



## Introduction

The English idea of government, which I shall here call the English ideology, is the idea of liberty expressed through parliamentary institutions. It has long attracted attention and emulation; but the study of its time of flowering, in the reign of Victoria, has also attracted some misunderstandings that need to be dispelled. Three such misunderstandings are pre-eminent, and will be dealt with here in due turn: that the Victorians believed democracy to be the best form of government; that they believed in economic *laissez-faire*; and that they conceived individual man to exist independently of his social and economic conditions.

The study of the salient political doctrines of a complex institution like the British Parliament in the reign of Victoria cannot be simple, and I shall attempt it in stages, assembling ideas in groups and dealing with the larger literary forms such as the political novel, oratory and the social critics or 'sages' in separate chapters. I make no attempt to chronicle the institution of Parliament itself, a task that still remains unattempted. Historians have always found it understandably difficult to isolate events at Westminster from the history of the nation and the lives of members of its two Houses. The Victorians themselves were conscious of that omission. Macaulay observed in his *History of England* that 'no writer has yet attempted to trace the progress of this institution, an institution indispensable to the harmonious working of our other institutions'.<sup>1</sup> A few

1. Thomas Babington Macaulay, *The History of England* (London, 1849–61) iv. 487. Sir Lewis Namier, John Brooke and others, *The History of Parliament* (London, HMSO, 1964) a work now in progress and so far confined to the eighteenth century, will eventually provide a biographical dictionary of members.

years before, Erskine May had done something hardly less difficult than that, but far more practical. He had produced the first edition of a famous handbook, *A Treatise on the Law, Privileges, Proceedings and Usage of Parliament*, which under successive revisions has remained the standard guide to matters of procedure; and a few years after Macaulay's death Alpheus Todd, librarian of the Legislative Assembly of Canada in Ottawa, issued *On Parliamentary Government in England* (1867–69)<sup>1</sup> to supply a guide to the new parliamentary organs of a united Canada. These were practical aids. By contrast, Stubbs's *Constitutional History of England* (1874–78), though it offered itself as a History of Institutions, amounts in effect to a far-reaching social and economic history of England from Roman times. Parliament still lacks a history of itself, and this study does not attempt to fill that gap, even within a single century. It is a work of intellectual history; it describes the idea of Parliament in the vital decades between the first Reform Act of 1832 and the end of the century, a period when an ancient institution skilfully absorbed the strains of democracy and of advancing industrial revolution; and its sources are in the widest sense of the word literary.

A literary historian, in the nature of things, is bound to see such questions in a more extended sense than a political or social historian, and the uniqueness that might most safely be claimed for the present inquiry lies in the continuous significance it attaches to literary evidence, especially the novel, in expounding what is of lasting interest in Victorian political ideas. The general status of fiction as historical evidence may still need to be defended, though there can be no point in defending it absolutely. That it is unreliable evidence, regarded as a whole, I take to be beyond question: but then so are all other considerable bodies of evidence unreliable – whether parish records, newspaper reports, government statistics or eyewitness accounts. The plain truth is that there is no large category of historical evidence which is totally trustworthy; if novelists are capable of

1. This was reissued posthumously in 1887–89, expanded and revised. For an admiring American view of the system, barely post-Victorian, see Abbott Lawrence Lowell, *The Government of England* (New York, 1908); and for a recent anthology of constitutional texts, *The Nineteenth-Century Constitution 1815–1914*, edited by H. J. Hanham (Cambridge, 1969).

bias, omission, honest misunderstanding and plain lies, none of which I doubt, then so is everybody else; and to grant that is only to grant that the information they provide is, in that respect, like all other kinds of historical evidence. That it needs to be used with delicacy, tact and a reasoned scepticism is equally to say something that could be said of other kinds of historical evidence. But to suppose that because it is fictional it is likely to be less accurate than the essay, the political treatise or works of cultural analysis is at once to overrate the reliability of the essayist and analyst and to misunderstand the serious descriptive purpose to which much Victorian social fiction was dedicated.

The Victorians themselves were clear that novels described both the facts and the aspirations of the world they lived in: so much so, indeed, that they sometimes exaggerated the documentary interest of their fiction at the expense of the artistic. 'Truth in art is so startling', George Eliot once complained to her publisher, 'that no one can believe in it as art.' Her own delicately balanced view that a novel is a work of art, however representational, and that it should never be allowed to lapse 'from the picture to the diagram' or degenerate into the purely didactic, was at times too subtle for some of her contemporaries.<sup>1</sup> They read novels, as the English read them to this day, to learn more about the world they lived in – where it had come from and where it was moving. Novels were social knowledge. When Carlyle suggested to Meredith that he should write history, Meredith replied that his novels were already just that.<sup>2</sup> Maria Edgeworth, writing to Mrs Gaskell after guessing her to be the author of *Mary Barton* in 1848, saw that novel as a contribution to the growing science of political economy, and notably to the problems of overproduction and overpopulation, 'both conjoined and acting as cause and effect'<sup>3</sup> –

1. *The George Eliot Letters*, edited by Gordon S. Haight (New Haven, 1954–56) iii. 185, iv. 300.

2. J. A. Hammerton, *George Meredith in Anecdote and Criticism* (London, 1909) p. 108.

3. R. D. Waller, 'Letters addressed to Mrs Gaskell by celebrated contemporaries', *Bulletin of John Rylands Library*, xix (1935). Extracts from Maria Edgeworth's exchange of letters with Ricardo in 1822–23 were first published in the *Economic Journal* xvii (1907); they have since appeared in full in David Ricardo, *Works and Correspondence*, edited by Piero Sraffa (Cambridge, 1952) vol. ix.

a flatteringly serious view of fiction from an old lady who more than twenty years before had corresponded at length, and on something like equal terms, with David Ricardo on the problems of food supply in Ireland and the economic function of the potato.

The Victorians did not merely expect novels to be accurate: they demanded that they should be so. This argues powerfully in favour of the general accuracy of their novels as social evidence, though many details may still be questioned: in a tradition in which the terms of operation are as widely understood as in English social fiction, a novelist cannot easily commit inaccuracy without a loss of credit and a loss of sales. Reviewers and readers insisted on the truth, nothing less and nothing other. George Eliot's first letter from a stranger about her first work of fiction, *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1858), admonished her in characteristic vein to maintain her fidelity to reality: 'You are natural and truthful now – will you always keep it so?'<sup>1</sup> She could hardly have afforded not to keep it so, even if she had wished. The limits of the activity and its procedures were widely known, and a novelist who tried to draw a prudent veil of fantasy or romance over the reality he described might still reveal more than he intended. Macaulay's biographer, with no exceptional knowledge of Dickens's career, perceived that, 'for those who could see between the lines' in *David Copperfield*, what emerged was no invention but 'the most delightful of autobiographies'; and that the novels of Thackeray could no less be seen as a picture of his life and times.<sup>2</sup> This is how such novels were read: they were seen, by their earliest readers, as direct sources of social knowledge.

The great ancestor in accuracy in that sense of the word was Scott, and he was an exacting model. 'The best writer of history we have', Ruskin called him in a lecture as late as 1884, more than half a century after his death: greater than any Victorian historian, he added, since he had shown in the *Waverley* novels how a historian can 'see all round a thing'. That view of historical fiction is no longer common. But it is not absurd to see

1. *The George Eliot Letters* (1954–56) iii. 154.

2. George Otto Trevelyan, *The Life and Letters of Lord Macaulay* (London, 1876) i. 2.

the novel, on occasion, as more informative than a factual account. It can be based on firsthand experience, and often is; whereas few works exceed in misrepresentation the writings of the heavily committed historian or of the social analyst with an axe to grind. And it can be based on scholarly research, as surely as any work of scholarship can be based on research. The difference between 'fact' and 'fiction' is not the same as that between truth and falsehood. Engels's study of Manchester poverty in the 1840s, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*,<sup>1</sup> once thought of as a serious contribution to social observation, has recently been shown to be spurious in its claim to direct knowledge and less than trustworthy in its details. This has not yet been shown of an exactly contemporary novel on a similar theme, *Mary Barton*. That novelists could be wrong as well as right is not, of course, in question; what matters is that when they were wrong they could be caught out. Their inquiry was objective in its nature, irrespective of whether their findings were true or false.

The social fiction of the nineteenth century begins in the past, with Scott, moves into that fascinating period of middle ground between past and present in Dickens's early novels of the 1830s – that recent era which the old and the middle-aged can recall, and which the young know because their parents and grandparents have told them of it – and achieves high contemporaneity by the 1850s and 1860s. Trollope is the master of the final phase, of the fiction of the here-and-now. His first successful novel, *The Warden*, appeared in 1855 when he was forty, and with a record of false starts in historical and regional fiction behind him. By that time practical men were already using novelists as indicators not just of large periods but of the brief span of a decade or less: reliability could shift as social reality shifted. An historian of the later century, James Bryce, noticed that Dickens's grasp of lower middle-class London life remained rooted in the 1830s, when he had been a reporter, and that the twentieth century would have to read Trollope to learn the

1. Edited by W. O. Henderson and W. H. Chalonner (Oxford, 1958). In their introduction the editors expose Engels's dependence on unacknowledged sources, concluding that he 'can hardly be taken seriously as a historian' (p. xv) or, in the light of ensuing events, as a political prophet.

flavour of the years after 1850; what is more, life had changed again since then.<sup>1</sup>

But the modes coexisted. Mid and late Victorian fiction, though nowhere stronger than in contemporary analysis – in what Trollope called ‘the way we live now’ – never totally abandoned the historical, and it remained especially powerful in that middle ground between past and present with *Adam Bede*, *Silas Marner*, *Great Expectations* and *Tess*. The historical novel itself did not die, but it languished after the turn of the mid century under the competition of more immediate interests. Thackeray triumphed over these difficulties in *Henry Esmond* (1852) in a startling *tour de force*, achieving an Augustan style of language as well as of life; he demanded in his first chapter that history must now ‘rise up off her knees and take a natural posture’, one ‘familiar rather than heroic’, as if even the historical sense were now influenced by the demand for accurate social detail. That was the climax: a dozen years later George Eliot had to swallow defeat, both artistic and commercial, in *Romola* (1863); Blackwood had hoped that in that novel she would ‘return historical romance to its ancient popularity’,<sup>2</sup> but his hopes, and hers, were dashed. The trouble was not just that she had failed to capture the Florence of Savonarola. Her age, by then, had reached a point where it was too obsessed with its own century to find it easy to look steadily at another. ‘Whatever you do,’ remarks a publisher to an aspiring authoress in Trollope’s *The Way We Live Now* (1875), ‘don’t be historical. Your historical novel, Lady Carbury, isn’t worth a straw’ (ch. 89). The word ‘straw’, adds Trollope, was pronounced after some hesitation. If he had not been addressing a lady, he would have used something stronger.

The social novel from the 1830s was a novel of reform; it rejected, by and large, both conservatism and revolution. As a mirror of the times it could hardly do otherwise. Scott had died in September 1832, three months after Bentham: the Reform Act he had hated and opposed was already law; and his successors noted with satisfaction the paradox of a conservative fathering so much that was analytical to the point of radicalism.

1. James Bryce, *Studies in Contemporary Biography* (London, 1903) pp. 123, 125.

2. *The George Eliot Letters* (1954–56) iii. 340.

Though 'a Tory of the purest water', as T. H. Green wrote half a century later, Scott had been 'a reformer against his will'.<sup>1</sup> To analyse is to perceive how things might be better; equally, it is to respect the state enough neither to wish it away entirely, nor to wish it entirely some other thing. Analysis tends towards reform: to that middle way between blind acceptance and the horrors of upheaval. This is largely true of all social analysis in that age, and not merely in fiction. But the novel was quickest and subtlest in its task. It was known to hear the note of distress earlier, on occasion, than other forms of discourse. 'The novelist catches the cry of suffering before it has obtained its strength or general recognition', as Green goes on. Newspapers only take up causes already familiar. 'The miseries of the marriage-market had been told by Thackeray, with almost wearisome iteration, many years before they found utterance in the columns of *The Times*.' Fiction is even faster than reporting. And the novel can inform, and with accuracy, not only about your own street and region, but about the street at the other end of town and a region at the far end of the kingdom. Englishmen learn of the totality to which they belong by watching the novelist 'merging distinctions of privilege and position into one social organism'. This remark of Green's is an apt comment on novels like *Felix Holt* and *Bleak House*; less apt as a comment on early Dickens or even early George Eliot, where distinctions of rank are not merged but presented in startling clarity. Status and distinction never lapse: no society could survive if they did. But the novelist shows that they matter less than might be supposed, that they are far from rigid, and that the common properties of human kind outweigh differences of birth and wealth. A good novel, as Green puts it memorably, 'does something to check what may be called the despotism of situations', and prevents 'ossification into prejudice'. Even if the world chooses to remain as it is, at least it perceives that it might be otherwise.

The fine balance of the social and the fictional in the Victorian novel is precarious and transitory. Its heyday follows the death of Scott and the emergence, four years later, of the precocious genius of Dickens in *Pickwick*. Its gentle decline, in the 1870s

1. T. H. Green, 'An estimate of the value and influence of works of fiction in modern times', in his *Works* (London, 1888) iii. 43.

and 1880s, follows the pursuit by new novelists after Dickens's death in 1870 of ever finer analysis and an ever more inward vision. Politics, which calls for a large view of human realities, is among the first victims of the new psychological realism. A telescope turns into a microscope. Henry James, like Jane Austen, was to confine his vision with rare exceptions to a single social rank. Hardy, who had tried to launch a literary career in 1868 with a revolutionary novel, *The Poor Man and the Lady*, a work rejected by Meredith as a publisher's reader and now lost, came later to believe that inner events are the more authentic sources of narration – 'not physical but psychical'. It is not adventure that the new novel handles, but rather 'the effect upon the faculties';<sup>1</sup> and a note written a few days later shows he had ceased to call himself either a Tory or a Radical. Henry James, from his earliest fiction in the 1870s to the last, could hardly view political ideas seriously, in any human context. They were too large to be real. Acton's ideas, he once told a friend, were mere verbal juggling: 'How unreal, how remote it all is from the realities of practical life!' And Parliament, so far as he could see, was an 'immense waste of talk and energy and solemnity'.<sup>2</sup> A precarious marriage between fiction and politics had already lapsed.

The mid century in literature, by contrast, is supremely a political age, and its coincidence of literary skill with high ideological ferment in the cause of a principal party of state is the subject of this book. Politics itself was a more strenuously intellectual endeavour than in previous ages. Mill, with an intellectual's exaggeration, called it 'thought in action'. That may never have been quite true, but it is not a naïve view. Those who pride themselves on the pragmatic notion that, in the real world of political action, men move only under the compulsion of events and reform only what they find intolerable should be invited to answer two questions: what initiates the events that compel change, unless men themselves; and what unless a shift in the world of ideas renders an existing situation intoler-

1. Florence E. Hardy, *The Life of Thomas Hardy* (London, 1962) p. 204, from a note written by Hardy in January 1888.

2. Leon Edel, 'Henry James and Sir Sydney Waterlow: the unpublished diary of a British diplomat', *The Times Literary Supplement* (8 August 1968).



able? It is what men think that counts. Foreign conquest apart, as Mill argued, 'all political revolutions . . . originate in moral revolutions'.<sup>1</sup> Thought is the primal force: events can only follow behind. The Victorian political mind, and especially in mid century, denied the cogency both of mere pragmatism and of lofty abstractions about historical inevitability. Both positions were familiar to intellectuals of the age, both were rejected. The note that is struck again and again is that of rational debate in open forum. Parliament is the summit, but many a house and many a club is a lesser debating ground. Even Bagehot, a cautious observer, emphasizes in the 1850s the 'total revolution of political thought' that had occurred in the forty years since Waterloo: an intellectual revolution that stood for minds open to ideas of reform. Where reform had once been resisted as a road to revolution, he argued, during and after the Napoleonic wars, it had since been accepted in differing measure by both parties of state since Peel's ministry of 1841–46.<sup>2</sup> The most favourable of all situations for a political literature had been achieved. Men knew they had the right to speak and publish freely; they also knew that what they wrote might be acted upon, and perhaps swiftly. If there were delays, as there often were, they were not inevitable: men can now ask for what they want, and Parliament can give it.

The impulse of the present study, then, lies in its assumption of a close and continuous relation between literature and events in the Victorian age, and I have used fiction as readily as other sources, and more readily than some, in pursuit of intellectual and political history. For my title, *The English Ideology*, I have adapted that of a well known treatise on the German ideology by Marx and Engels. However apt or inapt it may be thought, I find it hard to doubt that the parliamentary idea is at least as certainly English as socialism is German. Whether ideology itself is English must now be considered.

1. John Stuart Mill, review of Alison's *History of Europe*, *Monthly Repository* (August 1833).

2. Walter Bagehot, 'The character of Sir Robert Peel', *National Review* (July 1856); reprinted in his *Collected Works*, edited by Norman St John-Steuvas (London, 1968) iii. 246.