Sir Arthur Helps and the Making of Victorianism

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By

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PREFACE

This book actually began many years ago in the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York city when I was researching John Ruskin's historical thought. I remember reading Ruskin's personal letter to someone named Arthur Helps and realised that I knew nothing about the man to whom one of Victorian Britain's most famous critics was writing. Accordingly, I started a search which began to uncover not only the relationship between the men, but much more. Helps was not only forgotten, but had largely chosen to become so. More importantly, perhaps, as a writer, activist, civil servant, historian and friend to many significant persons, especially Queen Victoria, he had been a very prominent figure in the mid-Victorian firmament. And, at least as compelling, his story had never been told, and so he had in essence become nearly invisible to the history of his times.

Making Helps visible again became my agenda because I believe that one of the fundamental obligations of a historian is to recover the historical record where it may have been lost or become marginalised. Professional historians usually get to do research on only a small fraction of the things which interest them, but some topics are compelling because it may only be a historian who is able to address them. It may not be obvious, but practicing historians have ethical responsibilities which come with the professionalisation of the discipline. Too much time and training have been invested in the making of a historian for them not to be intellectually and socially accountable in some way. In my case, it became an ethical ambition to recover Helps for history, because I reasoned if I did not, it might never happen. With the naïveté, then, that can possibly only come with a recently completed D.Phil. at Oxford, I began to contemplate a project which would make Helps reappear.

With the assistance and patience of Cambridge Scholars Publishing, I decided to make Helps visible so that his ideas and career might be studied. The methodology of recovery—including first checking the index of virtually every book with any connection to the Victorians—became well known to me. In fact, checking indexes became a habit, and possibly an occupational hazard. Since Yale University generously makes its stacks available to visiting scholars, this involved going through a great number of indexes and periodicals. It turned out that many of Helps' writings were available, even if their physical condition was quite uneven. Happily

enough, the wave of digitisation made accessing Helps' writings possible even as I lived and worked in places such as Singapore and Sharjah (United Arab Emirates). Additionally, research trips to the UK assisted me in reconstructing a more complete picture of Helps' life and thought.

Furthermore, I am unapologetic about writing what is an unashamedly old fashioned book. That is, while I am comfortable connecting the subject to recent and present scholarly interests, this book has had a more straightforward aim—namely, to let Arthur Helps speak. To that end, I have relied more upon quotations than I might have otherwise, and the book's chapters try to tell stories which go a way towards identifying their subject. Yet, because Helps was an important figure in nineteenth-century Britain, it should be possible that those, whose scholarship is informed by more immediate concerns, will find this volume useful, despite its limitations.

Finally, Arthur Helps was born on July 10, which is the day that I was married to Samantha in Singapore. Such a coincidence should clinch any decision about whom to dedicate the book. The years of marriage have been wonderful and have doubtless given Samantha the patience to wait for my next book—which will be dedicated to her. *Sir Arthur Helps and the Making of Victorianism* is dedicated to my father, Leander E. Keck who has supported this project from that first day when I came home from the Pierpont Morgan Library with a good deal to talk and think about. My father will be eighty-five when this book comes into print, and, like Arthur Helps, he organised many aspects of his life around scholarship, service and family. Growing up, I could not have enjoyed a better teacher, role model and, ultimately, friend, and so this first book is dedicated to him.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to begin by acknowledging Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II for allowing me to quote directly from the manuscripts in the Royal Archives at Windsor Castle. Credit also goes to Helen Clark and her colleagues at Windsor for all their support. I have looked forward to adding that every archival researcher would do well to have a topic for which they must go to Windsor, because the experience was so pleasant. With respect to archival materials, I am also indebted to the librarians at the Pierpont Morgan Library, the Beinecke Library at Yale University, the British Library and Trinity College, University of Cambridge. I want to also thank the Interlibrary Loan Department at the American University of Sharjah, who made it possible for me to read a number of important secondary sources, while working in the United Arab Emirates.

I have benefitted enormously from the response that I received from papers that focused on Arthur Helps which I delivered in conferences. In particular, I want to thank Ronald D. Cassell, Theodore Koditschek, Martin Hewett and Richard Bodek for their feedback in these situations.

At Oxford I was very fortunate to have the excellent supervision of Jose Harris and Dinah Birch, who recognised the possible importance of the project and encouraged its development. I should also add that I will be forever grateful to be a member St. Peter's College, Oxford; it was there that we all benefited from the leadership of Gerald Aylmer, who served as Master. He was also encouraging to me at an early stage of this project. St. Peter's also had a vibrant graduate community which included a number of historians. Out of that group Steve Lee stands out for his support, friendship and skill as a colleague.

I was no less fortunate to be a member of the Department of History of the College of Charleston. A number of my colleagues were again helpful, and I want to mention Bernard Powers, Peter McCandless, Richard Bodek, Bill Olejniczak, Amy McCandless and Frans and Katherine von Liere in particular. At the National University of Singapore I benefitted greatly from the wisdom and guidance of many talented historians. Brian Farrell and Malcolm Murfett stand out among those whose support for this project was the strongest. I would also like to acknowledge that I learned a great deal along the way from Maurizio Peleggi, Paul Kratoska, Gregory

Clancey, Huang Jianli, Ian Gordon, Tim Bernard, Peter Borschberg and Tan Tai Yong.

Since 2006 I have had the pleasure of being a member of the Department of International Studies at the American University of Sharjah. I want to thank all of my colleagues in the department and call attention to the support that I have received from its historians: Richard Gassan, Tom DeGeorges and Pernille Arenfeldt. It was also useful to team teach with Sabrina Tabhoub-Schulte, who was a great and positive stimulus in organisation and time management. Pia Anderson has been a great friend and marvellous source of wit and wisdom. More generally, I have benefitted from having a number of colleagues who have collectively made a difference in my research. This group includes some such as Jeremy Bendik-Keymer, Marcello Fiocco, Jamila Abu Bakar, Neil Partrick, Neemia Noori and Isa Blumi who are no longer members of the department; Nada Mourtada-Sabah, Antoliy Kharkhurin, Mark Aveyard , Angela Maitner, David Lea, Kevin Gray, Arianne Conty, Meenaz Kassam, Yuting Wang, Ravindaran Sriramachandran, James Sater, Karen Young and Line Khatib. The support of senior administrators is often underrated, but not by this author. In particular, the leadership of both Peter Heath and Winfred Thomspon and Chancellors Provost Thomas Hochstettler, John Mosbo and Kevin Mitchell have all ensured that AUS has continued to thrive. Deans William Heidcamp and Mark Rush have been important as well. Flor Khattab has been generally helpful and provided assistance with the formatting of a number of my drafts. Outside INS, Joseph Gibbs has been a great colleague and motivator.

It was a pleasure to thank Her Majesty the Queen, and it is a much greater one to acknowledge my debt to His Highness Sheikh Dr. Sultan Bin Mohammad Al Qassimi whose vision, leadership and deep commitment to both humane letters and improving the peoples of the United Arab Emirates enabled the American University of Shajah not only to develop, but to flourish and lead.

Three institutions have provided funds which have made it possible to complete this project. The College of Charleston assisted its development by enabling me to attend conferences where I could begin by presenting papers on Helps. The National University of Singapore made it possible for me to spend part of the summer of 2003 at the Public Record Office in Kew, the British Library and Trinity College, Cambridge. Finally, a Seed Grant from the American University of Sharjah enabled me to go to the Royal Archives at Windsor Castle in 2008.

These institutions have also enabled me to have the privilege of teaching hundreds of wonderful students. These students have not only enriched my life, but in teaching them history, made me a better historian.

Cambridge Scholars Publishing has enabled me to bring this project to fruition. I want to personally thank Carol Koulikourdi and Amanda Millar, as they have been helpful in a number of ways. Let me also commend Graham Clarke for his fine eye as a proofreader. His work has been very important in the final stages of this publication.

Last, I want to thank my family, in particular my father, Leander E. Keck, to whom the book is dedicated, and my brother David Keck, who has made a bigger difference in the success of this project than he might have realised. Most important has been my wife, Samantha, who has given more time to this project than anyone should have to, reading draft chapters and the manuscript twice. More importantly, she has been a great source of assistance—she has challenged assumptions, nurtured and stimulated my ideas and, best of all, remained an inspiration to me.

Sir Arthur Helps and the Making of Victorianism has been a pleasure to write, but it will not be the first monograph to have limitations. I am happy to acknowledge that these shortcomings are my work alone.

A Note on Sources

The sources used for this monograph are largely self-evident because they include both primary and secondary material. Many of these sources are familiar to specialists, but with respect to Arthur Helps' publications a few preliminary remarks are in order. To begin with, scholars who work on Helps do so without any kind of standard edition of his works. In fact, there is no catalogue of Helps' publications, which many of his contemporaries regarded as considerable.

Therefore, this study will use Helps' writings which were published in both Britain and North America. In most cases, preference will be given to the earliest edition, but some choices have been made by availability of the books. One exception is *The Spanish Conquest in America; and its Relation to the History of Slavery and to the Government of Colonies* (New York & London, 1900-04), which will be used as *Conquerors of the New World and Their Bondsmen* (1848–1852). A number of libraries have Helps' earliest books, but in some cases their condition made using later editions preferable.

For this study, then, there is an Appendix of Helps' publications with the earliest date listed. There will also be a separate set of references in the bibliography which specifies the particular publication of Helps' cited in the monograph.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: A THOROUGHLY ORIGINAL STYLE

Up to this point, Sir Arthur Helps—early Cambridge Apostle, social reformer, literary figure, historian, Clerk of the Privy Council and trusted advisor to Queen Victoria—has succeeded in becoming anonymous to history. This prominent, possibly eminent Victorian who was both deemed significant and whose influence was widespread, deliberately sought oblivion. Helps' effort stemmed partly from his tendency to value self-effacement; however, he had a more important and even stronger reason to evade history—the primary motivation was that he was aware that any type of biography would probably fit into the genre of "life and letters," opening up his private life for public inspection. In all probability, Helps had little to hide: his greatest setbacks appear to have been some ungenerous book reviews and financial mismanagement. Yet, the course of Helps' life had brought him into intimate contact with some of the most prominent and fascinating figures of the nineteenth century. Helps had been close not only to the Queen, but also to Lord Palmerston, Benjamin Disraeli, Lord Ripon, Frederick Dennison Maurice, Charles Kingsley, Thomas Carlyle, George Eliot, George Lewes, Anthony Froude, John Ruskin and many other key persons. Since he foresaw that the publication of his papers would compromise, if not violate the trusts of these public figures, he chose to have many, if not most, of his private papers, notebooks and letters destroyed after his death.[1] From the point of view of scholarship, this loss was undoubtedly significant. Not only did Helps manage to become invisible to subsequent generations of Victorian scholars, but he probably closed useful avenues of enquiry for students of the period, particularly those interested in Queen Victoria and mid-nineteenth-century intellectual life.

Helps' Reputation

If Sir Arthur Helps was lost to the generations which followed him, he was well known in his day. Helps' reputation changed somewhat over the

course of his life, but even though he was probably less well regarded in 1875 than he was in the previous decade, his death still merited considerable attention. More importantly, it is clear from book reviews, memoirs and the surviving correspondence of key figures and his publications, that Helps was a fairly eminent figure in Victorian Britain; that is, from the mid-1840s until his death in 1875. Helps was not only prominent but well connected. He could count among his friends the Royal family and just about every major political or literary figure in Britain. In addition, it is clear that in reviewing some select instances from his life, Helps had played a prominent and at times significant role in the nation's public affairs. Accordingly, it is possible to document his impact as a "public moralist," literary stylist, historian and civil servant.

To begin with, Helps was regarded as an important writer in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. In the January 1875 issue of *Macmillan's Magazine*, Thomas Hughes reviewed Helps' *Social Pressure* (1875). Writing only a few months prior to Helps' death, Hughes' review already carried the hint of obituary, as he placed *Social Pressure* into a retrospective view of Helps' career. Hughes held that Carlyle had been the dominant presence in addressing the question of the "condition of England." Helps belonged to a smaller phalanx of writers who helped to shape public debate. In fact, Hughes claimed that Helps might challenge:

> Carlyle as to the priority, for his "Claims of Labour" (unless our memory is at fault) was published shortly before "Past and Present" … from that time he has worked with rare industry, ability, and persistence, in the same field. His persistence, indeed, has more than once drawn the fire of unfriendly criticism on his books. We have had these "friends in council," it has been said, *ad nauseam*; they have discussed these same topics over and over again, only clothing them, for decency's sake, in slightly new forms. When *will* they take their farewell benefit? "Never," we hope Sir A. Helps would reply, "as long as these great social problems remain unsolved—until the conditions of life of all English citizens have been made as satisfactory as they can be on this confused planet."[2]

Ralph Waldo Emerson, already regarded in the 1840s as one of America's most significant thinkers, famously toured Britain where he met Helps, whom he described as "omniscient,"[3] and complained that British newspapers, principally *The Times*, did not contain pieces among well-informed men such as "Milnes, Carlyle, Helps, Gregg, [and] Forster."[4] The publication of *The Claims of Labour* (1845), and the two volume *Friends in Council* (1847), established his reputation as an essayist, wit and social reformer.

At mid-century, Helps was emerging as a writer whose literary style was itself indicative of a thoughtful and wise point of view. The reviewer for *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal* recommended Helps for readers who have an "enlarged observation of human life," because his perspective drew upon wide experience for wisdom and practical advice.[5] More important, perhaps, Helps had a distinctive style:

> All Mr. Helps's writings have been published anonymously; and it is only within the last two years that he has become known out of his own circle, to be the author … It is a thoroughly original style, in the sense of being a correct representation of the author's cast of intellect and character. Moreover, it seems to us to be the true style of a gentleman—not one of the "mob of gentlemen that write with ease"—but of an extensively informed, sincere cultivated man of the world; using the term "world," not signifying "worldly," but in its widest and most authentic meaning—as one who knows and understands the world. In purity of diction, clearness, ease, pith brightness, and variety, it is well-nigh as perfect as any style can be. Shrewder critics than ourselves might possibly detect "faults" in it, but, for our part, we have as yet been unable to discover any which it would not be sheer trifling to mention.[6]

However, many readers found Helps' insistence of moral considerations to be more important than his powers of detachment and observation. William Whewell, like many Victorians, found Helps' moral voice to be attractive: "I would rather read of the Councils for averting moral than physical evil."[7] While Leslie Stephen did not use the term public moralist, he identified Helps' significance in much the same way. Stephen regarded Helps as a secular preacher:

> The "middle," originally an article upon some not strictly political topic [writes Stephen] had grown in their hands into a kind of lay sermon. For such literature the British public has shown a considerable avidity ever since the days of Addison. In spite of occasional disavowals, it really loves a sermon, and is glad to hear preachers who are not bound by the proprieties of the religious pulpit. At this period the most popular of the lay preachers was probably Sir Arthur Helps, who provided the kind of material—genuine thought set forth with real literary skill and combined with much popular sentiment—which served to convince his readers that they were intelligent people. The "*Saturday Review-ers*" in their quality of "cynics," could not go so far in the direction of the popular taste; and their bent was rather to expose than to endorse some of the common-places which are dear to the intelligent reader.[8]

If contemporaries such as Leslie Stephen saw Helps as a champion lay preacher, later Victorians could recall turning to his writings for wise

counsel. To cite one instance, Lucy Soulsby, author and headmistress of Oxford High School, advocated the creation of a collection of sources for practical wisdom. Along with the works of Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, Gratian, the book of Ecclesiasticus, Trench's book on Proverbs, and Sir Henry Taylor's *Notes on Life*, Soulsby commented: "Those of a philosophical turn may read Kant and Hegel, but all would find life easier for the mild metaphysics and shrewd wisdom of *Friends in Council*."[9] For both Soulsby and Stephen, then, Helps was valuable because he emphasised practical advice as an important resource for public morality.

Helps was held in high regard as a prose stylist and, even when his readers praised his writing, they often acknowledged that his style was connected to larger social concerns. For example, the philosopher Alexander Bain (1818–1903) may not have directly appealed to Helps as a public intellectual, but long before *Friends in Council* appeared he was impressed by *Thoughts in the Cloister and the Crowd*. This early work evinces both Helps' experience as an Apostle and reflects the set of elitist presuppositions which often characterised the discourse of the public moralist: namely, that while the problems which define modern society start with the crowd, it is the thought in the cloister that must make a key, if not decisive, contribution to their resolution. Bain explained that he was greatly struck with Helps' first major work, *Thoughts in the Cloister and the Crowd*, and he had the "occasion to peruse Helps' more mature writings, and to utilise them as illustrations in rhetoric."[10] Elizabeth Gaskell would tell Marianne Gaskell that Helps' work was valuable:

> Those in Friends in Council & are admirable examples of how much may be said on both sides of any question, without any (dogma) decision being finally arrived at, & certainly without any dogmatism.[11]

Just as Stephen recognised Helps as a lay preacher, Gaskell understood that the value of his writings lay in their ability to approach public questions from a number of vantage points. Like others who might write and later be dubbed public moralists, Helps' works appeared in a relatively wide selection of periodicals. Frederick Greenwood recruited Helps, along with Froude and Charles Kingsley, to write for the *Pall Mall Gazette*[12] because he possessed the "gentle wisdom of words."[13] Writing about a number of moral issues, Helps' works also appeared in the following: the *Spectator*, *Cornhill's Magazine*, *Good Words*, *Macmillan's Magazine*, the *Contemporary Review*, the *Quarterly Review* and *Fraser's Magazine*. However, it would be Ruskin who would elevate Helps to an even higher plain:

> I should be very sorry if I had *not* been continually taught and influenced by the writers whom I love; and am quite unable to say to what extent my thoughts have been guided by Wordsworth, Carlyle, and Helps; to whom (with Dante and George Herbert, in old time) I owe more than to any other writers … there are things which I hope are said more clearly and simply than before, owing to the influence upon me of the beautiful *quiet* English of Helps.[14]

Beyond the quiet English, Helps' significance as a public moralist was not confined to specific formulations about the burning issues of the day. Indeed, his dialogues assured Victorians that these questions—many of which produced considerable anxiety—could be approached from a variety of angles. As the musician and critic John Hullah (1812–1884) noted in his obituary tribute, Helps "habitually checked in himself and others sweeping conclusions respecting anything or anybody. He had something to say for the worst cause, and—which is less common, because far more difficult—for the worst man. His consideration for the 'other side' seemed sometimes excessive."[15] That is, Helps' achievement was to insist that there was a safe, civil tone in which many fractious questions might be discussed. Above all, Helps aimed to impart a message which was at once subtle and humane.

In addition to being a master rhetorician and essayist, Helps would have been recognisable to Victorians as a historian and biographer. Macaulay urged Palmerston to appoint Helps to the vacant Regius Professorship of History at Cambridge. Since Helps had treated some "interesting and important portions of modern history … ably and popularly," Macaulay was confident that appointment by Palmerston would be applauded by the public.[16] However, Helps turned down the Regius Professorship to concentrate on literary pursuits.

The obituary notice in the *Saturday Review*—a publication which was at times associated with Helps—outlined some of the chief achievements of his career. These included not only reference to his work as a Clerk of the Privy Council and with the Queen (examined in chapters seven and eight respectively), but his literary reputation. The *Saturday Review* noted that as an author:

> Sir Arthur Helps cultivated with unequal success two or three distinct forms of literary activity … The possibility of adding largely to human happiness by petty arrangements and minute thoughtfulness is one of the doctrines which are most constantly and systematically taught in Sir Arthur Helps's [*sic*] long series of essays and dialogues … he found in the *Friends in Council* his proper natural mode of utterance … Soon after the publication of his first essays, Sir Arthur Helps created the well known

> personages whose discussions on social and moral questions have amused and instructed one or two generations. Philosophic dialogue is almost as old as philosophy itself; and the form is preserved, as it was first adopted, on natural grounds of propriety and convenience. Inspired teachers, with a strong and simple message to deliver, have found no need to balance their convictions, or to distribute the expression of their opinions among different interlocutors. In controversy Plato and his imitators found the advantage of introducing representatives of the doctrines which were to be confuted, as well as of the truths which required to be substituted for error. The form of dialogue also enables authors who have not quite made up their own minds to exhibit impartially the arguments for both sides of the question. The dramatic genius of Plato has never been approached by his imitators; but Sir Arthur Helps's "Friends in Council" are as real and credible as the Marcus or Cassius of Cicero.[17]

The *Saturday Review*'s obituary reflected the reality that for more than a generation Sir Arthur Helps was well known in Victorian Britain as a civil servant, activist and man or letters. He had achieved both wide influence and a broad readership and could count upon the most significant people in Britain as his friends. Helps may not have been regarded as a seminal thinker, but it would have been clear to his contemporaries that his influence upon public life was wide-ranging.

Biographical Considerations

Despite the fact that Arthur Helps was a significant person in mid-nineteenth century Britain, his biography has yet to be written, partly because the obstacles to such a project remain considerable. Challenges for potential biographers arose almost immediately. Helps' daughter Alice explained that after her father's death she was "besieged with offers of a life."[18] Alice Helps squashed these potential biographies in deference to Arthur Helps' wishes—she explained to her brother such a volume would necessarily involve "many things related to the Queen's confidence."[19] Helps' wishes had to have been known to his friends—less than six months before his death in March 1875 Helps explained to Lord Northbrook:

> I cannot help praising myself. There will be no papers found after my death—no diaries—containing disagreeable stories about people and telling all that I have seen and heard of strange things. I resolved from the first that there should be an instance of a man who saw and heard much that was deeply interesting, but private, and who could hold his tongue and restrain his pen, forever.[20]

Nonetheless, nearly a generation and a half later, E. A. Helps, his son, (who qualifies for a footnote in history as Oswald Spengler's translator) published what remained of his father's correspondence in 1917. The book's title, *The Correspondence of Sir Arthur Helps, K.C.B., D.C.L.*, was itself telling as the son wanted the father's knighthood (Oxford conferred the D. C. L. in 1864 and Helps received the C. B. in 1871 and the K. C. B. in 1872) to be proclaimed for all who had forgotten.[21] The appearance of the letters in 1917 reflected the fact that by the new century Helps had virtually succeeded in escaping into oblivion. Many of the epistles which have been published reveal a lively conversation with many major public figures; however, these letters can only suggest the size and extent of the destroyed correspondence. In all probability this was a vast and interesting correspondence. Writing to the editor of the *Spectator* in March 1870, Helps thanked him for a review *Casimir Maremma*, adding: "I am also obliged to you for having kept my name out of the review." He explained that this amounts to a "real service to me, I am nearly overwhelmed with correspondence."[22]

Yet, if Helps was successful in erasing his private life from any kind of historical record, his extensive writings would remain available. Many of his more celebrated publications stayed in print for nearly a generation after his death; the major writings *Thoughts on the Cloister and the Crowd* (1835), *Organization in Daily Life* and *Essays Written in the Intervals of Business* (1841), *The Claims of Labour* (1845), *Friends in Council* (1847-1859), *Conquerors of the New World and Their Bondsmen* (1848-1852), *Thoughts Upon Government* (1872), *Some Talk About Animals and Their Masters* (1873), and *Social Pressure* (1875) would all be reprinted and published in different venues. Other works, such as Helps' historical fiction and his biographies, including *The Life and Labours of Mr Thomas Brassey* (1872), were not reprinted as frequently. However, both the major writings and these less successful works tended to be republished in North America. Aside from his own publications, *Queen Victoria's Leaves from the Journal of Our Life in the Highlands* (1868), which Helps edited and promoted, went through numerous editions and continues to be read by students of both the monarchy and time period. More generally, in the twentieth century select publishers brought out fragments of Helps' writings. Of course, there is no systematic or standardised collection of Helps' writings which would assist scholars who might seek to understand his life or ideas.

The biographical sketch which follows will recount many of the critical developments in Helps' life in order to make his ideas and career more comprehensible. It should emerge that Helps was a relatively

consistent figure, but a number of developments in his life proved decisive for the maturation of his outlook. In recapturing Helps' ideas it is probably safe to say that utilising the approach of organising his thought into the categories of early or late (which might work well with other thinkers), is not particularly fruitful. Furthermore, it would be an exaggeration to say that Helps' life fit into equally discernible phases and periods. Nonetheless, it is clear that a number of points in his life proved to be crucial: Eton, Cambridge (where he was an early Apostle), ministerial service, marriage, early publications, his life as a public moralist, his attempt to create an Owen-like experiment which led to financial ruin, and his appointment as Clerk of the Privy Council where he would befriend both Prince Albert and Queen Victoria, ultimately making him both a literary figure and trusted advisor to the Queen.

Biographical Sketch

While there was a strong autobiographical component in Helps' writings, he did not leave behind any which tell us about his childhood and early youth. Helps was born in July 1813 at Balham Hill where his family lived. We do know that his family was comfortable, as his father, Thomas Helps, was prominent in both commercial and public affairs.[23] The elder Helps was the head of a large Mercantile House in London and also distinguished himself as Treasurer of St. Bartholomew's Hospital. Thomas Helps had married Ann Frisquett Plucknett, who claimed to be descended from the twelfth century Norman Hugo de Pluggenet (who in 1155 obtained from Henry II a grant to the Manor and lands of Hedendune in Berkshire), but was herself remembered for her attractive personality, cleverness and appreciation of literature. Arthur Helps was the youngest of four sons: Thomas Williams, the eldest, would become a barrister and outlive his siblings; another died in early life from injuries gained in the hunting field; the last died in middle age.[24]

Young Arthur Helps proved to have notable intelligence, and by the age of eight he could read Greek. It seems probable that in these years he developed a love for animals and an awareness that he was not interested in athletic activities. E. A. Helps told his readers that his father attended an unspecified preparatory school.[25] Arthur Helps entered Eton (which will be discussed in the next chapter) in 1829 and received his BA from Trinity College, Cambridge in 1835 where he was made an Apostle.[26] His first official occupation was as private secretary to Lord Monteagle, who served as Chancellor of the Exchequer in Lord Melbourne's government. In 1839 Helps moved to a position under Lord Morpeth, the chief

secretary for Ireland. As we will see in chapter two, it would be in the late 1830s and 1840s that Arthur Helps developed as an author. It is evident that by this point Helps was considered to be a promising thinker. As such, he soon found himself becoming friends with many leading intellectuals. For instance, nearly a generation later Helps dedicated *The Life of Hernando Cortes* (1871) to Carlyle: "you first honoured me by making me your friend, I was a mere youth, while you were in the full maturity of manhood."[27] By the 1840s, then, Helps was gaining access to the likes of the Carlyles and other figures who defined many of the intellectual circles which existed in London.

One of the most significant developments which took place in Helps' development occurred with the death of his father. While it is difficult to ascertain the emotional and psychological impact of this trauma upon Helps, it almost certainly changed his life in other obvious ways. Prior to his father's death, Helps had lived in a house in Chester Square that had been left to him. In 1843 he bought a house in Hampshire. As E. A. Helps put it, this:

> was a queer, old-fashioned, rambling house, called Vernon Hill, after Admiral Vernon of Portobello fame, who had lived there. It stood on the top of a hill, and commanded fine views stretching away to the Isle of Wight, with the village of Bishops-Waltham, the ruins of a palace of Henry II, and a small lake in the foreground. There were woods near, and downs, called Stephen Castle Downs.[28]

Helps put a significant amount of energy into Vernon Hill, adding land to the estate, enlarged the house and took up farming on a modest scale. He told his family that he preferred an estate with vast woods at the back and a mere cabstand at the front.[29]

This nearly idyllic setting proved to be the place where Helps resumed not only the apostolic mission (vigorous, if humorous conversations) with his friends, but the place where many of the writings which make up *Friends in Council* were set. The most frequent guests included Charles Kingsley, Richard and Charles Doyle, Dr. Phelps, George Lewes, W. G. Clark (public orator Cambridge), Carlyle, Theodore Martin and Thomas Woolner. In addition, Ralph Waldo Emerson made a memorable visit to Vernon Hill.[30]

Despite the fact that Helps was becoming settled in the countryside, the publication of *The Claims of Labour* (1844) illustrated that Helps had become concerned with urban social questions. This work, with its attention to the condition of labourers, social relations, sanitation and housing, was based upon both his visits to factories and Parliamentary

reports. It was also from Vernon Hill, a location that George Lewes proclaimed to be "Helps's hospitable and delightful mansion,"[31] that Helps functioned as an activist. Like Ruskin working around Coniston (possibly imitating or drawing inspiration from Helps), Helps established friendly relations with all his poorer neighbours.[32] This took many forms, including the creation of a lending library. To cite another instance, during the 1856 Christmas season, Helps constructed a theatre so that he and Lewes could perform charades for the entertainment of local families.[33] Lewes would prove to be one of Vernon Hill's most frequent guests; he was sent there to take rest in 1854 when he began to suffer from intense headaches and a range of neurological symptoms which would bedevil him for years.[34] Most of Lewes' time at Vernon Hill was more relaxed, and he came to spend many Christmases there as a house guest.[35]

The full range of these activities would be realised in *Friends in Council* which appeared in 1847. This work drew upon not only on his experience as Apostle, and conversations with friends at Vernon Hill, but also on his increasing commitment to social questions. Even though *Friends in Council* was published anonymously it was clear from many of the reviews that it was widely known that the author was Helps. The success of this work along with *Companions of My Solitude* (1851) fully established Helps as a major figure by the middle of the century.

In the second volume of *Friends in Council*, Helps addressed the question of slavery. This theme began to interest him during the second half of the 1840s. The result would ultimately be the massive four volume work *The Conquerors of the New World and Their Bondsmen*, which would later be published as *The Spanish Conquest in America*. This work was realised after two trips to Madrid where he consulted authorities and obtained copies of key manuscripts. All told, it took Helps seven years to produce the four volumes. *The Conquerors of the New World and Their Bondsmen* proved to be one of the standard treatments of the subject throughout the second half of the nineteenth century. It also established that Helps had become one of Britain's leading experts on slavery and the slave trade. Finally, it meant that Helps would be regarded not only as a key literary figure, but also as a historian.

1850s: Helps at Midcentury

Helps entered the 1850s as a rising star in the British intellectual firmament. He was regarded as a literary figure and historian who had both the experience of government and the connections which came with it to draw upon.[36] Vernon Hill had not made Helps become detached from

social problems. Yet, it also seems clear by mid-century that Helps had clearly decided not to directly engage most social questions. In *Companions of My Solitude* (1851), he looked ahead to the future and mused about how he might be remembered by one of his ancestors, who "busied himself about many worldly things."[37] Helps explained, nevertheless, that this ancestor, who had not become more prosperous, might regard him with contempt and incomprehension:

> I wonder why he did not become rich and great. I suspect he was very laborious. ("You do me full justice there.") I supposed he was very versatile, and did not keep to one thing at a time. ("You do me injustice there, for I was always aware how much men must limit their efforts to effect anything.") In his books he sometimes makes shrewd worldly remarks which show he understood something of the world, and he ought to have mastered it. "Now, my dear young relative, allow me to say that last remark of yours upon character is a very weak one. Admitting, for the sake of argument, that what you urge in my favour be true, you must know that the people who write shrewdly are often the most easy to impose upon, or have been so. I almost suspect, without, however, having looked into the matter, that Rochefoucault was a tender lover, a warm friend, and, in general, a dupe (happy for him) to all the impulses and affections which he would have us imagine he saw through and had mastered. The simple write shrewdly: but do not describe what they do. And the hard and worldly would be too wise in their generation to write about what they practice, even if they perceived it, which they seldom so, lacking the delicacy of imagination."[38]

This fascinating passage hints that, at mid-century, even with his rising reputation, Helps suffered from self-doubts about his direction and possible achievements. It had become evident to him that while he possessed a full arsenal of intellectual gifts—a rich imagination, a sense of irony a desire to engage in playfulness, a sharp wit, a capacity for satire and fount of wide insights—he was nonetheless unclear about his ability to either have a decisive impact upon his times or to be able to acquire adequate wealth to pass down to his family. This premonition of relative failure may well account for his tendency to move away from writing works such as *The Claims of Labour,* which directly addressed "the condition of England" question, and instead invest in works related to the *Friends in Council* series which enabled him to present many options for policy without being directly connected to any one of them. In this way, Helps might demonstrate his erudition, wit and literary style without having his ideas easily or completely rejected.

Nevertheless, despite these insecurities (and their implicit defence mechanisms) his writings from the 1850s engaged the full range of issues which confronted social reformers. Since he continued to rely upon the characters in *Friends in Council*, his works furnish later generations with a vivid picture of the manner and ways in which Victorians held informal debates and carried on in their drawing rooms. The most obvious thing about Helps' publications was the stress upon social questions. Helps' confidence in dealing with issues involving slavery reflects the position and awareness of someone who could see a complicated question from many sides, even though his abolitionist sympathies were clear.

Helps' encounters with Americans reflected his interest in the "slave question," and the issue's prominence at mid-century. He met Ralph Waldo Emerson on the latter's famous tour of Britain. However, it would be Charles Eliot Norton who would know Helps best. Norton saw to it that Helps' ideas received attention in North America. In April 1851 Norton sent Helps *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, noting that it was a work of "extraordinary popularity."[39] Helps' reply was a massive letter which was reprinted for private circulation in both Britain and America. The publication of Helps' letter to Norton began a series of intellectual exchanges about the value of labour on both sides of the Atlantic. It would become evident that Helps sharply criticised the conditions of industrial labour, but it did not stop him from developing a highly nuanced argument which identified modern slavery as the greater evil.

His relationship with Harriet Beecher Stowe is instructive. The publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* proved to be an event in Britain. Given Helps' expertise, he was the logical choice to review the novel in *Fraser's Magazine*, to which he gave his blessing in an open letter to Charles Eliot Norton. Helps came to correspond with Stowe, and he met her when she visited London. Stowe—arguably at the height of her powers—was at once surprised and impressed by Helps:

> We had never, any of us, met Lord Carlisle before; but the considerateness and cordiality of our reception obviated whatever embarrassment there might have been in this circumstance … The only person present not of the family connections was my quondam correspondent in America, Arthur Helps. Somehow or other I had formed the impression from his writings that he was a venerable sage of very advanced years, who contemplated life as an aged hermit from the door of his cell. Conceive of my surprise to find a genial young gentleman of about twenty-five, who looked as if he might enjoy a joke as well as another man.[40]

Helps' enthusiasm for *Uncle Tom's Cabin* did not prevent him from challenging Stowe's comparison of slaves with the status of English

workers; his review provoked a strong letter in reply.[41] The picture which emerges, then, is that by the early 1850s Helps was regarded on both sides of the Atlantic as a well-connected and important intellectual, whose reviews and ideas mattered.

Helps continued to work as an activist, moving into the field of public health. He responded (which will be discussed in chapter four) to the prospect of a cholera epidemic which threatened London by proposing a scheme for aiding local boards of health in the creation of a health fund. Helps envisioned support from public subscription which would provide for adequate sanitary action. He followed this with a pamphlet on cholera, cheerfully entitled "Thoughts for Next Summer."[42] Despite the fact that he had a number of influential friends involved, the project ultimately did not garner sufficient public backing. Ultimately, neither direct activism nor elective politics suited Helps. In the middle of the 1850s he declined to capitalise on a wealth of promising political connections when he decided not to stand for a seat in Parliament.[43] He told his friend Lord Monteagle:

> What I am going to say will probably astonish you, but the truth is I am a speaker rather than a writer, and have always been so. I never feel so much myself as when I see a great number of heads looking up to me, and waiting to hear what I shall say next. My usual shyness and timidity vanish, the subject arranges itself before me in a clearer manner than I ever see it elsewhere. I have presence of mind on these occasions to abridge here, and enlarge there, accordingly as I see my audience coming to, or going from me: in a word, I was born a speaker as my father was before me.[44]

Despite the fact that he was interested in public issues and possessed gifts as an orator, he chose not to get involved directly in politics. For one thing, even though Helps' outlook was liberal, he did not become involved with a political party.

1860s: Clerk of the Privy Council

Helps re-entered official life in 1860 when he replaced W. L. Bathurst as Clerk of the Privy Council. Helps would serve in this position until his death in 1875. During this fifteen-year period he would help to lead the Privy Council under six different governments. This meant that he worked directly with Palmerston (with whom he was close), Lord John Russell, Derby, Disraeli and Gladstone. The discussion in both chapters seven and eight should make it clear that this appointment changed Helps' life in many ways. To begin with, he had diverse responsibilities as the Privy

Council drew up, and registered the Orders of Council. These Orders dealt with a great deal of affairs, ranging from appointments to public health. In practice this allowed Helps to operate behind the scenes managing the Orders in Council. As Clerk of the Privy Council, Helps became intimately involved with the administration of public policy. As E. A. Helps explained, the position also enabled his father to befriend not only Palmerston, but Lord Granville and W. E. Forster. As a well-established public writer, who had already served as a civil servant, Helps was an appropriate fit because the Privy Council had a significant literary reputation as Henry Reeve, editor of the *Edinburgh Quarterly*, was the Register of the Privy Court of Appeal, while the Registrar of Clergy Returns was Reverend W. Harness, who had been a friend of Byron and had a reputation for his brilliant writing.[45]

More important, as Clerk, Helps also gained access to the Queen. He esteemed the Prince Consort and was rewarded in 1862 when the Queen asked Helps to edit—initially for private circulation—a selection of Albert's speeches and addresses. This collection would later be published with a character sketch which appears to have been regarded as a success.[46] During this period, Helps became an important figure for the Queen, serving her as an advisor in both her private and personal affairs.

As we will see in chapter eight, it was in this capacity that Helps encouraged the Queen to publish her journal. For this inspiration he was rewarded with the task of copy-editing the Queen's hand. Putting up with the Queen's temper proved to be worthwhile, and *Leaves from the Journal of Our Life in the Highlands* was a bestseller during the second half of the 1860s. In this position, and by this point in his career, Helps had numerous influential contacts. In addition to his apostolic connections, social reformers, scholars and intellectuals, he befriended important politicians. For example, he became close to Lord Ripon and W. E. Forster, while Lord Salisbury was a regular correspondent.[47] The picture we have of Helps in the mid-1860s is that of a man who was not afraid to wield his power in order to secure particular advantages for his friends. For example, Helps wrote to D. Bence-Jones—a physician who also served on the Royal Commission which investigated the Cattle Plague and who appears to have built a career on caring for prominent figures—to request "especial favours and encouragement" as it would be a "great kindness to me."[48]

It is also clear that Helps continued to play an active role in London's literary life. In addition to his own writing, he functioned as a pillar of the literary establishment. The novelist Jean Ingelow (1820–1897) found that Helps was an important stimulus for her career and development.[49] To cite

another example, Helps made a point of letting George Eliot know that the Queen regarded *Mill on the Floss* favourably.[50] Helps' opinion continued to be valued as significant. George Lewes wrote to George Eliot bringing her the "encouraging word that Arthur Helps highly enjoys Romola, and thinks it the finest thing I have done."[51]

Probably Helps' most significant achievement as Clerk concerned the Cattle Plague of the mid-1860s (which is discussed in Chapter seven). The Cattle Diseases Act led to the creation of a separate department to the Privy Council Office which dealt with infectious disease. The transit of animals was also placed under its jurisdiction. Helps served as Chairman for this Committee and was able to ameliorate some of the harsh conditions which governed the movement of cattle (across borders and by land).[52]

If the appointment to the Privy Council changed his public life, so too did the discovery of clay at Vernon Hill. Helps appears to have consulted a number of experts who told him that this clay was of value in the manufacture of hard blue brick and terracotta. Helps seized on what he felt to be an opportunity of the greatest magnitude—he could create an industry while establishing conditions for workers which would fulfil his ideal for the proper relationship between capital and labour. Drawing upon his friends for support, Helps invested the bulk of his wealth in the development of the clay enterprise. Unfortunately, he found that fuel and transportation costs eliminated his profits. At the same time, the company was not blessed with good management. In essence, he could not compete with the goods which were produced in Staffordshire, and since his investment was heavy Helps experienced significant financial hardship in the 1860s. This had two obvious consequences: first, the stress from these matters impacted negatively upon his health; second, he was forced to sell Vernon Hill. Subsequently, Victoria offered him one of her houses in Kew Gardens. This proved to be a welcome development as Helps could stroll in the gardens after Privy Council business. It also enabled him to befriend Sir Joseph Hooker. More importantly, it provided a comfortable environment in which Helps could continue to write. Nonetheless, it is clear that the prospect of financial ruin proved to be a devastating blow, one which almost certainly contributed to his early decline.[53]

1870s: Helps in Decline

By the 1870s, then, Helps had seen his fortunes rise and fall. He had survived financial ruin and the embarrassment which accompanied it. During the 1870s he published a number of books which continued to

emphasise social and governmental reform. In these works he relied upon the literary conventions which he had developed in *Friends in Council*. These books were generally well-received, but the reviewers increasingly paid less attention to the ideas than to the fates of Helps' characters. In short, these last publications reflect a tired quality to Helps' later writings. Helps had never possessed a strong constitution and by the 1870s the combination of hard work, financial stress and age led to a state of poor health. In March 1875 he contracted a chill while attending a levee given by the Prince of Wales. The chill was soon followed by an attack of pleurisy and inflammation of the lungs. After battling illness for several days, Helps died on 7 March 1875.

Helps' death had been unexpected. Queen Victoria was shocked and by all accounts badly shaken. E. A. Helps proudly cited the *Court Circular*: "the Queen has sustained a loss which has caused her Majesty great affliction. As a loyal subject and as a kind friend he rendered to her Majesty many important services. He assisted with a delicacy of feeling and an amount of sympathy which her Majesty can never forget … The Queen feels that in him she has lost a true and devoted friend."[54] However, Victoria and others would probably have been surprised and unhappy that Sir Arthur Helps—Apostle, civil servant, literary figure, historian, Privy Councillor and trusted friend—would soon disappear into history.

The Methodological Challenge

The existence of Helps' corpus of published writings makes access to his ideas possible, even if many of these pieces have long been out of print. The body of Helps' published work extends over about thirty-five years and covers a relatively wide range of subjects. Victorians would discover that he wrote drama (though not very successfully), essays, books devoted to specific problems, biographies, history and the *Friends in Council* series, which were fictional dialogues on public issues. It should be pointed out that while Helps published two distinct series entitled *Friends in Council*, the characters in these works appeared in many of his mature and later writings. Taken together, these publications might amount to a medium-to-large body of work. Analysing these texts will provide the basis for recovering Helps' core ideas.

While Helps appears to have succeeded in destroying his personal papers, a number of documents did survive. Helps' writings remain available in many libraries, but they have been largely forgotten. The published letters remain the most useful tool for students interested in Helps, but it leaves us with only a sketchy idea of the man's life and

thoughts. In addition, this study draws upon three other major sources of surviving Helps material: the Helps collection at Duke University, which is made up most of some of his correspondence with Froude; the correspondence of Lord Ripon, with whom he was close and, finally, materials from the Windsor Archive, where Helps' papers relating to Victoria and monarchy can be found.

Scholarship on Helps has predictably been limited—the most important student of Helps, John R. DeBruyn, collated a number of Helps' published letters with archival materials to trace his relationship with Victoria, Ruskin, Carlyle, Gladstone and Disraeli. In addition, he also traced Helps' contact with Dr. John Simon and some of the larger public health issues in London. Clearly, DeBruyn's work remains valuable, but while it furnishes us with a great deal of information, it does not address the question of whether Helps actually had any lasting impact on his times. In fact, DeBruyn's efforts to trace Helps' influence among key figures bordered on being counterproductive. He concluded one article by asserting that it showed a "more cordial than just official relationship with Disraeli and Company."[55] This assessment was almost certainly correct, but the near desperation to use the surviving correspondence to document Helps' proximity to leaders such as Gladstone and Disraeli reflects some insecurity about Helps' perceived status. There is no doubt that DeBruyn's publications have made it easier to trace Helps' contact with a number of leading Victorians, but for the most part they did not try in any sustained way to measure his actual impact on his times. At the same time, DeBruyn did not directly explore Helps' thought or seem to regard it as important in its own right. The approach in this study will be to build upon DeBruyn's careful work by also considering Helps' works and also try to recover how these writings were themselves perceived.

This unstated assessment was consistent with the dismissive note in Asa Briggs' *Victorian People*, where Helps was identified as the civil servant who had taught Samuel Smiles the advantages of shorthand.[56] Helps, however, was regarded as important in the history of British public administration. Bernard Schaffer in *The Administrative Factor* (1973) regarded Helps as an important figure in the development of the Ministerial Department.[57] Helps not only served as Clerk of the Privy Council, but his *Thoughts upon Government* provided some of the most pertinent reflections on the evolution of government practice in mid-Victorian Britain.[58] A generation later, F. David Roberts in *The Social Conscience of the Early Victorians* (2002) located Helps as an important writer, whose ideas were part of a much larger effort between 1823 and

1847 to provide some theoretical and practical basis for paternalist thought.[59]

Instead, this monograph will attempt to build on this slender body of work by investigating a number of key themes in Helps' writings. These publications are wide-ranging and were evidently popular in their day, but are made less accessible by the fact that they have not been studied in a sustained way by scholars. Consequently, there has never been any attempt to collect and organise Helps' works or even attempts to produce standardised editions of some of his more successful publications. Nor can there said to be any kind of Helps corpus, or even an essential Helps. Research devoted to exploring the texts and ideas of Victorian literary intellectuals—many of whom were Helps' contemporaries—has the advantage of producing useful secondary literature. All of these projects might well have produced the scholarship to depict whatever changes Helps made in successive editions and, no less important, the cross referencing of themes, terms and ideas across his broader corpus. Therefore, it remains for scholars to pursue these enterprises because it would greatly facilitate the future study of Helps' ideas, and with it the broader mid-Victorian world in which he flourished.

In addition to navigating Helps' works, scholars who have explored his ideas have yet to adequately place him in the broader historical context. One of the aims of this study is to connect Helps to many of the lived realities of mid-nineteenth century Britain. This project should not be read as exhaustive, but in exploring Helps' engagement with industrialism, urbanisation, the writing of history, domestication, public health and the monarchy, it should become clear that he was a very significant voice in mid-Victorian Britain. Finally, by examining the highlights of Helps' career and thought, this study will offer a preliminary assessment of his place in history.

Those generations who lived after the Victorian period have understood nineteenth-century Britain from the biographies of many of key figures. The idea of comprehending the Victorians, as such, from those who were eminent is an old one—in fact, it is an idea which many in the nineteenth century would themselves have recognised. Furthermore, a great deal of useful scholarship has attempted to recover the lives of lesser known, but still significant figures. For instance, Julia Markus's *J. Anthony Froude: The Last Undiscovered Great Victorian* made the case for the importance of her subject.[60] Helps, with whom Froude carried out a vigorous correspondence over many years, was not mentioned once in Markus' book. That Markus overlooked Helps is hardly surprising as the biographers of many key figures from the nineteenth century have