



Home and School; Sport and Leisure; Travel and Transport; Work and Industry

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off

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You could be forgiven for thinking that this new series from Belitha really does offer all you would ever need for Victorian social and economic history for 8-12 year olds. The four books all come in neat twin subject packages and in different bright coloured covers, so that you can tell them apart on the shelves. Their presentation has a Victorian feel: each page has a line border and at least every other double page spread is confined to black and white illustrations. It is the illustrations that matter most, and they and their captions take up the lion's share of the space. While Morris's text offers three paragraphs on, say, 'work and school', including information on school leaving age, how science was taught, and learning to write with sand trays and slates, four illustrations cover topics as various as school merit certificates, teaching methods and the chemistry sets that wealthy parents could buy for their children to use at home.

The illustrations, which are all Victorian in origin, are well chosen, and the captions draw out their detail (what are those kites for, hanging from the rafters of the schoolroom?) and make broader points. Diana Morris, the picture researcher, has used only two picture libraries, the Hulton Getty and the Public Record Office, but has found fascinating visual sources, which look at Victorian life from a variety of viewpoints: from social reforming cartoons to proud family photographs. She includes many Victorian advertisements, which, alongside playbills, post-cards and greeting cards, provide the colour in the books. These are particularly successful in putting across Victorian preoccupations and aspirations.

The mixture of the (very) general text and specific illustration is beguiling. But anyone relying on these four books alone for their knowledge of Victorian times, would have only an impression. So much is missed out: not just in the subjects that are covered, but in those that are not. There is no mention of the church in **Sport and Leisure**, for

instance. Yet, for many Victorians, religion and religious organisations took up much of their spare time. There is a great deal about the middle classes and the rich. Nearly all of the section on family life in **Home and School** is about the better off and is preceded by a statement 'Working people had to spend so much of their day earning a living that there was not much time left for anything else' which is untrue, a poor justification for inadequate research, and is contradicted by much in the **Sport and Leisure** volume.

There is the question of balance between topics: in **Travel and Transport**, should canals have the same amount of space devoted to them as bicycles? Sometimes, individual topics are not related to one another: it is not made clear, for instance, how the development of railways affected the use of canals. There is not a strong enough framework of change and development over the ninety years of Victoria's reign to link together all the disparate topics. There is a short introduction to each volume, but none has any conclusion, although you can infer that if a subject appears towards the end of the book, it probably appeared towards the end of Victoria's reign.

There is a good index to each volume, a sometimes eccentric glossary (entry for 'goggles' but not 'mass production') but no further reading list. Of the four, I have a slight preference for **Sport and Leisure**, which is a topic well suited by this approach, and which brings together information which is difficult to find otherwise.

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