Minney's *The Edwardian Age*, (London: Cassell, 1964), this study attempts to reveal "not literary history but the intellectual climate of Edwardian England" (Hynes, p. viii). But the attempt is made, not through a carefully prepared list of central figures as in *Eminent Victorians*, nor through a central person and theme—King Edward, his role, his activities, the people he knew, the events which involved him, and the social trends he advocated or opposed—such as the reader encounters in Minney's study, but through poorly defined and shifting groups of writers, dramatists, essayists, and public speakers. It is difficult at times to determine precisely the thesis of Professor Hynes's book.

[The Edwardian age] was not quite Victorian, though conservatives tried to make it so, nor was it altogether modern though it contained the beginnings of many ideas that we recognize as our own. . . . In this Edwardian conflict of old and new, "old" is, generally speaking, a Victorian inheritance. . . . "New" means all those movements of the early twentieth century that aimed at liberating English society from the stiff limitations of its immediate past (p. vii).

Statements of this kind are over-generalized at best, and can be menacingly deceptive if taken seriously. Professor Hynes establishes his own paradox immediately by going on to state that the contradictions he must present can not be accounted for by structure, political affiliations, or the generation gap, and that, in this social struggle between "new" and "old", "the sides were not clearly drawn, loyalties were shifting and uncertain, and even within single groups or movements there were curious anomalies . . ." (p. viii).

Seemingly we are to admire the simplicity of structure in this Victorian-Modern struggle where it exists and to excuse as paradoxical the many erroneous conclusions that arise from its application.

Some of the subjects with which Professor Hynes deals are still pressing social problems—censorship and the public discussion or practice of certain sexual forms have not yet been satisfactorily resolved—but the kinds of feminist agitation of the early 1900s are almost unique to that period and these are certainly legitimate subject matter for a book of this kind. In this case the author achieves a happy blending of biography, using Mrs. Webb, the history of the feminist movement, legal considerations about divorce, and the literary impact

of such works as Granville-Barker's *Waste* and Shaw's *Mrs. Warren's Profession*. But it is difficult to sustain so wide a series of subjects and retain their interconnections. As a result the book "wanders", concentrating too heavily on certain subjects—for example the material in a chapter loosely entitled "Human Character Changes"—and skimming too quickly over other and better illustrations: there are no references to Bloomsbury beyond individual artists, and no indications of its influences; and the brief but tantalizing look at Baden-Powell would have been more effective had it been treated at the same length as the interesting sketch of C. F. G. Masterman (pp. 57-73).

The informative material of *The Edwardian Turn of Mind* is framed within two general chapters, "The Edwardian Garden Party" and "The End of the Party", which assume the kind of easy interlude traditionally accorded to those few years before the century really got down to business. The intervening eight chapters examine five aspects of society which were affected by currents of change, all touching on the issue of sex in its many forms—socialism, equal rights for women, medical and psychological advances, freedom in the theatres, and the forms of social control exercised by various "conservative" agencies.

At bottom, however, the problem of selection and organization remains unsolved. The book is not comprehensive enough to achieve the claims of its title and preface. It is not sufficient to explain feminism only in terms of prostitution and the intellectual liberals who tried altering the conditions of its existence, and ignore completely the labour movements, female employment and its implications, or the social aspects of such a book as Gissing's *The Odd Women*. Labour as a force receives only a bare nod in passing, and the political scene is equally poorly served. The few references to Herbert Asquith are made merely to illustrate in an individual the ineffectual and self-defeating Liberal mind—hardly a perceptive estimate.

Strachey solved the first of Professor Hynes's organizational difficulties by avoiding it. To keep from becoming involved in the interactions of people, events, and groups, which ultimately demands a firm and decisive cut to demarcate a period of social cohesion, Strachey concentrated exclusively on individuals, focussing his analysis on aspects of character—Florence Nightingale's obstinacy, prudishness, and bad temper, Gordon's religious fanaticism, and Arnold's muddle-headedness—leaving the conclusions to the reader. G. M. Young, in his essay "Portrait of an Age", in *Early Victorian England: 1830-1865* (2 vols., Oxford, 1934), resolved the issue by the opposite process of attempting to assess the dominant social movements, and seeing in the coming

together of people and events the patterns that marked an age. As well, his survey was supported by a series of papers on specialized topics in which no attempt was made at inter-relation, but whose totality gave an impression of life a century ago.

Professor Hynes has attempted the analysis of how individuals and groups affected each other, limited on the one hand by a lack of scope to encompass all relevant forces, and on the other by an over-simplified view of the issues and their resolutions. He is not content to present the facts of the case, or even a mildly jaundiced view of them. Rather, he constantly interjects his opinion of reform-minded, thinking liberals pitted against a rear-guard of Tory conservatives intent on retrenching Victorian ideals. Interesting material on G. A. Redford and C. H. F. Brookfield, the Examiners of Plays for the period, is marred by the constant reiteration of the "old-new" theme. Not content with letting the actions and speeches of Redford speak for themselves, Professor Hynes must inform his readers.

Redford was a man of strong convictions and limited intelligence, blandly confident of his own (that is, his society's) standards (p. 216).

In short, he proceeded by simply transferring the code of a gentleman's club, or an officers' mess, to the stage (p. 216).

After the initial equation of Redford's lack of intelligence and the Victorian viewpoint that he championed, Hynes extends his definition to include the "official" mind, the officer class, "gentlemen", and the "governing class" of the nation. At once two contradictions occur. From the brief character sketch that immediately precedes these examples, Redford can in no way be seen as either an officer or a gentleman. He may have been a bureaucrat but he was not a member of the governing class, if we can assume that Professor Hynes has any real meaning for that term. Redford was as far removed as it was possible to be, from Lord Curzon either as the Examiner of Plays and the administrator of Egypt, or as a kind of dull prude and the man whose meetings with Elinor Glyn at the Cavendish Hotel were discreet but known (see Minney, p. 87).

Hynes takes for granted so completely a code of conduct labelled "Victorian" that the reader gradually comes to assume that somewhere in Whitehall a document with that title continues to exert its evil influence almost as insidiously as bad law.

Shaw is a personality who fits centrally in the author's construct as writer, dramatist, social reformer, and feminist, and it is interesting to compare the two writers' views of England in this period—Shaw's directly after the

Great War in his introduction to *Heartbreak House* (1919) and the author's at a half-century's remove. Hynes says of Shaw "In his hope and in his disillusion Shaw was characteristic of his generation as it passed from the Victorian period to the Edwardian" (p. 132). But the very facets of society that Shaw saw as most debilitating, and most typical of "Heartbreak House"—"ars gratia artis", philosophical inquiry as an alternative to boredom, intellectual activity at the theoretical level alone, and the indiscriminate search for new emotional experience—are not Victorian legacies. Rather they are the hallmarks of the very society which Hynes depicts as in revolt against Victorian austerity. Shaw was not uncomfortable in the Edwardian period (if we can assume that he was not merely playing a part) because of a pernicious influence from an earlier age, but rather because aspects of his own day displeased him. The very things that he felt were leading to a great disaster are the things that Hynes views as the pathways into a new age, more free from restraint. The two views can, of course, be argued endlessly to no conclusion. Shaw's case does have the war and its effects on England to support it. Professor Hynes has to explain by his structure just how the tragedy occurred with so many capable and enlightened captains steering the ship.

A more serious charge than lack of viewpoint yet remains. Some neglect of subject matter can be excused by the breadth of the topic and the proximity of some of the issues to our own time. As well, his personal interests are naturally uppermost in an author's mind, so that it is understandable that the theatre, with dramatists and critics and the circles in which they moved and worked, would receive greater attention and a more effective treatment. The reader sometimes gets the impression that all of English society swung to the pendulum of the London theatre and its contending factions. Spatial limitation is the excuse for permitting the part to stand for the whole, but the serious scholar is aware of the need for accuracy. Two small examples will serve. In the chapter "Science, Seers, and Sex" the author speculates on what he sees as the re-emergence of an interest in mythic process as a kind of alternative to fundamentalist Christianity, and the particular use of imagery involving the god Pan. The examples he gives are Barrie's *Peter Pan*, Forster's use of the figure, and Kipling's "Pan in Vermont". The first is strained, and although the second applies, the third reference is to an obscure poem in which—beyond the title and the image of a salesman as a kind of mythic trickster—the subject-matter is entirely about seed catalogues. Only its obscurity and the reference in the title make it possible to classify it with the two legitimate works on this theme.

Alike in degree but different in kind is the misquotation of A. E. Housman's lines from *A Shropshire Lad*:

Oh, God will save her, fear you not:  
Be you the men you've been,  
Get you the sons your fathers got,  
And God will save the Queen.

Hynes alters these to "Be thou the men your fathers were/And God will save the Queen" (p. 282). Neither footnote nor index reference offers a source for this. Not only are metre and number in error, but the mistake betrays a misunderstanding of the point of the poem. In effect, how far can one rely on the parts being accurate, either in themselves, or as they apply to the whole?

It is still safe to say that the definitive social history of the Edwardian age has not been written, although there are many interesting and informative texts, of which Simon Nowell-Smith's editing of *Edwardian England, 1901-1914* is probably still the soundest. Reference has already been made to R. J. Minney's *The Edwardian Age* as perhaps more successful than the present text simply because it attempts less and adheres more firmly to an informing pattern—the figure of the king. And on the "fictional history" shelf, Victoria Sackville-West's *The Edwardians* (1930) is certainly worth reading for a portrait of the times, along with works by other writers whom Hynes discusses, not least among them being John Galsworthy.

In conclusion, then, although the weaknesses of the book have perhaps been overstressed, there is the danger, since Professor Hynes is a persuasive writer, that his style will convince where, in point of fact, the content is inadequate. Had the author limited his scope and conclusions, concentrating particularly on his fortes—drama, painting, and the workings of the theatres—a more organized, more balanced, work might have resulted. It is evident where his central interests lie, but Hynes is not convincing when he attempts to make them the microcosm of an entire society, or even the symptoms by which its social change can best be measured.

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