

Films Review: Victoria, The Young Queen, The Monarchy Rebranded, Poldark, Historical Insights on Class Conflict

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Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [History](#)

“All men were born in the same way: no privilege existed which was not of man’s own contriving.” —Winston Graham *Ross Poldark* (1945)

Introduction

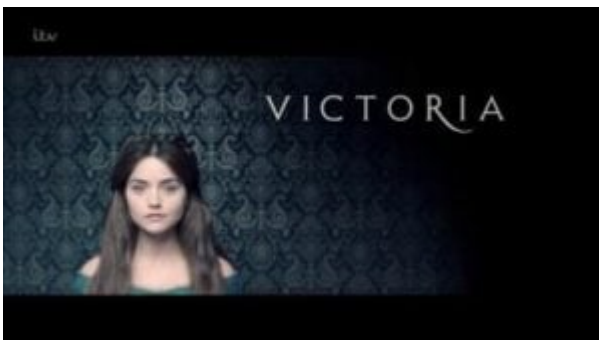
The recent drama, *Victoria* (2016-2019) on Netflix based on the life of Queen Victoria is an elaborate, well-made and well-acted series, all the better to convince one of the authenticity of its content.

Victoria was presented as a young queen who was always concerned with the interests of not only her adoring public but with the staff who worked in her palace.

However, this all starts to break down in an episode that dealt with the horrors of the Great Hunger raging in Ireland in 1847.

Victoria

Image: Victoria ITV [Intertitle](#)



In this episode, “Faith, Hope & Charity” [S2E6], Victoria is depicted as being **very concerned about the plight of the Irish**:

“The truth is, ma’am, the population of Ireland has grown beyond its natural limits. It would be immoral of us to interfere in what is an inevitable period of self-regulation.

[Victoria] Self-regulation?

I don't know if you are familiar with the works of Malthus, ma'am, this is exactly the sort of situation he predicted. Population growth always outstrips food production, with inevitable results.

[Victoria] I think I should like to visit Ireland. I feel I need to see the situation for myself."

"Victoria, I can see how much you care about the situation in Ireland, but we have to remind ourselves that charity begins at home."

"I had some papers for the Queen from the Prime Minister.

I should go, there is a debate on the Irish question.

Yes, the Queen talks about nothing else."

"[Victoria] Thank you, Mr Trevelyan. You may leave us. I will not stand by while the Irish die of hunger! I cannot have it on my conscience."

The episode started with the repetition of the old saw that the starvation was caused by the lack of food due to the potato blight:

"What a gloomy sermon. I found it rather thought-provoking. How pestilence and plague is part of God's will. What can be gloomier than that? I've seen potato fields in my parish where every plant is black, my lord. And when they dig the tubers up they are quite putrid." (*Victoria* (2016-2019) "Faith, Hope & Charity" [S2E6])

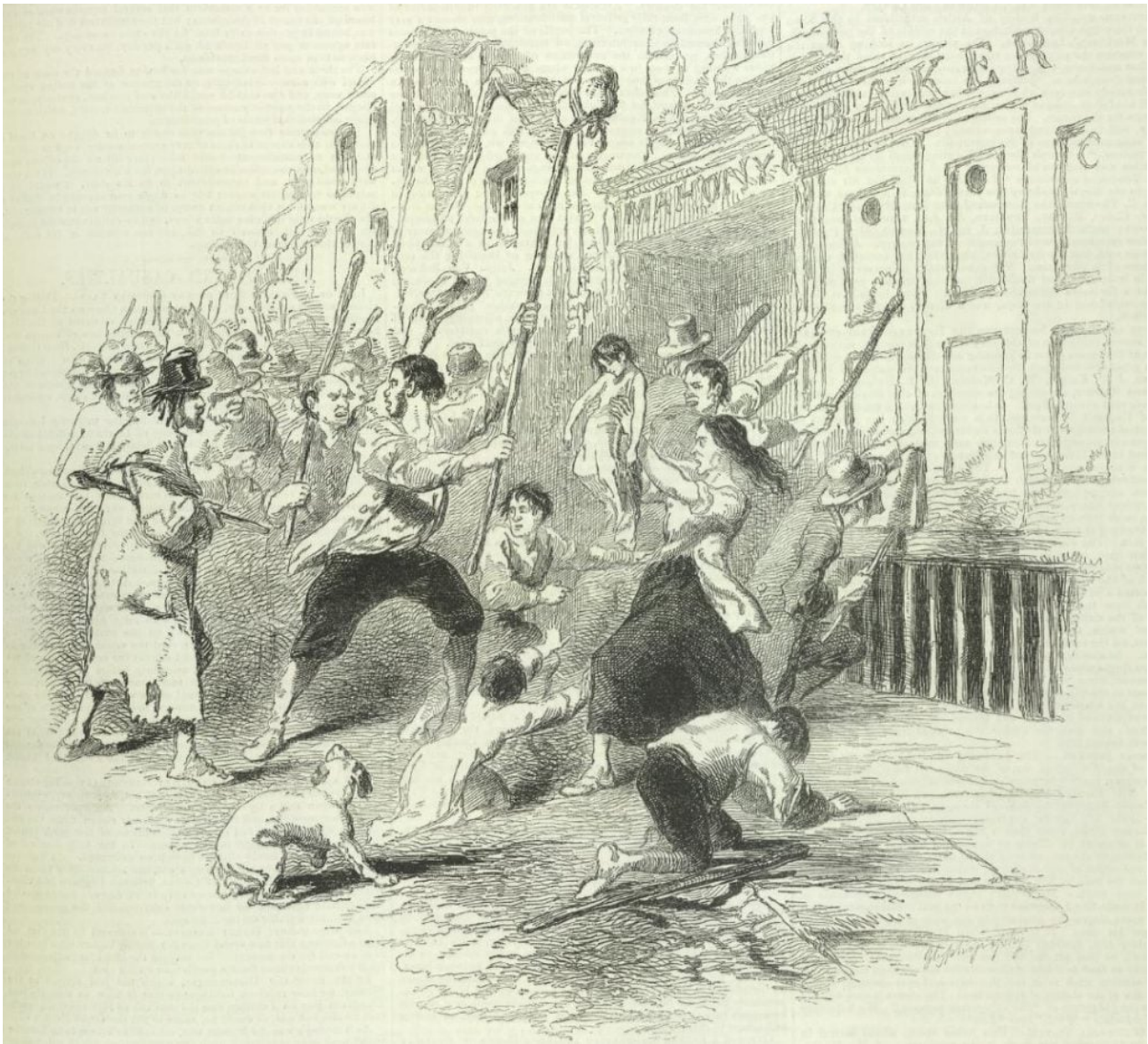
However, [according](#) to historian Christine Kinealy, the founding director of Ireland's Great Hunger Institute at Quinnipiac University:

"There is no evidence that she [Victoria] had any real compassion for the Irish people in any way [...] We know that really she had no interest in Ireland and so to imagine she wanted to do more doesn't really ring true [...] In her very long reign, she only visited Ireland four times and one of those times was 1849 when the famine was still raging but coming to an end. At that point, she didn't do anything, so it's hard to imagine that what they're portraying is really based on fact."

Furthermore, the monarchy prevented others from donating more to the cause than the queen so as not to embarrass the Queen's mediocre efforts.

And there was not much sympathy from the aristocracy either, according to the Duke Of Cambridge, (January 1846):

"Rotten potatoes and seaweed, or even grass, properly mixed, afforded a very wholesome and nutritious food. All knew that Irishmen could live upon anything and there was plenty of grass in the field though the potato crop should fail."



Rioters in Dungarvan attempt to break into a bakery; the poor could not afford to buy what [food](#) was available. (*The Pictorial Times*, 1846).

Yet much could have been done by the British ruling class to alleviate the suffering which caused one million to die and a further million to emigrate. In earlier times British policy was different:

“During the subsistence crisis of 1799-1800, the government had placed a temporary embargo on the export of potatoes from Ireland. [...] Similar intervention and market regulation occurred in Britain. For example, following the poor grain harvest in 1773, the bounty on wheat exports was removed in an attempt to keep grain in the country. [...] At the same time, local and central governments throughout Europe were responding to food shortages in their own countries by closing their ports as a short-term expedient. The Dutch government also repealed their Corn Laws in 1846 in an attempt to facilitate the import of cheap grain.” [1]

In this case early government attempts to alleviate famine distress were ended by a new Whig administration in London, which followed a laissez-faire economic doctrine. As a result, the export of food from Ireland continued unabated:

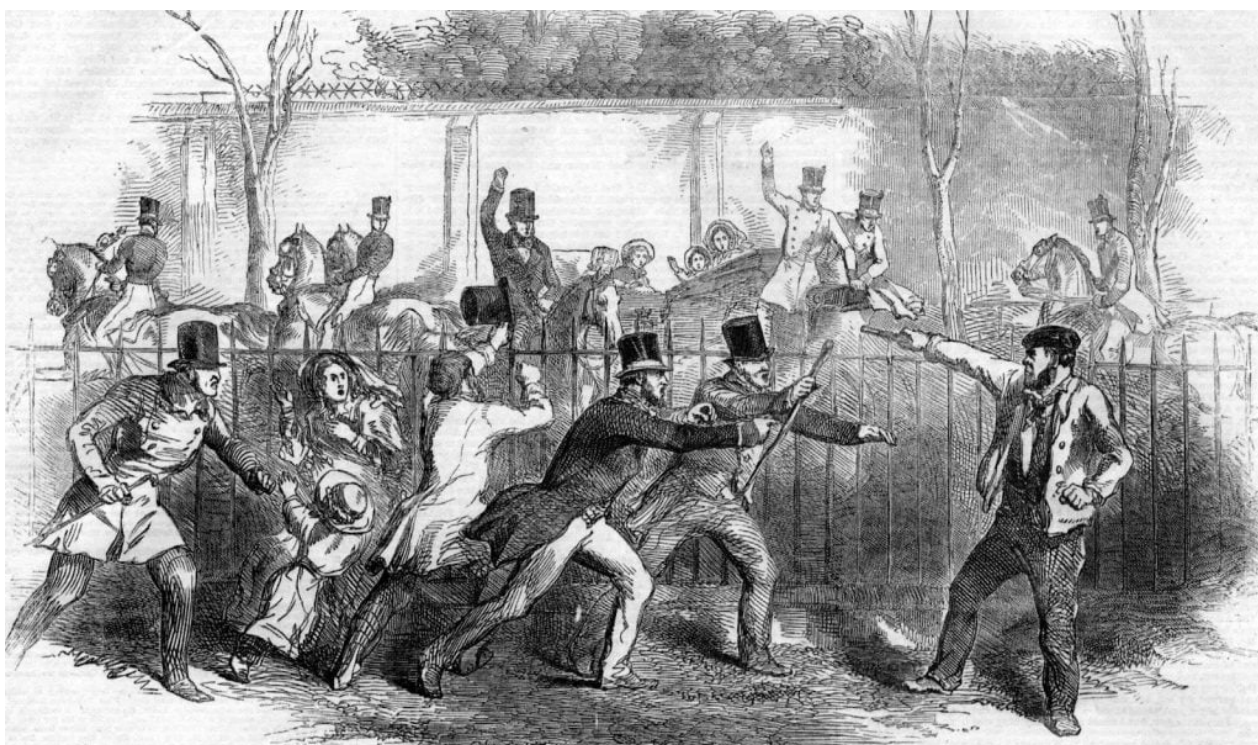
“It is generally accepted that by the 1840s, Ireland had become the granary of Britain, supplying the grain-hungry British market sufficient to feed two million people annually. At the same time, large quantities of other merchandise were exported from Ireland. In the twelve month period following the second failure of the potato crop, exports from Ireland included horses and ponies (over 4,000), bones, lard, animal skins, honey, tongues, rags, shoes, soap, glue and seed. [...] In 1847 alone, the worst year of the Famine, almost 4,000 vessels carried food from Ireland to the major ports of Britain, that is, Bristol, Glasgow, Liverpool and London.” [2]

The Irish nationalist, John Mitchel, summed the whole situation up neatly when he wrote in 1861: “The Almighty, indeed, sent the potato blight, but the English created the Famine.”

Far from helping the victims of the famine, Victoria was perceived very [differently](#) in Ireland:

“In a scathing article titled “The Famine Queen,” [Maud] Gonne [(1866–1953) Irish republican revolutionary, suffragette and actress] accused Queen Victoria of failing to help “the survivors of sixty years of organized famine.” Although quickly banned by the British authorities, the article’s damning nickname for Queen Victoria stuck. The queen found herself shouldering some of the blame for the approximately one million deaths.”

In England, Victoria’s popularity was tempered by [eight](#) assassination attempts on her life. On Thursday, 19 May 1849, William Hamilton, a 22-years-old, orphaned, unemployed Irish [bricklayer](#), “fired a pistol at the Queen Victoria, as she drove, yet again, down Constitution hill toward Buckingham Palace. Hamilton had to immigrate from Ireland to London in the 1840s at the onset of the Irish Famine/Great Hunger.”



William Hamilton [shooting](#) at Queen Victoria

The Monarchy Rebranded

The attempt to portray Victoria in a positive light in the *Victoria* (2016-2019) series could be seen as a modern version of the rebranding of the British monarchy in the nineteenth century when British society was perceived to be under threat from its own peasantry and working class à la French revolution taking place across the channel. According to David Cannadine in 'The British Monarchy, c. 1820-1977', in the early nineteenth century the press was hostile to the monarchy and the public were more interested in heroes like Nelson or Wellington whose funerals surpassed those of former kings in 'splendour and popularity'. [3] In general, royal occasions were marred by laughter, gossiping, drunkenness, and general disrespect. Cannadine writes:

“Even as late as 1879 the commons once more debated Dunning’s famous motion ‘that the influence of the crown has increased, is increasing, and ought to be diminished’. If continuing royal power made grand royal ceremonial unacceptable, then renewed royal unpopularity made it impossible. For the public character and reputation of successful generations of the royal family during the first three quarters of the nineteenth century meant that they were almost without exception viewed with indifference or hostility.” [4]

By the end of the nineteenth century Britain had become mainly an “urban, industrial, mass society, with class loyalties and class conflicts set in a genuinely national framework for the first time.” [5]

Thus, the change for the monarchy or Victoria in particular, from obscure and isolated leaders of the wealthy to becoming a matriarchal figure for the whole British nation, became increasingly necessary and urgent. [6]

The hostility of the press towards the monarchy ended and the yellow press was expanded.

The church changed its attitude towards the monarchy and took monarchical ceremonies very seriously, increasing the theatrical aspects exponentially:

“In 1887 and again in 1897, the officiating clergy at Victoria’s jubilee services dressed in copes and colored stoles, a novel and picturesque innovation. And, as with the secular side of royal ritual, the motive was in part a wish to appeal to the working-classes. As E. W. Benson, archbishop of Canterbury, noted after the Golden Jubilee, ‘days afterwards, everyone feels that the socialist movement has had a check.’ [7]

The monarchy was redrawn as ‘a unifying symbol of permanence and national community’. This process was continued over the decades to the elaborate coronation of Elizabeth II up to the beginnings of the Brexit campaign. Over the last ten years cultural nationalism has become more evident in the amount of films and TV/online series produced that emphasise the glories of the national community in the face of external adversity, such as *The Last Kingdom* (2015-2022) *Dunkirk* (2017), *1917* (2019), etc.

Poldark

“Do you believe we are masters of ourselves, or merely dance like puppets on strings having the illusion of independence?” —Winston Graham, Jeremy Poldark

A very different approach can be seen in another British series, *Poldark* (2015). The series

was based on a set of novels by Winston Graham who wrote the first Poldark novel in 1945 and the last one in 2002. The BBC made a series based on the novels for television from 1975 to 1977 with Robin Ellis in the lead role. The new **Poldark (2015)** series starred the Irish actor, Aidan Turner (with Robin Ellis returning to play Reverend Halse).

Ross Poldark is a veteran of the British army who returns from the American Revolutionary War to his landed estate in Cornwall. He finds that his father has died and Poldark has to rebuild the estate which is now in ruins. He marries his maid Demelza and they work hard with the local people to establish a vibrant local economy. However, many problems beset them as the mines do not deliver up much copper and he takes on a lot of starving miners and farm hands to try and alleviate the local economic and agricultural crises.

Poldark has no liking for the local elites and aristocrats and sides [with](#) the poor:

“They disgust me, my own class. Not all of them, but... most.”

Poldark is an Enlightenment man who reads Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Man* and fights against injustices forced on the local people by the upper classes. When he eventually becomes an MP, Poldark campaigns for the abolition of slavery. As Adrian Pabst [writes](#):

“A revulsion against wilful injustice, not mere income inequality, drives Ross in his crusade against the abuse of power and privilege. Instead of wallowing in a culture of victimhood, Poldark believes in sacrifice, service and solidarity with the dispossessed. He waits neither for the visible hand of the state nor for the invisible hand of the market, but promotes self-government and democratically governing institutions of mutual assistance. Specifically Poldark helps to set up workers’ co-operatives in which members have power and can share in the sacrifices, risks and, indeed, rewards.”

The underlying politics of Poldark is possibly due to the influence of the Labour government post-war politics on Winston Graham, as Labour had served in a wartime coalition and then [won](#) “a majority in the 1945 election. Clement Attlee’s government enacted extensive nationalisation and established the modern welfare state and National Health Service before losing power in 1951.”

This was duly noted by Jack Adrian in his obituary of Winston Graham [written](#) in 2003:

“There is more than just a tinge of incipient socialism in Poldark’s views and actions, which are mirrored on a much larger, even heroic, scale across the English Channel, where revolution, which will directly affect the Cornish fisher-folk, is breaking out. All this chimed in perfectly with the recent coming to power of a reforming Labour government under Clement Attlee.”

While this is not exactly revolutionary socialism, it is not the class conciliatory politics we see in *Victoria* and much of the products of British cultural nationalism. As far as mainstream media goes Poldark’s revulsion of his own class is about as radical a thought we are ever going to hear or see.

The constant popularization of the monarchy by the mass media (for example: *The Madness of King George* (1994), *To Kill a King* (2003), *Whatever Love Means* (2005), *The Young Victoria* (2009), *The King’s Speech* (2010), *William & Kate: The Movie*(2011), *Diana* (2013),

The Crown (2016–2023), *Mary Queen of Scots* (2018), *The King* (2019), etc.) leads to a very skewed view of British history, not to mention the exclusion of British working class history and politics.



Famine [sculpture](#) in Dublin

By its nature the promotion of a broad national family led by the monarchy is the politics of an ethnic group that includes all classes.

The nature of class struggle, on the other hand, is the recognition of differing and contradictory interests of the different classes in that ethnic group/society. The use of culture to present the nation as one united family under King/Queen and God hides the brutal fact that the ongoing crises caused by right-wing economic and geopolitical agendas are generally borne by one class, and it's not the rich one. While shows like *Victoria* and *Poldark* give us some insights into British society in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth centuries, the limitations of the mainstream media mean that the stories of those who tried to radically change the economic and political system itself remain excluded and untold.

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He is a Research Associate of the Centre for Research on Globalization (CRG).

Notes

[1] Christine Kinealy 'Food Exports from Ireland 1846-47' *History Ireland* Spring 1997.

[2] Christine Kinealy 'Food Exports from Ireland 1846-47' *History Ireland* Spring 1997.

[3] David Cannadine in 'The British Monarchy, c. 1820-1977' in *The Invention of Tradition* (Canto Classics) 2012 by Eric Hobsbawn p116

[4] David Cannadine in 'The British Monarchy, c. 1820-1977' in *The Invention of Tradition* (Canto Classics) 2012 by Eric Hobsbawn p109

[5] David Cannadine in 'The British Monarchy, c. 1820-1977' in *The Invention of Tradition* (Canto Classics) 2012 by Eric Hobsbawn p122

[6] David Cannadine in 'The British Monarchy, c. 1820-1977' in *The Invention of Tradition* (Canto Classics) 2012 by Eric Hobsbawn p122

[7] David Cannadine in 'The British Monarchy, c. 1820-1977' in *The Invention of Tradition* (Canto Classics) 2012 by Eric Hobsbawn p131/132

Featured image: *Poldark* series title [card](#)

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