
Reviewed by Tony Little

At the beginning of his final chapter, Leslie Mitchell claims that ‘Whiggery is no more’ (p. 175). And like many extinct creatures, by their disappearance the Whigs have created something of a mystery, which continues to intrigue Liberal Democrats, who claim the Whigs as part of their ancestry but who mostly know little about them. For any such Liberal Democrats Leslie Mitchell has written an enticing introduction to the world of the Whigs.

Despite the title, Mitchell’s book is not a narration of political events during his chosen period, which covers the reigns of George III and his sons, up to the accession of Queen Victoria. Superficially, this choice would appear odd as at this time the Whigs, who had been so dominant in the early part of the eighteenth century were largely out of power. Moreover, Mitchell classifies the short periods when they were in government as ‘ugly experiences’ (p. 1) and argues that their taste for self-destruction was so marked that, from time to time, ‘their political opponents were driven to beg them to pull themselves together’ (p. 1) for the good of the nation. Yet this was the period in which the traumatic events of the American and French Revolutions laid the foundations of the divisions between the parties in succeeding generations and in which the nature of Whig opposition to the authoritarian Tory governments of the period was a contributory factor to the avoidance of a revolutionary outbreak in Britain. Eventually the Whigs did get their act together and the contribution of their administrative brawn to the Victorian Liberal governments was significant in the constitutional transformation of the nineteenth century. But, because he is not trammelled by the chronological dictates of the life of the various administrations, Mitchell is able to perform a more valuable service. He constructs a sociology of the Whigs, describing their character and their mode of life, building a picture of the archetypal Whig.

Gladstone, who joined the Liberals from the Peelite wing of the Conservative Party, was reported by a Whig of the later Victorian period as complaining that ‘a man not born a Liberal may become a Liberal, but to be a Whig he must be born a Whig’. Mitchell concurs, arguing that Whigs were ‘made by nature and confirmed by nurture’ (p. 6). Born to a rich aristocratic family comprising a mother and father of similar backgrounds and similar intellectual and political outlooks, indeed possibly cousins, the young Whig went through his formal education in the company of other Whigs and in a suitably

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Oaten mostly sides with Disraeli’s famous aphorism, ‘England does not love coalitions’, while at the same time completely failing to explain how else the country is supposed to be governed under a PR electoral system.
qualified environment – Harrow rather than Eton, Cambridge rather than Oxford. If international conditions allowed, a Grand Tour of the continent followed, where he developed a taste for everything French and classical rather than gothic architecture. As a substitute, when continental warfare made such visits tricky, a visit to Enlightenment Scotland would help in fermenting the right, rational, outlook on life. Family and the acquaintance of childhood formed the circles in which he moved for the rest of his life.

Since Whigs were so rarely in government in this period, their cohesion required Whiggery to be a complete way of life, not just a set of political opinions. Although they visited the grand country estates that they owned and which were fundamental to their position in the pre-Reform political process, Whigs tended to be more comfortable in metropolitan surroundings and rather at a loss for things to occupy their time in the countryside – unless visited by other Whigs. As leaders in fashion, their immersion in the pleasures of the West End and its Season set an example of profligacy that was easy to condemn and expensive to follow. Clothes styles were changed arbitrarily from season to season as a form of conspicuous consumption, though the costs were insignificant compared to the losses sustained by some Whigs in the pursuit of gaming. They were at best sceptical of organised religion, which was just as well given that they also tended towards indifference to conventional sexual morality. The flaunting of wealth, mistresses and illegitimate offspring tended to emphasise the differences between the Whigs and Tories, or even with the mass of the educated citizenry, and Mitchell’s work is rich in the scorn of the Whigs’ critics. But like Millwall football fans of a more recent generation, the Whig aristocracy was unconcerned – their motto could easily have been: no one likes us, we don’t care.

**Change was to be managed rather than feared**

Although the word ‘Whig’ is reputed to have originated as a term of political abuse, Mitchell leaves his chapter on politics until around two-thirds of the way through the book, and even then combines it with an analysis of Whig views of history. This is less odd than it may superficially appear. The defining Whig belief was in progress, a belief imbibed from the Scottish Enlightenment. As Palmerston claimed to have learnt from Dugald Stewart, ‘change was to be managed rather than feared … the correct Whig response to change was to accept it, welcome its possibilities and moderate its impact’ (p. 101). But a belief in progress relies on a view of the past. That view was coloured by the part played by the Whigs of times past – the toast ‘the cause for which Hampden bled on the field and Sydney perished on the scaffold’ referred to the part played by Whig families in the taming of the monarchy between the Civil War of the 1640s, through the crisis over the succession of James II to the Glorious Revolution of 1688. As G. W. E. Russell wrote in 1918, ‘I trace my paternal ancestry to a Russell who entered the House of Commons at the General Election of 1441, and since 1538 some of us have always sat in one or other of the two Houses of Parliament’ (p. 153). As recently as 2004, the late fifth Earl Russell, a great-grandson of Lord John Russell, the Victorian Prime Minister, sat on the Liberal Democrat front bench in the Lords. It was the belief that past Whig relatives had been right in these great crises in Britain’s history that reconciled the Whigs at the end of the eighteenth century to their exile from power; their analysis would be vindicated and in the end they would triumph.

The other fundamental Whig belief highlighted by Mitchell is that property was the key to liberty. ‘The love of enjoying, the fear of losing an estate, is the main principle of action with all who have an estate to keep or lose’ (p. 135). The rule of law was to safeguard property rather than the rights of man, and the ownership of property gave a stake in the country and the independence which justified political participation. Naturally, as some of the largest property owners, the Whigs should then have a prominent place in politics, but as the country grew wealthier it justified the extension of the franchise to incorporate the newly propertied, for example the protagonists of the Industrial Revolution. Property not only gave a stake in the country but also the means of securing an education which fitted a man for politics. Property owners had a vested interest in opposing
the pressure of events and, if plausibly having to give way before it managed affairs in Britain, not tainted by the revolutionary violence that has disrupted the development of continental Europe and so many developing countries. From time to time the descendants of the Whig families have played a part in modern politics—some, unfortunately, on the side of the Conservatives—but as a significant prominent coherent group they have vanished. Nevertheless, the gradualist reforming philosophy of the Whigs is still the mindset of the mainstream parties of the British left, whether Labour or Liberal Democrat, no matter how much they like to think of themselves as Radicals.

Leslie Mitchell has produced an important book which distils a lifetime of study of leading Whigs, including biographies of Melbourne and Fox. By giving us a portrait of the wider lives of the Whigs, rather than just their politics, he helps to reincarnate them as whole people rather than just as statesmen and party leaders. His apposite choice of quotations, his balancing of statements from within the Whig family and its acolytes with those of Tory and Radical opponents, is done so lightly that reading this book was a real pleasure and entertainment which I hope will not lead to an underestimation of its value as an introduction to a critical group in Liberal history.

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