**Victoria’s Victorians and the mid-Victorians – Martin Hewitt**

**Introduction**

How might those who shared an 1819 birthdate be placed in a broader generational context? We, like the Victorians, speak of generations in indefensibly indistinct and inconsistent ways, and the members of the 1819 cohort have been grouped with various generational bedfellows. Take the poet Arthur Hugh Clough (1819-61). For David Newsome, he is one of a generation which followed Thomas Arnold and John Keble, which included Arthur Penrhyn Stanley (1815-81), Edward Meyrick Goulburn (1818-97), Benjamin Jowett (1817-93), Stafford Northcote (1818-87), Frederick Temple (1821-1902), and Matthew Arnold (1822-88);[[1]](#endnote-1) for Bernard Reardon he is bracketed with Tennyson (1809-92), Browning (1812-89), Arnold, George Eliot (1819-80), George Meredith (1828-1909), Thomas Hardy (1840-1928), and Mrs Humphrey Ward (1851-1920);[[2]](#endnote-2) whereas P.G. Scott puts Clough in a generation of ‘Oxford Liberals including Jowett, Stanley, Arnold and [James Anthony] Froude [(1818-94)]’.[[3]](#endnote-3) Such variety of association and of age demonstrates the problematics of achieving any form of useful, stable generational groupings.

Our theoretical apparatus, such as it is, for generational analysis is rooted in the twentieth century, at a point at which generations became self-conscious identities. Under the influence of the paradigmatic work of Karl Mannheim, the tendency has been to look to generational cohorts with birthdates spanning between 25 and 33 years, and associated with the cultural revolt of youth, developing out of specific conditions and influences coinciding broadly with a period of ‘emerging maturity’. But Victorian experience diverged from later dynamics in a number of ways. In the nineteenth century, the language of generations was almost as ubiquitous as in the twentieth, but generational affiliations were less readily adopted, and generational solidarities are much less obviously discerned.[[4]](#endnote-4) And most significantly, an initial exploration of patterns of authorship in the Victorian periodical press, and the configuration of artistic schools and cliques, suggests that the traditional 25-33 year span is too long, perhaps unduly influenced by the natural cycle of generational succession within families, and that for the Victorians at least, it makes more sense to identify successive generations of roughly fifteen years in duration.[[5]](#endnote-5) As a rough schematic, these can be divided as indicated in Table 1.

***Table 1: Victorian Generations***

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Birth Range | Formative | Influences | Associations |
|  | c.1750-68 | 1774-89 | American Independence;Methodist revival | Anti-Slavery; Clapham Sect; [Napoleonic era radicalism] |
| Revolutionary | 1768-81 | 1789-1801 | French Revolution  | SDUK (1825) First Generation Romanticism |
| Late Georgian | 1782-94 | 1800-19 | Napoleonic Wars | Second generation Romanticism; Analytical Society; Philosophic Radicals |
| Early Victorians | 1795-1813 | 1815-32 | Waterloo; Peterloo; deep time; Parliamentary Reform | Tractarians; evolutionary thoughtLiberal Anglicanism; [Manchester School] |
| Mid-Victorians | 1814-29 | 1832-51 | Carlyle, German higher criticism; Hungry Forties; [1848] | Pre-Raphaelites; Christian Socialism;  X-Club; Langham Place; Alpine Club; Metaphysical Society  |
| High Victorians | 1830-45 | 1848-67 | 1848; Great Exhibition; Crimea; *Risorgimento*; Darwin; Challenge of ‘democracy’ | British idealism; Arts and Crafts MovementAestheticism] [Society for Psychical Research] |
| Late Victorians | 1846-59 | 1865-85 | Franco-Prussian War; Darwinism | Fabians; NUWSS; Lux Mundi; Socialism; imperialism; [Synthetic Society] |
| Edwardians | 1860-75 | 1880s/90s | Mass market; scramble for Africa; fin de siècle | Decadents; New Liberals? |
| Modernists | 1876-90 | c.1897-1918 | Anti-Victorianism; Boer War; World War I | Bloomsbury; Camden Town Group; Vorticists |

**Generational Dynamics**

This schema does not claim to represent any sort of coherent contemporary sensibility. Victorian languages of generations were not stable or consistent. Nor is the argument here that all members of these generations shared the same views. Rather it is that dates of birth and age were powerful structuring forces, helping to shape cohorts whose particular ‘age-perspective’ encouraged shared values, assumptions, preoccupations, vocabularies and modes of thinking, of the sort suggested by Raymond Williams’ term ‘structures of feeling’, and W.H. Mallock’s observation on the debates between the mid-Victorian evolutionists Herbert Spencer and Thomas Huxley, that ‘underneath the several questions they quarrel about, there is a solid substructure of conclusions, methods, and arguments, as to which they all agree—agree in the most absolute way'.[[6]](#endnote-6)

These structuring forces did not produce the sort of generational identities characteristic of the twentieth century not least because, for the Victorians, generational dynamics were primarily localised and intimate: coteries and close networks rooted in particular institutions and localities, rather than wider cultural solidarities. The hot-house intensity of the Oxford or Cambridge lives of young men (and eventually young women), often extended by temporary fellowships, tutoring and other semi-formal connections, consolidated by debating groups and intellectual dining societies, and broadened by university reading parties, created powerful but intimate affinities, affinities that were not obviously generalizable beyond those involved.

The discussion that follows focuses largely on such university-connected elites, for whom the extant sources provide the fullest documentation of the processes involved. But the argument is both that these networks rippled outwards, and that they were mirrored, albeit in less intense forms, beyond the ancient universities, and ultimately in a multiplicity of less visible locations across society as a whole. Debating clubs were a feature of the Scottish and London Universities, of students studying for the bar, but also of young working class radicals. The connections formed at Oxford and Cambridge were paralleled in the experiences of Walter Bagehot (1826-77) and R.H. Hutton (1826-97) at University College London. And by the 1830s when the generation of 1819 were entering adulthood an increasingly rich landscape of mechanics’ institutes, literary and scientific societies, young men’s societies and mutual improvement associations drew many young adults outside the universities into similar milieu of intellectual fellowship and character formation. As Bagehot reflected of his formative years, 'All that "pastors and masters" can teach young people, is as nothing compared with what young people can't help teaching one another'.[[7]](#endnote-7)

**George and Josephine Butler**

The sorts of socio-cultural solidarities that resulted can be illustrated by the case of another figure born in 1819, George Butler. The Butler family was one of Noel Annan’s ‘intellectual aristocracy’ of nineteenth century Britain.[[8]](#endnote-8) His father was Headmaster of Harrow and Dean of Peterborough, his brothers included another Headmaster of Harrow and Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, and a Headmaster of Haileybury College and Dean of Oriel College, Oxford. His sister Louisa Jane (1822-97) married Francis Galton (1822-1911), thus connecting the Butlers to the Galton-Darwin-Wedgwood family nexus in the manner Annan celebrated. In 1852 Butler married Josephine Grey (1828-1906), member of a minor branch of family of Lord Grey, the Whig prime minister, and herself related to a number of significant families, including the Birrells of Liverpool.

But more significantly, through his schooling at Harrow, his university education, and then his work at Durham, as Examiner at Oxford, and then as schoolmaster at Cheltenham and Liverpool, Butler can be situated in a web of close friendships and connections powerfully moulded by the year of his birth. As an undergraduate and then young fellow at Oxford his close circle inevitably included other exact contemporaries, including Charles Kingsley (1819-75), Kingsley’s close friend Richard Cowley Powles (1819-1901), and William Thomson (1819-90), Archbishop of York, along with others slightly older or younger, including Stanley, Jowett, Froude, William Charles Lake (1817-1897) (Dean of Durham), John Duke Coleridge (1820-94) a lawyer and ultimately Lord Chief Justice, and Theodore Walrond (1824-87), fellow of Balliol and later Commissioner of the Civil Service.

Beyond this circle was a much wider configuration of interlaced networks, the creation and composition of which we get some sense of from Butler’s later reminiscences of reading parties in the summer of 1844 in the Lake District. Butler’s own party was small, consisting of his younger brother and two Oxford undergraduates, later joined by Froude. But it was the wider community of university acquaintances in the Lakes at the same time which is revealing, including his close friend Walrond, but also Edward Hayes Plumptre (1821-1891), later Professor at King’s College, Clough, Bonamy Price (1807-88), and Matthew Arnold and his family. Or to take another instance, through his wife Josephine Grey, better known of course to history as Josephine Butler, women’s rights campaigner, Butler was closely integrated into the group which coalesced around the campaign against the Contagious Diseases Act, including James Stansfeld (1820-98), Mary Catherine Hume-Rothery (1824–1885), Lydia Becker (1827-90), Samuel Alfred Steinthal (1826-1910), as well as a few born in the years immediately after 1829, such as Elizabeth Clarke Wolstenholme Elmy (1833–1918),[[9]](#endnote-9) and also the movement for the Higher Education for Women, including Anne Clough (1820-92), sister of Clough. Living in Oxford in the later 1840s and early 1850s the Butlers inhabited a wider community of Oxford-based intimates, including a number of prominent, slightly younger members of the University: the liberal politician Goldwin Smith (1823-1910), the philologist Max Muller (1823-1900), and the diplomat Robert Morier (1826-93).[[10]](#endnote-10)

These were more than merely the sort of friendship groups that grew up around any Oxbridge graduate of these years, and the temporal scope of their birthdates from the mid-1810s to the end of the 1820s is more than simply a function of Butler’s birthdate roughly in the middle. Rather they can be seen as cells of a more general and coherent ‘generation’.

**A mid-Victorian Generation?**

Each of the prominent members of Butler’s circle inhabited their own networks, the tracing of which suggests the centripetal force of the birth-years 1814-1829. Jowett and Arnold were both frequent and influential reference points for contemporaries, while the links with Clough and Froude provided connectivity to a number of important coteries and networks. Froude, identified as the spokesman of a generation by John Burrow, was linked to non-university networks of mid-Victorians, via his active role in the circle around the publisher John Chapman (1821-94) at 142 Strand.[[11]](#endnote-11) This circle is itself interesting for the strength of its generational identity, notwithstanding its much more diffuse relationships: boarders, visitors, authors, confidants.[[12]](#endnote-12) It included a number of influential early-Victorians, and some individuals at the generational margins, most notably Mark Pattison (1813-84) and William Hale White (1831-1913); but otherwise centres on a significant group of mid-Victorians, including, in addition to Froude and Clough, Herbert Spencer, Huxley, Eliot, G.H. Lewes (1817-78), Bessie Rayner Parkes (1829-1925), Barbara Bodichon (1827-91), and Wathen M.W. Call (1817-90). Of itself, again, the Chapman group was still a fairly narrow coterie; but it in turn overlaps and aligns with other mid-Victorian coteries, such as the ‘Leader’ group, the editorial leadership and key contributors of the 1850s weekly *The Leader*, which had editorial offices close to Chapman’s, and included Thornton Hunt (1810-73), George Dawson (1821-76), Richard Congreve (1818-99), W.J. Linton (1812-97), E.F.S. Pigott (1824-1895), and Edward Michael Whitty (1827–1860).[[13]](#endnote-13) From the aggregative effect of the interconnections of such networks wider social and perhaps cultural solidarities emerged.

The patterning that could result is particularly visible for nineteenth century artistic groups, in which the firmly mid-Victorian pre-Raphaelites, whose seven core members were Thomas Woolner (1825-1902), James Collinson (1825-1881), Frederic George Stephens (1827-1907), William Holman Hunt (1827-1910), Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1888), William Michael Rossetti (1829-1919) and John Everett Millais (1829-96), sit in a surprisingly well-defined generational sequence. The Victorians had a particular penchant for conceiving successions of this sort. In the same way, we might situate Froude as part of a coherent ‘generation’ of historians, including William Stubbs (1825-1901), E.A. Freeman (1823-92), S.R. Gardiner (1829-1902), and J.R. Seeley (1834-95), distinct from earlier and later groupings of historians.[[14]](#endnote-14)

***Figure 1: Art Groups in Victorian Britain***


Note the y-axis in the graph has a double function: it aligns the groups at the point of their formation (so 1848 for the Pre-Raphaelites); but it also expresses the proportion of members in each five-year cell of birth dates (so that the thicker the block, the higher the proportion of members with birthdates in that cell, up to 100% for ‘The Clique’.

What is noticeable about these groups is how little they sought to adopt generational labels. Even the tightly-knit Pre-Raphaelites, who were conventionally divided into first- and second-generations by later Victorian commentators, and who clearly saw themselves as involved in an assault on established artistic practices and mores, showed no interest in adopting a generational badge. But if the Butlers’ affinity groups did not overtly identify themselves in generational terms, they do offer instances of generational thinking. For example the discussions in the mid-1840s around possible futures of the *Oxford and Cambridge Review* (which involved Butler, Froude, Cowley Powles, and Kingsley), which aspired, in Kingsley’s words, to create a space ‘in which the young men of the day could find a vehicle for free expression of their opinions’.[[15]](#endnote-15) ‘I am more and more painfully awake to the fact’, Kingsley told Powles, ‘that the curse of our generation is that so few of us deeply believe in anything’.[[16]](#endnote-16) Kingsley’s explicit focus was ‘young men of 25 or 30’, that is those born 1817-22.[[17]](#endnote-17)

The writings of Bagehot demonstrate how far the mid-Victorians thought in larger generational patterns.[[18]](#endnote-18) For Bagehot historical actors operated generationally; they grew to adulthood bringing new perspectives, they wielded power in conscious rejection of the approaches of a previous generation, and they then aged and were superseded by the challenge of the new ideas of a new generation. Thus Bagehot traced the reforming character of the 1830s to an 1828-30 watershed when ‘a new race came to influence public affairs, who did not remember the horrors of the French Revolution, and who had been teased to death by hearing their parents talk about them’.[[19]](#endnote-19) His historical essays frequently explored the misunderstandings of generational encounter, and the disruptive power of generational succession.

**The mid-Victorian archetype**

Bagehot, as W.L. Burn many years ago warned us, offers a standing invitation to ‘selective Victorianism’. The temptation is not just a function of his ability to speak for a wider generation, but also that it is the generation which survived into the 1890s and so filled out the ‘Victorian period’. It was the mid-Victorians who were the *locus classicus* of notions of ‘Victorianism’; they mostly supplied Asa Briggs’ *Victorian People* and articulated Walter Houghton’s *Victorian Frame of Mind*.[[20]](#endnote-20) Indeed, for a long time the two labels were largely synonymous. Subsequent rejection of the grand characterisations offered by these texts has reflected a justifiable suspicion of their potential reductionism, but it could equally have derived from attentiveness to generational multiplicities and to a recognition that Victorian culture was constituted out of intergenerational exchange as much as the character of any one of its constituent generations. This sensibility is registered in the description of the Church of England offered by Reginald Baliol Brett, 2nd Viscount Esher (1852-1930), in the later 1880s, in which ‘the High Churchmen of forty years ago, undergraduates then, are the High Churchmen of today who look uneasily at the generation passing into middle age, … and with dread at the younger generation coming to early manhood’.[[21]](#endnote-21)

Nevertheless, such encounters were only meaningful to the extent to which each generation presented a specific character, and with greater scope than is available here, we could begin to identify the distinctive nodes of coalescence and commonality characteristic of the mid-Victorians. Formative experiences, including an adolescent encounter with the reform agitations of the 1830s which engendered a sense of distance from parents who responded to the Reform crisis with attitudes 'largely founded on that fear of Jacobinism' which had been so powerful.[[22]](#endnote-22) Intellectual influences, for example Tractarianism (Arnold later recalled of Newman that from him he had learned ‘habits, methods ruling ideas, which are constantly with me’).[[23]](#endnote-23) Perhaps even a characteristic temper, the consciousness of the strength of religious orthodoxy which saw Froude ostracised and others unable to publicly acknowledge their agnosticism, but which gave religious debate a particular charge. ‘The present generation’, Froude later remarked, ‘which has grown up in an open spiritual ocean, … will never know what it was to find the lights all drifting, the compasses all awry, and nothing left to steer by except the stars'.[[24]](#endnote-24)

Mid-Victorianism in this sense can be seen in various guises. Although only raggedly, it is visible in the *Essays and Reviews* volume (1860), four of whose six essayists (Pattison, Jowett, Temple and Goodwin) were mid-Victorians. It is more obviously apparent in the Metaphysical Society, whose membership spilled across the generational boundaries considerably, but whose centre of gravity was markedly mid-Victorian, and whose aspiration to reconcile science and religion marked a particular phase of nineteenth century religious decline. Part of the force of the Metaphysical Society as an epitome of the mid-Victorians is the depth of its divisions. It was not a consensus over belief or some particular intellectual schema which gave the generation its character, but its willingness to engage publicly in debate about theological and religious issues and to canvass novel solutions. This, for Mark Francis, ‘signalled a generational shift’ from older radicals who tended to avoid religious controversies.[[25]](#endnote-25)

***Figure 2. Membership of the Metaphysical Society 1869-1880[[26]](#endnote-26)***



**Conclusion**

To those following on behind, the mid-Victorians came to feel like a dead weight, the entrenched ‘men of the last generation'.[[27]](#endnote-27) In contrast, as they aged, the mid-Victorians felt themselves drifting to the margins of the currents of history. The sense from the mid-1880s that ‘'the generation that listened to Carlyle and studied Goethe under his advice is passing away' contributed to the ferment of the fin de siècle.[[28]](#endnote-28) Younger figures were certainly not slow to mobilize such language as a way of staking a claim to influence. Commenting in 1900 on the increasing irrelevance of his ‘chief’, Goldwin Smith, Arnold Haultain (1857-1941) remarked that ‘He has outlived his day, ... the day of the `forties, `fifties and `sixties. … He fails to see that his lessons have been learnt by heart, and that now far other and far graver lessons are to learn. … Today he is a “Bystander”, a bystander judging of the present with his eyes fixed on the past’.[[29]](#endnote-29)

It was an unfair judgement, and one which alerts us to the dangers of the potential instrumentalism of generational languages, of the narrow linearity of much generational analysis, and of the *ex post facto* reasonings that generational identities can reflect. But it also alerts us to the often neglected age dynamics of Victorian history, and the role of generations as well as of narrower birth cohorts, in shaping solidarities and construing conflict. And it encourages us to place the men and women of 1819 into a broader generational cohort of which they were often central, in more ways than one.

1. David Newsome, *Godliness and Good Learning: Four Studies on a Victorian Ideal* (London: Murray, 1961), p. 11. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Bernard M.G. Reardon, *Religious Thought in the Victorian Age: Illustrated from Writers of the Period* (Longman, 1995), p. 266. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Patrick G. Scott, ‘A.H. Clough: a case study in Victorian Doubt’, in Derek Baker, ed., *Schism, Heresy and Religious Protest* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), pp. 383-89. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. In part this reflects the ‘serious problems of method in the analysis of cultural groups’ which Williams subsequently noted, ‘The Bloomsbury Fraction’, in Raymond Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London: Verso, 1980), pp. 148-69. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The authorship study examined the authorship of just over 10,000 articles published in eight nineteenth century journals (*Ainsworth’s*, *Blackwood’s*, *Edinburgh Review,* *Fraser’s*, *London Quarterly Review*, *Macmillan’s*, *The Nineteenth Century*, and *Westminster Review*). While the data was not robust enough for detailed analysis, when grouped according to the generational bands deployed here, it did demonstrate much greater coherence than for random 15-year cohorts. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. William H. Mallock, 'Cowardly Agnosticism. A Word with Prof Huxley', *Fortnightly Review*, 45 (April 1889), pp. 529-54 (p. 530). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Walter Bagehot, *Collected Works*, VII, *The Political Essays*, ed. Norman St John Stevas, (London: The Economist, 1974), pp. 354-55. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Noel Annan, ‘The Intellectual Aristocracy’, in *Studies in Social History: A Tribute to G.M. Trevelyan*, ed. byJohn H. Plumb (London: Longmans, Green and Co.,1955), pp. 243-87. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Michael J.D. Roberts*, Making English Morals. Voluntary Association and Moral Reform in England, 1787-1886* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 214-18. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. A society registered in Josephine Butler, *Recollections of George Butler* (Bristol: J.W. Arrowsmith, [1894]). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. John W. Burrow, *The Crisis of Reason: European Thought, 1848-1914* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 151. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Rosemary Ashton, *142 Strand. A Radical Address in Victorian London* (London: Vintage, 2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Mark Francis, *Herbert Spencer and the Invention of Modern Life* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), pp. 113-31; see also Christopher Kent, ‘The Leader’, in *British Literary Magazines, vol. 3 ‘The Victorian and Edwardian Age, 1837-1914’*, ed. Alvin Sullivan (London: Greenwood Press, 1984), pp. 185-189. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Michael Bentley, *Modernizing England's Past. English Historiography in the Age of Modernism, 1870-1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2005), pp. 23, 70. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Ciaran Brady, *James Anthony Froude. An Intellectual Biography of a Victorian Prophet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p.vii. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Frances E. Kingsley, *Charles Kingsley. His Letters and Memories of His Life* (London: Henry S. King, 1877), i, 85, 140-41. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Kingsley, p. 144. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Dowling suggests that Victorians such as Bagehot not only saw themselves as part of a distinctive generation, but 'as students of Mill, they understood that a generation was precisely the unit of historical change', Linda C. Dowling, *Charles Eliot Norton: the Art of Reform in Nineteenth Century America* (London: University of New England Press, 2007), p. 86. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Walter Bagehot, 'Lord Althorp and the Reform Act of 1832', *Fortnightly*, 20 (Nov 1876), p. 584. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. William L. Burn, *The Age of Equipoise* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1964), p. 57. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Reginald B. Brett, 'What are the Ideals of the Masses?', *The Nineteenth Century*, 28 (1890), p. 527. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Ina Argyll, *George Douglas, Eighth Duke of Argyll, Autobiography and Memoirs* (London: Murray, 1906), p.67. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Quoted Park Honan, *Matthew Arnold. A Life* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1981), p.61. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. James A. Froude, *Carlyle*, I, 290-91, cited in G. Himmelfarb, *Darwin and the Darwinian Revolution* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1959), p. 329. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Francis notes that it is characteristic of the period that the radicalism of Newman is almost entirely religious. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Membership list taken from Alan W. Brown, *The Metaphysical Society: Victorian Minds in Crisis, 1869-1880* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1947). [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. 'Seniority in Literature. By a Journeyman Journalist', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 13 October 1885, pp.2-3. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. J.R. Seeley, 'Goethe', *Contemporary Review* 46 (1884), 161-177 (p.169). [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Arnold Haultain*, Goldwin Smith. His Life and Opinions*, (London: T. Werner Laurie, 1913), pp. 69-70. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)