

## Preface

This book describes the parliamentary idea in Victorian England – its terms, its literature, including fiction and oratory, and its most characteristic arguments. None of these, as it happens, are dead letters today, and I hope there are few spent cartridges here; though I am haunted by Bagehot's warning that 'the characteristic danger of great nations, like the Romans or the English, which have a long history of continuous creation, is that they may fail from not comprehending the great institutions which they have created'. But my main concern here has been historical, notably with the interpenetration of politics and literature in the Victorian age. Pioneer works like Humphry House's *The Dickens World* (1941) and Kathleen Tillotson's *The Novels of the 1840s* (1954) have eased my task, as well as historical studies by W. L. Burns, Asa Briggs, G. Kitson Clark and many others. I hope none of my Welsh or Scottish friends will be offended by the word 'English' in the title: as a literary historian, I prefer to use a word that describes a language rather than the name of a nation; and the book is subtitled 'studies' to suggest that the chapters, though related, are not continuous. Some of the findings concerning the relation between the study of a society and the study of its fiction I have already made available, in a more theoretical sense, in the chapter on sociology in *The Study of Literature* (1969). The present book, which is historically more specific than that, and more fully documented, attaches some of these principles to a single nation in a single age. My hope is that the theory and practice of parliamentary government, that most profound of all constitutional ideas, may be better respected and more intimately understood. Victorian England offers the supreme example of a civilization where the political and the literary are richly linked; and it is the nature of those links that is my theme.

Some of the debts I have contracted on my way will be seen in the range of quotation, especially to those recent editions that

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are now transforming the study of the Victorian age. These include, most notably, the *Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, edited by R. H. Super (Ann Arbor, 1960–77); the *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, edited by John M. Robson, F. E. Mineka and others (Toronto, 1963– ); Gordon S. Haight's edition of *The George Eliot Letters*, 7 vols (New Haven, 1954–56); the Pilgrim edition of Dickens's letters, edited by Madeline House and Graham Storey, which began to appear in 1964; Bagehot's *Collected Works*, edited by Norman St John-Stevas since 1965; Gladstone's *Diaries*, edited by M. R. D. Foot (Oxford, 1968– ); Walter E. Houghton's *Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals 1824–1900* (Toronto, 1966–89), with its abundant identifications of many anonymous articles; and Maurice F. Bond, *Guide to the Records of Parliament* (London, HMSO, 1971). My debt to the *New* (later *Oxford*) *English Dictionary*, for which editing began in 1879, is almost too obvious to record: but it is, after all, a Victorian book, and without it I could not even have considered such an undertaking as this.

Beyond the reach of books, I have been helped by librarians, institutions and friends. Some of these studies began as lectures for undergraduates in the University of Cambridge, and it was their active interest that prompted me to read more, and to question more of what I read. Edwin Muir, in his *Autobiography*, tells how when he taught Mill's idea of liberty to Prague students after 1948, some looked agitated, while many 'seemed to be fearfully enjoying a forbidden pleasure', as if 'coming to life again' (p. 272). I am above all grateful not to have known all of that experience. Others have helped too. David Holland, Librarian of the House of Commons, guided me to manuscripts in that collection, and Maurice F. Bond to those in the Record Office of the House of Lords. And John Gross and Henry Pelling were generous enough to read and criticize an early draft of the book.

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Numerals in the text following a quotation refer to chapters; in footnotes to volume and page.