



Heyday: Britain and the birth of the modern world

Ben Wilson

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Heyday brings to life one of the most extraordinary periods in modern history. From 1851, in the space of little more than a decade, the world was reshaped by technology, trade, mass migration and war. As instantaneous electric communication bridged the vast gulfs that separated human societies, millions of settlers travelled to the far corners of the Earth, building vast cities out of nothing in lightning-quick time. A new generation of fast steamships and railways connected these burgeoning frontier societies, shrinking the world and creating an interlinked global economy.

In the company of fortune-seekers and ordinary migrants, we journey to these rapidly expanding frontiers, savouring the frenetic activity and optimism of the boom-towns of the 1850s in Australia, New Zealand the United States. This is a story not only of rapid progress, but of the victims of an assurgent West: indigenous peoples who stood in the pathways of economic expansion, Asian societies engulfed by the forces of modernisation. We join, among others, Muslim guerrilla fighters in the Caucasus mountains and freelance empire-builders in the jungles of Nicaragua, British free trade zealots preying on China and samurai warriors resisting Western incursions in Japan. No less important are the inventions, discoveries and technologies that powered progress, and the great engineering projects that characterised the Victorian heyday, notably the transatlantic telegraph cable.

In a fast-paced, kaleidoscopic narrative, Ben Wilson recreates a time of explosive energy and dizzying change, a rollercoaster ride of booms and bust, witnessed through the eyes of the men and women reshaping its frontiers. At the centre stands Great Britain. The country was the peak of its power between 1851 and the mid-1860s as it attempted to determine the destinies of hundreds of millions of people. *Heyday* is a dazzlingly innovative take on a period of extraordinary transformation, a little-known decade that was fundamental in the making not only of Britain but of the modern world.

Heyday: Britain and the birth of the modern world Details

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Mayo says

Interesting pop-history book. I learned about a lot of different things that happened during that time that I didn't have prior knowledge of. I liked reading about the connections the author made to different events happening around the world and how we can see a lot of the same things happening today.

Fred Svoboda says

Very nice history focuses on the international role of Great Britain in the decade of the 1850s as improvements in communication and transportation technology and Britain's faith in the liberal influences of free trade came up against the limitations of the world as it actually was, in such disastrous happenings as the Indian Mutiny and the resistance of the Chinese to foreign influence. This is particularly of value to U.S. readers, who tend to get a history that focuses on what was happening in North America to the exclusion of larger patterns. Thus in "Heyday" we have the California Gold Rush, but also the gold discoveries in Australia, for example. Highly recommended.

John Walker says

If you are an American you should read this book. Don't worry the opening of the West and the lead up to the civil war are all in this. How did the world get this way...well in 1851 the "great Cable" was laid between England (the world Superpower) and Europe, the Great Exhibition opened in London, gold had already been discovered in California and Australia..The Age of Gold, the Rise of the Media and the beginning of what we call the 'Modern Age' really began.

Now of course there was, in the middle of the decade, the Crimean War, the Taiping Rebellion, stirrings of Civil War in the USA which lead to...well you know then there was Indian Mutiny that changed the entire British Empire. Plus all the problems with the natives in China, New Zealand, the rise of a united Prussia, Italy, the fall of Napoleon III and the destruction of Japan, and China are all in this book, which compasses the mid-nineteenth century world, that we now live in..

Ben Wilson has done a stellar book that shows the world as it was and how it is today.

Steve says

A fantastic book - I initially thought that this would just be another 'wasn't Britain great in the 19th century' tome; but it is a subtle, incredibly diverse and yet coherent view of the period 1850-1862 which shows how a series of incredible global events were inter-connected; and also how the pace of change further intensified those events. Simply superb!

Russell James says

An excellent tour through the momentous 1850s: the gold rush, China, India, slavery, the American Civil War, that new-fangled telegraph ... Lucid and eye-opening.

Chris Jaffe says

This is a very engaging and enjoyable bit of pop history that does a very good job tying together some of the major trends of the 1850s. Wilson notes that the era was looked at as something of a golden age at the time. It came after the Revolutions of 1848 and economic problems (most notably the Irish famine) - but the 1850s itself was noted by progress and prosperity.

He starts in London, and begins with a big event from the late 1840s - the repeal of England's Corn Laws. This pushed the British Empire into free trade - and boy, did it work out great for them. The world entered free trade with the empire. Wilson looks at the 1851 Crystal Palace Expo in London to show where the world was, and where it was going. The British Empire produced 66% of the world's coal, 70% of its steel, 50% of its iron, and 50% of its textiles. So the Corn Laws repeal was big news for the entire world. The Crystal Palace expo set the tone of progress and confidence for the decade.

The main theme of the decade was globalization. The world seemingly became more and more connected all the time. You had gold rushes in California and Australia. You had not only people pour to those remote places, but the flow of humans forced improved transportation around the world - in the form of more railroad miles and new Clipper ships. The American frontier was part of this story of globalization, and immigrants came to Minnesota or Kansas to grow crops that would sell to markets elsewhere. Food production itself was globalized with the rise of grain elevators and the eruption of cities overnight like Chicago. Oh yeah, and later he notes the opening of Japan.

The middle section looks at the Crimean War and its impact. The Russians saw it as saving Christians from tyrannical Muslim rule. The British saw it as free trade versus autocracy; modernity versus backwardness. The war didn't go great for anyone. Wilson ponders how the world might be different if it had. The British failed to do anything about Caucasus regions like Chechnya. They had success in Crimea, but that might not have been as important. He also points out that the US and UK nearly went to war in the mid-1850s over US aggression in the Caribbean and Central America. A more successful Crimean War might've caused England to be more belligerent across the Atlantic. The Crimean War also caused Russia to enter Manchuria, which China's government didn't initially see as a problem. Russia was a counter-weight to mutual enemy England.

Wilson covers William Walker and guys who tried to bring Latin America into the US fold. Wilson doesn't note much regional complexity in how these guys were viewed. Well, he does a little, but not as much as he probably should.

This decade also saw more European influence across Asia. England and France had their Second Opium War in China. The bigger story of the era, though, was India. A new leader, Dalhousie, engaged in a series of reforms to modernize India. He pushed for more direct rule, more railways, telegraphs, and a postage system. But high-handed behavior also sparked the great uprising in 1857. The British viewed it as civilization versus savagery, and made heroes of those who put it down. By the 1860s, though, a backlash set in due to British

reprisals that made them seem less than civilized as well. Oh yeah, the Taiping Rebellion gets covered (though not in much too detail - but it is part of the story of globalization based on the obvious Christian influence on Hong Xiuquan).

The Atlantic cable was laid - and though it soon snapped, it did create a new era. (In the early 1850s, the first cable connected England to Europe itself, so this was a leap). A giant solar flare or two nearly wiped out all electricity at the time. If it happened now, the result could be calamity. But it didn't. Darwin's book came out in 1859, as did the works of John Stuart Mill, Karl Marx, Tale of Two Cities by Dickens, and a huge seller simply called "Self-Help."

By the end of the decade, the early optimism began to loose its shine. There was an economic downturn in 1857. Austria and France went into war. Garibaldi became an international hero, though one not fitting into the social order of the earlier era. Other radicals like John Brown also made their mark.

There is a chapter on the US Civil War, which is a bit off the book's topic, but isn't too far off. He largely rehashes arguments of others on how close England came to getting involved, and the role Garibaldi played in diverting attention from it at a key moment. The war also sparked an increase in internationalization, as King Cotton was surpassed by King Corn, and India became Cotton land. (Those 1850s reforms now paid off).

He has an epilogue about 1873, noting that the earlier hopes in peace, prosperity, and progress fell apart as a long recession entered in, and the climate became more belligerant.

Adam Thomas says

What is gutta-percha, and how did it change history? Find out in Wilson's wide-ranging history of "Britain in the world" during the optimism of the 1850s. "Heyday" is a good account of the growing interconnectedness of the world, with fascinating coverage of the Great Exhibition, the introduction of oceanic telegraphy, the development of record-breaking sea travel, the beginnings of Reuters, and the manly importance of beards. Sadly for me, the fascinating sections are interspersed with much less interesting sections on money and fighting, but this was still a good read.

Liviu says

Excellent non-fiction book about the 1850's (and a little beyond) which were a time of huge advances and boom, but also with wars, busts and with more clouds on the horizon; however the first successful underwater cable connection between the UK and Europe under the Channel which allowed telegraph to be extended to Britain, the first universal Expo or world fair showcasing the goods of the world and allowing people to see something of most places without having to travel there were events that galvanized the public as the world truly entered the global era; yes, the first transatlantic cable (laid in the 1850's) failed after a few messages but it was clearly a matter of time only (one that will keep working will be completed in 1866) and the long distance railways connecting the East and West coasts here in the US as well the ones connecting Europe with the farthest reaches of Asia were a little in the future too, but the outline of the global world was clear; on the flip side, the huge improvements in organized destruction (the Colt repeating revolver, the rifled gun and then the automatic Gatling gun) meant that the remaining indigenous warrior cultures (the Plains

Indians, the Maoris, various African tribes etc) who could fight on equal terms on horseback and/or regular guns were now doomed as was the Indian rebellion of 1857-9 as the British could use the modern railways, telegraph stations and fast ships to mobilize fast

and those are only some highlights since the book covers a lot and it is very absorbing, reading like a novel

Highly recommended

Casey says

A great book, covering the energetic 1850s, a decade that saw many technological, economic, and social “leaps” alongside the start of the struggles and conflicts that would define the rest of the Century. The author makes a well-reasoned thesis that a decade in the middle of the 19th Century (specifically the period from 1851 to 1862) was a major turning point in world history; that it was truly the start of the modern era, and all the good and bad which that entails. Fueled by the Californian and Australian gold rushes of the late 1840s and early 1850s, pushed forward by a quickened economic cycle due to various legal and business developments, supported by major progress in transportation and communications technologies, and motivated by the theories of free-market trade arrangements (which finally won their long political battles in the late 1840s), the 1850s were a boom time for the world economy. Even the occasional “busts” were short lived and regional or sector specific, bypassed by the larger economic story that was global in nature. Yet behind these good times, and the predominantly Anglo-Saxon moralizing self-righteousness it fueled, lay a darker realization that the global markets were dependent on the increasingly imperialistic nature of European world affairs, were built upon staple crop agriculture in slave or indentured cultures with limited freedoms for their workers, and were pushing working classes and frontier communities to ever more separation from their original cultural centers. All of those darker elements grew over time so that the “Heyday” decade that started with the Crystal Palace in London and a shortened route to California via Nicaragua ended with a Civil War in America and the burning of the Summer Palace in Beijing. The author does a great job weaving together this global story, presenting seemingly separate entities or persons as close examples of a worldwide trend. Amongst others he presents New Zealand and Minnesota as the essence of frontier development; William Walker and Imam Schamyl to show the power of remote individuals in a connected world; and John Brown, Giuseppe Garibaldi, & Yoshida Shoin demonstrating the growing conflict against the powerful market forces shaping the world. All in all this is an enjoyable book to read, providing both deep explanations to the beginnings of our modern world and an interesting history of a bygone era. Great for those who want to know more about the mid-19th Century, with an emphasis on the history of transportation and communications technology.

Lauren Albert says

This just didn't do anything for me. Because of all the great reviews and ratings, I was excited when the book came but it was just another history. There didn't seem to be any new point of view or theory. It wasn't bad but it wasn't great.

Hal says

Recommended by Hendrik

Susanj says

Oh my goodness what a wonderful book. I'd been wondering about what-all was going on in the rest of the world in the years leading up to our U.S. Civil War, and this book was so very helpful... I'm ordering my own copy now that I've returned the library's, and also reading some others that fill out various aspects of the world scene about which I had known little.

Rebecca says

Heyday was an interesting book that basically gave a review of historical events in the 1850s focusing on the themes of transport, communication and globalisation. I thought it was great for giving a global overview of this period. I had previously only encountered the Victorians through a very British-centric lens and it really helped me to put this in a wider context. It was a fairly straightforward read but it helps if you already have a basic idea of the history of this period. It was a bit dry at points and I read it in two goes. Overall though, I learnt a lot of new things and it really got across the importance of global communication in causing massive change. Would definitely read another book by Ben Wilson.

Michael Hettinger says

A strong account of various events during the 1850s interconnected, and how technological advances enabled information to disseminate much more quickly than had been possible beforehand. Wilson ranges from the development of trans-Atlantic communication and fast clipper ships to the Crimean War and the opening of Japan, with enough detail about each subject to pique my curiosity and make me want to read more deeply about some areas. Definitely a book that I'll reread in order to pick up more details.

Darren says

Making connections between the events during the decade: 1850-1861, and British participation. From the Australian gold rush to the Great Exhibition, Opium war to the Indian mutiny. Wilson articulately illustrates the drive for free trade, the thread that runs through these well informed and well written chapters. This is an exciting read that I found hard to put down, except when reading further on these subjects.
