VICTORIAN ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM

BY WALTER E. HOUGHTON

Man is sent hither not to question, but to work: "the end of man," it was long ago written, "is an Action, not a Thought."—Carlyle, "Characteristics." ¹

The practical nature of the English mind, its deep respect for facts, its pragmatic skill in the adaptation of means to ends, its ready appeal to common sense—and therefore, negatively, its suspicion of abstract and imaginative speculation—have always been characteristic of the nation. What distinguishes the Victorian period is that the conditions of life tended to increase this bias, to lessen the contrary influences of theological and classical studies, and thus to make what may be called a kind of anti-intellectualism a conspicuous attitude of the time.² This is not to forget that many of the Victorians were intellectuals nor that the age of Mill and Darwin made significant contributions to thought. It is to claim only that middle- and upper-class society was permeated by a scornful or frightened view of any free and detached play of the mind. The Industrial Revolution alone would have gone far to bring this about; but when the intellectual climate added its powerful pressure in the same direction, the result was inevitable.

1. BUSINESS

If "the extremely practical character of the English people" made them, as Mill recognized, excel all the nations of Europe "as men of business and industriels,"³ their commercial activity, in its turn, deepened this inherited bent. The minds which made the machines, which organized factories and solved the problems of supply and distribu-


² The more radical sense of the term anti-intellectualism, meaning a doubt or denial of our capacity to discover ultimate truth or resolve the dilemmas of practical life, does not apply to the Victorians as a whole, though it begins to appear in the last decades of the century. In the period from 1825 to 1875 their faith in the human mind and their confidence that solutions to their problems could be found suggest that in this sense of the word we are far more anti-intellectualist than they. In still another use of the term, meaning reliance upon authority or upon inner feeling, conscience, or intuition rather than upon logical reason, many Victorians may be called anti-intellectual, but that attitude, which is better defined as anti-rationalism, is not under consideration.

ition—and did so under high competitive pressure—received an indelible training in practical contrivance. It was, as Carlyle said in 1829, the age of machinery in the inward as well as outward sense of the word; "the age which, with its whole undivided might, forwards, teaches and practises the great art of adapting means to ends." 4 When Mill spoke in 1835 of the celebrity of England resting on her docks, her canals, and her railroads, he added, "In intellect she is distinguished only for a kind of sober good sense; . . . and for doing all those things which are best done where man most resembles a machine, with the precision of a machine." 5

In minds so constituted, and in lives so immersed in business, what counts is tangible results, in profits, in larger plants or firms, in promotion and social advancement—in short, material or worldly comfort. The test of value is utility in the narrow sense:

There is a general opinion got abroad, that nothing is valuable that is not useful; and though the word useful is not very explicitly defined, yet there is a feeling that usefulness is confined to the material productiveness which regards the being and well being of the body. The earth is useful because it produces corn, and the miller is useful because he grinds the corn.6

And thought is useful only so far as it improves productiveness by devising better machinery, political, social, or mechanical. Otherwise it is neglected or disparaged. When John Morley analyzed the intellectual climate of the sixties and seventies, he found what he called the political spirit, "which is incessantly thinking of present consequences and the immediately feasible," to be "the strongest element in our national life, the dominant force, extending its influence over all our ways of thinking;" with the result that all matters not bearing "more or less directly and patently upon the material and structural welfare of the community" were falling out of sight.7 This was simply Mill's analysis a generation earlier:

The English public think nobody worth listening to, except in so far as he tells them of something to be done, and not only that, but of something which can be done immediately. What is more, the only reasons they will generally attend to, are those founded on the specific good consequences

7 On Compromise, first published in 1874 (London, 1923), 90, 86, 88 respectively.
Small wonder that in the passage where he spoke of England's celebrity resting on her docks and railroads, Mill went on to say that "philosophy—not any particular school of philosophy, but philosophy altogether—speculation of any comprehensive kind, and upon any deep or extensive subject—has been falling more and more into distastefulness and disrepute," not merely among businessmen, but "among the educated classes of England." 9 Except in mathematics and science, there was "not a vestige of a reading and thinking public engaged in the investigation of truth as truth, in the prosecution of thought for the sake of thought." This no doubt is overstatement, but such a reading public was much smaller, proportionally to those who read at all, than it had been fifty years earlier. And Mill put his finger squarely on the assumption that underlay this decline. There was no recognition, he said, that from philosophical inquiry into the nature of man and society, "a single important practical consequence can follow."

This blindness to the ultimate connections between theory and practice extended even into the field where we should least expect it, the physical sciences. As late as 1850, according to Huxley, "practical men" still "believed that the idol whom they worship—rule of thumb—has been the source of the past prosperity, and will suffice for the future welfare of the arts and manufactures. They were of opinion that science is speculative rubbish; that theory and practice have nothing to do with one another; and that the scientific habit of mind is an impediment, rather than an aid, in the conduct of ordinary affairs." 10

This was not so stupid as it looks. The fact is that the Industrial Revolution owed very little to scientific theory. The great inventors, Watt, Stephenson, Arkwright, Hargreaves, had had little mathematics and less science. Their inventions were almost entirely empirical. 11 It was only after the mid-century that the work of trained scientists like Davy and Faraday began to reveal the practical fruits of scientific theory. And even a generation later Huxley had to attack the notion "that there is a sort of scientific knowledge of direct practical use,

9 Dissertations, I, 98–99. The quotations that follow are on page 97.
10 In "Science and Culture" (1880), Science and Education (New York, 1898), 137. I deduce the date of 1850 from the fact that Huxley refers, on 136, to the situation "some thirty years ago."
11 This was recognized by the writer of "Plato, Bacon, and Bentham," Quarterly Review LXI (1838), 502.
which can be studied apart from another sort of scientific knowledge, which is of no practical utility, and which is termed 'pure science.'”

It is ironic that the very success of early technology, instead of encouraging scientific research, confirmed the anti-intellectualism that is indigenous to the business mind.

If “deep thinking,” even deep scientific thinking, is “quite out of place,” as William Sewell dryly remarked, “in a world of railroads and steam-boats, printing-presses, and spinning-jennies,” so too are the humanities. They fail to pass the same utilitarian test. The important studies became the vocational skills—mining, electricity, surveying, agriculture, bookkeeping, together with the necessary mathematics and a little history. This, indeed, is Bentham’s curriculum. It is the new education which the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge set out to provide, and the Edinburgh and Westminster Reviews to recommend, for the middle class. In such a context the humanities are scarcely defensible. In a well-known passage of The Idea of a University, Newman imagines the derogatory question of those who take “Utility” as their watchword:

What is the real worth in the market of the article called “a Liberal Education,” on the supposition that it does not teach us definitely how to advance our manufactures, or to improve our lands, or to better our civil economy; or again, if it does not at once make this man a lawyer, that an engineer, and that a surgeon; or at least if it does not lead to discoveries in chemistry, astronomy, geology, magnetism, and science of every kind? Tried by that standard, art and philosophy are condemned as useless or patronized as “cultural.” A writer in the Athenaeum for 1835

---

12 “Science and Culture,” op. cit., 155.
13 This is illustrated by the quotation from Carlyle’s Past and Present, below, footnote 30.
14 “Carlyle’s Works,” Quarterly Review LXVI (1840), 447. Sewell also noticed the assumption “that prudent practice has no connexion with profound theory.”
charged that “a thorough-paced Utilitarian . . . cannot exactly see
the use of Painting and Music; flowers look pretty, but then flowers
are of no use.” 18 This sounds like a caricature, but a writer in the
*Westminster Review* ten years earlier said quite seriously that he
would be “glad to be informed, how the universal pursuit of literature
and poetry, poetry and literature, is to conduce towards cotton-spin-
ing.” 19 Art is defended, if it is defended, as an ornament or a
recreation.20 Philosophy is a waste of time, or worse, a distraction
from work. There is a revealing statement in *Modern Painters*, all
the more significant because Ruskin was no utilitarian in either the
narrow or broad sense of the term:

An affected Thinker, who supposes his thinking of any other importance
than as it tends to work, is about the vainest kind of person that can be
found in the occupied classes. Nay, I believe that metaphysicians and phi-
losophers are, on the whole, the greatest troubles the world has got to deal
with. . . . Busy metaphysicians are always entangling good and active
people, and weaving cobwebs among the finest wheels of the world’s busi-
ness; and are as much as possible, by all prudent persons, to be brushed out
of their way, like spiders, and the meshed weed that has got into the Cam-
bridgeshire canals, and other such impediments to barges and business.21

The imagery reminds us that Ruskin’s father made a fortune in the
City.

To adopt the related attitudes I have been describing is simply to
deny, however unconsciously, what Arnold called “the whole life of
intelligence.” 22 It is to make practice everything, a free play of the
mind nothing, and to exalt the man of action at the expense of the
thinker and the artist. It is to be a philistine,23 and philistinism for

---

18 Number 418 (Oct. 31, 1835), 817.
19 Volume IV (July, 1825), 166.
20 Bentham’s judgment is standard: see Works, I, 317–318; II, 212–213, 252–
separate article to trace downwards the decline of Art to its present debased con-
dition of a mere slave to pleasure; and it would need another to show how our
notion of Education has dwindled from the right formation of the whole man, to the
introduction of mere passive notions of outward things—*useful knowledge*, as it is
called—into his brain.” As the writer implies, the two articles would be intimately
connected.


22 In “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time,” (1864), *Essays in Criti-
cism*, first series (London, 1875), 18. My next sentence is a paraphrase of Arnold’s
passage.

23 *Id.*, 191–192.
Arnold was the characteristic of bourgeois society. In *Culture and Anarchy* he therefore set up the cultivation of the mind to oppose the anarchical tendencies of thought-less action, and wrote the classic protest against Victorian anti-intellectualism.

It was applicable as much to some of the Victorian prophets as to bourgeois society in general. If Mill and Newman and Bagehot, Morley and Leslie Stephen were as ready as Arnold to attack the tyranny of practice and utility, some of their colleagues were so infected by the glamor, or the requirements, of commercial life that they became, in varying degrees, apostles of anti-intellectualism. I refer, in particular, to Kingsley, Froude, Carlyle, and, of course, Macaulay.

Kingsley’s lecture on “How to Study Natural History” (1846), which contains a eulogy of Bacon and business worthy of Macaulay, recognizes that “in an industrial country like this, the practical utility of any study must needs be always thrown into the scale”—and quite rightly.

What money will it earn a man in after life?—is a question . . . which it is folly to despise. For if the only answer be: “None at all,” a man has a right to rejoin: “Then let me take up some pursuit which will . . . be of pecuniary benefit to me some day.”

The beauty of scientific studies is that besides drawing the imagination away from an inner world of morbid fancies and fixing it on external objects, they save you money. Think how much wealth is lost “for want of a little knowledge of botany, geology, or chemistry”—mines sought where no mine could be, crops attempted to be grown where no crops could grow. On the other hand, hidden treasures are missed, improvements in manufacturing passed over, all from ignorance of science. “And for the man who emigrates, and comes in contact with rude nature teeming with unsuspected wealth, of what incalculable advantage . . .,” etc., etc. True enough, England is far behind other nations in “metaphysical and scholastic science,” but what matter? Her practical science has made her the most powerful and wealthy nation in the world.

Some years later Kingsley gave the students of Wellington college some characteristic advice which brings out the full extent of his anti-intellectualism, and relates it to the whole competitive life of the period, though science is still at the back of his mind:

*Scientific Lectures and Essays* (London, 1880), 305. The passage on Bacon is on page 308.

*Id.*, 300–301, 305, 308.
They say knowledge is power, and so it is. But only the knowledge which you get by observation. Many a man is very learned in books, and has read for years and years, and yet he is useless. He knows about all sorts of things, but he can’t do them. When you set him to do work, he makes a mess of it. He is what is called a pedant: because he has not used his eyes and ears. He has lived in books. He knows nothing of the world about him, or of men and their ways, and therefore he is left behind in the race of life by many a shrewd fellow who is not half as book-learned as he: but who is a shrewd fellow—who keeps his eyes open—who is always picking up new facts, and turning them to some particular use.26

After this, Kingsley’s protest that he does not mean to undervalue book-learning, “no man less,” has a rather hollow ring. Its only possible value is its contribution of new facts capable of being turned to use. The notion that books may so broaden and deepen one’s knowledge of life, and so sharpen one’s perceptions, that he can live more wisely and judge more intelligently, has dropped out of Kingsley’s mind—and to a large extent, the Victorian, in fact, the modern mind. In bourgeois society the conception of utility became too narrow to include the great but intangible utility of the humanities.27

This is illustrated specifically by James Anthony Froude. When he succeeded Mill as Chancellor of St. Andrews, his inaugural address was plainly a reply to his predecessor’s plea for intellectual and aesthetic culture. He deplored the devotion of so much time and effort in university education “to subjects which have no practical bearing upon life.” The humanities, he said, “are supposed to have an effect on character,” but the truth is that “history, poetry, logic, moral philosophy, classical literature, are excellent as ornament; . . . they may be the amusement of your leisure hereafter; but they will not help you to stand on your feet and walk alone.” And since you cannot master all the objects of knowledge, and must choose among them,

26 Charles Kingsley: Letters and Memories of His Life, ed. by his wife (2 vols., London, 1877), II, 161. The date of the lecture was June 25, 1863. Cf. Arnold’s account of Archimedes Silverpump, Ph.D., principal of a dissenting academy, in Friendship’s Garland (1871), Culture & Anarchy and Friendship’s Garland (New York, 1901), 264: “‘We must be men of our age,’ he used to say. ‘Useful knowledge, living languages, and the forming of the mind through observation and experiment, these are the fundamental articles of my educational creed.’”

27 Cf. Peter Bayne, “Milton,” Contemporary Review XXII (1873), 431: “Milton . . . went in due course to Cambridge University, and during those years when the youthful mind is in its stage of richest recipiency, lived among the kind of men who haunt seats of learning. On the whole, the most uninteresting men in existence; whose very knowledge is a learned ignorance; not bees of industry, who have hoarded information by experience, but book-worms.”
"the only reasonable guide to choice in such matters is utility." 28

What is responsible for such an attitude? Froude gives the answer himself:

In a country like ours, where each child that is born among us finds every acre of land appropriated, a universal "Not yours" set upon the rich things with which he is surrounded, . . . such a child, I say, since he is required to live, has a right to demand such teaching as shall enable him to live with honesty, and take such a place in society as belongs to the faculties which he has brought with him.29

Such an education will enable him to succeed, if not in overcrowded England, then in the greater English Empire now spreading over the world. "Education always should contemplate this larger sphere," Froude says, echoing Kingsley, "and cultivate the capacities which will command success there." The expansion of business and population, both in turn promoting the expansion of empire, have undermined "the whole life of intelligence."

The anti-intellectualism of Carlyle, the master of Froude, and of Kingsley, too, in good part, is in the end equally radical. For quite other reasons, which I shall come to presently, it was well established long before he felt the fascination of Manchester. But it was strengthened and given a new basis, as we see in Past and Present, by his conversion to big business. There the burly figure of John Bull, the Man of Practice, inarticulate, ignorant, with nothing to rely on but his dogged energy and shrewd common sense, is pitted against the adroit Man of Theory, clear of utterance, learned, all equipped with logic—"surely he will strike down the game, transfix everywhere the heart of the matter." But lo and behold, "to your astonishment, it turns out oftest No." It is the stupid, lumbering Bull who comes off victor. Why? Because he has attained to Nature's Fact, followed Nature's regulations, and built "sea-moles, cotton-trades, railways, fleets and cities, Indian Empires, Americas, New Hollands."30

There is an element of truth here—or there might be. Theory may be too absolute, out of touch with concrete conditions. But that point is not made; nor is this an oversight. Three years earlier

28 Short Studies on Great Subjects (4 vols., London, 1888), II, 464-465. The address was delivered on March 19, 1869. Cf. his remarks in "On Progress" (1870), id., II, 373: "The knowledge which a man can use is the only real knowledge, the only knowledge which has life and growth in it, and converts itself into practical power. The rest hangs like dust about the brain, or dries like raindrops off the stones."

29 Id., 467, which is also the reference for the next quotation.

Carlyle had written to Emerson that "all theory becomes more and more confessedly inadequate, untrue, unsatisfactory, almost a kind of mockery to me." 31 Plainly, therefore, he means this passage to exalt practice at the expense of thought; and in doing so, he even ignores the potential contribution of scientific theory to the very industrial success he so much admires, though in this respect, as we have seen, his mistake was still a common deduction from the empirical character of the great inventions.32

This passage reminds one of Carlyle's earlier attack on the Theoriser in "Characteristics" (1831), but there the contrasting figure is the man of insight and intuition, an intellectual like Goethe. The attack is on rationalism.33 Here the choice of Bull is a measure of how far industrial progress could induce a Victorian "philosopher" to discount the value of all thought, logical or intuitive. A similar shift of allegiance, from intelligence to action, is seen in the changing conception of the hero. Originally Carlyle conceived of him as a man whose "pure reason" pierced beyond nature into "the True, Divine and Eternal," and had included Dante, Shakespeare, Johnson, as well as Goethe, among his great men. But after 1840 he came more and more to identify greatness with dynamic energy, and to make heroes of Dr. Francia, Cromwell, Frederick—and Governor Eyre.34 The alternative to democracy was not a "philosopher king" nor even a "patriot king" but a dictator. And literature, in the broad sense that includes philosophy and history, which Carlyle had once spoken of as the highest of human vocations, as the modern priesthood, lost all of its value by comparison.

Life was action, not talk. The speech, the book, the review or newspaper article was so much force expended—force lost to practical usefulness. . . . England had produced her greatest men before she began to have a literature at all. Those Barons who signed their charter by dipping the points of their steel gauntlets in the ink, had more virtue, manhood, practical force and wisdom than any of their successors.35

31 The Correspondence of Thomas Carlyle and Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed. C. E. Norton (2 vols., Boston and New York, 1883), I, 330.
32 Indeed, he cites James Brindley here, and Watt, Arkwright, and Brindley in the important passage on industrial achievement in "Chartism" (1839) (Essays, IV, 180-185) which marks his "conversion." 33 Essays, III, 5-6.
34 Tennyson reported in 1848 what he learned from conversation with Carlyle (Hallam Tennyson, Alfred Lord Tennyson, A Memoir [2 vols., London, 1905], I, 279): "Goethe once Carlyle's hero, now Cromwell his epitome of human excellence."
35 J. A. Froude, Thomas Carlyle: A History of His Life in London, 1834-1881 (2 vols., London, 1884), II, 265. I do not mean to claim that the transformation of the hero into the dynamic man of action was solely the result of Carlyle's admira-
The last sentence makes one think of Kingsley or Froude, where the same admiration for strength is allied with the expansion of England to make heroes of Drake and Hawkins—and Rajah Brooke. The analogous patterns of work and action emerge: the worship of the Worker, able by scientific training or common sense to build steamboats and British empires; and the worship of the Hero, able by sheer force of will to found a great nation, at home or overseas.

Finally, there is Macaulay, "the great apostle of the Philistines," whose essay on Bacon is the *locus classicus* of Victorian anti-intellectualism. The glory of Baconian philosophy was its practical aim, "the multiplying of human enjoyments and the mitigating of human sufferings," physical enjoyments and physical sufferings; and as a result, it has wonderfully succeeded—witness its tremendous fruits in the nineteenth century. Ancient philosophy by contrast "disdained to be useful." It "dealt largely in theories of moral perfection" designed "to form the soul," and it failed to make men virtuous. "Words, and more words, and nothing but words, had been all the fruit of all the toil of all the most renowned sages of sixty generations."

The Stoic and the Baconian come to a village where the...
small-pox has just begun to rage. The Stoic wastes his time preaching fortitude against the ills of life, while the Baconian whips out a lancet and begins to vaccinate.\(^\text{41}\) It does not occur to Macaulay that we need both, so completely has the useful become the tangible—and the attainable.

An acre in Middlesex is better than a principality in Utopia. The smallest actual good is better than the most magnificent promises of impossibilities. The wise man of the Stoics would, no doubt, be a grander object than a steam-engine. But there are steam-engines. And the wise man of the Stoics is yet to be born.\(^\text{42}\)

Unrealizable ideals are useless. Wisdom is simply practical knowledge.\(^\text{43}\)

2. THE INTELLECTUAL CLIMATE

In an age of transition, when established beliefs are questioned and new ones debated, “the divisions among the instructed nullify their authority,” and the uninstructed are forced to judge for themselves.\(^\text{44}\) This they might have done with some caution but for the further fact that in an age of democratic theory the assumption of equality gave the average man a self-confidence he had never had before. As Coleridge noted, all men were now considered able to judge.\(^\text{45}\) And that meant, in effect, the exalting of natural shrewdness at the expense of the trained intellect. No need for special knowledge or theoretical analysis, except in “pure” science. Everywhere else the answers are available to common sense. This is the situation described by Mill in *The Spirit of the Age* (1831):

Every dabbler . . . thinks his opinion as good as another’s. Any man who has eyes and ears shall be judge whether, in point of fact, a person who has never studied politics, for instance, or political economy systematically, regards himself as any-way precluded thereby from promulgating with the most unbounded assurance the crudest opinions, and taxing men who have made those sciences the occupation of a laborious life, with the most con-

\(^{41}\) Pp. 464–465.  
\(^{42}\) P. 460.  
\(^{43}\) Cf. John Morley, “Byron” (1870), Critical Miscellanies (3 vols., London, 1913), I, 205: “That intense practicalness which seems to have done so many great things for us, and yet at the same moment mysteriously to have robbed us of all, forbids us even to cast a glance at what is no more than an aspiration.” In “Locksley Hall” (line 141) Tennyson made the distinction which Macaulay obliterated: “Knowledge comes, but wisdom lingers.”  
temptible ignorance and imbecility. It is rather the person who has studied the subject systematically that is regarded as disqualified. He is a theorist: and the word which expresses the highest and noblest effort of human intelligence is turned into a bye-word of derision. People pride themselves upon taking a "plain, matter-of-fact" view of a subject. . . . Truth, they think, is under a peremptory obligation of being intelligible to them, whether they take the right means of understanding it or no. Every mode of judging, except from first appearances, is scouted as false refinement. . . . Men form their opinions according to natural shrewdness, without any of the advantages of study.46

In this way democratic theory supported the influence of business—how closely can be seen in a passage of Bagehot's which parallels the conclusion of Mill's, but with a different point of reference. "A man of business hates elaborate trifling: 'If you do not believe your own senses,' he will say, 'there is no use in my talking to you.' As to the multiplicity of arguments and the complexity of questions, he feels them little: he has a plain, simple—as he would say, 'practical'—way of looking at the matter, and you will never make him comprehend any other." 47

Allowing for certain obvious distinctions, this might be said of the typical evangelical or non-conformist; and if so, we must reckon Victorian Puritanism as a major factor in the tendency not only to value the active over the intellectual life, but to exalt conscience at the expense of the intellect. Although the eighteenth-century evangelicals, men like Isaac Milner, Thomas Scott, and John Newton, were concerned to some extent with theology, the pietistic core of the Wesleyan movement soon came to the front. In the Clapham Sect emphasis had shifted to works of charity and philanthropy—fighting the slave trade, establishing foreign missions, distributing Bibles. By 1839 Newman could argue, without much exaggeration, that "Evan-

VICTORIAN ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM

angelical Religion or Puritanism... had no intellectual basis; no internal idea, no principle of unity, no theology.” And a little later Mark Pattison traced “the professed contempt of all learned inquiry, which was a principle of the Evangelical school” to its original reaction against the intellectual, if too dry and rational, character of eighteenth-century apologetics:

Evangelism, in its origin, was a reaction against the High-Church “evidences”; the insurrection of the heart and conscience of man against an arid orthodoxy. It insisted on a “vital Christianity,” as against the Christianity of books. Its instinct was from the first against intelligence. No text found more favour with it than “Not many wise, not many learned.”

When we recognize that this might equally be said of the non-conformists, we have little difficulty accounting for middle-class philistinism from its religious, no less than its commercial, life.

Indeed, the two are closely connected. From the beginning Puritan ethics had harmonized with business ideals, so much so that the former has been traced to the rise of capitalism. This may be debated, but it is certain that Puritanism laid great stress both on moral discipline (the prerequisite for business efficiency) and on hard work and well-earned profits (the latter rationalized as the reward of God upon industry); and consequently neglected, or viewed with suspicion, the intellectual and artistic life. This was Carlyle’s inheritance. It was from his father he first learned “that man was created to work, not to speculate, or feel, or dream.” And the maxim was enforced by the teacher’s example: “As a man of Speculation... he must have gone wild and desperate as Burns: but he was a man of Conduct, and Work keeps all right.” This is a relevant illustration of a famous passage in Culture and Anarchy where Arnold relates “our preference of doing to thinking” to Puritan ethics:

We may regard this energy driving at practice, this paramount sense of the obligation of duty, self-control, and work, this earnestness in going manfully with the best light we have, as one force. And we may regard the

49 In “Learning in the Church of England” (1863), Essays (2 vols., Oxford, 1889), II, 268. Canon Charles Smyth, “The Evangelical Discipline,” Ideas and Beliefs of the Victorians (London, 1949), 102–103, maintains that Pattison’s statement is too sweeping, but he cites, as a truer account, one which is equally anti-intellectual, from R. W. Dale’s The Old Evangelicalism and the New (1889): the party was “wanting in a disinterested love of truth for its own sake, otherwise than as an instrument for converting men.”
intelligence driving at those ideas which are, after all, the basis of right practice . . . as another force. And these two forces we may regard as in some sense rivals. . . . Hebraism and Hellenism,—between these two points of influence moves our world. At one time it feels more powerfully the attraction of one of them, at another time of the other; and it ought to be, though it never is, evenly and happily balanced between them.51

In Arnold’s period the attraction of Hebraism was more powerful; it was therefore time to Hellenize that the balance might be restored. Mill once spoke of “commercial money-getting business and religious Puritanism” as the two great influences “which have chiefly shaped the British character since the days of the Stuarts.” 52 Plainly they gave it an anti-intellectual shape.

They were joined by the reactionary effect—intellectually reactionary—of the pain of doubt and the fear of religious scepticism. At the very moment when modern speculation seemed to be undermining Christian faith, and therefore robbing men not only of religious consolations in the face of suffering and death, but of the very sanctions of morality on which social order and personal happiness depended, surely one had best stick to his job and leave well enough alone.53 Lecky spoke for the age when he insisted that “a strong sense of the obligation of a full, active, and useful life is the best safeguard both of individual and national morals at a time when the dissolution or enfeeblement of theological beliefs is disturbing the foundations on which most current moral teaching has been based.” 54 And for the intellectuals, there was the analogous obligation not to encourage intellectual activity. This is brought out by Mill in his essay on the “Utility of Religion”:

Many . . . are either totally paralysed, or led to confine their exertions to matters of minor detail, by the apprehension that any real freedom of speculation, or any considerable strengthening or enlargement of the thinking faculties of mankind at large, might, by making them unbelievers, be the surest way to render them vicious and miserable. Many, again, having

51 Pp. 129–130.
52 “Inaugural Address at St. Andrew’s” (1867), James and John Stuart Mill on Education, ed. F. A. Cavenagh (Cambridge, Eng., 1931), 191.
53 Cf. Edward C. Mack, Public Schools and British Opinion, 1780–1860 (New York, 1939), 289, where he speaks of “the amazing disruptive force of new ideas” (after 1840) frightening the average middle- or upper-class citizen “into reaction, into a mistrust of free thought of all kinds. More and more he became fearful of genuine liberalism and confined his desire for knowledge to the narrowly useful.”
54 The Map of Life, first published in 1899 (London, 1921), 62; and cf. 228.
observed in others or experienced in themselves elevated feelings which they imagine incapable of emanating from any other source than religion, have an honest aversion to anything tending, as they think, to dry up the fountain of such feelings. They, therefore, . . . dislike and disparage all philosophy— 55 exactly the same result which Mill had once associated with worship of canals and railroads.

Nor are these the only reasons, grounded in the dangers of scepticism, which discouraged freedom of thought. There was the other side of the same coin, the pressure of public opinion. Even if the thinker himself believed that the service of truth was worth any actual, or supposed, ill consequences that might result, he was often deterred by the fear of social stigma and its potential threat to his public career. Under such circumstances the better part of wisdom, for anyone not prepared for martyrdom, was to narrow his “thoughts and interest to things which can be spoken of without venturing within the region of principles, that is, to small practical matters.” 56 Was there ever another age where the potential cost of speculation ran so high? At one and the same time, the thinker was threatened both by the fear of what he might do to society and the fear of what society might do to him.

According to Edward Mack, “the suspicion of free thought reached a climax in the sixties with the publication of the notorious Essays and Reviews.” 57 If Kingsley is a typical case in point, as he usually is, this is certainly true. Not only did he “thrust the book away in disgust” as soon as he found it stirred up old “doubts and puzzles”; but when his new curate asked him if he should read the essays, Kingsley told him, “By no means.”

They will disturb your mind with questions which you are too young to solve. Stick to the old truths and the old paths, and learn their divineness by sickbeds and in every-day work, and do not darken your mind with intellectual puzzles, which may breed disbelief, but can never breed vital religion, or practical usefulness. 58

To this Froude would have given an emphatic “amen.” For him the old paths of the eighteenth-century Church, so much criticized by

55 Three Essays on Religion (London, 1874), 71-72. The essay was written (see vii) between 1850 and 1858.
57 Public Schools and British Opinion, 289.
Newman, were the perfection of a healthy, anti-intellectual religion:

It was orthodox without being theological. Doctrinal problems were little thought of. Religion, as taught in the Church of England, meant moral obedience to the will of God. The speculative part of it was accepted because it was assumed to be true. The creeds were reverentially repeated; but the essential thing was practice. People went to church on Sunday to learn to be good, to hear the commandments repeated. . . . About the powers of the keys, the real presence, or the metaphysics of doctrine, no one was anxious, for no one thought about them. It was not worth while to waste time over questions which had no bearing on conduct, and could be satisfactorily disposed of only by sensible indifference.  

But unhappily this ideal state of affairs was shattered by nineteenth-century inquiry. Religion passed "out of its normal and healthy condition as the authoritative teacher of obedience to the commandments, into active anxiety about the speculative doctrines on which its graces were held to depend." The wording is important. It was the anxiety, which Froude himself knew so well (it informs his semi-autobiographical Nemesis of Faith), that threw a nostalgic halo over the age when "doubts about the essentials of the faith were not permitted" and "doctrinal controversies were sleeping;" and led Froude into saying that an established creed should not be discussed (only bad men will question its formularies), and that the test of a religion is not its truth [not now when truth is so dubious] but its success—"you look to the work which it is doing."  

The last clause, as well as the earlier claim that the essential thing is practice, taken together with Kingsley's appeal to "practical usefulness," show how precisely the fear of speculation in religion and the emphasis of business came to the same conclusion. The concurrence is illustrated if we remember Ruskin's opinion that metaphysical inquiry distracts men from secular business, and place beside it Thomas Arnold's advice "to a person distressed by sceptical doubts" to refrain from theological inquiry because it tends "to lead men away from their great [Christian] business—the doing good to themselves and others."  

59 "The Oxford Counter-Reformation" (1881), Short Studies, IV, 239–240.  
60 P. 264.  
61 Respectively, 238, 242, 237, 238.  
62 From a letter dated June 21, 1835, in A. P. Stanley, Life of Thomas Arnold, first published in 1843 (London, 1904), 364. Also cf. the letter to Augustus Hare (Aug. 3, 1833) 315, where Arnold laments the fact that men's minds are being led away "from the love of God and of Christ, to questions essentially tempting to the
ley and Froude in the previous section, we see that the concurrence is
demonstrated not merely in the age, but in specific individuals.

This is also true of Carlyle. If his admiration for industrial
achievement confirmed his earlier reaction against speculation, what
made him abandon, to begin with, the philosophical studies he had
pursued ever since he went to Edinburgh in 1809? Partly the influ-
ence of the romantic epistemology, the distrust of the "meddling
intellect" and the cult of the "heart," the organ of intuitive insight.
But it is significant that the essay on "Characteristics" (1831), which
begins by expounding this romanticism, ends by dwelling on doubt
and its close association with philosophy. Carlyle now considers
speculation either directly sceptical in its tendency (the metaphysics
of Hume) or at best (German transcendentalism) only an anodyne to
doit, and temporary at that. The truth—that is, the truth Car-
lyle learned, he felt, from his own experience between 1809 and 1829—
was that metaphysical studies raised more questions than they solved;
that "all Speculation is by nature endless, formless, a vortex amid
vortices"; and that long years of wandering in mazes of thought
made one's whole heart sick. Small wonder he returned, in the
"Characteristics," to his father's Puritan teaching, and decided that
the only "Profitable Speculation" was, "What is to be done; and
How is it to be done," and the right end of life, "not to ask questions,
but to do work." With the slightest rewording this becomes, a
decade later, the creed of John Bull, the builder of railroads and
empires.

The advice to abandon thought and work hard is not merely a
protection against the dangers of speculation; it is also the soundest
cure for those who catch the disease of doubt. It seemed to Froude

intellect, and which tend to no profit towards godliness." The reference is to the
clash of High Church and Low Church. Though the liberal Broad Church move-
ment was by no means unintellectual (Coleridge, Maurice, and Jowett, as well as
Arnold himself, are evidence of that), its primary emphasis on Christian ethics and
the Christian life had a distinctly anti-intellectual influence. This is pointedly re-
vealed by Kingsley's letter to John Bullar, Mar. 12, 1856, in Letters and Memories,
I, 467-468.

63 Essays, III, 1-18.
64 P. 26.
65 Respectively, "On Periods of European Culture" (1838), printed by Edward
Dowden, Transcripts and Studies (London, 1896), 38-39; Sartor Resartus (1833),
ed. C. F. Harrold (New York, 1937), 195; and a letter to Mill, June 13, 1833,
Letters of Thomas Carlyle to John Stuart Mill, John Sterling, and Robert Browning,
66 Essays, III, 27 and 28.
“as idle for the mind to hope to speculate clear of doubt in the closet, as for the body to be physicked out of sickness kept lying on a sofa.” To sit still and think was simply fatal. Regular employment alone could keep soul and body from disease. Arthur Hallam may have “fought his doubts and gathered strength,” “faced the spectres of the mind, and laid them,” but Tennyson himself had no such success. According to Gladstone, he recommended “the persevering performance of daily duty as the best medicine for paralysing doubts, and the safest shelter under the storms either of practical or of speculative life.” The same panacea is often suggested by Carlyle. The famous trilogy of chapters in Sartor Resartus on the resolution of doubt begins by recommending grim-eyed defiance, passes on to suggest the recovery of faith through recognizing that “Great Men are the inspired. . . . Texts of that divine Book of Revelation, whereof a Chapter is completed from epoch to epoch, and by some named History,” or through finding the divine spirit immanent in nature or present in the heart at the moment when the “worship of sorrow” fills one’s being. But the passage ends by offering the practical advice Carlyle found in Wilhelm Meister, which, he says, had proved to him “of invaluable service.” “Let him who groipes painfully in darkness or uncertain light,” lay two precepts well to heart: “‘Doubt of any sort cannot be removed except by Action’”; “‘Do the Duty which lies nearest thee.’” And so “The Everlasting Yea” closes with a fervid injunction, not to seek God, but to work:

Produce! Produce! Were it but the pitifullest infinitesimal fraction of a Product, produce it, in God’s name! ’Tis the utmost thou hast in thee: out with it, then. Up, up! Whatesoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy whole might. Work while it is called Today; for the Night cometh, wherein no man can work.

Out of its context would anyone imagine this was not the daily chant of the Captains of Industry? The Intellectual and the Industrial

68 In Memoriam (1850), sec. 95, lines 13, 15–16.
69 “‘Locksley Hall’ and the Jubilee,” Nineteenth Century XXI (1887), 4. Cf. the “philosophy” of James Fitzjames Stephen, as described by Leslie Stephen in his Life of his brother (London, 1895), 453–454: “The way to be happy was to work. Work, I might almost say, was his religion. ‘Be strong and of good courage’ was the ultimate moral which he drew from doubts and difficulties.”
71 P. 196.
72 P. 197.
Revolutions met together in the Gospel of Work, with the powerful encouragement of Puritan ethics. The child of business and doubt was an anti-intellectual.\(^{73}\)

In more Christian or clerical minds than Carlyle's a similar formula for exorcism is often employed and recommended. After Kingsley describes the battle between faith and materialism which "has gone on in me since childhood," filling him with fear that he should "end by a desperate lunge into one extreme or the other," he suddenly throws up his hands and cries out with relief:

But after all, what is speculation to practice? What does God require of us, but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with Him? The longer I live this seems to me more important, and all other questions less so. If we can but live the simple right life—

Do the work that's nearest,  
Though it's dull at whiles;  
Helping, when we meet them,  
Lame dogs over stiles.\(^{74}\)

Years earlier, long before *Essays and Reviews*, when Kingsley had suffered from the same doubts and puzzles which they raised afresh, he had put them "out of sight and mind, in the practical realities of parish work."\(^{75}\) Or rather, he tried to. What he said on one occasion to Maurice was true for a great part of his life: "I live in dark, nameless dissatisfaction and dread. . . . Terrible and sad thoughts haunt me—thoughts which I long to put away, which I do and will put away in simple silent home-work."\(^{76}\) Thomas Arnold, so bothered by certain points in the Articles he could not go forward to ordination, was told by Keble "to put down the objections by main force," that is, to take "a curacy somewhere or other, and cure himself not by physic, *i.e.*, reading and controversy, but by diet and regimen, *i.e.*, holy living"—advice "which he had the wisdom to act upon," and on a later occasion himself gave "to a person distressed by sceptical doubts."\(^{77}\)

\(^{73}\) Cf. *Past and Present*, Book III, start of chap. 11 (ed. cited in note 30: 226-228) where work is first exalted as the great virtue of Plugson of Undershot, the cotton manufacturer, and then as the great cure for "Doubt, Desire, Sorrow, Remorse, Indignation, Despair itself."


\(^{75}\) II, 130–131.


From this perspective we can better understand the tremendous activity of the Victorians, their capacity to pack so much writing, books and essays and letters, into every twenty-four hours, and in many cases (both the Arnolds, for example, as well as Kingsley, Mill, and Huxley) on top of a regular job. This enormous production, far greater than anything we are now accustomed to, had one source in their confidence that the human mind could resolve every problem however difficult, and that the individual could influence the course of events regardless of all impersonal political or economic forces. But another source was the temptation to bury their doubts and anxieties under the distraction of objective and constant activity. This is reflected by the frantic intensity with which they often work, so different from the quiet, steady production that rests on inner peace and assurance. They cannot sit still—they dare not; and they cannot work calmly.

Why did Kingsley write so much, novels and poems and sermons and essays, let alone thousands of letters, and then, fatigued in mind, plunge rabidly into violent physical action, running to hounds on foot, and leaping hedges and ditches for five hours at a stretch, but because he could not bear to be alone with himself? "Except during sleep, . . . repose seemed impossible to him for body or mind." His "impetuous, restless, nervous" energy made constant movement "almost a necessity to him." Would Carlyle's later life have been filled with so much writing done under such constant strain if at heart he had found the spiritual peace he talked about? In a passage of Froude's essay "On Progress" where he is describing the change which had come over the English Church in the Victorian period, he compares the quiet life of the eighteenth-century parson with the feverish activity of the modern clergyman. Why the difference? Because where the former assumed the truths he preached, the latter has to wrestle with uncertainties, and therefore "conceals his misgivings from his own eyes by the passion with which he flings himself into his work." Today the clergy are "building and restoring churches, writing books and tracts; persuading themselves and others with spasmodic agony that the thing they love is not dead, but sleeping." It seems apparent that intense activity became for the Victorians not only a rational method of attacking, but an irrational

---


79 From a letter by John Martineau, once a pupil of Kingsley's at Eversley, Letters and Memories, I, 302-303, 300, 301 respectively.

80 Short Studies, II, 366-367.
method of escaping, the anxious and perplexing problems of an age of transition.

Finally, there is another dimension to the anti-intellectualism of doubt. It runs this way: "Don't speculate, but if you must, don't speculate too much. Beware of pushing arguments to their logical conclusions, or examining first principles too closely. Stop before it's too late." No doubt the English have never been conspicuous for logical rigor, but in the Victorian period there was a conscious effort, personal and public, not merely to discourage the pursuit of truth, but where that was impossible, to check it at a safe distance from subversive conclusions.

So long as speculation threatened to undermine the religious and moral foundations of society, it was wholly natural—if ultimately unwise—for society to demand that thought should issue not in a logical but in an orthodox answer. This is the requirement which Mill exposed and attacked in the Liberty, though without perhaps sufficient recognition of its underlying cause:

Who can compute what the world loses in the multitude of promising intellects combined with timid characters, who dare not follow out any bold, vigorous, independent train of thought, lest it should land them in something which would admit of being considered irreligious or immoral? Among them we may occasionally see some man of deep conscientiousness, and subtle and refined understanding, who spends a life in sophisticating with an intellect which he cannot silence, and exhausts the resources of ingenuity in attempting to reconcile the promptings of his conscience and reason with orthodoxy, which yet he does not, perhaps, to the end succeed in doing. No one can be a great thinker who does not recognize, that as a thinker it is his first duty to follow his intellect to whatever conclusions it may lead.81

But this is a minority opinion. To most Victorians the first duty was not to upset the applecart.

But not, I think, entirely from fear of public criticism. If In Memoriam is typical of the mid-Victorian mind in its "incapacity to follow any chain of reasoning which seems likely to result in an unpleasant conclusion," was this because Tennyson was too prudent to risk publicly, or too timid to draw privately, the final deduction? Was it not both? Was it only deference to public opinion which made


"the most sensible and well-informed men" whom Emerson met in England "possess the power of thinking just so far as the bishop in religious matters," and talk with courage and logic on free trade or geology but not on the English Church? 83 Was it not also the pervasive psychology of the age—the pain of doubt, the terror of scepticism, the will to believe—warning them where, and where not, they could pursue the truth in safety without endangering their peace of mind or the stability of their society? 84 Certainly it was the fear that "the advance of natural explanation, whether legitimately or not, would be in some degree at the expense of the supernatural" which made Gladstone stand aside "from any full or serious examination of the details of the scientific movement, ... safe and steadfast within the citadel of Tradition." 85

To put the point another way, the public opinion which Mill rapped for curbing free thought was not merely the normal intolerance that characterizes a dominant social group, and especially one like the Victorian middle class, already hostile to speculation for the best of business reasons. It was itself the expression of deep-seated fears. Why had it become, as Ruskin noticed, "a point of politeness not to inquire too deeply into our neighbour’s religious opinions; and ... to waive any close examination into the tenets of faith?” His answer throws a flash of light into the Victorian mind:

The fact is, we distrust each other and ourselves so much, that we dare not press this matter; we know that if ... we turn to our next neighbour, and put to him some searching or testing question, we shall, in nine cases out of ten, discover him to be only a Christian in his own way, and as far as he thinks proper, and that he doubts of many things which we ourselves do not believe strongly enough to hear doubted without danger.86

Precisely. It is the danger to their own stability which frightened the Victorians into making searching questions and tenacious inquiry a point of serious indecorum, and one which the individual himself was only too glad to respect. In 1849, the year before In Memoriam, Froude reported that English opinion had rejected classical mythol-

83 English Traits, Works, V, 212–213.
84 Cf. Mill, On Liberty (ed. cited in note 56), 83: “... the present age—which has been described as ‘destitute of faith, but terrified at scepticism’—in which people feel sure, not so much that their opinions are true, as that they should not know what to do without them.” The reference is to Carlyle, “Sir Walter Scott,” Essays, IV, 49.
86 Stones of Venice, III (1853), Works, XI, 132. The italics are mine.
ogy and supernatural stories of medieval saints and witches, but was stopping short—or trying to stop short—of applying the logical analogy to Biblical myth and miracle. "It halts here," he said, "for it is afraid of its conclusions." 87

A personal experience of Wingfield-Stratford's will give concreteness to these generalizations:

I had been taught about God by a dear old Victorian clergyman, who explained to me just why God must be. It was extremely simple. The world was so wonderful, that somebody even more wonderful must have made it. Hence God.

I could detect no flaw in this reasoning, but a certain apparent incompleteness. With a faith I never afterwards recovered in the capacity of grown-up people, and particularly reverend grown-ups, to resolve incipient doubt, I proceeded to ask:

"But then, who made God?"

The result was not the explanation I had expected, but an explosion that left me utterly bewildered. I had been brought up in a Christian family. . . . I had been the cause of unutterable grief and disappointment. . . . Satan had quite obviously entered into my heart, not without previous encouragement. . . .

I had, all unwittingly, blundered into what, to every good Victorian, was the unforgivable sin. It was not, as I half suspected myself, that the unknown God-maker was some one not quite respectable. It was simply that I had pried beneath the surface of a belief, that I had not known where to stop short of a logical consequence. 88

It was not so, as Wingfield-Stratford goes on to point out, in the ages of faith when the medieval schoolmen would leave no question unanswered about the divine nature and attributes. "They had no fear, at the back of their minds, that any danger to faith could lurk in the process of such definition." 89 But his conclusion that Victorian common sense and business instinct dictated the curtailing of thought in the cause of social stability is only half of the truth. The fear at the back of those grown-up minds, which issued in such a horrified outburst, was personal as well as social. Their own peace of mind was at stake.

Wellesley College.

87 Nemesis of Faith, li.
88 The Victorian Sunset (New York, 1932), 62. The italics are mine.
89 P. 63.