

APRÈS THE VICTORIANS ...

KIRK WILLIS
History / U. of Georgia
Athens, GA 30602-1602, USA
KW@UGA.EDU

A. N. Wilson. *After the Victorians: the Decline of Britain in the World*. London: Hutchinson; New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005 (hb); New York: Picador, 2006 (pb). ISBN 0-312-42515-5. US\$32.50; US\$18.00 (pb). Pp. xii, 609.

Poet, novelist, biographer, anthologist, literary critic, and cultural commentator, A. N. Wilson is one of Britain's most prominent and productive contemporary men of letters. Most at home with religious themes and individuals, he has written popular biographies of Jesus, St. Paul, Tolstoy, Milton, C. S. Lewis, and Hilaire Belloc, edited *The Faber Book of Church and Clergy*, collected the religious writings of Tolstoy, and featured religious themes conspicuously in his many novels. Most comfortable intellectually in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, he has in recent years moved into the cultural history of this period—producing a collection of his own *Eminent Victorians* in 1983 and a survey of *The Victorians* in 2003. Full of sharply drawn pen portraits, lively anecdotes, and tartly expressed opinions, these books have won a wide audience, if far from a universally approving critical reception.

Hard on the heels of his successful depiction of the Victorians, Wilson has now extended his account into the first half of the twentieth century—from the death of Victoria in 1901 to the coronation of Elizabeth II in 1953. As with its companion volume, *After the Victorians* is more cultural sketch than academic history. Indeed, as a work of history it lacks any sense of historical causation and is resolutely descriptive and judgmental rather than explanatory and detached. Wilson, indeed, seems not so much interested in explaining the past—or even in accounting for current conditions—as in telling some good stories, settling some festering scores, passing some harsh judgments, praising some admired individuals, and bemoaning the fact that the Britain of the old Queen, Gladstone, and Disraeli has gone to the dogs. Not for nothing is the book subtitled “the Decline of Britain in the World”.

A reader of *After the Victorians* therefore learns a great deal about Wilson's own likes and (especially) dislikes concerning literature, politics, religion, and war but not much about the larger social, economic, scientific, and technological changes that transformed Britain in the first half of the twentieth century. Possessing a nice line in invective and an enviable fluency in presenting literary and

political vignettes, Wilson peppers his text with bright, funny, and caustic set pieces which he leaves the reader to string together and to make larger sense of. The Liberal Prime Minister H. H. Asquith, for example, is described as “languid, emotional, sexually obsessed and clever in a second-rate sort of way” (p. 183), while the press lords Northcliffe and Beaverbrook are dismissed as “appalling vulgarians” (p. 186), and Lord Louis Mountbatten, to offer a final example, is condemned fiercely for his role in managing Indian and Pakistani independence in 1947: “By his superficial haste, his sheer arrogance, his inattention to vital detail, and his unwillingness to provide the huge peace-keeping forces which could have protected migrant populations, Mountbatten was responsible for as many deaths as some of those who were hanged after the Nuremberg trials” (p. 495).

Given his robustly expressed Conservative sympathies and Christian faith, it should be no surprise that Wilson does not number Bertrand Russell among his intellectual icons. In *The Victorians* Wilson contented himself with a mention of how the young Russell had, with the equally youthful G. E. Moore, “broken with the Idealists and adopted the philosophy of ‘realism’” (New York: Norton, 2003, p. 569). No longer believing metaphysically that “truth is a unity”, Wilson asserted, Russell had then been led ineluctably into any number of errors and had catapulted into a “career [with] a violent disjunction between the belief in vast impersonal realities—logical or mathematical truth—and the vacillations of his wholly irrational, often self-contradictory, views on free love, the education of children, or war and peace” (p. 570). Observing, correctly, that “Russell was in every sense a Victorian”, Wilson dismissed Russell’s own proclamation that “three passions, simple but overwhelmingly strong, have governed my life” not simply as self-dramatizing but as quite untrue. In fact, Wilson concluded harshly, Russell’s “philosophical journey by the end of the 1890s made it seem pointless, even illogical” to look for love, to search for knowledge, or to feel pity for a suffering mankind: “This detachment in Russell, so influential to the whole of the later generation, between the demand of the ethical, and of logical truth, is the true Decadence of the 1890s” (p. 571).

In *After the Victorians* Wilson shows a similar disdain for Russell’s character, philosophy, and influence. Observing that “Russell was not one of those rare beings—not Einstein, Bonhoeffer, Gandhi or Wittgenstein—the pure in heart”, Wilson judges that, instead, “he was a complex of impurities, whose very superficiality made him an increasingly appropriate mouthpiece for the age, as the decades unrolled” (p. 172). True to his preference for lively portraiture, Wilson, when searching for reasons to justify his own opinions of Russell, begins with the physical: “Russell looked and sounded very much like his famous prime minister grandfather: tiny, and with a very distinctive, rather ugly voice ... a rasping version of pre-1832 aristocratic English.” Pressing more deeply, Wilson asserts that Russell possessed insufficient emotional self-awareness and intellec-

tual consistency—failings which meant, among other things, that “as a husband, father and grandfather he clearly had appalling defects.” Nonetheless, Wilson—who pauses to discuss none of Russell’s books or essays in any detail or, indeed, even by name—does confess to a grudging respect for Russell’s enduring political courage, especially his anti-nuclear and anti-Vietnam campaigning at the end of his life:

Whatever his personal follies, there was a great nobility in this.... Those of us who continue to revere the memory of the ancient Lord Russell, the removal of whose recumbent form into police vans formed an essential part of any peace ritual of the 1950s and early 1960s, believe his protests to be both sincere yet absurd, noble but theatrical. The tainted century in which Russell gleefully played his totemic role allowed for little purity. (P. 172)

Colourful, opinionated, and wide-ranging, *After the Victorians* thus lives up to its proclaimed purpose as “a portrait of an age rather than a formal history” (p. xi). Full of memorably drawn scenes and character sketches and lacking even the pretence to objectivity aspired to by academic historians, it is never dull, always judgmental, and unpredictably quirky—to be read with care and the company of a second opinion.
