

Book review

[History](#), [Middle Ages](#)



Book Review Understanding the Victorians Politics, Culture and Society in Nineteenth-Century Britain Author Background: “ Understanding the Victorians” was written by Susie L. Steinbach. Susie was born in 1966 to Jewish Eastern European family in NYC. Her father was a Holocaust survivor and immigrant. She was born and raised in a lower middle-class family. She had public school education; she was able to attend gifted and talented magnet school grades 7-12, which provided support for her college application process. She was an undergraduate student in Harvard in the History and Literature Department, (senior honors essay and magna cum laude). She worked with historians John Montano, John Brewer, Chris Waters, Kathleen Wilson. She graduated with honors in Yale. She used to teach history in Yale University where she was a prize student. She later became an Associate Professor of History at. Her first book is “ Women in England 1760-1914” which explores and focuses both on women and gender history of the nineteenth century in Britain and the law. Steinbach works were extensively well researched and mostly focused on gender, class structures, politics and the economy. Moreover, her language is not overly academic; therefore it is suitable for everyone who is interested in learning more about that time period. Susie Steinbach is currently a professor in the History Department in the University of Hamline and is very knowledgeable of the Victoria period in England as can be seen by her writings. With her knowledge and comprehension of her work in English history, she can be undoubtedly qualified as an expert in her field. Understanding the Victorians: Class and Society In 1820, Victorian society can be split up into three different classes— upper class (aristocracy and gentry), middle class, and

working class—they had extremely different lives. In Victorian Britain class is related to, but not defined by, income, which tells us how much money people had, but not how or where they spent it. “ Some upper working-class families had higher incomes than some lower middle-class families, but did not consider themselves middle-class. A wealthy middle-class father might send his sons to an elite school in a bid to have them accepted as upper-class as adults” (3702). Some members of the aristocracy were happy to socialize with wealthy middle-class people whose incomes were as high as their own, but some sneered at them because of their class origins. Some scholars recommend that it is wiser to think about Victorian society in terms of status and hierarchy; for example, a village schoolteacher or community priest had a status that far outweighed not only his income but his class. Steinbach mentioned that, “ Status was central; the village schoolteacher had higher status than a manual laborer. Members of the Church of England were different from those who worshiped at Methodist chapels. People of African and Asian descent were considered to be of a different race, and many were convinced that this made them incapable of being fully British or fully patriotic, regardless of where they were born or how many generations of their families had lived in Britain” (3710-3713). In 1820, the working class covered about 80 percent of the population. Their family income was usually under £ 100 annually, but could go as high as £ 300 annually. The middle class made up about 15 percent of the population, and were growing both in absolute terms and as a proportion of the population throughout the Victorian period. They made often between £ 100 and £ 300 annually. The remaining 5 percent of the population were upper-class, with family incomes

of at least £ 1, 000 annually, and often more than that. Upper class usually got their incomes from rents of their landed estates or from investments, included the royal family, the aristocracy, and the gentry. Women were assigned the class of their husbands when they married; therefore women were rarely seen married themselves. The working class was divided into two categories. In the upper category were skilled laborers who worked with their hands, like carpenters and blacksmiths. The lower category held the masses of working men and women who provided unskilled paid labor to factories, farms and shops, or who did the dirtier jobs like fishing and butchery. Adult women spent an excessive amount of time figuring out how to keep their families fed and clothed on a small budget; adult women could be extremely clever and patient; For example, “ in Birmingham, working-class women would wait outside butchers’ shops on Saturday evenings until they were about to close. With no refrigeration, the butchers could not keep what meat they had left, and began selling it at lower prices”(3766). Most working-class women worked for wages for at least part of their lives. Women’s work included factory work, piece work done at home, work in the service division, domestic service, and white-collar work. Married women who did not work outside the home for wages often did piece work to generate income at home. With household budgets so tight, at least until the end of the century, most working-class children also started paid work at the age of 11 or 12, though some began earlier. Working-class children went to school only if it was affordable and did not conflict with their paid or unpaid work. Literacy levels remained quite low until after the passage of the 1870 Education Act, with literacy lower in the working class and lower among women than men of

each class (3775). Working-class men worked full-time and year-round at respected jobs, which earned a sufficient wage to support their family. In practice, most working-class work was manual which required low or no skills; “ work could be artisanal or industrial, skilled or unskilled, rural or urban” (3780). Moreover, their works were heavily taxing. Men were often injured or died young because they were not protected from danger or long hours by Factory Acts as women and children were. Men often spent their entire lives draining themselves earning a living. Most workers got paid in cash at the end of the week. Working class families often lived the most difficult lives in that time period. “ Between one-fourth and one-third of the working class in those cities was living in terrible poverty, with families who lived crowded into and sharing small living spaces and who often went hungry”. In 1870, some working class strove to further educate themselves to move to higher class and become lower middle class. Even though wages were usually no higher than before, lower middle class would be able to avoid manual jobs. Being lower middle-class was an opportunity, but also a constant challenge. It was difficult if not impossible to keep up even modest middle-class standards with a lower middle-class income. Yet lower middle-class people were determined to maintain their status and to avoid manual labor. They made sacrifices to educate their children to prevent them from slipping back into the working class (3792-3800). To maintain a family in a middle-class lifestyle, it required an income of between £ 300 and £ 1, 000 annually. However, a large number of middle-class families actually lived on only £ 100 to £ 300 annually. Most families struggled to maintain the appearances that were necessary to their class status. Middle-class men

worked, but they did not do manual labor, dirty or physical work as working-class, and priding themselves by dressing nicely for work. Middle-class work had higher status than working-class work not only because it was not manual but because it required education. They usually worked in civil service, local government, banking, insurance, railways, commerce, hospital, and the professions (including teaching) (3744). “ Between 1870 and 1920 the number of men doing office work increased by a factor of five, and the number of women increased by a factor of 500, as both private and public concerns hired masses of clerks and assistants of all kinds”(3749). In pursuit of respectability, young men often chose jobs that paid as little or even less than the best working-class jobs; for example, entry-level clerking and retail sales jobs. Ideally middle-class women were not supposed to earn money. However, most middle class women saw work was a necessity, and wanted to be employed. Respectability was central to any money-earning for middle-class women. Before 1860, governess or dressmaker was the only respectable paid option for women, however they both were poorly paid and low-status. After 1860, many options opened up for middle-class women. “ In 1861 fewer than 200, 000 women did white-collar work, but by the turn of the century that number had risen to almost 600, 000”. Although some of the women’s jobs sounded the same as men’s work, middle-class work was always carefully gender-segregated; women were trained and worked in women environments only. They were restricted to secondary tasks and were paid less than men. They also were required to remain unmarried and childless, as men were not. The Victorian middle class was distinguished by its gender system and its ideas of domesticity. A person could make a lot of

money by being an industrialist, or a banker, for instance, but these would not make them acceptable to the old upper classes, although it was becoming slightly more fluid than in earlier decades. The upper class was the smallest but wealthiest in Europe. The wealthiest aristocratic families had annual incomes earned from land of £ 10, 000 or more per year. Below them were the lesser gentry or some aristocrats, who had smaller incomes of at least £ 1, 000 per year, and hold a small provincial estate. The British aristocracy owned most of the nation's land and earned much of their wealth from agricultural products, and from rents paid by their tenants, the rural working class who lived in small cottages on their land. Aristocratic Steinbach mentioned in the book that, " in 1873, more than 80 percent of the land in the United Kingdom was owned by less than 0. 5 percent of the population. "(4003-4007). Even this lower amount represented much wealth, the upper class for most of the century did not have to pay land tax, which keep them to remain wealthy. They managed their agricultural holdings, their investments in the City, and their new uses of land, including mines and factories. They also worked in politics, with men in appointed or elected positions and women behind the scenes. Upper-class children were almost always educated at home, by governesses and, for boys, by tutors. Boys were sent to boarding schools, which served critical social as well as educational functions; Upper class girls rarely went to academically oriented schools or to university (4017). Understanding the Victorians: Daily life in the period Although Victorian working-class worked very long hours, they did find themselves some time for leisure, especially from mid-century as their wages rose and work hours declined. The dominant form of working-class

sociability was drinking at the pub. Over the first few decades of the period, pubs became extremely popular for the working class. Alcohol consumption remained high throughout the. “ In the 1820s and 1830s men and women both went to the pub, but by the 1840s respectable women were rarely seen in pubs” . They often stayed home and took short moments of sociability by chatting with neighbors between chores. Local clubs, such as friendly societies or church- based groups, were leisure places for them. Music halls, in which varied programs of songs, dances and dramatic performances, were performed, were popular in the working class, as was theatre. Gambling was popular across all classes. However, working-class men found themselves gamble in separate spaces from middle-class and upper-class men. From mid-century, shorter work days and the available of railway make holiday travel possible for working class. “ Working-class seaside resorts such as Blackpool were popular for longer holidays”. Mass newspapers, including sporting papers, were widely read among the working class as literacy and mass publication increased (3790-3800). Middle-class men tended to marry in their thirties to forties while middle-class women married in their twenties; as a result, an age difference between husbands and wives in the middle-class caused unbreakable men’s dominant position. (3936-3939). Middle-class life was mostly philanthropy. One journal commented at mid-century that “ there was not a town in the kingdom which did not have its lying-in society, female school, visiting association, nursing institute and many other charitable organizations, “ Britons were extremely charitable; “ in 1885 money donated by Londoners alone was larger than the national budget of Sweden. “ Many upper middle-class families spent as much on charity as on

rent or food. Middle-class philanthropy often visited the homes of the poor, and formed institutions such as the workhouse, or funds for particular groups. Middle-class philanthropy had been permeated in British society for a long time, and affected many women and children of the working classes. “ Although most middle-class people believed that poverty was the fault of the (lazy, perhaps drunken) individual, they worked to alleviate its worst symptoms; in return they expected the poor to adopt their values and to live thriftily. ” (3973-3975) Middle-class leisure pursuits expanded over the Victorian period. At mid-century, many members of the respectable middle class saw leisure pursuits (even novel-reading) as moral temptations that needed to be resisted; however, by the end of the century the class had grown more comfortable with leisure and the pursuit of it. Middle-class people used public culture, especially cultural events such as classical music concerts and civic ceremonies, to express themselves as a class.

Department store shopping was used as a form of leisure for middle-class women. From mid-century theatre also became popular; “ musical comedy, in particular the operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan, was especially popular with middle-class audiences. ” The middle class distinguished themselves from the working class by avoiding the pub. Instead, middle-class men went to social clubs, which were private and therefore selective, to have the comforts and relieve from home. Golf and lawn-tennis were also popular among men, as were seaside resorts (3980-3984). “ For the upper class, domestic life was distinguished by the fact that men and women existed in the domestic space together, and for the fact that home, work, and politics were so interwoven. ” The aristocratic home, with its dinners, parties, and

meetings, was also a place for political activities. “ Upper-class leisure was different from other classes. “ For the very wealthy, leisure pursuits were partly dictated by which home the family found itself in. " Fox-hunting and shooting were some of the popular countryside entertains for wealthy families; in London, opera, ballet, and theatre were popular. Wealthy families were often giving parties for their tenants on their estates for Christmas or upon family celebrations such as birthday party. At the end of the century, however, as they became less politically powerful, they also became less dutiful and more self-indulgent. Student Critique: “ Understanding the Victorians" draws a clear picture of the era, combining broad survey with close analysis, and introduces students to all of Great Britain and Ireland over the whole of the Victorian period. The book was organised into thirteen themed chapters, based on extensively well researched, starting with the Queen Caroline Affair in 1820 and coming right up to the start of World War I in 1914, and mostly focused on gender, class structures, politics and the economy. Moreover, her language is not overly academic; therefore it is suitable for everyone who is interested in learning more about that time period. I think that “ Understanding the Victorians" is a good book to read. Ingrid Hanson, University of Sheffield, wrote in his book review of “ Understanding the Victorians that “ The book’s treatment of literature shows less nuance, although it is well integrated with historical detail and each chapter ends with a list of ‘ Relevant Fiction that Students Might Enjoy’, consisting of Victorian and neo-Victorian novels. " Returning to the opening timeline after reading the rest of the book, its use as a reference tool for the more detailed accounts that follow is evident; its miscellaneous character

appears more deliberate, more effective and more useful than on a first reading. Ingrid Hanson acknowledges that Steinbach is well qualified as she wrote about the history of the Victorian Era. Work Cited Steinbach, Susie L. (2012-11-12). *Understanding the Victorians: Politics, Culture and Society in Nineteenth-Century Britain*. Taylor and Francis. Kindle Edition. Web. Mar. 2013. Hanson, Ingrid. " Book Review: *Understanding the Victorians: Politics, Culture and Society in Nineteenth-Century Britain*. " Cercles. com. Web. 1 Mar. 2013.