Urban

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FOR much of the nineteenth century, Great Britain was the most urban place on earth.[1] To make such an observation is not to engage in national chauvinism but simply to state reality: for better or worse, more people in Britain lived in urban areas during the Victorian era than those inhabiting any other region of the globe at the same time. "Ours is pre-eminently the age of great cities," proclaimed Robert Vaughan in 1843, and countless other Britons echoed his characterization in the following decades.[2] Whether this was a positive or negative consequence for these Britons—not to mention other persons inhabiting rural areas of the British Isles, the nation's colonies, places subject to direct and indirect British influences, or the larger planetary ecosystem—is a matter of debate. Yet the geographic, demographic, and social reality remains: that of an island, characterized by an ever-more densely concentrated population and built environment as the century progressed, and that remains overwhelmingly urban in the present day. Our scholarly lexicon should reflect this, not only to better comprehend what was historically distinctive about nineteenth-century Britain, but also to offer another means of connecting lessons drawn from the study of this past society to an important component of life in the present-day world, where an ever-larger proportion of the global population inhabits cities, suburbs, or conurbations.

One striking feature of the 2018 *Keywords* issue was the absence of any direct references to the city or urban life. This represented a divergence from both Raymond William's original *Keywords* (1976) and its subsequent 2005 updating, both of which included entries dedicated to the "city."[3] The decision not to foreground the category of the urban by contributors to this journal, however, was very much in keeping with long-established scholarly tendencies. Scholarship on the Victorians regularly acknowledges the urban transformation of the British Isles, while also consistently deemphasizing it as a subject of analysis. David

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Cannadine's recent synthetic history of nineteenth-century Britain is a case in point. He postulates, for example, that nothing would have impressed Britons of 1800 more than the "overwhelming importance of urban life" in their country one hundred years later.[4] Yet this profound transformation only features in the rest of Cannadine's historical narrative as one of many contexts shaping the evolution of the British state. In fact, throughout the critical and historical scholarship on nineteenth-century Britain, urbanization routinely features as the neglected sibling of that century's oft-cited, foundational twin phenomenon, Britain's "urban-industrial revolution," with industrialization receiving the lion's share of attention.

Even specialists in British "urban history" regularly deemphasize the category of the urban, instead focusing their attention on "the city" or "cities," both conceptually and as the primary subject of analysis. Asa Briggs's classic study *Victorian Cities* (1963) asserted that the urban history of nineteenth-century Britain was primarily the "story of the development of separate provincial cultures," and scholars have overwhelmingly echoed Briggs's claims, producing a rich literature dedicated to individual cities but rarely endeavoring to connect these local histories to those of similar communities or the metropolis.[5]

This focus on analyzing "cities" over, for example, "urban areas," or nineteenth-century Britons' favored term, "large towns and populous districts," offers one explanation for scholars' ongoing tendency to underemphasize the broader challenges of the transition to urban life during the Victorian era. The word "city" encompasses a wide range of ideas, and its use in nineteenth-century Britain was varied and inconsistent. Throughout this period, it was primarily employed either to denote a community possessing a cathedral or, later, a specific, legal, municipal status. The practice of referring to large urban areas in general as "cities," in contrast, was relatively new, and this more generic usage, and the older, more specific historic and legal meanings of the term, have remained in tension in British culture ever since.[6] There is also a temptation to conceptualize "cities" primarily as unique entities possessing distinctive economies, cultures, and "personalities." This is why it seems to make sense to write "biographies" of cities, and Richard Vinen's history of Birmingham, as the story of "one extraordinary place," exemplifies this point of view.[7]

The choice to study "cities," while foregrounding those peculiarities of history, architecture, economy, or community that make individual communities unique, nevertheless simultaneously discourages the

examination of broader characteristics of urban life, whether in the nine-teenth century or the present day. As a generic shorthand for a socio-environmental category of existence, the word "urban," in contrast, encourages us to do the very opposite: to deemphasize the particular and instead foreground conditions defining life in all concentrated, pop-ulous, built environments. "Urban" describes a geographic and environ-mental type, and a condition of daily existence characterized, above all, by mass anonymity and the agglomeration of economic, political, and cultural networks. The term is thus far more capable of encompassing the different kinds of populous living environments in nineteenth-century Britain, including London, industrial and port cities, regional centers, suburbs, and early conurbations like Merseyside and the Black Country. "Urban," while itself an English word of long-established usage by the nineteenth century, was also the root in a number of new words invented in the Victorian era, including: *urbanism*, *urbanist*, *urbanite*, and *urbanization*, not to mention the analytic focus of the new disciplines of urban studies and urban planning, both of which also originated in nineteenth-century Britain.[8] All this suggests, in turn, that recalibrating our scholarship to focus on the urban dimensions of nineteenth-century British life offers a means to more closely align it with the thinking of those Britons who first began to grapple with the pressing questions raised by the transition to an overwhelmingly urban mode of life, whether for local ecosystems, economies, and societies or governments, communities, and individuals.

Such a focus promises to enrich not only our understanding of the Victorians but also their relevance for understanding our contemporary world. After all, Vaughan's 1843 assertion that "the world has never been so covered with cities as at the present time" remains true. Our age is like-wise the "age of great cities." Today, as in 1843, more humans inhabit urban areas than at any previous moment in history. Whether this ongo-ing pattern of urbanization first recognized in the nineteenth century will continue is an open question, but it seems clear from the vista of the early twenty-first century that the revolutionary transition of the pop-ulation of the British Isles from rural to urban areas represented an early, albeit pronounced, manifestation of what would become the default experience of a large swath of the global population by the close of the twentieth century, and thus deserves our continued attention.

NOTES

1. David Cannadine, *Victorious Century: The United Kingdom, 1800–1906* (London: Penguin, 2019), 387.
2. Robert Vaughan, *The Age of Great Cities; or, Modern Society Viewed in Its Relation to Intelligence, Morals, and Religion* (London: Jackson and Walford, 1843), 1.
3. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 22–23; Tony Bennett, Lawrence Grossberg, and Meaghan Morris, eds., *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 32–35.
4. Cannadine, *Victorious Century*, 494.
5. Asa Briggs, *Victorian Cities* (1963; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 43.
6. Williams, *Keywords*, 22.
7. Richard Vinen, *Second City: Birmingham and the Forging of Modern Britain* (London: Allen Lane, 2022), xxiii.
8. Ronan Paddison, *Handbook of Urban Studies* (London: SAGE, 2001), 2–3.