Victorian Norway

• By mid-century, Norway was still far from a "democracy". Voting was limited to officials, property owners, and leaseholders. For the most part, political power was held in the hands of the social elite: university educated civil servants (graduates in theology, law, and medicine). Life in Norway (especially economic life) was dominated by the aristocracy of professional men who filled most of the important posts in the central government. There was no strong bourgeoisie class in Norway to demand a breakdown of this aristocratic control of the economy. Women were not granted universal suffrage until 1913.

• This academic elite was an exclusive social group. All university students were men until 1882, and over half had fathers who had academic occupations, which tells us that there was quite a good deal of self-recruitment going on. (Another ¼ of the student population had businessmen fathers, leaving only ¼ to other groups like farmers and workers to pull themselves up by their bootstraps.)

• In 1854, women were given the right to inherit property in their own right just like men. But it was not until the 1890s that married women gained the right to control their own wealth. Prior to the start of industrialization in the nineteenth century, the role of women was entirely subservient to men.

• Norway was considerably more progressive politically than other nations, but women’s place in society was still largely thought to be in the domestic sphere. The notion of romantic marriage is popularized during the Victorian era, but because of practical political circumstances, marriage is predominately still a financial transaction; i.e., because married women had little political power except through their husband, they were inclined to marry politically powerful men as opposed to men with whom they were “in love.” This has resonance for men, as well: political power was effectively a prerequisite for family.

• Courtship in the Victorian era always took place under the watchful eye of a parent. Many couples get to know each other through a series of letters as opposed to face-to-face interaction.

• In 1882 women were given access to higher education, but when Ibsen writes The Lady From the Sea in 1888, women are still denied admission for a myriad of reasons. It was not until 1903 that the first Norwegian woman received a doctorate at the University of Oslo. By this time many women had already joined the work force as secretaries, teachers and industrial workers. Industrialization gave women new opportunities in the cities, but the female factory workers had a hard life, with extremely long hours, a poor working environment and very low wages. Equal pay was an unknown principle.
• In the first half of the century Norway remained an overwhelmingly agrarian country with a considerable foreign trade in timber, fish and metal. Industrialization began in the 1840s and grew into an important part of the economy in the course of the 1860s and 1870s. Shipping was another hugely important industry. In the course of the 19th century, the population grew from 0.9 million to 2.2 million people. Population increase was a result of falling infant death rates and rising fertility rates for women (averaging 4.5 children toward the end of the century).

• By the turn of the 20th century, life expectancy was at an all-time high: 48.7 years for men and 51.2 years for women.

• Norse religion reached its zenith of sophistication during the Viking era. Scholars in the late 18th century/early 19th century found renewed interest in Norse (pagan) mythology, but by this time Christianity had become too deeply rooted in Norwegian society to accept such paganism as a legitimate religion, and viewed it rather as popularized legend.