The greatest Victorian

by Roger Kimball

On Walter Bagehot

There are few ways in which a man can be more innocently employed than in getting money.
—Samuel Johnson, Boswell’s Life of Johnson

The essence of civilization, as we know, is dullness. In an ultimate analysis, it is only an elaborate invention . . . for abolishing the fierce passions, the unchastened enjoyments, the awakening dangers, the desperate conflicts, . . . the excitements of a barbarous age, and to substitute for them indoor pleasures, placid feelings, and rational amusements. That a grown man should be found to write reviews is in itself a striking fact. Suppose you asked Achilles to do such a thing, do you imagine he would consent?
—Walter Bagehot, on Matthew Arnold (1853)

Only a blockhead can fail to realize that our characters are the result of our conduct.
—Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics

The historian Jacques Barzun got it exactly right when he noted that the English writer, editor, and professional banker Walter Bagehot (1826–1877) is “well-known’ without being known well.” Bagehot is one of those distinguished literary figures who seems to have been embalmed by his own distinction. There are no doubt many reasons for this. In his essay “Bagehot as Historian” (1968), Professor Barzun mentions two: he bore a name that was “puzzling to pronounce”—this made people shy about quoting him—and he made the mistake of dying at the inconsiderate age of fifty-one, before his idiosyncratic genius could take firm root in the popular imagination. Bagehot—I pronounce the first syllable like “badge,” the second like “it”: “badge-it”—has consequently had the misfortune to become more celebrated than he is read and discussed.

The misfortune affects the reading public as much as it does Bagehot’s posthumous reputation. To miss out on Bagehot is to miss out on one of the great triumphs of English prose. It is a light, champagne prose: sparkling but not facile, broadly allusive but never pedantic, witty and epigrammatic but shrewd, strong, and sober enough to treat an extraordinarily wide range of serious issues. And treat them it does. Bagehot’s prose is more than an aesthetic delight: it is a repository of uncommon wisdom about the common realities of life. The excellence of Bagehot’s
writing, in other words, is an excellence of substance as well as style, matter as well as manner. What he says, he invariably says well; but one generally also finds that it is well that he said what he did.

During his lifetime, Bagehot’s essays exerted an enormous influence. He had keen and original things to say about literary figures from Shakespeare and Milton to Shelley and Henry Crabb Robinson. He wrote penetrating essays on Adam Smith, Macaulay, Gibbon, Disraeli, Sir Robert Peel, and the English reformer John Bright. His speciality, as one critic observed, “was the human element in all the affairs and institutions of life, whether it relates to literature, history, politics, economics, sociology, religion, or science.” At the end of 1851, Bagehot went to Paris to escape a bout of melancholy and indecision about his future career. Louis Napoleon just then embarked on the coup d’état that inaugurated the Second Empire. Bagehot’s eye-witness dispatches to the Inquirer, a London newspaper, on the coup and its aftermath turned out to be a classic of political reporting. In 1867, Bagehot published The English Constitution (serialized the preceding two years in Anthony Trollope’s Fortnightly Review), a work that is still regarded as an indispensable account of the workings of the English government. Indeed, one cannot help thinking that Prime Minister Tony Blair and what remain of the Windsors could profit greatly by meditating on Bagehot’s reflections on the importance of preserving the charm and mystery of the monarchy. “We must not let in daylight upon magic,” Bagehot wrote in a famous passage. “We must not bring the Queen into the combat of politics, or she will cease to be reverenced by all combatants; she will become one combatant among many.” Autre temps, autre moeurs—or do I mean plus ça change . . . ?

Bagehot did not simply comment on events from afar. As editor of The Economist—a position he held from 1861 until his untimely death—his advocacy of free trade helped to shape the financial policies of England at the zenith of her power. Gladstone was one of many politicians from both parties who sought his counsel. He became, it has been frequently observed, a kind of “supplementary Chancellor of the Exchequer.” In an essay published in 1948, the eminent
Victorianist G. M. Young, after duly reviewing the obvious candidates for the title of “The Greatest Victorian,” finally awarded the palm to Bagehot. George Eliot, Tennyson, Arnold, Ruskin, or Darwin may each have made greater contributions in his own line; the title *Victorianorum maximus*—greatest of the Victorians—may belong to one of them. But Bagehot’s all-round genius, Young concluded, entitles him to the title *Victorianum maxime*, “The Greatest Victorian.”

**Many distinguished personages have agreed.** Woodrow Wilson, for one, was smitten with Bagehot, calling him “a seer” and “one of the most original and audacious wits that the English race has produced.” Of course, it would be unfair to hold Bagehot accountable for all of his enthusiasts. But it is remarkable how intense his appeal has sometimes been. Consider: the first collected works was issued not by a university or a commercial press but by an American corporation. In 1889, at the direction of its president, the Traveler’s Insurance Company published *The Works of Walter Bagehot* in five volumes and sent copies to their policy holders—the idea being, perhaps, that imbibing Bagehot’s common-sense reflections on the human condition would tend to make people better insurance risks. Doubtless it does.[1] Bagehot possessed abundantly a gift he discerned in Shakespeare: an “experiencing nature.” He delighted in what he called “the grand shine on the surface of life.” A central word for him is “enjoyment.” Keenly moral, he abominated moralism: “Nothing is more unpleasant,” he wrote, “than a virtuous person with a mean mind.” Likewise, though formidably learned himself, he regularly cautioned against bookishness. “He wrote poetry . . . before breakfast,” Bagehot wrote of Southey with undisguised contempt; “he read during breakfast.” His sense of ironical contrast was indefatigable. Comparing Gibbon’s ornate style with the world-shaking events he described, Bagehot observed that perhaps “when a Visigoth broke a head, he thought that was all. Not so; he was making history: Gibbon has written it down.” Mrs. Barrington frequently remarks on Bagehot’s boyish sense of fun. At breakfast once with a young nephew struggling to open an egg, Bagehot advised: “Go on, hit it hard on the head. It has no friends.”

In politics, Bagehot was a conservative Liberal: a Whig with Tory leanings. How significant were those leanings may be gleaned from his observation (in the context of a discussion of Scott, one of his favorite authors) that “the essence of Toryism is enjoyment.” The other side of this heartiness was an impatience that could sometimes border on callousness. “Ugly men,” he wrote in his essay on Milton, “are and ought to be ashamed of their existence.” Bagehot was loath to entertain, let alone dwell on, life’s failures. Poverty, he remarked in a prickly essay on Dickens, is “an unfit topic for continuous art.” It is in this sense that Bagehot represents what one critic called “a standing temptation to indulge in selective Victorianism,” accentuating the positive and—though not ignoring the negative—tending to dismiss it as a regrettable necessity. “The best history,” Bagehot wrote in *Physics and Politics*, “is but like the art of Rembrandt; it casts a vivid light on certain selected causes, on those which were best and greatest; it leaves all the rest in shadow and unseen.” And again: “The difficulty in truth is in the existence of the world. It is the fact, that by the constitution of society the bold, the vigorous, and the buoyant, rise and rule; and that the weak, the shrinking, and the timid, fall and serve.” True enough; indisputable, even: but not
calculated to appeal to sentimentalists.

In a biographical sketch published in 1963, Norman St. John-Stevas noted Bagehot’s unusual capacity to “bridge the gulf between the practical and intellectual worlds.” One suspects that Bagehot’s upbringing had something to do with this amphibious talent. He was born in Langport, Somerset, to parents whose families dominated the town. Bagehot’s father, Thomas—an earnest, pragmatic man—was a partner in the Stuckey Bank, which his wife’s uncle had founded. It seems fitting that Walter, who would later join his father in business, was born just upstairs from the bank, in the living quarters occupied by his parents. Edith Stuckey, ten years Thomas’s senior, was a widow when he married her. Of the three children from her first marriage, one was an imbecile and two died in childhood. Walter was the second of two children from her marriage to Thomas, the first of whom also died in childhood. Perhaps in response to these multiple tragedies, Edith Bagehot suffered from periodic bouts of insanity. After her brother died in 1845, Walter became her chief support. As many commentators have noted, the “dark realities” to which he alludes in several essays undoubtedly refer in part to his mother’s dementia. “Every trouble in life,” he later remarked, “is a joke compared to madness.” Despite, or perhaps because of, this mental custodianship, Walter was always extremely close to his mother and was devastated by her death in 1870.

Bagehot’s lifelong friend Richard Holt Hutton (1826–1897)—with whom he founded the *National Review* in 1855 and who went on to become editor of the *Spectator*—described Bagehot as “a thorough transcendentalist” but not a “dogmatist.” As with many Victorians—and not only Victorians, of course—it is difficult to ascertain all that much about Bagehot’s religious convictions. His father, a Unitarian, presided over Sunday morning services at the family house. Walter regularly attended these services—and then accompanied his mother, an ardent Anglican, to the parish church in the afternoon. Bagehot, it is worth remembering, lived at a time when doubt had become an animating principle of faith for many serious people. It was a generation after the time when, as G. M. Young put it in his classic essay “Portrait of an Age,” “one undergraduate has to prepare another undergraduate for the news that a third undergraduate has doubts about the Blessed Trinity.” By the time Bagehot came of age, the sea of faith was well advanced on (in Arnold’s famous phrase) its “melancholy, long, withdrawing roar.” Whatever the exact nature of Bagehot’s doctrinal commitments, he belonged to those determined to preserve the echoes of that retreat, confident, perhaps, that as a tide ebbs so it invariably flows. In his article on Bagehot for the *Dictionary of National Biography*, Hutton noted that his friend’s “great characteristic as a writer, whether on economic or literary subjects, was a very curious combination of dash and doubt, great vivacity in describing the superficial impressions produced on him by every subject-matter with which he was dealing, and great caution in yielding his mind to that superficial impression.” This characteristic acted as a prophylactic against dogmatisms of doubt as well as dogmatisms of credulity.

Both Thomas and Edith were extremely solicitous about Walter’s education. At thirteen, after grammar school in Langport, he was sent to school in Bristol, where Dr. James Cowles
Prichard, Edith’s brother-in-law and the founder of the science of anthropology in England, took him under his wing. University posed a problem. Thomas objected to Oxford and Cambridge because of the religious tests that were still in force. So when he was sixteen, Bagehot went up to the recently established University College in London, where he took a B.A. and M.A. Though dogged by ill-health—at one point he had to take five months off to recuperate—Bagehot was a brilliant student. He studied mathematics with the eminent, idiosyncratic mathematician Augustus De Morgan, and took a first in classics followed by a first in philosophy and the gold medal in intellectual and moral philosophy. Bagehot met and became friends with R. H. Hutton directly he went up in 1842. In 1848, he met and came under the influence of the poet Arthur Hugh Clough (1819–1861), then principal of University Hall. Clough rather specialized in cultivating intellectual and spiritual impossibilities—Bagehot later criticized his “fatigued way of looking at great subjects”—but, according to Hutton, Clough’s adamant negativity exerted a “greater intellectual fascination for Walter Bagehot than any of his contemporaries.”

After leaving university in 1848, Bagehot read law. He was called to the bar in 1852, but had by then decided against a legal career and returned to Langport and his father’s shipowning and banking business. (Banking suited Bagehot. When depressed, St. John-Stevas tells us, Bagehot found it cheering to go down to the bank and run his hands through a heap of sovereigns.) It was around this time that Bagehot began writing in earnest, contributing literary and biographical articles to The Prospective Review and other journals and newspapers. At Clevedon, Somerset, in 1857, he met and befriended James Wilson, Financial Secretary to the Treasury, who had founded The Economist in 1843. At the same time, he met and befriended Eliza Wilson, the eldest of Wilson’s six daughters. The two soon became engaged and were married the following year. It was an advantageous as well as an affectionate match. At the Wilson’s London house in Belgravia, Bagehot met many prominent contemporaries, including Gladstone, Thackeray, Matthew Arnold, and Lord Grey. In 1859, James Wilson went as a financial advisor to India, where he died from dysentery the following year. In the meantime, he had made Bagehot a director of The Economist, which was then being edited by Hutton. After Hutton left to edit the Spectator, in 1861, Bagehot took over the editorship. (The paper was owned by Eliza and her five sisters, who paid him £800 a year for his services.) Bagehot regularly contributed two—and sometimes three or four—articles a week to The Economist for the rest of his career.

Bagehot was both intensely social and intensely private. He had, Mrs. Barrington says in her biography, “no enemies but few intimates.” Outwardly, the balance of Bagehot’s career was uneventful. By all accounts, his childless marriage was extremely happy. He stood for Parliament four times and four times lost, once by seven votes. His always delicate health took a decided turn for the worse in 1867 when he caught pneumonia. He never fully recovered. There followed a succession of chills, colds, and other pulmonary complaints, cheerfully borne but increasingly enervating. In March 1877, Bagehot contracted his last illness: a cold that quickly worsened and within a few days proved fatal. He spent his last hours reading Scott’s Rob Roy.
It should be noted that Bagehot’s magic does not work on everyone. One who is conspicuously resistant to his spell is the English poet and critic C. H. Sisson. In *The Case of Walter Bagehot* (1972), Sisson assembled what amounts to a brief for the prosecution. Sisson’s objection to Bagehot is twofold. On the one hand, he sees him as “a founding father of the apologetics of ‘fact,’” a skeptical, even cynical, force bent on exploding inherited values. On the other hand, Sisson regards Bagehot as “a moneyed provincial pushing his way in a conventional society.”

And so on.

What we get from Bagehot is not so much a theory as a position, and not so much a position as a form of tactics. It is Walter Bagehot whom the successive positions are intended to protect—the Walter Bagehot who slipped down the crack between Unitarianism and Anglicanism; who was the child of the Bank House as some are sons of the manse; whose money was better than that of the squire’s but did not produce better effects on the locals; who should have been educated at Oxford but was above that sort of conformism; who conformed instead to the world of business but was cleverer than its other inhabitants; who was all the time worried about the sanity of his stock and did not have any children; who distrusted hereditary powers and owed all his opportunities to family influence.

There is probably no antidote to the allergy Mr. Sisson has to Bagehot. It is the revulsion of one sort of temperament to another that seems antithetical. What Mr. Sisson objects to—a large part of it, anyway—is the very thing that makes Bagehot Bagehot. Not his subtlety, exactly, but his deployment of subtlety. Bagehot seldom runs on one track. Whatever topic he is discussing, he always seems to be looking behind it as well. It is not irony, precisely, for although he *uses* irony, Bagehot is too earnest to be described as ironical. Jacques Barzun referred in this context to Bagehot’s “binocular vision,” his habit of taking “double views.” The historian Gertrude Himmelfarb, in “Walter Bagehot: A Common Man with Uncommon Ideas,” observes that “he was that rare species of the twice-born who could give proper due to the rights and merits of the once-born. And he did so not by a denial of his own nature but by virtue of the very subtleties, complications, and ambiguities that informed his nature.”

What another critic has dubbed Bagehot’s “duomania” shows itself even in his methods of analysis. Bagehot is fond—perhaps overly fond—of breaking his subjects into two categories. When he talks about genius, he begins by discerning two types, regular and irregular; religion comes in two flavors, natural and supernatural; biography is selective or it is exhaustive; fiction is either ubiquitous or sentimental; goodness is sensuous or ascetic. Writers, he says, like teeth, “are divided into incisors and grinders.” A rare exception to this law of pairs is found in Bagehot’s famous essay on Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Browning (1864), which expatiates on “Pure, Ornate, and Grotesque
In fact, the duality one sees in Bagehot’s work reflects a duality in his character. On the one hand, we have Bagehot the banker and man of affairs, the man St. John-Stevas describes as “a sardonic, no-nonsense, experienced man of the world.” On the other hand, we have “the passionate, mystical Bagehot” who understands that what really matters in life is not calculable in terms of a profit and loss ledger. (“No real Englishman, in his secret soul,” Bagehot observed “was ever sorry for the death of a political economist: he is much more likely to be sorry for his life.”) The “mystical” side of Bagehot peeks out most conspicuously in some of his literary essays. In “The First Edinburgh Reviewers” (1855), one of his most celebrated essays, Bagehot writes that “A clear, precise, discriminating intellect shrinks at once from the symbolic, the unbounded, the indefinite.” He then goes on—with the quintessential Bagehot touch—to observe that

The real motor for Bagehot’s “duality” was his inextinguishable sense of the incongruous. “How can a soul be a merchant?” he asks. “What relation to an immortal being have the price of linseed, the fall of butter, the tare on tallow, or the brokerage on hemp? Can an undying creature debit petty expense and charge for carriage paid? . . . The soul ties its shoe; the mind washes its hands in a basin. All is incongruous.” One of the things that makes Bagehot’s writing so tonic is his refusal to resolve such incongruities. A more pedestrian writer, contemplating the absurdity of the soul tying its shoe, would dispense with the soul and come down firmly on the side of the footwear. It is part of Bagehot’s genius to preserve the extravagance—not because it is startling but because it is true to our experience of the world.

Bagehot’s greatest achievement was in applying his “binocular vision,” his incorrigible sense of the incongruous, to the realm of politics and social life. His talents in this regard were already fully developed in the seven letters that he wrote about Louis Napoleon’s coup d’état for the Inquirer, a Unitarian paper of abundant goodwill and characteristic shallowness. Bagehot was only twenty-five in December, 1851, when the coup began. But the letters show that he was already a master of controversy and in full possession of several themes that would occupy him later.
Bagehot certainly knew how to get his readers’ attention. Noting that “the first duty of a government is to ensure the security of that industry which is the condition of social life,” Bagehot went on cheerfully to defend Louis’s use of force and approve his curtailing the French press. The effect of Louis’s intervention, Bagehot wrote, “was magical. . . . Commerce instantly improved,” the boulevards were once again “gay and splendid; people began again to buy, and consequently to sell.” Not that Bagehot was surprised by Louis Napoleon’s appeal; after all, he was bold; he had “never been a professor, nor a journalist, nor a promising barrister, nor, by taste, a littératueur.” These were powerful, if negative, recommendations for leadership in Bagehot’s view. Besides, the French people had time and again shown that they were too clever to be trusted with political liberty. “With a well-balanced national character,” Bagehot argued, “liberty is a stable thing.” “Stupidity,” he wrote in a famous passage, is “about the most essential mental quality for a free people, whose liberty is to be progressive, permanent, and on a large scale.” It is “nature’s favourite recourse for preserving steadiness of conduct and consistency of opinion.” But a Frenchman is constitutionally incapable of stupidity: “esprit is his essence, wit is to him as water, bon-mots as bon-bons.” Liberty is pleasant; but “the best institutions will not keep right a nation that will go wrong.”

All this, of course, outraged the good readers of the Inquirer, who detested Louis Napoleon, were aghast at his dictatorial pretensions, and regarded any infringement on British-style liberty (at least in Europe) as unconscionable. Then, too, there was the embarrassing thought that if “stupidity” were a prerequisite for political freedom and the English were peculiarly suited for liberty then the English must be mired in stupidity. Well, Bagehot would not have said “mired.” But he claimed early and often that stupidity was an Englishman’s birthright. “A great part of the ‘best’ English people,” he wrote in The English Constitution, “keep their mind in a state of decorous dullness. They maintain their dignity; they get obeyed; they are good and charitable to their dependants. But they have no notion of play of mind; no conception that the charm of society depends upon it.” Even worse, perhaps, Bagehot had kind things to say about the reactionary behavior of the French Catholic Church, an unpardonable abomination. “Tell an Englishman that a building is without use and he will stare,” Bagehot wrote elsewhere; “that it is illiberal, and he will survey it; that it teaches Aristotle, and he will seem perplexed; that it don’t teach science, and he won’t mind; but only hint that it is the Pope, and he will arise and burn it to the ground.”

Naturally, there was a good deal of calculated outrageousness in Bagehot’s missives to the Inquirer. The sober backdrop to his playfulness was the Burkean theme that stresses the importance of “sense and circumstance” in politics. Above all, Bagehot was writing against “the old idea which still here creeps out in conversation, and sometimes in writing,” that

politics are simply a subdivision of immutable ethics; that there are certain rights of men in all places and
all times, which are the sole and sufficient foundation of all government, and that accordingly a single stereotype government is to make the tour of the world—and you have no more right to deprive a Dyak of his vote in a “possible” Polynesian Parliament, than you have to steal his mat.

Here again, we see that the pertinence of Bagehot’s political reflections is not limited to the nineteenth century. The difficult insight that Bagehot is everywhere at pains to communicate is that not all things are possible at all times and all places. If political liberty is a precious possession, it is forged in a long development of civilization, much of which is distinctly, and necessarily, illiberal. Hence the advantage of binocular vision, which allowed Bagehot, even as he was extolling Louis Napoleon’s coup, to risk his life helping the republicans build barricades. This was not an expression of irony or inconstancy on Bagehot’s part; it was an expression of political insight. As he put it later in “Caesarism As It Now Exists” (1865), the Second Empire is “an admirable government for present and coarse purposes, but a detestable government for future and refined purposes.” One can help prepare for the future; one must live in the present. The insights that found preliminary expression in Bagehot’s letters on Louis Napoleon’s coup recur again and again in his writings. They received their most complete development in what many consider Bagehot’s masterpiece: Physics and Politics, a sequence of essays that he began serializing in the Fortnightly Review in 1867. This was some eight years after the publication of On the Origin of Species and five years before Herbert Spencer’s Study of Sociology: “Social Darwinism” was in the air. And the long subtitle of Bagehot’s book—“Thoughts on the Application of the Principles of ‘Natural Selection’ and ‘Inheritance’ to Political Society” —clearly suggests that it belongs to that unpromising genre. As always with Bagehot, however, things are not as straightforward as they at first seem. By “physics” Bagehot means “science,” more particularly “Darwinism.” But the great theme of his book is “the political prerequisites of progress.” He approvingly quotes various works by Spencer and T. H. Huxley; he refers on and off to the “transmitted nerve element” and other Lamarckian museum pieces; but he early on makes it clear that in invoking the idea of natural selection he is merely “searching out and following up an analogy.”

Bagehot has (of course) two main ideas: first, the enormous difficulty our forefathers must have faced in establishing any political order or rule of law. “What this rule is,” Bagehot remarks, “does not matter so much. A good rule is better than a bad one, but any rule is better than none.” Second, the enormous difficulty later ages always face in advancing beyond the order that made their own existence possible. The first step—inaugurating law, custom, and habit—is the hardest; but history proper begins with the next step: “What is most evident is not the difficulty of getting fixed law, but getting out of a fixed law; not of cementing . . . a cake of custom, but of breaking the cake of custom; not of making the first preservative habit, but of breaking through it, and reaching something better.” The perennial problem—and the book’s admonitory theme—is that “history is strewn with the wrecks of nations which have gained a little progressiveness at the cost of a great
deal of hard manliness, and have thus prepared themselves for destruction as soon as the movements of the world gave a chance for it.” Bagehot traces the vicissitudes of this dialectic through various stages from “The Preliminary Age”—that is, the rude time of prehistory when “the strongest killed the weakest as they could”—to modern times, “The Age of Discussion.”

It is naturally “the age of discussion”—the age of political liberty—that Bagehot ultimately extols. But he is ever at pains to remind his readers of the harsh prerequisites of civilization, which include war, slavery, and gross inequity. Government by discussion, Bagehot is quick to acknowledge, is “a principal organ for improving mankind.” At the same time, he insists that “it is a plant of singular delicacy.” The question of how best to nurture this delicate plant is Bagehot’s final problem. Part of the answer is in facing up to the unpalatable realities about power that make civilization possible. The other part lies in embracing what Bagehot calls “animated moderation,” that “union of life with measure, of spirit with reasonableness,” which assures that discussion will continue without descending into violence or anarchy. It seems like a small thing. But then achieved order always does—until it is lost.

Notes
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1. There are numerous editions of individual works by Bagehot. Besides the five-volume Traveler’s Insurance Company edition, there are two other collected works. The first is The Works and Life of Walter Bagehot, edited by his sister-in-law, Mrs. Russell Barrington, in an edition of ten volumes. This edition was published in 1915 and includes, as its final volume, a biography-in-letters of Bagehot by Mrs. Barrington. The other, definitive, edition is The Collected Works of Walter Bagehot, edited by Norman St. John-Stevas, who is the author of an informative biographical monograph, Walter Bagehot: A Study of His Life and Thought Together With a Selection from His Political Writings (Indiana University Press, 1959). The fifteen-volume St. John-Stevas edition of Bagehot appeared between 1965 and 1986 and features important introductory essays by several scholars, including Jacques Barzun’s “Bagehot as Historian.” This edition was published by The Economist in London and Harvard University Press in the United States. Go back to the text.