One’s first thought on contemplating reading a history of England from before the Roman invasion to the present day is how on earth can such a story be told in any depth and with sufficient detail to convey an accurate idea of events? However, one’s last thought on having read such a book is that, in fact, it is the only sensible way to deal with English history. The trouble with writing about any single episode or era in England’s history—be it the Middle Ages, the Tudors, the Civil War, or the Victorians—is that each is so much a product of what has come before. No generation, no movement starts with a clean sheet. In the end, for England as with any old country, one has to understand the entire story, and, in order to do this, one has to be given the entire story.

This is what Robert Tombs has done. The history of England is shown as a continuum, as it should be: everything that...

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Simon Heffer’s *High Minds: The Victorians and the Birth of Modern Britain* will be published in America by Pegasus in April.

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