

What would Charles Dickens would have written about, if poverty and philanthropy had not been such essential features of Victorian Britain? Philanthropists appear throughout his novels, not just as a dramatic device to offer hope (or not) to impoverished characters but also as a subject in their own right. Dickens' novels capture the contradictions of Victorian philanthropy - the enormous need for generosity in an age where poverty and plenty literally rubbed shoulders, and the inadequacy of so much of the charity actually provided. Some of his characters play a positive role, such as Mr. Brownlow in *Oliver Twist*, the Cheeryble brothers in *Nicholas Nickleby*, and Mr. and Mrs. Garland in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. But philanthropists also come in for some caustic ridicule in his later works. In a novel mainly attacking the legal system, Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle in *Bleak House* are, respectively, guilty of 'telescopic philanthropy' and 'rapacious benevolence', neither of them helping to save the life of the child Jo, who dies of pneumonia. In his final, unfinished, novel *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* Dickens ridiculed a selfish, paternalist attitude to philanthropy that, even today, colours our perception of the Victorians, taking a direct swipe at the leading philanthropic body of the time, the Charity Organisation Society (COS). The character Mr. Honeythunder's 'Haven of Philanthropy' would have been unmistakable to the readers of the day as a parody of the COS, or 'Cringe or Starve' as it was known by critics.

Dickens knew what he was talking about, having been philanthropic advisor to Angela Burdett-Coutts (1814-1906), later Baroness Burdett-Coutts, at one time 'the richest heiress in all England'. Just after Queen Victoria took the throne in 1837, Angela Burdett was told that she had been chosen to inherit a banking fortune from her grandfather, subject to various conditions such as taking the Coutts name and not marrying a foreign national. She had many suitors but, controversially, chose to propose to the Duke of Wellington, who was more than 40 years her senior. He declined. In 1881 she eventually married, to an American-born man nearly 40 years her junior, so forfeiting a large part of her fortune to her sister, in accordance with the conditions of her inheritance.

It was Burdett-Coutts' philanthropy, however, that earned her noble title in 1871. Her giving covered almost the entire Victorian era and reflects the scope and ambition of the age. She was always generous to the Church of England at home and overseas but Dickens directed much of her giving to social causes as well. In 1847 he used her money to found Urania Cottage for homeless women, many of whom were prostitutes. Under his guidance she also supported the Ragged School Union, which was founded in 1844 to provide free education to poor children by Lord Shaftesbury (1801-1885) - whose work to limit child labour in factories in Britain is marked by the statue in London's Piccadilly Circus popularly known as 'Eros' but actually 'The Spirit of Charity'. Burdett-Coutts also supported 'shoeblack brigades', which from 1851 provided employment to boys in London (although critics argued that uniformed brigade boys were just displacing in the shoe-shine business their independent competitors who were unsupported by philanthropic capital). Influenced by *Oliver Twist* Burdett-Coutts retained a particular interest in the East End, where she continued her philanthropy even after she and Dickens had parted company, establishing schools and factories to provide skills and create work.

Burdett-Coutts' philanthropy spread out over her vast interests: President of the British Goat Society, funding the statue of the hero dog Greyfriars Bobby in Edinburgh, supporting the development of the fishing industry in South West Ireland, sponsoring research into potato disease, funding David Livingstone's exploration in Africa, introducing cotton gins to southern Nigeria, providing lifeboats to Brittany in France, funding the ordinance survey of Jerusalem. Over her lifetime she is estimated to have given away £3-4 million.

Early Victorian Britain was undergoing dramatic change. The industrial revolution had shifted up a gear from craft workshops to large factories. Around these factories grew new cities such as Liverpool, Sheffield and Manchester in the North of England, dominated by heavy industry. Liverpool, for example, grew from a large village of 4,240 to a city of 222,954 between 1701 and 1841. With this massive migration to the cities came new social problems, as the public and philanthropic infrastructure could not keep up. The cities, old and new, became centres of so much death and disease that the *Cambridge Urban History of Britain* sees the 1830s and 1840s as probably the "worst ever decades for life expectancy since the Black Death". In 1842 the average age at death of a labourer in Bethnal Green in East London was just 16 years. For tradesmen it was 26 years, whilst the average gentlemen lived to 45.

In contrast to the suffering of the poor, this was a period of rapidly expanding wealth from industry and commerce. At the start of the period, as Arthur Rubinstein describes in *Men of Property*, his seminal history of wealth in Britain: "An observer entering a room full of Britain's 200 wealthiest men in 1825 might be forgiven for thinking that the Industrial Revolution had not occurred." However, while landowners were to retain a firm foothold in the 19th century 'rich list', by 1840 about 40% of the millionaires in the country were people who had made their money

from industry rather than land, as manufacturers scaled up from workshops to factories. At the same time, the number of rich people grew fast: probate records show that from the 1850s to the 1890s, the total number of estates greater than £100,000 trebled. The share of national wealth held by the rich was enormous: in 1858, just 67 people accounted for 22% of all the wealth that passed in probate that year.

Government policy was pulled in different directions by the new social problems. A Royal Commission on the Poor Law was established in 1832 in response to the Swing Riots of 1830 where agricultural labourers smashed the new threshing machines that were threatening their livelihoods. The Commission's findings were heavily influenced by Edwin Chadwick, a student of Jeremy Bentham and firm believer in empirical research (and elder half-brother of the 'Father of Baseball' Henry Chadwick). The Commission collected evidence from 3,000 parishes, demonstrating that the Poor Law was poorly administered. The purpose of the resulting Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 was to do away with the waste and inefficiency of the old system, so contributing to national efficiency. The Act abolished direct payments to the poor, the Speenhamland system of 'outdoor relief'. It also revived the austere workhouse (remember *Oliver Twist*) as a way to prevent 'pauperisation', despite the fact that no one ever resolved the dilemma that the only way to make workhouse conditions significantly worse than the outside world was to starve the inmates. In a public scandal about the Andover House workhouse in 1846, it was reported that the starving inmates were chewing the gristle off the old bones that they were grinding up for fertiliser as part of their workhouse duties. In Ireland the workhouse conditions were worse than in England, which contributed to the scale of suffering during the Irish Potato Famine of 1845-49.

This left plenty of room for philanthropists. Education, as we have already seen, was a popular cause. Given the squalor of the slums, housing was also a priority for many philanthropists. The Metropolitan Association for Improving the Dwellings of the Industrious Classes was founded in 1841 to build new homes for the poor. This organisation practised what the Victorians called '5 per cent philanthropy', where donors could invest their money for a good cause while receiving a respectable but below-market rate of return. Similar sorts of 'socially responsible investment' are increasingly common today. The London-based American financier George Peabody (1795-1869) followed a more traditional model of giving when he committed £500,000 in the 1860s to house poor Londoners of good moral character. Peabody buildings continue to provide social housing in London today.

John Passmore Edwards (1823-1911), a journalist and publisher, is known to his admirers as the 'Cornish Carnegie' for the way that he poured his money into building institutions, particularly hospitals and libraries. Colleges of higher education also received generous support, such as Royal Holloway and Morley in London and Mason in Birmingham, all named after their benefactors. Critics of Victorian philanthropy have questioned whether this type of giving was really very effective, for, as the Socialist thinker G.D.H. Cole put it, "The great Trusts of the nineteenth century put most of their money into immortalising their benefactors in bricks and mortar."

This was also the period when some of Britain's leading charities were formed: e.g. the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA). The rise of national charities mirrored the rising scale of industry in this period; as manufacturing moved from workshops to factories, so charity moved from small, local groups to national organisation. The rise of the affluent, urban middle class also played a role. Indeed, in the mid 1880s, *The Times* newspaper of London claimed that the income of London charities was greater than the governments of some European countries, "...exceeding the revenue of Sweden, Denmark and Portugal, and double that of the Swiss confederation." And a study of 466 wills published in *Daily telegraph* in 1890s showed that men left 11% of their estates to charity and women left 25%.

Perhaps the most famous name in charity during the Victorian era is Florence Nightingale (1820-1910). Her family's wealth left her free to pursue a career in nursing, refusing offers of marriage to follow her calling, she became famous for her voluntary work in military hospitals during the Crimean War of 1854-56. A keen mathematician (she was later the first woman to join the Royal Statistical Society), she demonstrated that ten times more British soldiers were killed by disease than by battle wounds, and put in place new sanitary standards to save lives. A grateful nation gave generously to her Nightingale Fund, which she used to set up a school of nursing attached to St Thomas's Hospital in London in 1860.

Better regulation of charity was also part of the reforming Victorian mission. Anthony Trollope's novel *The Warden* illustrates the difficulties of the old foundations through the story of a medieval almshouse, Hiram's Hospital. The

story revolves around the efforts of a young reformer, John Bold, to redress what he sees as the unfair privileges of the warden of the hospital, Septimus Harding. *The Warden* reflects a series of scandals about abuse of charitable status in the first half of the 19th century. The resulting campaign by a Member of Parliament, Henry Brougham, against the waste endemic in the old charitable foundations, resulted in the revival of the Charities Commission in 1853, which had lost its way in the 17th century.

The charities that filled the gap left by the state typified the zeal of the Victorian age. The leader of this movement, the Charitable Organisation Society, co-ordinated the efforts of voluntary organisations across London. The COS actively lobbied against more public relief for the poor. One of its leaders, C.S. Loch, went as far as comparing the unemployed to a giant sea anemone insatiably devouring all forms of philanthropy. The role of charity was not to be a safety net for all, but a means for those who could to improve. *Self Help*, written by Samuel Smiles in 1859, was a manual for many members of the COS, including the housing reformer Octavia Hill (1838-1912), who sought to 'improve' slum dwellers with playgrounds and singing classes. While patronising to modern eyes, the COS should be credited with leading a wave of innovation in social service provision to those whom they saw as deserving: 'face to face' casework with individuals and schemes to get people into work, involving training and education.

The great divide in philanthropy over whether to respond to immediate need, risking creating dependency, or to only help the deserving, risking callousness, was captured in the dispute between Thomas Barnardo (1845-1905) and the COS. Inspired by his Christian faith, Barnardo began working with the poor in London's East End in the late 1860s. He had a natural flair for publicity. He coined a good slogan, 'No destitute child ever refused admittance'. And he had great success raising funds using faked 'before' and 'after' photos of rescued children. The COS regarded Barnardo as an indiscriminate almsgiver and sought to discredit him. After a protracted and ugly legal battle, during which Barnardo's right to the title 'doctor' was exposed as bogus (he'd never completed his studies) and he was forced to abandon the fake photographs, Barnardo was cleared of any wrongdoing.

One peculiar aspect of Victorian poor relief that enjoyed broad support from Shaftesbury through to Burdett-Coutts and Barnardo was the export of surplus labour. In contrast to 18th century mercantilism that attempted to strengthen the nation with more workers, the Victorians feared more dependent mouths to feed. Canada, Australia and other parts of the empire were to take in those unlikely to prosper in Britain, with the one-way tickets paid for by philanthropists. In Europe, by contrast, 'home colonisation' was the fashion towards the end of the 19th century to deal with urban unemployment and rural labour shortages. Sometimes, as in Belgium, these schemes were controlled by the justice system to deal with persistent beggars, whereas, in Germany these were refuges for the needy run by the Church. Britain's only home colony at Starthwaite failed.

Rich industrialists started to develop their own schemes of what is now called corporate social responsibility, to address the social ills of the age. The pioneer was Sir Titus Salt (1803-1876) who opened a new mill with a model village for his workforce in 1853, at Saltaire, near Bradford. The houses were all connected to mains drainage, and nearly all had their own lavatory. Parks and other institutions were also laid on for the inhabitants, but no pubs, since Salt saw drink as the source of most social evils. He is also alleged to have maintained an eyrie from which he could look over the village to ensure that no laundry was hung out - another pet hate.

Similar schemes were adopted at the end of the 19th century by the Quaker confectionary dynasties, the Cadburys and the Rowntrees. George Cadbury (1839-1922) took over the family chocolate company from his father in 1861 and, with his brother Richard, built a new factory at Bournville in 1879. Their vision was 'a factory in a garden' with decent, affordable housing for the workers. And no pubs, of course. Joseph Rowntree (1836-1925) followed suit with his own model village, New Earswick, in 1901, although his gifts to found the Joseph Rowntree Trusts to study social policy in Britain are probably a greater legacy. Another well known model village is Port Sunlight, built in 1889 by the Lever Brothers to be the home of their soap empire, now part of Unilever. This community was located on the Mersey in Cheshire, providing picturesque houses and gardens as well as local parks and amenities.

So how did philanthropy fall from such a high in the Victorian age?

First, even as philanthropy reached new heights, so it became apparent that it was unready for the scale of the challenges. The London COS could provide caseworkers to help 800 people a year, but this was only scratching the surface in a country where up to 1.75 million people were unemployed. Model villages were accommodating barely a few thousand. The Ragged Schools movement at its zenith only numbered 192 schools, which could not provide

the elementary schooling that the nation needed to educate future voters and workers, so that by 1870 Parliament had begun to lay the foundations for mass, compulsory education paid for by local taxation.

Second, economic circumstances were changing. Mass Irish immigration into cities such as Liverpool in the mid 1840s caused by the famine, gave rise to unprecedented poverty in the slums. Britain's economic power was also beginning to be challenged by competition from Europe and the New World. A long economic depression hit the UK from the mid-1870s to the mid-1890s, which stretched the Victorian welfare system beyond its limits. As a result, says social historian Jose Harris, "Between 1880 and 1890 the uneasy synthesis of Poor Law, thrift, and charity which had relieved distress from want of employment since the 1830s broke down".

Third, social reformers such as Charles Booth, author of *In Darkest England and the Way Out*, and *The Causes of Pauperism: Evidence from East London*, and Benjamin Seebohm Rowntree (*Poverty, A Study in Town Life*, 1901), investigated and wrote about the causes of poverty, challenging preconceptions that had driven the COS and other charities. Pioneering work supported by charity and philanthropists was now moving over to the state to deliver on a massive scale, including the provision of sanitation in cities to prevent disease, again inspired by the social reformer Edwin Chadwick.

Fourth, by the end of the 19th Century, the debate on poverty had started to move on. George Sims' moving poem *Christmas Day in the Workhouse* may not have been written until 1903, but social reformers like Dickens had been making the point about the inhumanity of the system for years. Dickens had also pilloried the ideas of Malthus through his character *Scrooge* in *A Christmas Carol*, who justifies his meanness on the grounds that he wouldn't want to support 'surplus population'. Now the old economics of Ricardo, which blamed 'excess wages' as the cause of idleness, was being undermined by Alfred Marshall, the founder of modern economics. Marshall's revolutionary concept of 'unemployment', as caused by trade cycles, made poverty a product of the economic environment rather than the moral degeneracy of the poor themselves. Or, as one of Kipling's characters put it: "you can't pauperise them as hasn't things to begin with. They're bloomin' well pauped."

Finally, change was coming through new political movements. Revolutionary Marxism never found mass popular support in Britain, but the trade union-dominated and Methodism-inspired 'socialist' movement started to gather electoral support, in common cause with the Liberal Party. This was fuelled by the electoral reforms of 1867 and 1884/5, which had finally extended the vote to a majority of adult males. Eventually in 1901, the trade union movement established its own electoral vehicle, the Labour Party. The rise of the women's emancipation movement, whose members became known as the 'suffragettes' because of their campaign for an extension of the franchise to universal suffrage, was another new feature on the political map.

Fear of political unrest pushed the traditional ruling classes towards social programmes to ease the pressure. Winston Churchill put it thus: 'With a "stake in the country" in the form of insurances against evil days these workers will pay no attention to the vague promises of revolutionary socialism'. Liberals, who then included Churchill, saw state welfare provision as the way to protect free trade from the damaging protectionism proposed by the Conservatives, while also building 'national efficiency' and preventing social unrest. In doing so, they were following a path already taken in the 1880s by the German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, who sought to draw the strength from the new social democratic and reformist parties by implementing the minimum-acceptable version of their proposals. Based firmly on an insurance model, the new German welfare state covered health, accident, old age and disability.

By the dawn of the 20th century there was a growing political consensus in Britain about the need for government to do more to address social problems, albeit for a variety of reasons. The Conservatives were spurred into action by the dismal experience of the Boer War of 1898-1901 when the Inspector General of Recruiting bemoaned the "gradual deterioration of the physique of the working classes from who the bulk of the recruits must always be drawn". But it was the 'New Liberal' Government, elected by a landslide in 1906, that began the work in earnest to create a new, government-led welfare system. The government started by providing free school meals and, in 1908, a range of measures called the Children's Charter which included provisions to keep children out of workhouses, raising the minimum age for capital punishment to 16, and introducing the first limitations on children's access to alcohol and tobacco. In the same year pensions were introduced for the over 70s, although these were set low and subject to a means test. In 1909 Labour exchanges were set up to help unemployed people find work. The National

Insurance Act (Part I) of 1911 gave workers the right to sick pay and free medical treatment and unemployment benefit.

These new state commitments to the welfare of the poorer classes were expensive and were funded by higher rates of income tax, including a supertax on the highest earners, increased death duties and a new tax on land (the basis of the wealth of many Conservatives). The working classes also had to bear some of the burden, since this new welfare state was, as in Germany, based on an insurance principle that required part of the contribution to come from workers' wages. Hence the popular chant of abuse "*Taffy was a Welshman, Taffy was a thief*", directed at the unmistakably Welsh Chancellor David Lloyd George. But Lloyd George demonstrated his own campaigning genius by calling this package of measures 'the People's Budget'. When presented to Parliament in 1909, his proposals were initially blocked by the House of Lords and only passed after a constitutional crisis that involved two general elections and the nearest thing to a constitutional amendment in the British political system.

Britain still had some journey to travel from the Liberal reforms of the early 20th century to the comprehensive welfare state designed by the 1945 Labour Government, but the trend was clearly set. Government was taking on responsibility for the provision of basic services as a right of the citizen, not a favour. Philanthropy did not die out rapidly, but rising taxes and an ever-encroaching state slowly sapped the strength of the movement in the 20th century. But while philanthropy was left wondering about its role in Britain, it was flowering across the Atlantic.