

## 5 The Victorian age, 1832–1901

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*Progress, expansion, mobility* – these keynotes of Victorian history and culture evoke in their different ways a society keenly attuned to and preoccupied with transformations in nearly every arena of daily life. ‘Your railroad starts the new era’, Thackeray wrote in *The Roundabout Papers* (1863), and, indeed, the opening of railway lines from 1830 onwards and their rapid spread throughout Britain captures the period’s ethos of energetic pursuit, advancement, growth and diffusion. The evolution of industrial society, the rise of great towns and cities, and dramatic increases in population enabled, maybe even forced, government activities to expand exponentially; literacy rates increased, print culture proliferated, information abounded, the circulating library took hold, and a mass reading public was born; the franchise was extended through a series of key parliamentary reform measures; technological developments broadened and quickened opportunities for travel and communication; uncharted lands were explored and mapped, and, for much of the century, Britain enjoyed an expansion of commerce with the wider world – all this outreach making for what Robin Gilmour has described as ‘a dynamo hum in the background of Victorian literature’ (*The Victorian Period*, p. 2 [B]).

These transformations and the optimistic embrace of progress upon which they depended inevitably wrought their fair share of anxious response. The central metaphors of Dickens’s fiction – fog, contagion, the prison – evoke the capacity of disease, both literal and figurative, to spread throughout modern society, eventually to immobilise it. Moreover, if fundamentally outward-looking, the trademark Victorian emphases on progress, expansion and mobility (and the celebratory display of their fruits) also helped to produce a corollary preoccupation with interiority, what the poet Matthew Arnold called ‘the dialogue of the mind with itself’. Victorians were nothing if not inquisitive – one can find everything from ‘The Irish Question’ to ‘The Oyster Question’ discussed in the press – and curiosity itself is arguably the premise of major works as different as *Jane Eyre*, *Little Dorrit* and *Alice in Wonderland*. Preoccupation with the idea and ideal of transformation is no less central to the Victorian study of self than of society. Although Scrooge redeems himself with an eleventh-hour promise to change, figures such as Dr Jekyll and, still later in the century, Dracula, embody a deep-seated uncertainty about the stability of identity itself in a changing and modern world. The contradictions and complexities of Victorian England account in no small measure for its

enduring appeal. The chronology and overview that follow provide a point of entry into this complex and fascinating period in British history.

## Chronology

	HISTORY AND CULTURE	LITERATURE
1819	Queen Victoria born	
1824	<i>Westminster Review</i> founded	
1829		Thomas Carlyle, 'Signs of the Times'
1830	Passenger railway lines open between Liverpool and Manchester <i>Fraser's Magazine</i> founded Charles Lyell, <i>Principles of Geology</i> (–1833)	Edward Bulwer, <i>Paul Clifford</i> Alfred, Lord Tennyson, <i>Poems, Chiefly Lyrical</i>
1831	Reform Bill introduced Cholera outbreak in England British Association for the Advancement of Science founded	John Stuart Mill, 'The Spirit of the Age' Robert Surtees, <i>Jorrock's Jaunts and Jollities</i> (–1834)
1832	First Reform Act <i>Chambers' Edinburgh Journal</i> and <i>Penny Magazine</i> (–1837) begin Harriet Martineau, <i>Illustrations of Political Economy</i> (–1834)	
1833	Factory Reform Act First of John Henry Newman's <i>Tracts for the Times</i> issued Abolition of Slavery Act	
1833	<i>Penny Cyclopaedia</i> (–1843)	Carlyle, <i>Sartor Resartus</i> (–1834)
1834	Poor Law Amendment Act	
1836		Charles Dickens, <i>Sketches by Boz</i> ; (–1837) <i>The Pickwick Papers</i>
1837	Victoria succeeds to throne Smallpox epidemic Brunel, Great Western Railway	Carlyle, <i>The French Revolution</i> Dickens, <i>Oliver Twist</i> (–1838)
1838	People's Charter issued Anti-Corn Law League formed	Dickens, <i>Nicholas Nickleby</i>
1839	Charles Darwin, <i>The Voyage of the Beagle</i> Sarah Stickney Ellis, <i>The Women of England: Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits</i>	
1840	Victoria marries Albert Penny post established	Dickens, <i>The Old Curiosity Shop</i> Frances Trollope, <i>Michael Armstrong, Factory Boy</i>
1841	Peel becomes Prime Minister William Henry Fox Talbot awarded patent for calotype process (positive/negative photographic process) <i>Punch</i> begins	
1842	Mudie's Lending Library opens Chadwick's <i>Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population</i> Poor Law renewed	Tennyson, <i>Poems</i> (2 vols.) Robert Browning, <i>Dramatic Lyrics</i>