Savannah Catron, Review of Briggs, Asa. *Victorian People: A Reassessment of Persons and Themes, 1851-67*. University of Chicago Press, 2015.

Asa Briggs was a social historian who was one of the founders of the University of Sussex, and he was the vice chancellor for many years before he retired from the university. Asa Briggs has written many works that focus on the Victorian period. This book, Victorian People, which was originally published in 1955 and was republished in 2015, is the first in the series of works that Briggs has written especially about the Victorian era in England. The two that follow this book in the series are Victorian Cities and Victorian Things. He also wrote many journal articles about Victorian politics and society.

This book highlights the people who helped shape the Victorian era and the future of England. Briggs states the thesis of the book within the introduction, but it is not stated directly. The thesis or the main argument within this book is to tell the reader about the individual lives of Victorians so they may understand the values of the era. Briggs' main audience is in the academic field. Briggs uses each chapter to talk about a specific person to get then get a larger picture of the topic of the chapter. Starting with the Great Exhibition, the reader learns about a great event that helped to bring countries of the world together. It was also used to highlight the English inventions to the world, to simulate trade, and to help the world recognize the power of England. With this event in mind, Briggs continues this chapter by talking about the men who helped in the politics of the 1850s. This focus on the men of politics, it gives the reader a foundation to use for the rest of the book. [1]

[1] Briggs, Victorian People, 15-51.

In the continuing chapters, Briggs talks about the Crimean War and how many people were for the war, but by the end of the war, they were not. Briggs also mentions that while individual soldiers were heroic, the leadership team was lacking in this situation, even though there were many victories within. Many were upset that the British army could not take Sebastopol faster than it did. Along with this, Briggs mentions the activities that Lord Palmerston had in the government and how he was slowly unfavored by parliament and the Queen. [2]

In later chapters, Briggs uses Trollope and Bagehot, and he also uses Samuel Smiles to explain the politics of this era. But he especially uses Samuel Smiles to explain the work ethic of the people because Smiles wrote a book about the Gospel of Work called Self-Help. The Victorians believed that hard work built character and that people should not rely on the government for help. This theme, in a way, continues in the next chapter with the reform of public schools. In this chapter, he uses Thomas Hughes, who was a reformer of the public schools, and he believed that the public schools would raise students to become political leaders and military leaders. He wanted to make the schools more like the private ones that were already established. With this, he wanted to include the prefect system and the moral codes that the private ones did. [3]

Briggs uses a chapter on trade unions and another chapter on reform to talk about the changes happening during this period. In one chapter, he mentions Robert Applegarth to explain the growth of trade unions that were different from those of the past. Applegarth led the charge that would get the ball rolling for the Reform Bill of 1867. With the theme of reform, Briggs uses John Bright, who was a proponent of the repeal of the corn laws, which kept the price of grain

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[2] Ibid, 52-86.
[3] ibid, 87-167.

high. Bright was also a Quaker, which influenced the way he thought about politics, and along with this, he was a middle-class politician. Bright believed, which is used in this chapter as the creed; in the extension of free trade, reduction in taxes, free trade in land, a cheaper foreign policy, and an increase in voting rights in the countryside. To finish the book, Briggs presents two people who were on opposite sides of the Reform Bill of 1867. Robert Lowe believed that increasing the suffrage to working-class people would weaken the government, while Benjamin Disraeli accepted the reform that was coming and used it to the advantage of his party.[4]

This book shows the reader the politics of the mid-Victorian period, which, upon reading this book, gives a reason why this period is called by many, including Briggs, the golden period of the Victorian era. Briggs gives the reader a different way of learning about the period by not specifically saying that each chapter is about a topic, but by using people and their values to describe the topic that he wants to tell the reader about. This way of writing has its advantages and disadvantages; if the reader is not paying attention to this fact, they can lose the whole point of each chapter, but if they understand this, it enhances the reader's knowledge of the subject. Overall, this book helps create a part in the historiography that at the time of writing was not a clear topic of discussion.

[4] ibid,168-295.