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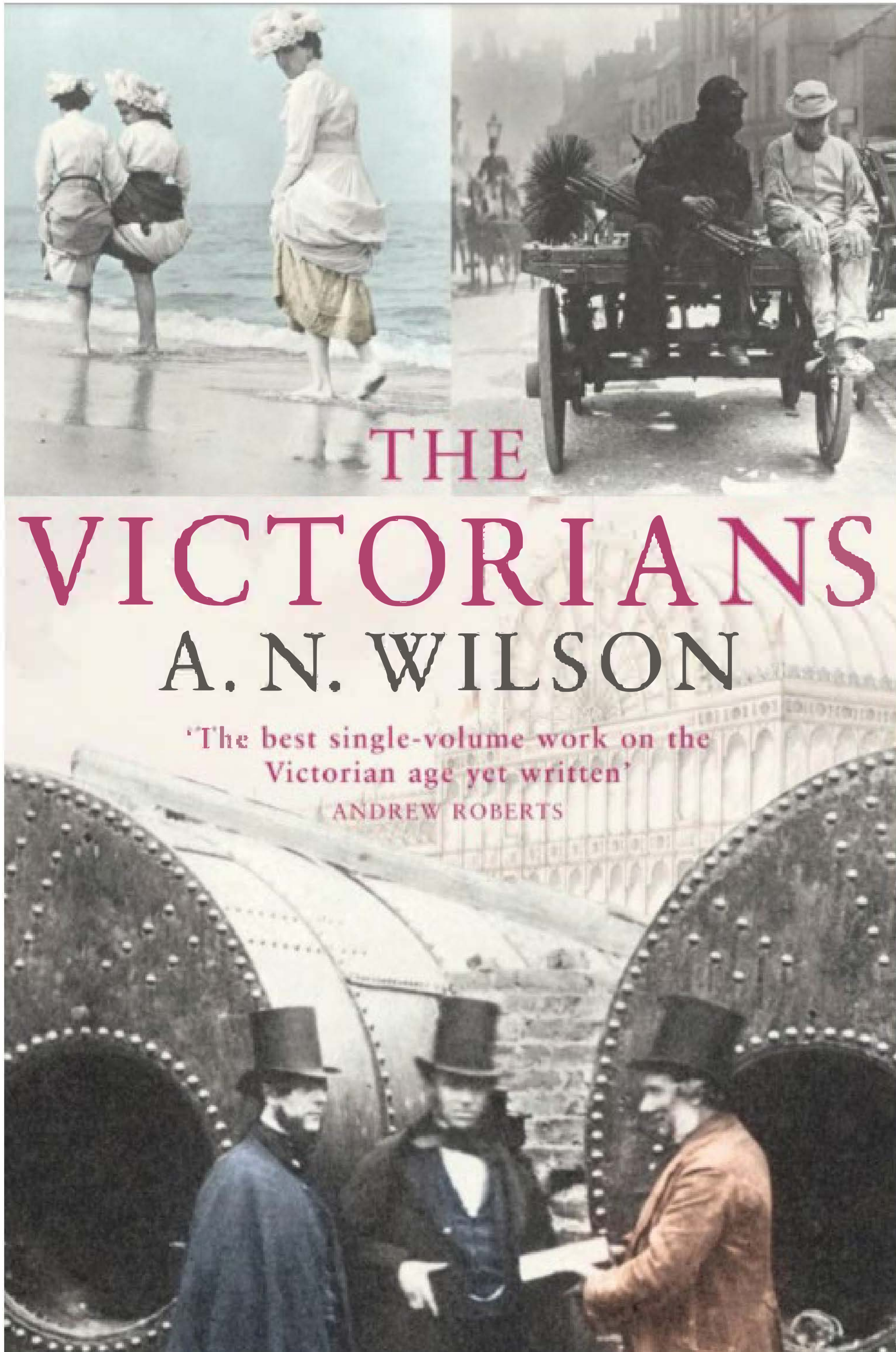

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I

The Little Old Woman Britannia

On 16 October 1834, two visitors arrived at the Palace of Westminster and asked to be shown the chamber of the House of Lords. Parliament was in recess: sessions were much shorter in those days than now. The Speaker of the Lords, the Clerk of the Parliament, the Gentleman Usher of Black Rod, the Sergeant-at-Arms – all those charged with the responsibility for the safety and upkeep of the Houses of Parliament – were away, in the country. The place was in the charge of a housekeeper called Mrs Wright.[1]

When, at four o'clock that afternoon, Mrs Wright showed the visitors into the chamber of the Lords, they could scarcely make out the magnificent tapestries on the walls. There was smoke everywhere. The visitors complained that the stone floor was so hot that they could feel it through the soles of their feet. The throne, the grand centrepiece of the chamber, where sat the constitutional monarch when opening and proroguing their Lordships' assemblies, was invisible because of smoke. The house was, Mrs Wright agreed, in 'a complete smother'.

The workmen in the crypt who had started the blaze had been charged, in the absence of the parliamentarians, with the task of burning the wooden tallies used by the Exchequer for centuries as a means of computing tax. These were modern times and these wooden tabs were to be replaced by figures written down in paper ledgers. It had been suggested to the Clerk of Works at Westminster, Richard Whibley, that this abundance of little sticks would make useful kindling for the fireplaces of the poor. (Then, as now, there were many poor people living within a short walk of the Houses of Parliament.)

> The sticks were housed at Westminster, and it would naturally occur to any intelligent person that nothing could be easier than to allow them to be carried away for firewood, by some of the many miserable creatures in that neighbourhood. However, they never had been useful, and official routine could not endure that they ever should be useful, and so the order went forth that they were to be privately and confidentially burnt. It came to pass that they were burnt in a stove in the House of Lords. The stove over-gorged with these

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> preposterous sticks, set fire to the panelling; the panelling set fire to the House of Lords; the House of Lords set fire to the House of Commons; the two houses were reduced to ashes; architects were called in to build two more; and we are now in the second million of the cost thereof; the national pig is not nearly over the style yet; and the little old woman, Britannia, hasn't got home tonight.[2]

The voice, unmistakably, is that of Charles Dickens (1812–70), speaking years after the fire. There was, as he half implied, a fittingness about the fire. The Reform Bill of 1832 had selfconsciously ushered in a new era; when the emperor of Russia heard of the Westminster fire he thought it was heavenly punishment for the Whiggish abolition of rotten boroughs – boroughs which, with only a handful of voters, could nevertheless return a member of Parliament. That was perhaps because he saw the passing of the Reform Bill as the first stage of the modernizing of the British political system, the first unpicking of an old-fashioned system of hierarchy, and deference, the first stage in a hand-over of political power from the aristocracy to the bourgeoisie. This, however, was hardly how it appeared at the time. Few, if any, of the Whig aristocrats who had reformed the parliamentary system were believers in democracy. All deplored the notion of universal suffrage. The extension of the suffrage, which diehards so regretted, was limited wholly to persons of property. The great Reform Act 'had defined more clearly than at any time before or since in British history, and more clearly than had been done in any other country, a qualification for the inclusion in the political institutions of the country based entirely on the possession of property, and the possession of a regular income'.[3]

Even with the abolition of rotten boroughs, the new Parliament was representative of the people only in the most notional sense. That was not how it conceived its purpose. What was new about the political classes in the so-called Age of Reform was their desire, a successful desire, to exercise control over the populace. There was no divide in the Parliament of the 1830s and 1840s between what a modern person would conceive of as Left and Right. The agitations of the Left took place then – as, very largely now – outside Parliament. The problem for the political classes – whether old Whig aristocrats, Tory squires, or the new manufacturing and industrial bigwigs whose emergence into the political scene was to change the climate so radically – was all seen as the same problem: how to control a rapidly expanding population. How to feed it, how to keep it busy, how, if it was Irish, or Scottish, to

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restrain it from open rebellion, how, if it was poor and discontented, to discourage it from sedition, how, if it was French, to prevent it from invading Great Britain, how, if it was Jamaican or Canadian, to stop it seceding from the British Crown. Hence the development in this era of the first police force, of tight controls over paupers, and of the workhouses in which to incarcerate those incapable of feeding their families.

These were the common problems agreed upon by almost all parliamentarians, though the Tories might be more inclined in some areas, the Radicals in others, to raise a voice of protest against the incursion, by new parliamentary measures, into the personal liberty of Englishmen.

The statistics speak for themselves. Over the previous eighty years, the population of England, Wales and Scotland had doubled – 7,250,000 in 1751, 10,943,000 in 1801, 14,392,000 in 1821; by 1831, 16,539,000 – and in Ireland 4,000,000 had become 8,000,000.[4]

Economics and politics conceived in terms of population-growth was an inevitable development in the history of human thought. If the Reverend Thomas Malthus (1766–1834) had not existed it would have been necessary to invent him and someone else would have written *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, a work which he first wrote in 1798 and constantly revised – in 1803, 1806, 1807, 1817 and 1826. The Malthusian questions have not gone away in the twenty-first century, though Western societies have a polite way of exporting them and worry more about the population of India and China than they do about that of, let us say, Britain. A recent edition of Malthus's essay has an introduction which reminds us in apocalyptic terms that 'in the 1990s the world is gaining *each year* the population equivalent of Sri Lanka, the UK, Haiti and Somalia combined . . . By 2050 we shall have a world population of *ten billion*.'[5]

Such figures would have confirmed the worst fears of the Reverend Thomas Malthus, who in the 1790s had a friendly argument with his father about the population question. Daniel Malthus believed, with such sages as Condorcet, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and William Godwin, that society was advancing towards perfection. Thomas believed that human population grows at a 'geometric' rate, as in the series, 1, 2, 4, 8, 16, whereas means of subsistence must grow at an arithmetical rate – 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. The inevitable consequence of this, he believed, was starvation – and before that the misery, belligerence and social disruption which hunger brings to human societies.

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Although seen immediately as a kind of monster – Shelley called him 'a eunuch and a tyrant', Dickens makes Scrooge a mouthpiece for Malthusianism by asking why the poor don't go away and die 'to decrease the surplus population' – it was in fact with the highest altruism that Malthus wrote his *Essay*. He wanted poor people not to be poor – or if inevitably poor, at least to be well fed. Paradoxically he saw that the existent Poor Laws – what we would call Welfare – encouraged a dependency-culture. Whereas the old Poor Laws had left to the discretion of local parishes the choice of to whom charitable provision should be made, the new Poor Laws – enacted by the last Parliament before the fire of 1834 – centralized the provision of Poor Relief. Rather than extending charity to the poor in their own homes, the Commissioners had built a chain of workhouses across the country. It could be said that no one had to go to the workhouse. When the alternative, however, was to watch children go hungry, it is not surprising that the hated places began to fill up, even though most were faithful to the ideals of the Reverend H.H. Milman, writing to Edwin Chadwick, 'the workhouses should be a place of hardship, of coarse fare, of degradation and humility; it should be administered with strictness – with severity; it should be as repulsive as is consistent with humanity'.[6]

No wonder that those who found themselves taken to the workhouse should have cursed Malthus in their hearts – Malthus who advocated 'restraint' among the lower orders as the only permissible form of birth control.

One such child, born surplus to requirements in Staffordshire in the 1840s, remembered:

> We went by the field road to Chell, so as to escape as much observation as possible. One child had to be carried as she was too young to walk. The morning was dull and cheerless. I had been through those fields in sunshine, and when the singing of the birds made the whole scene very pleasant. Now, when the silence was broken, it was only by deep agonizing sobs. If we could have seen what was driving us so relentlessly up that hill to the workhouse ('Bastille' as it was bitterly called then) we should have seen two stern and terrible figures – Tyranny and Starvation . . . As a child – 'the very vastness of it' [the workhouse] chilled us. Our reception was more chilling still . . . No 'softening gleam' fell upon us from any quarter. We were a part of Malthus's 'superfluous population' and

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> our existence only tended to increase the poverty from which we suffered. 'Benevolence', he said, 'in a being so short-sighted as man, would lead to the grossest error, and soon transform the fair and cultivated soil of civilised society into a dreary scene of want and confusion'. This truly was a 'nice derangement of epitaphs' to come from the pen of a clergyman in a Christian country. I have wondered if the pen with which he wrote was a steel pen.

The author, Charles Shaw, inveighed bitterly against the 'gross selfishness and unspeakable crassness' of the 'statesmanship of England' for imposing these miseries.[7]

All of which – and much more – might have gone some way towards explaining Dickens's facetious tone in describing the Westminster fire, which MPs themselves and all those interested in the history of these magnificent old buildings, containing countless documents of historical importance, saw as 'that melancholy catastrophe'.[8] The Speaker, Charles Manners-Sutton, reckoned he had lost £9,000 worth of goods in the fire, including a valuable library.

On that fateful evening of 16 October, Mrs Wright, the housekeeper, locked the door of the House at five, feeling that she had done her duty in complaining to the workmen about the smoke and heat. Around an hour later, the doorkeeper's wife, Mrs Mullencamp, noticed flames licking the underneath of the door of the House of Lords and a few minutes later the entire building burst into flames. It was not until 7 p.m. that James Braidwood, superintendent of the London Fire Engine Establishment, heard of the fire and ordered twelve manual fire engines and sixty-four firemen to attend. By 7.30, fifty of the First Regiment of Grenadier Guards had arrived, and assisted by a strong body of the newly formed and much-hated Metropolitan Police they kept a space clear in front of both Houses.

Among the immense crowd gathered to watch the blaze was Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775–1851), who stayed up all night doing innumerable pencil sketches. Afterwards he rushed home to Queen Anne Street to do so many watercolour studies, based on immediate memory, that the leaves of his sketchbook stuck together. First he was on the Surrey bank surveying the scene from afar across the water. As the blaze died down however he came over and joined the thousands who thronged into Old Palace Yard.

'I never lose an accident,'[9] Turner once told his most articulate admirer. This particular accident, this blaze of orange and gold