INTRODUCTION ONE:
RETHINKING THE VICTORIAN AGE

Susan Bassnett

On 22 January 1901 Queen Victoria died, and so ended the Victorian era at the very moment when the new century began. The mood of that new century reflected a continuation of the sense of triumphalism that the latter years of Victoria’s reign had engendered: declared Empress of India in 1867, the old queen presided over the greatest empire of modern times. The territories of the British Empire stretched around the globe, coloured red on the pages of atlases used by schoolchildren, atlases that would barely change until after the Second World War. As the new century began, British eyes were turned outwards, beyond Europe, for British relations with European neighbours were increasingly uneasy, as the policy of ‘splendid isolation’ grew stronger. What interested Britain primarily was her network of relationships with those countries that flew the Union Jack.

For the first half of the twentieth century, the British Empire was to remain relatively intact, despite the ever-increasing stirrings of revolt against British rule and growing pressures at home. The partition of India and the creation of the separate states of India and Pakistan in 1947 stand as a clear marker in the history of empire in the twentieth century. This was a crucial moment of change, two years after the end of the Second World War in 1945, for India had played such a central role in the British narrative of imperial greatness. Barely a few years later, the series of armed conflicts in the 1950s in Malaya, in Africa, in Borneo and Cyprus illustrate the extent to which belief in empire had altered. The sense of solid national pride that brought people out onto the streets to celebrate
such an event as the relief of the siege of Mafeking in May, 1900 had changed by the late 1950s into a growing cynicism and uneasiness which is clearly reflected in the artistic production of that decade, the era of the Angry Young Men.

The Suez crisis of 1956 is often held up as the definitive end of the British imperial age. In that year, Egypt announced its intention to nationalize the Suez Canal, the vital waterway linking the Mediterranean to the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, constructed in 1870 and subsequently of fundamental importance for the expansion of British interests in India and South-east Asia. The Prime Minister, Anthony Eden, responded by attempting to occupy the Canal zone with a joint military force of English, French and Israeli troops. To Eden’s astonishment, world opinion, including that of the United States, turned against him and Britain was forced to withdraw. The age of gunboat diplomacy it seemed, had come to an end, certainly so far as Britain was concerned. Thirty years were to pass before any government felt sufficiently self-confident to attempt anything similar, until Margaret Thatcher sent gunboats to the Falkland Islands in 1982.

If Suez is remembered as one of the lowest points of British morale in the twentieth century, the Falklands campaign will surely be remembered as one of the most ambiguous and controversial. Opinion divided, and for once that division was not clearly reflected either in terms of class or party political allegiances. Support for the sending of British troops to the isolated group of islands in the South Atlantic off the coast of Argentina reflects the plurality of views on the role of Britain globally that were being expressed in the 1980s. On the one hand, there was a strong sense of almost jingoistic patriotism that harked back to the first half of the century, whilst on the other there was serious questioning about the rights of individual states to lay claim to territories far beyond their own geographical boundaries. The picture was made more complex for the Left, who might otherwise have united in anti-militarist opposition to the campaign, by the fact that the invading Argentinian army was under the control of a repressive dictatorial regime led by General Galtieri. Ultimately, the Falklands conflict led to Galtieri’s downfall and a new era of democracy in Argentina. It is interesting to note also that the most high-profile opposition to British intervention in the Falklands was led by religious groups. The Pope, on an historic visit to Britain in 1982, spoke openly against the campaign, aided by the Archbishop of Canterbury, who later refused to officiate at a triumphalist victory service in St Paul’s.