The reputation of the Victorian age in England has undergone many vicissitudes, but it is now higher than ever. And the issues were many: the revolution in class structure and class attitudes; the rise of utilitarianism and the evangelical spirit; the crisis in religion, including the Oxford movement and Darwinism; the democratization of culture; the place of art and the artist in an industrial, bourgeois society; the effects of industrialism, especially on the way people live.

Altick brings to the discussion of these complicated questions the lively and sensitive intelligence that his many readers have come to expect. He includes contemporary illustrations and a full reference index.
It's therefore more of a cultural history rather than a social history but invaluable for a reader who wants to really get to grips with Victorian literature. By way of evangelicalism, romanticism, utilitarianism and probably some other 'isms' that I've forgotten, Altick makes the case that the period of time we think of when someone says 'Victorian' is actually the relatively short 20 years from and that things were very different earlier and later in Queen Victoria's reign. I took lots of notes whilst I was reading but I found this so helpful that I think I want my own copy. I also appreciated that Altick seems to have a fairly balanced view of the ideas of the period and never completely dismisses or demonises a particular group.