

## **Reform, Religion & Rumpy-Pumpy**

### **Reform of the Electoral System**

Pressure was building for reform. The harvest of 1829 was poor, pushing up prices, and in the cities unemployment was rising. William Cobbett, veteran reformer, argued that the real cause of popular distress was misgovernment by a parliament of corrupt and extravagant landowners. He had a point. Corfe Castle returned two MPs. So did Old Sarum voted in by 7 landowners who didn't even live there. Dunwich, another Rotten Borough, with two MPs and just a few voters, had succumbed to coastal erosion. Most of the town was submerged beneath the sea. Dukes, Lords and Earls proliferated in Pocket Boroughs returning two MPs through ownership of land such as Bodmin, Buckingham, Camelford, East Grinstead, Midhurst, Tavistock, Thetford and Truro. Under the thumb of MPs, these constituencies had fewer than 50 voters whilst growing industrial cities such as Birmingham, Manchester and Leeds had no direct representation.

An alliance of middle and working classes came into existence, exemplified by the "General Political Union of lower and middle classes of the people," founded by radical Birmingham banker, Thomas Attwood in 1830. Other major cities followed suit and political rallies and demonstrations became widespread. Parliament was deluged with petitions for reform. The 1831 riots in Bristol began when Recorder and Magistrate, Sir Charles Weatherall, fiercely opposed to the Reform Bill, disregarded a petition. Out of a population of just over 100,000, only 6,000 people had the vote. When opening the new assize courts on 29 October, an angry mob chased him. Over three days, the mob ransacked the city, looting and burning civic buildings and 12 people died. Weatherall managed to escape, dressed as a woman. Of the 102 arrested, 55 were put on trial, 5 were hung and 42 transported to Australia.

In June 1830, George IV died. Given the complex involvement of the monarchy in national politics this triggered a General Election. The main issue was Reform, opposed by the Prime Minister, the Duke of Wellington. Supporters of George Canning sided with the Whigs and the government was duly defeated in the House of Commons. A new Whig government was formed under Earl Grey, pledged to Reform that would satisfy and placate public opinion. Some opposition came from aristocrats who feared, not just loss of property, but the end of aristocratic government and an unhindered way of life. Others feared social revolution. Peel believed the Reform Bill would not be final as it would open the door to further bills until full democracy was secured. It would take almost 100 years!

In 1830-31, a committee under Lord Durham drafted a scheme for reform but the inclusion of secret ballot ensured its rejection by the Cabinet. Earl Grey tendered his resignation after his request to create more peers was refused. Getting House of Lords approval was a major stumbling block. The King asked Wellington to form a new government to then pass a more moderate Reform Bill. Agitation increased with Frances Place urging property owners to withhold taxes. Robert Peel ended the Duke's chances of success by refusing to serve under him, whereupon Earl Grey took up the reins of office once again. In June 1832 the Bill was passed by 106 votes to 22 with most peers absent. The threat to create more peers was real, given disturbances and an angry public mood for electoral reform that could easily turn into national civil unrest.

The 1832 Reform Act broadened property qualifications in the counties to include smaller landowners, tenant farmers and shopkeepers. In boroughs, all householders who paid an

annual rental of £10 or more were given the vote, as were some lodgers. The electorate increased from 366,000 to 650,000, representing a mere 18% of the male electorate. The vast majority of working class males were excluded. So were all women. In addition the Act failed to introduce secret ballots.

By the 1850s the Chartist Movement peaked in their desire for parliamentary reform with a specific request for universal franchise. There was acceptance by MPs that more work was required to remove anomalies in the voting system. The call for universal male suffrage was still resisted by Parliament. The Reform Act of 1867 enfranchised most working class skilled men living in urban areas. The electorate tripled to some 2 million males. In 1872 secret ballots were agreed and, in 1883, an attempt made to prevent corrupt and illegal practices.

The Parliamentary Reform Act the following year, 1884, created a uniform franchise system in counties as well as boroughs. Whist still weighted towards the middle classes, two men in three now had the vote, amounting to 8 million. Only in 1918 were all men aged 21 or over enfranchised. At last, women had the vote but only those on attaining the age of 30. Full equality with men was not achieved until 1928.

## **Opium of the People**

Religion, asserted Karl Marx, "is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a soulless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people." For the poorest in society it may well have been in giving hope for a better future. For many, religion was a guiding light in how to live your life, bring up a family, and be an unrighteous citizen in what at times seemed a cruel and uncaring world.

The Church of England was the Established Church with all kinds of privileges. Its parishes, the basis of local government, all had a church which, with the pub, was the focus of village life. Its bishops sat, as of right, in the House of Lords. All people had to pay a tithe or tax on land to maintain its clergy who had their own benefice in the form of a glebe. In villages, the churchyard was often the only burial ground and those to be interred had to be buried by Anglican rites. Religion dominated Oxford and Cambridge Universities. Non-Anglicans, previously known as Dissenters, but now Nonconformists, resented these privileges and their exclusion from leading universities.

The first and only religious census was carried out on Mothering Sunday, 30<sup>th</sup> March 1851. Congregations were counted, perhaps a little embellished, whether morning, afternoon or evening. Double-counting was inevitable if people attended more than one service. Church and chapel were separated on the census but some attended both. Of most concern to the Established Church was that up to half the population chose not to attend worship on census Sunday. Of those that did, fewer than half adhered to the Church of England. The lowest church attendance was in the north and highest in the countryside where family attendance was expected. The larger the town, the lower Church of England attendance, but this masks other denominations under the collective umbrella of Non-conformists that embraced John Wesley inspired Methodists, Quakers and Unitarians, with the important addition of Catholics.

Lower orders may have felt uncomfortable with the traditions and liturgy of the Church of England. The best pews were often reserved for those who had paid for them. Sermons tended to be aimed at the better educated, propertied and wealthy, as if they might more fully comprehend religious imperatives, if not fulfil them. More controversial was the rise of

Roman Catholicism, fuelled by Irish Immigration during the Irish famine and years following, such as Preston and Liverpool that ran the Church of England a close second.

Religious organisations were surrounded by a paraphernalia of Sunday school, Bible classes, clubs and social activities. Children were greatly encouraged by the Church and parents too. Sunday school attendance was almost universal in many areas, inculcating moral fibre and affording parents a few hours of peace and quiet away from their boisterous offspring. The Church was a focal point.

Better still if a vicar displayed an element or two of eccentricity, such as Rev. Robert Hawker of Morwenstow in Cornwall. His extravagant array of songs and legends, dotted around the church, and antics of his nine cats, enlivened proceedings as did Parson Button of Landbedr. He would get roaring drunk and lambast religious adversaries, much to the amazement and amusement of his congregation. Then there was the length of a sermon, from the father of Cecil Rhodes with his famed 10 minute sermons, to long droning diatribes. The inevitable dire fate of straying from the straight and narrow was hammered home relentlessly to an increasingly semi-comatose congregation.

As well as missionaries spreading an evangelical message to the unheathen nations of Africa and elsewhere, others sought to promote their own message such as the Oxford Movement, emphasising the moral principles of honesty, purity, unselfishness and love. For some, their life's work was seeking moral redemption amongst the poorest in society. Lincoln Stanhope Wainright epitomised this. On Low Sunday 1873 he arrived in Wapping to serve at St Peters, the mission church by the docks. He was to spend 56 years in this slum parish that teemed with prostitutes, drunks and thieves, amidst huge warehouses containing cotton, tea, coffee, tobacco, skins and ivory. In the vaults were copious supplies of wines and spirits, destined for wealthy clients and those aspiring to affluence. A huge army of clerks, customs officers, artisans, labourers, lightermen and sailors sustained this emporium, a world away from the destitute.

Wainright's ascetic lifestyle was endorsed by the Catholicism of F. D. Maurice who sought to engage with the victimized and dispossessed, in a swipe at capitalism. Archibald Campbell Tait, Bishop of London, might agree, but not with the rituals of the Catholic church. The doors of Westminster Abbey were opened to the poor, enticed in by free services. Tait preached in Covent Garden and Ragged Schools and 900 people came to hear him speak after a cholera epidemic in 1866. Queen Victoria, wary of the Ritualists too, declared, "I am very nearly a Dissenter, or rather more a Presbyterian in my feelings, so very Catholic do I feel we are." Tait, by now Archbishop of Canterbury, introduced a bill that became law in 1874 under the title of the Public Worship Regulation Act. It aimed to rid the trappings of "adornments, fabric and furniture" and certain practices that symbolised High Church too. Passing of the Bill nearly descended into farce. Implementation certainly did but it took until 1963 for the Act to be repealed.

Like Methodism, Evangelicalism stressed the importance of having faith in personal salvation and preferably a "conversion" experience. In practical terms, both saw human talents as God-given and not to be wasted. Individuals should be thrifty and lead austere, sober and morally upstanding lives. They should be industrious so as not to waste time and be self-sacrificing. Where Methodism spread by revivalist mass meetings amongst lower orders, Evangelicalism spread gradually, and imperceptibly, like a slow-incoming tide, affecting primarily upper and middle classes. But non-conformist religion was proving popular. The

resulting melange was a religious revival lasting for 60-70 years in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. It affected social life, partly through inspiring efforts and partly as a result of rivalries between Church, Chapel and Rome.

There was an implied religious consensus that: time should not be wasted; time is money; be thrifty; take care of the pennies and the pounds will take care of themselves; shoulder to the wheel and nose to the grindstone. There was little escapist entertainment, for work conquers all. This had a negative connotation as, whilst thrift and hard work made some people rich, there was a tendency to believe being poor was down to being idle, improvident and feckless.

Best known amongst Evangelicals was the Clapham Sect and, of these, William Wilberforce. As an MP he formed a group of like-minded MPs known as "the Saints" who campaigned long and hard for the abolition of the Slave Trade, achieved in 1807, and, after his death, for the abolition of Slavery itself, finally reaching the statute book in 1833. The Clapham Sect clubbed together to buy church property to install like-minded vicars to spread their views within the Church of England. Evangelicals campaigned for Bible Societies, Foreign Missions, Sunday Observance, the prohibition of duelling and, for good measure, bull and bear-baiting.

Gradually, the stranglehold of the Church of England was lessened as the century unfolded. Roman Catholics were allowed to become MPs in 1829 and tithes were commuted to a rent charge in 1836. In the same year, Parliament agreed licences that permitted marriages in Nonconformist Chapels and registry offices. In 1868 compulsory church rates fizzled out and in 1871 the Anglican Church domination of Oxford and Cambridge was ended.

Nonconformists had to wait until 1889 to obtain the legal right to inter the dead in parish churchyards with services according to the rites of their own denominations. All of these shifts in the law, and attitudes, were achieved only after repeated uproars, if not rebellions, in Parliament. Religion had played its part in seeking social change to improve quality of life, thanks to the sterling efforts of William Wilberforce, the 7<sup>th</sup> Earl of Shaftesbury, F. D. Maurice and a host of others more self-effacing, such as Lincoln Stanhope Wainright of Wapping.

### **Sexism and Sexual Ignorance**

The 19<sup>th</sup> Century was stricter than either the previous and following centuries. Christianity was extremely successful in imposing its view of sexuality and taboo on sexual intercourse before marriage, reinforced by social pressures and stigma of a 'fallen' woman. Divorce was nigh impossible in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and illegitimacy a life-long blemish. Prudery, repugnance of sexual contact, and male domination of cold functional relationships, portray Victorian life in many accounts.

Some historians question the accuracy of this perception but plenty of evidence exists to support a view that many women were at the beck and call of men in daily life, and sexually. Take for example the wives of Charles Dickens, David Livingstone and artist William Powell Frith. Wives were for procreation and wedded to a life of domesticity. This was an age of reticence, and reluctance in questioning male chauvinistic attitudes and any discussion about matters of an intensely personal nature. Press censorship was alert to corrupted morals and the police to any likely charge of obscenity. The Victorian net curtains were tightly drawn in many households and in society.

In his remarkable book, *The Subjection of Women*, published in 1869, John Stuart Mill wrote that, once married, a woman ceased to possess a legal existence. Under the law she had no responsibility, in common with minors and idiots. No female could sign a contract, or make a will, nor cast a vote. In marriage, the husband was responsible for her actions unless a wife committed murder or treason. Until 1884, a wife could be imprisoned for refusing "conjugal rights" and until 1891 could be legally detained in the home, against her wishes.

She could not obtain a divorce for most of the century, except under the strictest terms, and then only by an expensive special Act of Parliament. Neither could a wife own property. As Marx and Engels put it, the only real difference between a married woman and a prostitute was that the married woman sold her body into slavery, whereas a prostitute sold her body as a form of piecework to procure an income.

If engaged, a woman could not legally dispose of any of her possessions without her fiancé's permission. Once married, all property, including inheritances and earnings, were legally that of the husband to do as he pleased, including disinheriting his wife. Even a devoted father could not keep his son-in-law's hands off his daughter's inheritance, unless he set up a trust. As Mill expressed it: "The most a wealthy man can do is to stop the husband squandering the capital by depriving the rightful owner heiress of its use." Nor could a wife claim her children. In law they belonged to her husband as he alone had rights over them. Even if he died she didn't automatically become their guardian, unless provision was made in his will.

The first notable break in this chain of subjection was the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857. It created a secular divorce court and restored some rights of a divorced woman over her property. However, a closer look reveals that in some ways the Act bound the shackles even tighter. A man could divorce his wife for adultery and keep her property. She could divorce her husband only for adultery on the grounds of incest, adultery, bigamy, adultery, cruelty, rape, desertion for 2 years, acts of sodomy, or bestiality. With few exceptions, a husband was free to fornicate to his heart's content.

The Lord Chancellor, sponsoring this Act, explained the difference in treatment: "The adultery of the wife might be the means of palming spurious offspring upon the husband, while the adultery of the husband could have no such effect upon the wife." Marx and Engels seemed correct in their forthright views on legitimacy and property. If the woman 'played away' from home and became pregnant, she could be pursued with the full force of the law. In contrast, if the husband 'played away' from home, and sired a child, it was a different legal matter. Only a brave woman tried to prove paternity in a court of law. If successful, expect a paltry award of 1/6 per week, assuming it was paid at all for the law would not enforce payment.

Ignorance, and occasionally superstition, played a part in medical and sexual matters. Based on evidence, doctors insisted that continued frequent pregnancies were very likely to weaken a woman's health and could lead to death. Whether this was from a general weakening of the constitution, or from increased exposure to infection, was open to conjecture. Little was known about antiseptics until after 1867 following pioneering work by Joseph Lister. He, as with colleagues, was unreceptive to female opinion on medical matters. Males dominated the profession and only gradually began to understand the mechanics of conception. The ovum was not definitively identified until 1832 and not until 1845 was it discovered that ova was ejected spontaneously.

Homosexuality was countered with the full force of the law as Oscar Wilde discovered, but the right social and political connections could save you. When a homosexual brothel was raided in 1889, otherwise known as the Cleveland Street Scandal, the Prince of Wales sent sufficient money to Lord Arthur Somerset to help him flee the country. The Home Secretary hushed up that the eldest son of the Prince of Wales, the Duke of Clarence, was a client too.

Nothing in the childhood of a respectable couple would prepare them for marriage. The best they could hope for were tales of gooseberry bushes, storks, or even belly buttons. A young couple were unlikely to meet alone if high in society. Financial prospects must be considered carefully and social status. It was quite common for a prospective bridegroom, who did not have great wealth, but did have prospects, to agree with his prospective father-in-law a sum of money to be banked before he could marry. If this was agreed, an engagement would follow. However, if the father of the potential bride suffered a financial catastrophe this gave perfectly acceptable grounds for the young man to terminate the engagement.

Preparation for a honeymoon was discussed. One young woman from an aristocratic family was told by her mother on the morning of her wedding, "Tonight, my dear, your husband will want to do strange things. Let him." Another was informed in some anatomical detail by her mother what she could expect. She replied, "Don't be ridiculous Mother. Charles is a gentleman and would not dream of anything so impertinent." Marie Stopes (1880-1958) read Zoology in her first year at University College, London. She obtained her doctorate in Botany at Munich and lectured at Manchester University. Nothing prepared her for marriage. She met and married her first husband within a fortnight in 1911 but 6 months later "began to feel that something was lacking." Her researches in the British Museum led her to discover that she was still a virgin and, moreover, was no longer supposed to be. The marriage was annulled in 1916.

Activist Annie Besant, a strong advocate of the birth control movement, was very religious but likewise experienced an unhappy marriage. Campaigning journalist friend, W. T. Stead, said, "She could not be the Bride of Heaven and therefore she became the bride of Mr. Frank Besant. He was hardly an adequate substitute." Annie said that when she married she had the awareness of a child of four. My dreamy life, into which no knowledge of evil had been allowed to penetrate, in which I was guarded from all pain, shielded from all anxiety, kept innocent from all questions of sex, was no preparation for married existence, and left me defenceless to face a rude awakening." Scant advice was also given by the Queen who told her eldest daughter Victoria, "Women were born for man's pleasure and amusement."

Men were assumed to pick up knowledge from each other and no doubt many did, with a great many myths as well, but even so when the art critic, John Ruskin, married it is said that he fainted on his wedding night when he discovered that his wife had pubic hair. It is hard to escape the conclusion that some honeymoons must have been nightmares, rather than a dreamy introduction to married life. In the case of John Ruskin it took his wife Effie six years to obtain an annulment. She married artist John Everett Millais and they had eight children.

The incidence of pregnancy was much higher than now. In 1900 average life expectancy of a woman of 20 was 46 if she married. William Gladstone's sister-in-law, Lady Lytton, was told by her doctor, after the birth of her 11<sup>th</sup> child, that she would likely die if she conceived again. When pregnant with her 12<sup>th</sup> she was asked why she had not told her husband of the doctor's warning. She replied, "My dear, we never spoke of anything so nasty." The lady's

prudery and reticence was literally the death of her. Condoms made of vulcanized rubber had been available since the 1840s but were not considered respectable.

In 1877-78, Charles Bradlaugh, who had already attracted notoriety by standing for election to Parliament although an atheist, teamed up with Annie Besant to re-publish a pamphlet entitled, "*The Fruits of Philosophy*." It had been on sale for 40 years but the previous year a Bristol bookseller was sentenced to 2 years hard labour for selling it, complete with obscene drawings, so it is said. Their aim was to test the law so they informed the police. Both were arrested and charged with incitement to indecent, obscene, unnatural and immoral practices with intent of obscene publication. They were found guilty and each sentenced to 6 months but their conviction was overturned on appeal on a technicality. They continued to publish, confident no further action would ensue. They then published a new pamphlet written by Annie Besant that sold 175,000 copies over 12 years.

Given the ignorance of men, and even greater ignorance of women, with the continual fear of pregnancy and notion nice women did not feel passion, it is unsurprising that prostitution was common. At the very top of the scale were courtesans, who, if they were discreet about how they earned their living, might be received in polite society, such as Lily Langtry. Most were not that discreet. Below them were dolly-mops, as they were called then; in today's parlance call-girls or escorts. Below these were girls patrolling the streets but it is difficult to ascertain how many there were in a city the size of London. The chief of the Metropolitan Police in 1839 said 7,000, in contrast to the Secretary of the Society for the Suppression of Vice who estimated 80,000. We may wonder how they obtained these estimates.

The 'fallen' women were likely to be domestic servants, 'ruined' by the young man of the household. Many were seamstresses or shop workers who had drifted into prostitution to supplement earnings. Some were youngsters sent out by parents. W.T. Stead, editor of the Pall Mall Gazette from 1883-89, ran a campaigns for "Good Causes." The sensational and sordid jockeyed for press coverage, arousing titillation and tut-tutting in equal measure. Stead knew his readership well, eager to lap up stories of lascivious shenanigans and other goings on, whilst protesting about the depraved and debauched, an absolute disgrace to society.

Moral hypocrisy had no bounds. In 1885, Stead ran a campaign against "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon." One gets the flavour from two of his headlines: "I order FIVE virgins" and "A child of THIRTEEN Bought for £5." Stead's publicity may well have been decisive in persuading Parliament that year to raise the legal age of consent for sexual intercourse from 13 to 16. It also led to his imprisonment for 3 months for procuring. Opportunistic as ever, on his release Stead persuaded the governor to allow him to keep his prison uniform, which he duly wore on each anniversary of his sentencing.

In London, out of a population of one million, eighty thousand prostitutes nightly roamed the East End, Strand, Leicester Square, Soho and Seven Dials. On returning to Carlton House Gardens in late evening, William Gladstone could not avoid them. "They showed themselves off along Haymarket and Piccadilly, even posing on the Duke of York Steps, gaudily dressed, gown cut so their lower breasts hung out, with nipples engaged." It is highly probable that Gladstone brought street girls back to his wife Catherine. Her comments are not recorded.

Catherine Walters, alias "Skittles," came from a poor family and attracted numerous wealthy lovers, including the Marquis of Hartington, later 8<sup>th</sup> Duke of Devonshire." A courtesan, not a

prostitute, "Skittles" died a rich woman. She was discreet as well as sexy and lived in South Street, Mayfair, next door to Florence Nightingale.

Skittles was hardly alone. In classy Haymarket, William Gladstone could enter the saloon of the Argyll rooms for two shillings. Asked by madame, Kay Hamilton, "What my dear is your particular fancy," he resisted temptation as bejewelled young ladies displayed their wares in these glittering surroundings with crystal chandeliers, to the sound of popping champagne corks. Not for nothing was Gladstone called "Willie do nothing!" In frequent nightly walks he came across girls as young as twelve or thirteen, but no longer profitable. Intercourse with a young virgin was said to cure rampant venereal disease but such advice was of no help to Mrs Beeton. Thanks to her profligate husband she succumbed to syphilis.

Under the Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, 1866 and 1869, prostitutes in specified naval and garrison towns had to be registered. The police could inform on a woman whom they believed to be a prostitute. She would be compelled to undergo a medical examination for venereal disease and, if infected, consigned to hospital for a cure. Secretary of the Ladies' National Association, Mrs. Josephine Butler, led a campaign against these Acts. The basis of her objection was a male doctor would look at their most intimate parts, expressed in precise medical terminology. By so doing they countenanced immorality that would interfere with the liberty of women, but not men. The Acts were suspended in 1883 and repealed in 1886.

Beatrice Webb countered middle class views of loose morals amongst the working class. "To put it bluntly sexual promiscuity, and even sexual perversion, are almost unavoidable among men and women of average character and intelligence, crowded into the one-room tenement of slum areas." In her autobiography she referred to a not uncommon crime of incest, "the effect of a debased social environment." In his surveys, Charles Booth revealed a similar pattern of depravity and lewdness that he attributed to the combined effects of drink, poor housing and overcrowding.

For society in general, public nudity was by no means confined to art. When the Rothchilds visited Scarborough in 1858 they found nudity "in the full glare of day and sunshine," adding "It was like the Garden of Eden." The diaries of Rev. Kilvert contain numerous incidents and he had strong views. "In Shanklin one has to adopt the detestable custom of bathing in drawers. If ladies don't like to see men naked why don't they keep away from the sight."

Meanwhile in sedate and salubrious Bournemouth an author remarked on the forwardness of women. "I have seen a woman morning after morning bring down two girls to undress and bathe from the sands, not on the women's side, but among the men." The author then drew attention to a particular incident. "One morning I saw a tall young lady, accompanied by a boy, deliberately walk along and back again, the whole beach just in front of a very long line of men drying or dressing themselves on the sands."

Victorian prudery had its limits! By way of contrast we may morph to modern society that tends to cover up on the crowded and conspicuous beaches of Bournemouth and Poole and neighbouring areas, with the notable exception of the naturist beach at Studland.