CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

I

THIS book is the product of many years of research. The literature of cities is prodigious both in its volume and its variety, and many of the most illuminating sources are buried away in the most unlikely places. Monographs on particular cities are invaluable, but they seldom exist in the form that the general historian needs. Moreover a collection of monographs, however scholarly or enlightening, does not constitute a synthesis. I have tried in this book to achieve a synthesis, as I did in *Victorian People* (1954), not by assembling all the material I could find on the subject – this would be more than a lifetime's work – but by selecting examples from nineteenth-century history and relating them to each other.

In *Victorian People* I was concerned with a brief period, the middle years of the nineteenth century from the late forties to the early seventies, years of orderly progress, continued economic development and social peace. I tried to account for the 'unity' of these years by choosing a number of people whose attitudes and careers reflected or directed the tendencies of the period and by examining the way in which their ideas and achievements converged. In *Victorian Cities*, which is a companion volume, I have chosen a number of cities and concentrated on particular facets of their history. These facets, singly or together, reveal and explain essential elements in Victorian society. The task of selection has been more difficult and must be considered more arbitrary than it was in my earlier venture. Not all urban problems or achievements find a place in this book. There is far more about the new than the old. Other cities might well have been included: some of the cities included might have been left out. There is a natural bias towards the cities I know. This is legitimate enough in so far

as Victorian cities are still alive, whereas the Victorian people I described in 1954 were all long since dead. There is no substitute for knowing a city: reading about it is second-best.

The period covered in this volume is longer than the period covered in *Victorian People*. It corresponds closely to the reign of Queen Victoria as a whole. I am not seeking in this study to account for the 'unity' or balance of one central part of that long reign but to assess one aspect (a changing aspect) of Victorian experience.

The Victorians began to interest themselves in cities in the late 1830s and early 1840s when it was impossible to avoid investigation of urgent urban problems. They were horrified and fascinated by the large industrial cities which seemed to stand for what a writer in 1840 called 'a system of life constructed on a wholly new principle'.[1] Both Blue Books and novels demonstrated the horror and the fascination. So did the reports of religious and charitable agencies and the surveys of provincial statistical societies. Newspapers and periodicals also provide an indispensable record of contemporary opinions. By the last years of Victorian England, attention had shifted back from the provinces to London. Again it was what was thought of as the unprecedented character of many of the problems which gripped people's imagination. Patrick Geddes's early twentieth-century account of London was typical and remains well known. He saw London as a 'polypus', 'a vast irregular growth without previous parallel in the world of life – perhaps likest to the spreading of a great coral reef'.[2]

A different way of describing the period covered in this book would be to say that it falls between the coming of the

1. *Bentley's Miscellany*, Vol. VII (1840).

2. P. Geddes, *Cities in Evolution* (1949 edn), p. 9. The language was not without previous parallel. The word 'polypus' was applied to London at least as early as 1776 when Horace Walpole stated that 'rows of houses shoot out every way like a polypus'. Quoted by H. J. Dyos in 'The Growth of a Pre-Victorian Suburb: South London, 1580–1836' in *Town Planning Review*, Vol. XXV (1954). For the image of the coral reef, see the *Quarterly Review*, Vol. 167 (October 1888), p. 542, where the life of London is said to be 'as disintegrated as that of a coral reef in which every individual polyp has its own separate existence'.

railway and the coming of the automobile. The railway linked the new cities together and made their growth possible: like the cities themselves, it was a symbol of 'improvement'. As Emerson put it, 'railroad iron is a magician's rod in its power to evoke the sleeping energies of land and water'. Railways were also often believed, like cities, to be symbols of 'democracy', in Dr Arnold's words 'destroying feudality for ever'. The first impetus to build them came largely from groups of active businessmen in the great cities, like the 'Liverpool Party', for example, who were responsible for the building of Crewe.[1] The first railways encouraged the concentration of urban population. Some new towns, like Barrow-in-Furness, owed their dynamism to railway interests and to men like James Ramsden, appointed Locomotive Superintendent of the Furness Railway in 1846.[2] Some older towns without railways withered away, like Courcy in Trollope's *Doctor Thorne* (1858). Some of the best pictures of cities are to be found in George Measom's Official Illustrated Railway Guide Books, and Bradshaw's, the great manual of the railways, was not the least impressive product of industrial Manchester.

The automobile by contrast scattered the cities, pushing them farther and farther away from their mid-Victorian centres to new suburbs. At the same time it narrowed the gulf between urban and rural life, transformed the outlook and prospects of the village and of many market towns, and in the process caused large tracts of countryside to become neither truly urban nor truly rural, what American sociologists have called 'rurban' territory.[3]

After the urban came the 'sub-urban', the 'con-urban' and,

1. The story of the struggle of the 'Liverpool Party' with groups based on Manchester and Birmingham is told in W. H. Chaloner, *The Social and Economic Development of Crewe* (1950), Ch. 1.

2. Ramsden's career is discussed in J. D. Marshall, *Furness and the Industrial Revolution* (1958).

3. Yet Dickens in *Dombey and Son* (1846) noted in North London the development of an area which was 'neither of the town nor of the country. The former, like the giant in his travelling boots, has made a stride and passed it and has set his brick and mortar heel a long way in advance; but the intermediate space between the giant's feet, as yet, is only blighted country, and not town'.

to use the last of the cluster of ugly adjectives, the 'ex-urban'. Sociologists have talked of a 'rural-urban continuum'. In this process the automobile became a symbol not of democracy but of status. Against the massive investment in Victorian railways, a great collective achievement which is now being frittered away, we have to set the hire-purchase nexus of private property, the faltering public programme for road development, and the traffic 'crisis' in old and new cities alike.

This story lies outside the range of this book. Indeed, the automobile age separates our own urban experience from the Victorian urban experience just as surely as the coming of the railway separated the Victorian age from earlier ages. The Victorians themselves were well aware of the significance of their great change. 'It was only yesterday,' one of Thackeray's characters remarked of the pre-railway age, 'but what a gulf between now and then. *Then* was the old world. Stage-coaches, more or less swift riding horses, pack horses, highwaymen, Druids, Ancient Britons . . . all these belong to the old period. I will concede a halt in the midst of it and allow that gunpowder and printing tended to modernize the world. But your railroad starts a new era. . . . We who lived before railways and survive out of the ancient world, are like Father Noah and his family out of the Ark'.[1]

Transport was also important in determining the chronology of Victorian urban development. Railway building led to drastic changes, usually in the poorer parts of the cities. Slums might be pulled down without much care being given to the rehousing of the slum dwellers. 'We occasionally sweep away the wretched dens, hidden in back courts and alleys, where the poor are smothered: but far too rarely do we make provision for them,' Charles Knight complained in his study of London.[2] More specifically Manby Smith in his *Curiosities of London Life*

1. The passage is quoted in K. Tillotson, *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties* (1954), pp. 105–6.

2. C. Knight, *London* (1841–4), Vol. IV, p. 254. See also H. J. Dyos, 'Some Social Costs of Railway Building in London' in the *Journal of Transport History*, Vol. III (1957). It was not only railways which created such problems. When the St Katherine's Dock was built in the late 1820s, eight hundred houses were destroyed and eleven thousand people turned out into the streets. See R. Sinclair, *East London* (1950), p. 245.

(1853) wrote of 'the deep gorge of a railway cutting, which has ploughed its way right through the centre of the market-gardens, and burrowing beneath the carriage-road, and knocking a thousand houses out of its path, pursues its circuitous course to the city'.[1]

If railways were symbols of progress, all too often the railway embankment became a symbol of the ruthless terror of the mid-Victorian city: it reappeared in Charles Booth's massive survey of London life as a frontier hemming in secluded groups of suspicious neighbours who hated intruders from outside. The building of local and suburban railway lines helped to determine the main lines of suburban growth. The first local passenger service to be authorized in London was started between Tooley Street, Southend and Deptford in 1836: the first workman's fare was introduced in London by the Metropolitan Railway Company in 1864 and on a section of the Stockton and Darlington Railway in the north of England as early as 1852. The Cheap Trains Act of 1883, which compelled the railway companies to offer workman's fares as and when required by the Board of Trade, was deliberately designed for 'further encouraging the migration of the working classes into the suburbs' in order to relieve housing congestion in the central areas.[2]

Trams served the same purpose. First introduced in Birkenhead in 1860 by the American engineer, George Francis Train, they were of enormous importance, particularly in the provincial cities. After the Tramways Act of 1870 gave local authorities the option to buy out private tramways by compulsory purchase after twenty-one years of operation, Birmingham, Glasgow, Portsmouth, Plymouth and London were quick to take advantage of the new facilities. By the end of Queen Victoria's reign sixty-one local authorities owned tramways and eighty-nine undertakings were managed by private enterprise.[3] Richard Hoggart has described trams as 'the gondolas of the people'.[4] They certainly brought new

1. C. Manby Smith, *Curiosities of London Life* (1853), p. 361.
2. S. A. Pope, *The Cheap Trains Act* (1906), p. 15.
3. Cmd 305 (1900), *Joint Select Committee on Municipal Trading.*
4. R. Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), p. 120.

areas of the city within access of working men by reducing the time taken to get to work. They also made it possible to get to the football grounds and to the holiday firework displays and galas in the public parks. Their introduction was a local landmark in all the provincial cities: battles between the protagonists of different systems of operation and of different structures of ownership enlivened late-Victorian local government.

In London, where the advent of trams was fiercely resisted, the first electric railway, the City and South London, was opened in 1890 and the first section of underground railway, the Metropolitan, from Paddington to Farringdon Street, built on a system of 'open cutting', began operating as early as 1863. The Inner Circle was complete by 1884. The City and Southwark Subway Company followed in 1890 and a number of other lines were in operation by the end of the reign. There was always a direct relationship between urbanization and transport. Perhaps the best area from which to illustrate it is 'Metroland', the district covered by the North Metropolitan Railway. In 1868 an independent railway company had opened a line from Baker Street to Swiss Cottage, and in 1880 the North Metropolitan extended this to Harrow. Other lines followed and, as the railway arrived, places like Willesden, which had been quiet and detached, were drawn into the vortex of London: North Harrow and West Harrow were new names, centred on the local station. The slogan of the Metropolitan Railway – 'Live in Metroland' – showed that it was not so much satisfying existing needs as creating new residential districts.

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The cities of this book are the cities of the railway and tramway age, of the age of steam and of gas, of a society sometimes restless, sometimes complacent, moving, often fumblingly and falteringly, towards greater democracy. The building of the cities was a characteristic Victorian achievement, impressive in scale but limited in vision, creating new opportunities but also providing massive new problems. Perhaps their outstanding feature was hidden from public view – their hidden

network of pipes and drains and sewers, one of the biggest technical and social achievements of the age, a sanitary 'system' more comprehensive than the transport system. Yet their surface world was fragmented, intricate, cluttered, eclectic and noisy, the unplanned product of a private enterprise economy developing within an older traditional society.

To the early twentieth-century critic of Victorianism the cities seemed as unsatisfactory as Victorian people: to a later generation they have acquired a charm and romance of their own. It is fascinating to compare H. G. Wells with John Betjeman. To Wells the cities were even more grim when they were considered as wholes than when they were judged by their component parts. 'It is only because the thing was spread over a hundred years and not concentrated into a few weeks', he wrote in his *Autobiography*, 'that history fails to realize what sustained disaster, how much massacre, degeneration and disablement of lives was due to the housing of people in the nineteenth century.' Betjeman has found interest and excitement, above all enjoyment, in at least some of the houses and in many of the public buildings which Wells would have condemned. 'Many a happy hour have I spent when ill in bed, turning over the pages of [Victorian] scrap-books, looking now at a new bank, now at a new town hall, warehouse, or block of artisans' dwellings, but chiefly at churches.'[1]

Quite apart from changes in taste or differing individual capacities for enjoyment, we are by now far enough away from Victorianism to understand its various expressions more sympathetically while at the same time retaining our freedom to criticize. We can and should criticize the appalling living conditions in Victorian cities, the absence of amenities, the brutal degradation of natural environment and the inability to plan and often even to conceive of the city as a whole. There is truth in Lewis Mumford's remark that 'the new industrial city had many lessons to teach; but for the urbanist its chief lesson was in what to avoid'. At the same time we realize also

1. H. G. Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography*, Vol. I (1934), p. 277. cf. *Victorian People*, p. 14 (Pelican edition); John Betjeman, 'The English Town in the Last Hundred Years', *Rede Lecture* (1956), and *English Cities and Small Towns* (1943).

that in a very different twentieth-century society we are often just as hard pressed as the Victorians were to make cities attractive and inspiring. The story of twentieth-century local government has not been a story of 'ever-onward progress', as the Victorians hoped it would be. The appearance of cities has been spoilt by 'subtopian' horrors which the Victorians could not have foreseen. Year by year we are pulling down the older parts of our cities – Victorian and pre-Victorian – with a savage and undiscriminating abandon which will not earn us the gratitude of posterity. If the detailed study of Victorian cities is not pursued at this perilous moment of time, when we are still poised between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it may be difficult to pursue it at all.

The worst aspects of nineteenth-century urban growth are reasonably well known. The great industrial cities came into existence on the new economic foundations laid in the eighteenth century with the growth in population and the expansion of industry. The pressure of rapidly increasing numbers of people and the social consequences of the introduction of new industrial techniques and new ways of organizing work involved a sharp break with the past. The fact that the new techniques were introduced by private enterprise and that the work was organized for other people not by them largely determined the reaction to the break.

The industrial city was bound to be a place of problems. Economic individualism and common civic purpose were difficult to reconcile. The priority of industrial discipline in shaping all human relations was bound to make other aspects of life seem secondary. A high rate of industrial investment might mean not only a low rate of consumption and a paucity of social investment but a total indifference to social costs. Overcrowding was one problem: displacement was another. There were parts of Liverpool with a density of 1,200 persons to the acre in 1884: rebuilding might entail the kind of difficulties which were set out in a verse in *The Builder* of 1851:

> Who builds? Who builds? Alas, ye poor!
> If London day by day 'improves',
> Where shall ye find a friendly door,
> When every day a home removes?

We know relatively little of how Victorian cities were actually built except that in the early and middle years of the reign building was often left to small speculators of limited resources.[1] E. Dobson's *Rudiments of the Art of Building* (1849) went through thirteen editions in forty years. There were some examples, however, of working-class self-help through freehold land societies (the initiative came from Birmingham), many examples of capitalist philanthropy, with mill-owners and railway companies building and letting houses, and a marked growth of building societies and housing associations, the earliest of which were the Metropolitan Association for Improving the Dwellings of the Industrious Classes, founded in 1841, and the Society for Improving the Condition of the Labouring Classes, founded in 1844. The Peabody Trust, set up in 1862, was active in London, and its work, limited in conception by considerations both of economy and of taste, can still be seen. There were also a few big builders like Thomas Cubitt, a characteristic Victorian self-made man, whose work, huge in scale, can be seen as a contribution to a long tradition in speculative building going back to the seventeenth century. By the end of the century the share of the bigger builders in London was increasing. So too was the pressure to re-examine the special housing problems of the working classes, the subject of a Royal Commission in 1884.[2]

It was not until after the 1870s that health conditions in the poorer parts of the cities began to improve. From an average of 22.4 in the decade from 1841 to 1851 the national death rate fell slightly to 22.2 during the next decade, rose again to 22.5 during the 1860s and still remained at 22 over the five years from 1871 to 1876. Infant mortality remained more or less constant around 150 per 1,000 live births until the twentieth century. The crude national rates need to be broken down into the figures for particular places, particular social groups

1. For examples of local studies see H. Richards and P. Lewis, 'House Building in the South Wales Coalfield 1851–1913' in the *Manchester School*, Vol. XXIV (1956), and J. Parry Lewis, 'Indices of House Building in the Manchester Conurbation, South Wales and Great Britain' in the *Scottish Journal of Political Economy*, Vol. VIII (1961).

2. H. J. Dyos is exploring the details of this story. See also D. J. Olsen, *Town Planning in London in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (1964).

and particular diseases, but they remained alarmingly high in the worst urban districts. The inquiries of the late 1860s and 1870s, backed by advances in medical science, were more productive of results than the noisier inquiries and the better publicized legislation of the 1840s, when the 'Sanitary Idea' was inspiring poets, moralists and artists as well as philanthropists and administrators. If only for this reason, there is need to devote adequate attention in all studies of Victorian cities both to the relationship between qualitative and quantitative evidence and to the administrative significance of the late-Victorian reforms which identified differences between the best and the worst and pointed to the need for more active national policies of social control. The Sanitary Commission of 1869 to 1871, which collected ample evidence concerning the ignorance, petty jealousies and unwillingness to spend money of the mid-Victorian Local Boards of Health, was the prelude to the setting up of the Local Government Board in 1871, the Public Health Act of 1872, the comprehensive Public Health Act of 1875, which divided the country into urban and rural sanitary districts with clearly defined duties, and the Artisans' and Labourers' Dwellings Improvement Act of the same year.

Belated public interest in housing and constant interest – fluctuating in intensity and range of appeal – in the 'Sanitary Idea' characterized the Victorian city, which was the locus and focus of all theories and policies of environmental control. The theories and the policies had to be backed by statistics and to be fought for by dedicated men. As late as 1869, when professional and administrative skills were greatly superior to those of 1848, the language of some of the pioneers of the Sanitary Commission echoed that of the pioneers of the Public Health Act of 1848. 'Our present machinery', Dr John Snow told the Social Science Congress in Bristol, 'must be greatly enlarged, radically altered, and endowed with new powers', above all with the power of 'doing away with that form of liberty to which some communities cling, the sacred power to poison to death not only themselves but their neighbours.'[1]

1. *The Times*, 5 October 1869. *The Times*, which had asked in 1848 for a 'bettish and personal opposition [to the Public Health Bill] just enough to

Lack of general concern for social costs was related to the pressures not only of urbanization but of industrialization. The city offered external economies to the businessman: it was all too easy to forget that the economies entailed social costs as well. In a new industrial society belief in private property survived as the foundation of the whole social system. The belief was sustained by the law. It had also shaped eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century schemes of improvement. When Victorian legislation was passed which tampered with the rights of private property, it was always contentious and difficult to implement. A Nuisance Removal Act, for instance, had been passed as early as 1846 and there was further legislation in 1855, 1860, 1863 and 1866, yet nuisances remained unchecked and prominent in all the cities. Sir John Simon, the great sanitary reformer who took over where Chadwick left off, claimed in 1868 that disease resulting from non-application or sluggish application of the nuisance laws accounted for a quarter of the entire mortality of the country.[1]

Throughout the Victorian age the most effective argument for sanitary reform was that it would actually save money in the long run, not squander it. 'Civic economy' was a branch of political economy. As the *British and Foreign Medico-Chirurgical Review* put it in the 1840s, 'one broad principle may be safely enunciated in respect of sanitary economics – that it costs more money to create disease than to prevent it; and there is not a single structural arrangement chargeable with the production of disease which is not also in itself an extravagance'.[2] The broad principle was more easy to accept as a principle than as a precept. There were protracted local

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quicken Lord Morpeth's energies', noted in 1849 that while apathy was still the main problem, 'the stage of universal consent has never been reached'.

1. See the important article by E. P. Hennock, 'Urban Sanitary Reform a Generation before Chadwick' in the *Economic History Review*, Vol. X (1957), and *Eleventh Annual Report of the Medical Officer to the Privy Council* (1868). For Simon's work, which points forward to the twentieth century, see R. Lambert, *Sir John Simon and English Social Administration* (1963).

2. For the attitudes of the 1840s, see my lecture 'Public Opinion and Public Health in the Age of Chadwick', *Chadwick Lecture*, 1946.

arguments before it could be shown to the satisfaction of ratepayers, first that the equations were correct, and second that the long run was worth bothering about. Those branches of civic reform which could not be justified in terms of the principle were generally neglected until late in the century. It was largely for this reason that the public provision of working-class housing was neglected throughout the century.

The early advocates of the 'Sanitary Idea' were usually amateurs, men like Chadwick himself, who 'seized on an abuse with the tenacity of a bulldog' and believed that he was battling against Fate itself, or Charles Kingsley, who identified sanitary reform with the will of God. The moral strength of Victorianism often lay in its reliance on amateurs rather than on professionals to get things done. At the same time, delay in implementing legislation was made worse by the tardiness of the Victorians to develop the necessary skills for managing growing cities – civil engineering skills, for example, and medical skills. The noisy opposition to Chadwick made the most of his self-confident dogmatism, his eagerness to provide non-expert answers to highly complex technical problems. Simon, by contrast, was distinguished not only for his moderation of temperament but for his greater willingness to accept expert advice when it could be made available. Yet he too reached an impasse. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that if half the technical skill applied to industry had been applied to the Victorian cities, their record would have been very different. As it was, Victorian cities were places where problems often overwhelmed people.

Even when a labour movement developed (and as it developed it was very slow to develop the demand for improved health and housing), even when working hours were cut, even when social investment increased, even when attempts at planning were made, and even when engineering and medical skills improved, as they did in the last phases of Queen Victoria's reign, the city remained a centre of problems. Far more remained to be done than had been done. Some of the changes within cities were the product of conscious municipal policy. Most changes, however, were the result of a multitude of single decisions, public and private: inevitably

there had to be bargains and compromises. The general plan of the Victorian city continued to express all this. At the end of the reign the cities remained confused and complicated, a patchwork of private properties, developed separately with little sense of common plan, a jumble of sites and buildings with few formal frontiers, a bewildering variety of heights and eye-levels, a social disorder with districts of deprivation and ostentation, and every architectural style, past and present, to add to the confusion. It is not surprising that George Bernard Shaw suggested that all British cities, like all Indian villages, would have to be pulled down and built again if people were to live in an environment worthy of them.

This, however, is only one side of the picture, the side which impressed the young H. G. Wells. The sheer magnitude of Victorian urban problems directed attention to issues about which people had hitherto been silent. The growth of the new industrial city meant that people took a closer look at the problems both of the old market town and of the village. It was true, as one of the great Blue Books of the 1840s put it, that 'more filth, worse physical suffering and moral disorder than Howard describes as affecting the prisoners, are to be found among the cellar population of the working people of Liverpool, Manchester, or Leeds and in large portions of the Metropolis',[1] but factual knowledge of these conditions and the conscience and drive to do something about them influenced pre-Victorian towns like Exeter and Norwich which had hitherto pushed their urban problems into the background. 'The discovery of the laws of public health,' the Registrar-General noted in 1871, 'the determination of the conditions of cleanliness, manners, water supply, food, exercise, isolation, medicine, most favourable to life in one city, in one country, is a boon to every city, to every country, for all can profit by the experience.'[2]

Social conditions in the new communities encouraged both the amassing of facts and the airing of viewpoints. However great the resistance, there was persistent pressure to control

1. *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population* (1842), p. 60.

2. Quoted in H. Jephson, *The Sanitary Evolution of London* (1907), p. 100.

social change. Victorian cities were not the 'insensate' ant-heaps which find a place in Mumford's pages. At their worst they were always more than 'mere man-heaps, machine warrens, not organs of human association'.[1] They were never mere collections of individuals, some weak, some strong. They had large numbers of voluntary organizations, covering a far wider range of specialized interests than was possible either in the village or the small town. They were more free of aristocratic 'influence'. They allowed room for middle-class initiative and for greater independence and greater organization of the 'lower ranks of society' than did smaller places: by the end of the century, both independence and organization were being reflected in new policies and in genuine transfers of power. Moreover, the cities possessed in their newspapers what were often extremely effective propaganda agencies focusing attention on local issues and through competitive rivalry stimulating the development of articulate opinions. 'In the forums of the public press,' one nineteenth-century writer put it, 'we see the forms of all the greater and lesser associations into which society at large has wrought itself.'[2] At their best, the cities created genuine municipal pride and followed new and bold courses of action.

The two sides of the picture must be taken together in assessing Victorian experience. There was alarming waste and confusion before there were signs of effective control, but the speed of urban development and the energy which lay behind it impress posterity even more than they impressed contemporaries. The visitor to Birmingham could 'expect to find a street of houses in the autumn where he saw his horse at grass in the spring'. In late-Victorian South London, according to Sir Walter Besant, the houses 'sprang up as if in a single

1. L. Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (1938 edn), p. 148. The remark is repeated in *The City in History* (1961), p. 450. The same view is expressed in G. M. Trevelyan, *Illustrated English Social History*, Vol. IV (1952), p. 118. 'The modern city, in the unplanned swamp of its increase, lacks form and feature; it is a deadening cage for the human spirit.' See also J. L. and B. Hammond, *The Town Labourer* (1917), especially Chapter III, and *The Age of the Chartists* (1930).

2. R. Vaughan, *The Age of Great Cities, or Modern Society Viewed in its Relation to Intelligence, Morals and Religion* (1843), p. 278.

night: streets in a month, churches and chapels in a quarter'.[1] 'Alexander's armies', wrote Wilkie Collins in *Hide and Seek* (1861), 'were great makers of conquests; but the modern guerrilla regiments of the hod, the trowel, and the brick-kiln, are the greatest conquerors of all; for they hold the longest the soil that they have once possessed ... with the conqueror's device inscribed on it – *This ground to be let on building leases.*'

The people of the twentieth century, able to draw more easily on expert skills, have had to wrestle with complex urban problems bequeathed by the Victorians – health, housing, education and traffic, for example: at the same time they are still relying (and this in itself is a part of 'the plight of the contemporary city') on the vast accumulation of social capital which the Victorians raised, usually by voluntary or by municipal effort. Much of the effort went into church building – this reflected Victorian concern for the future of religion in an urban environment[2] – but particularly in the last twenty-five years of Queen Victoria's reign there was a huge development of public offices, hospitals, schools, sewage farms and water works. The Victorian phase in city development cannot be ignored even as a visible factor in the present. It obtrudes in every provincial city and in London itself, although it is now being destroyed in the name of 'progress', a cause which was used by the Victorians themselves to sanctify much of their own destruction.

It is this side of the Victorian city that Betjeman has understood and appreciated. He recognizes that the right approach to a Victorian city is from the railway station, that 'the best guide books are the old ones published in the last century', that the 'restorations' of the Victorians reveal their mood and purposes as plainly as their new buildings, that the symbolism outside and within the Victorian public buildings is in its way as interesting (and as dated) as medieval symbolism, that both the variety and the individuality of private middle-class houses

1. J. A. Langford, *A Century of Birmingham Life* (1870), p. 100; Sir Walter Besant, *South London* (1899), p. 318.

2. See M. H. Port, *Six Hundred New Churches* (1961), for early Victorian development; and G. Kitson Clark, *The Making of Victorian England* (1962). See also below, p. 63.

merit sensitive and discriminating attention, that to understand the detail of the cities is more important than seeking to generalize about the general effect of the whole.

Your sense of the whole depended, of course, on your own place in it. G. M. Young emphasized that this was true of Victorian people. 'Suppose you fall asleep tonight and wake up in 1860. What is the first thing you would notice?' There is no single answer. It would depend on where you woke up.[1] Suppose you arrived at a Victorian railway station, key building of the age, your impressions of the city world beyond the waiting room and the new station hotel would be determined not only by your mood or your company, but as likely as not by the direction in which you first decided to go. Very quickly, within a few yards of the station, you might find yourself among the workshops and warehouses 'on the wrong side of the track'. For miles beyond there might stretch more workshops and more warehouses, gas works and breweries, long rows of ugly working-class houses in brick or stone, with occasional churches and chapels, institutes and clubs, dingy public houses and small corner shops, cemeteries and rubbish-heaps. You would pass through what Engels called those 'separate territories, assigned to poverty', where, 'removed from the sight of the happier classes, poverty may struggle along as it can'. If you were more fortunate, you might move instead towards the crowded 'city centre' with its covered market, its busy exchanges, its restored (?) parish church, its massive 'city chapels', its imposing town hall, its cluster of banks, its theatres and its public houses, the newest of them gleaming with rich mahogany, engraved glass and polished brass. It says much for the Victorians that despite these varieties of urban condition, they were occasionally able to create a general shared enthusiasm for the city as such, an enthusiasm which transcended the facts and consciousness of social class. Yet it was an enthusiasm which the collective achievement of the city often did far too little to justify.

1. See *Victorian People*, p. 13 (Pelican edition).