



*Welcome to our March book, Historians!*

Our next meeting is Tuesday, March 3 at 6:30. That is Super Tuesday so if you are planning to vote in the primaries, just remember to vote early. We will discuss *Victorious Century: The United Kingdom 1800-1906* by David Cannadine published in 2017. Sir David Cannadine is the Dodge Professor of History at Princeton and this book is, in many ways, the overview of 19<sup>th</sup> c. British history that history students no longer seem to study in today's hyper-specialized world. And it is an important history as nostalgia for this period is part of what drove some segments of the British population to embrace Brexit. Britain in the 19<sup>th</sup> century could celebrate military victories and naval superiority. This was the era of great statesmen such as Peel, Disraeli and Gladstone and the era of great political reform and potential revolution. This was the period of great technological and material progress as celebrated by The Great Exhibition of 1851. The sun never set on the British Empire as British Imperialism spread to every continent and Queen Victoria ruled over one in every five people in the world. But most people in Britain were still desperately poor. The Irish were starving. And colonial wars took money and men to manage. Dickens would write "It was the best of times and the worst of times" to describe the French Revolution. But the same could be said of 19<sup>th</sup> c. Britain.

Cannadine begins his history with the 1800 Act of Union which created the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. The book ends in 1906 when the Liberal Party won the election and then passed Home Rule for Ireland, thus ending the United Kingdom. This is a somewhat unusual choice for dates for the Victorian Period, but the choice of these dates fits Cannadine's focus on Parliament and the men who wielded political power there and what they did with this political power. In some ways, this is an old-fashioned approach to history, but Cannadine argues that it is in fact a necessary corrective to today's over-emphasis on identity politics. In the best of history worlds, these approaches blend together, but it does make

sense to begin with the men who drove domestic politics which in turn drove Britain's imperial outreach.

*Victorious Century* is also a study of the culture of this period. There too it was an age of contradictions. Parlors were filled with overstuffed furniture and sentimentality was the fashion of the day. Yet at the same time, Turner was painting and George Eliot was writing her realistic novels, and these were also accepted by the public. And they purchased all these things with the money earned by the newly rich and the newly respectable middle class. In taste and in politics, the 19<sup>th</sup> c. was the age of the middle class whose political fortunes rose with the passage of the Reform Bill of 1832 while the political power of the nobility began a downward trajectory. The Reform Bill also split the political aspirations of the middle class from those of the working class, leading to an underlying radicalism below the bourgeoisie's satisfaction with life.

As you read, note these contradictory movements. How does the rise of capital and newly efficient banking and lending systems affect both imperial and domestic politics? What about the various reform movements—votes for the middle class, votes for the working class, and how to deal with the Irish problem? And what about the tensions between British traders and settlers in the colonies as they conflict with the interests of the local populations? Overall, how are Britain's relations with Europe and Britain's own expanding empire integrated into domestic politics? Who wins and who loses?

*Victorious Century* is an insightful overview of the 19<sup>th</sup> c. as told by a master historian. As one awed critic, and fellow academic, noted, there are no footnotes! As he said, only a master historian would dare. So as you read, enjoy the tale of a fascinating era which still affects us today as told by an outstanding historian. And bring your thoughts and questions to our meeting on Tuesday, March 3 at 6:30. See you there! Cheerio!

*Donna McBride*