



A Mad, Bad, and Dangerous People?: England 1783-1846 (New Oxford History of England)

Boyd Hilton

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This was a transformative period in English history. In 1783 the country was at one of the lowest points in its fortunes, having just lost its American colonies in warfare. By 1846 it was once more a great imperial nation, as well as the world's strongest power and dominant economy, having benefited from what has sometimes (if misleadingly) been called the 'first industrial revolution'. In the meantime it survived a decade of invasion fears, and emerged victorious from more than twenty years of 'war to the death' against Napoleonic France. But if Britain's external fortunes were in the ascendant, the situation at home remained fraught with peril. The country's population was growing at a rate not experienced by any comparable former society, and its manufacturing towns especially were mushrooming into filthy, disease-ridden, gin-sodden hell-holes, in turn provoking the phantasmagoria of a mad, bad, and dangerous people. It is no wonder that these years should have experienced the most prolonged period of social unrest since the seventeenth century, or that the elite should have been in constant fear of a French-style revolution in England.

The governing classes responded to these new challenges and by the mid-nineteenth century the seeds of a settled two-party system and of a more socially interventionist state were both in evidence, though it would have been far too soon to say at that stage whether those seeds would take permanent root. Another consequence of these tensions was the intellectual engagement with society, as for example in the Romantic Movement, a literary phenomenon that brought English culture to the forefront of European attention for the first time. At the same time the country experienced the great religious revival, loosely described under the heading 'evangelicalism'. Slowly but surely, the raffish and rakish style of eighteenth-century society, having reached a peak in the Regency, then succumbed to the new norms of respectability popularly known as 'Victorianism'.

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