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# NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITAIN

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## 十九世纪英国： 危机与变革

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Christopher Harvie & H. C. G. Matthew 著  
韩敏中 译

通识教育  
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A VERY SHORT  
INTRODUCTION

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外语教学与研究出版社  
FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND RESEARCH PRESS  
北京 BEIJING

京权图字：01-2006-6846

Nineteenth-Century Britain was originally published in English in 2000.

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## 图书在版编目(CIP)数据

十九世纪英国：危机与变革：英汉对照 / (英) 哈维 (Harvie, C.)，(英) 马修 (Matthew, H. C. G.) 著；韩敏中译。—北京：外语教学与研究出版社，2013.1

(通识教育双语文库)

书名原文：Nineteenth-century Britain

ISBN 978-7-5600-8552-4

I. ①十… II. ①哈… ②马… ③韩… III. ①英语—汉语—对照读物 ②英国—近代史—19世纪 IV. ①H319.4:K

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字 (2013) 第 026262 号

审图号：GS(2007)439 号



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出版人：蔡剑峰

项目负责人：姚虹 周渝毅

责任编辑：高耿松

封面设计：覃一彪

版式设计：吕茜

出版发行：外语教学与研究出版社

社址：北京市西三环北路19号(100089)

网址：<http://www.fltrp.com>

印刷：紫恒印装有限公司

开本：650×980 1/16

印张：810

版次：2013年4月第1版 2013年4月第1次印刷

书号：ISBN 978-7-5600-8552-4

定价：1980.00元

\* \* \*

购书咨询：(010)88819929 电子邮箱：[club@fltrp.com](mailto:club@fltrp.com)

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物料号：185520001

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# Chapter 1

## Reflections on the Revolutions

In 1881 the young Oxford historian Arnold Toynbee delivered his *Lectures on the Industrial Revolution*, and in so doing made it as distinct a 'period' of British history as the Wars of the Roses. This makes it easy, but misleading, to conceive of an age of the 'dual revolution' – political in France and industrial in Britain. But while the storming of the Bastille was obvious *fact*, industrialization was gradual and relative in its impact. It showed up only in retrospect, and notions of 'revolution' made less sense to the British, who shuddered at the word, than to the Europeans, who knew revolution at close quarters. A Frenchman was in fact the first to use the metaphor – the economist Adolphe Blanqui in 1827 – and Karl Marx gave the concept general European currency after 1848.

This makes the historian's task awkward, balancing what is significant now against what was significant then. The first directs us to industrial changes, new processes developing in obscure workshops; the second reminds us how slowly the power of the pre-industrial elites ebbed, how tenacious religion proved in the scientific age. Only around 1830 were people conscious of substantial and permanent industrial change; it took another 20 years to convince even the middle class that it had all been for the better.

## Statistics and Context

Should there not be a simple factual record of developments? In theory, yes. But the age of the 'supremacy of fact' was so ever-changing and obsessively individualistic that recording and assessing facts was another matter. There was no official population Census until 1801; before then there had been real controversy about whether the population of Britain was growing or shrinking. Although the Census subsequently developed into a sophisticated implement of social analysis, covering occupations and housing conditions, this was a gradual process as the systematic mapping of the country, carried out by the Ordnance Survey in stages between 1791 and the 1860s. The ideology of *laissez-faire* and actual government retrenchment adversely affected statistical compilation, as fewer goods or businesses were regulated or taxed. (Continental autocracies were, by comparison, enthusiastic collectors of data about their little industrial enterprises.) So controversy still rages over some elementary questions – notably about whether industrialization did the mass of the people any good.

At this point, modern politics casts its shadow. Toynbee's contemporaries agreed with Karl Marx that capitalist industrialization had, by 1848, failed to improve the condition of the working class. After 1917 Soviet Russia seemed to demonstrate a viable alternative: 'planned industrialization'. But the costs of this, in human life and liberty, soon became apparent and, with the 'developing world' in mind, liberal economists restated the case for industrialization achieved through the operation of the free market. Even in the short term, they argued, and faced with the problem of providing resources for investment, British capitalism had increased both investment and living standards. The results of this vehement dispute have been inconclusive. They have also been restricted in their geographical context, considering that British economic development had direct, and far from fortunate, effects on Ireland, India, and the Southern States of the USA.





## Consciousness

If there are problems with statistics and context, there is also the question of consciousness. Industrialization as a concept was only germinating in the 1820s. Whatever the governing elite thought about economic doctrines, as magistrates and landowners their watchword was stability, their values were still pre-industrial. But by 1829 the trend to industrialization became, quite suddenly, unmistakable. Only 11 years after the last of Jane Austen's novels a raucous new voice pictured the 'Signs of the Times' in the *Edinburgh Review*: 'We remove mountains, and make seas our smooth highway; nothing can resist us. We war with rude nature; and by our resistless engines, come off always victorious, and loaded with spoils.' Thomas Carlyle summed up, vividly and emotionally, a plethora of contemporary impressions: the change from heroic to economic politics that Sir Walter Scott had described in the *Waverley* novels, the planned factory community of Robert Owen's *New Lanark*, the visionary politics of desperate handloom weavers, the alarm and astonishment shown by European visitors. Only a few months later, his word was made iron in George Stephenson's *Rocket*.

But can we gain from such images a consistent set of concepts which are relevant both to us and to the age itself? G. M. Young, its pioneer explorer, in *The Portrait of an Age* (1936), saw his actors 'controlled, and animated, by the imponderable pressure of the Evangelical discipline and the almost universal faith in progress'. But Young's history – 'the conversation of the people who counted' – was pretty elitist history, which neglected the mass of the people – miners and factory hands, Irish cotters, and London street arabs – or identified them solely as 'problems'. The perception, at its most acute in Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, that great movements stem from millions of individual decisions reached by ordinary people, was lacking. Few of the British contemporaries of his French and Russian soldiers shared the views of 'the people who counted': as far as we know, only a minority of them