Victorian Britain: A Century of Reform

The 1800's were a time of liberal reform in Britain. These reforms came as a result of two things: the French Revolution and the industrial revolution. Though the French Revolution happened in France, not Britain, its rallying cry of "liberty, equality, and brotherhood" appealed to many people in England. While the British hated both the actions of Robespierre and the conquests of Napoleon, many of them recognized that the French had done something dramatic when they had let all men vote, and allowed religious toleration. (In Britain, only wealthy Anglican men could vote, and Catholics could not worship freely.)

The industrial revolution had made Britain the most powerful nation on earth. But industrialism had also led to many workers working eighty hour weeks, to children as young as five working in factories, and to terrible labor conditions. Workers were unable to do anything to better their working conditions; unions and strikes were illegal, and of course poor workers could not vote. These conditions changed slowly as a result of reforms made in the nineteenth century.

Early Reform

By 1800, both parties in the House of Commons, the Tories and the Whigs, saw that changes needed to be made in British government and law. The Whigs, known officially as the Liberal Party, were liberals who believed that the government should help the poor, but also give the poor the right to vote. The Conservatives, or Tories, agreed that the upper classes should help the poor, but did not believe that the poor could be trusted to help run the government.

Both these groups were pushed to reform Britain by the riots of British workers. In 1816 a group of unemployed workers, called Luddites, smashed up factories and machines because they blamed the machines for their unemployment. Soon after, unemployed blanket workers marched by the hundreds through London, demanding jobs. (This was the March of the Blanketeers). The biggest riot, the Peterloo Massacres, occurred in 1819. Sixty thousand workers had met to listen to a radical labor leader, Henry Hunt, demand the right for all men to vote. The army attempted to arrest Hunt, and the British cavalry charged the crowd, killing eleven people and wounding many more.

These marches and riots forced the government to act. The Tory leader Sir Robert Peel led Parliament to reform the criminal code by making punishments less severe. He organized the first professional police force for London, called the
"bobbies." Most importantly, in 1828 non-Anglican Protestants were given the vote, and in 1829 Catholics were allowed to worship and vote.

When the Whigs took power they forced further voting reforms. The Reform Act of 1832 slightly lowered property requirements, and redistributed seats from the depopulated countryside to the growing city. Still, only one in seven men could vote.

Other reforms took place in this period. In 1834 slavery was abolished everywhere in the British Empire. The 1833 Factory Act limited child labor; children under nine could not work, children ages 9-13 could only work nine hours a day and had to be given two hours of schooling a day. Young people ages 13-18 could only work twelve hour days. The Municipal Corporations Act set up democratic city governments across Britain and allowed those governments to supervise basic services like water, sewer, and police protection. Some government money was also given to private schools to aid the education of the poor. However, this money was very limited; about half of Britain's population remained illiterate.

Not all the laws of this period were good for workers, however. The Poor Law of 1834 forced all unemployed men to either find jobs or go to live in "poor-houses." These were workhouses for men where they lived and worked apart from their families. They were unpleasant enough that men were forced to take even the worst paying jobs just to stay out of them.

**Victoria**

In 1837, 18 year old Queen Victoria took the throne. She ruled until her death until 1901. Her period of rule is known as the "Victorian Era." This era is known as time of British power abroad and British wealth and morality at home. Victorian citizens were supposed to be hardworking, religious, and devoted to their families.

Victoria herself was remarkable in that she gracefully agreed to give up her own power to Parliament. This process took a number of years, but by the time of her death, Britain was on the road to becoming a full democracy in which the monarchs and the House of Lords had little real power.

Victoria was advised by two of Britain's greatest prime ministers, William Gladstone and Benjamin Disraeli. William Gladstone was born into an upper class family, well-educated, and nearly went into the Anglican priesthood. He became a leader of the Liberal Party and fought hard for reform. Benjamin Disraeli was a British Jew without money or university education who rose to be prime minis-
ter of the Conservative Party. Disraeli also became Queen Victoria's closest friend after the death of her husband, Albert. Like Gladstone, he was a reformer, but unlike Gladstone he also believed that Britain should extend her empire all over the globe. (He won this argument.)

After 1865, when Gladstone and Disraeli took on the leadership of their parties, a new era of reform began in Britain. The Reform Bill of 1867 gave the vote to most urban males. The Irish were granted more freedoms; they didn't have to pay to support the Anglican Church, and they were given certain rights in their dealings with English landlords, who still owned much of the land in Ireland. The Education Act of 1870 made public schools. In 1880, all children between 5 and 13 were forced to go to school. The 1872 Ballot Act made secret ballots part of the voting process. The Civil Service Act of 1870 made a civil service exam that people had to pass before they could be appointed into government positions.

Working and living conditions were also improved by new laws. The Public Health Act of 1875 made laws about sanitation. The Factory and Workshop Act of 1878 made laws concerning working conditions.

Finally, in 1884, a third Reform Act was passed. It gave even poor agricultural workers the right to vote. Thus, most men in England could vote. This gave the lower classes political power which they had never had before. To use it effectively, lower class people began to work together.

Workers had been trying to work together for change since the early 1800's. However, they had been blocked by many laws. Though workers were given the right to form unions by the repeal of the Combination Act of 1824, those unions were not allowed to picket or to bargain collectively. The laws against picketing and collective bargaining were changed in 1876, giving workers the chance to try to better their working conditions. In 1888, the match factory workers of London, mostly women and girls, staged a successful strike which brought them more money and better working conditions. Their strike also led to more people sympathizing with the hard lives of the workers.

Some of these people set up societies to help workers. Some of these groups, like the famous Fabian Society, were made up of socialists who wanted to make major reforms in capitalism. The Fabians had many famous members, including the playwright Bernard Shaw. In 1900, the Fabians joined with fellow socialists and created the Labor Party.

Before the Labor Party, or even the Liberal Party, could make more reform in Britain, however, they had to get power away from the House of Lords, which con-
tinually blocked their laws. The 1911 Parliament Act stripped the power to block laws from the House of Lords. The House of Lords was forced to sign it by Victoria's son, King George V.

Thus, by 1911, the monarchy and the nobility had lost most of their power. All men could vote. The only adult group left powerless was women.

The quest for equality for women in Britain, started by Mary Wollstonecraft in the late 1700's, continued into the 1900's. Caroline Norton challenged British laws that kept women from owning property. In 1857, as a result of her efforts, the Reform of Marriage and Divorce Laws gave deserted wives the right to control their own property. The Married Women's Property Act later gave married women these same rights.

Women also won more rights to higher education during this period. Emily Davies opened the first college for women at Cambridge University. Elizabeth Blackwell and Florence Nightingale both paved the way for women to enter into the medical profession. Blackwell became the world's first female doctor, and opened the first medical school for women. Florence Nightingale established the nursing profession, and opened the first nursing school.

Finally, many British women led the struggle to earn women the right to vote. The drive for women's suffrage (suffrage means voting) was at first led by the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies. Beginning in 1897, these women used petitions and speeches to try to win the vote.

In 1903, Emmaline Pankhurst and her daughters Christabel and Sylvia broke away from this group and formed their own more radical organization, the Women's Social and Political Union. They interrupted political meetings, picketed, and did other disruptive activities to gain attention for their cause. They were often arrested, and imprisoned. When in prison, many of them went on hunger strikes to try to gain their release. In 1914, Parliament passed the Cat and Mouse Act, allowing starving women to be released from jail, only to be rearrested when they regained their health. Women finally won the vote in Britain in 1918.