'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 (which he clearly does support). He argues that coalitions do not tend to provide strong government (while slightly undermining his own case by accepting that Lloyd George and Churchill in fact did) and mainly ends up with the conclusion that 'if a coalition government can have a strong leader it stands a greater chance of success' (p. 322). Well, yes; yet again, one could say the same about single-party government.

The book is littered with errors, over dates (the London bombings of July 2005 are given as 2004), election results (in 1931 the Liberal Party is simply omitted, though the Liberal Nationals (wrongly called 'Coalition Liberals') are there), events (the Liberal–Liberal National split happened before 1931, not after; Charles Kennedy became Lib Dem leader in August 1999, not spring), issues (the 1909 People's Budget and the 1911 Parliament Act are treated as though they're the same thing) and places (Bute House, not Bude House, is the home of Scotland's First Minister). Words are misused ('attributed' where he means 'allocated', 'contingency' instead of 'contingent', 'denouncing' instead of 'renouncing', 'throws' instead of 'throes'). The grammar is erratic, and references are incomplete and sometimes wrong.

Coalition is a frustrating book. The topic is a good one, and there's enough of interest in the text to think that it could have turned out much better if it had gone through a couple of further drafts and been properly proof-read before publication. As it is, Geoffrey Searle's *Country Before Party* (Longman, 1995) is far better on the historical side; and we still await a thorough analysis of recent experiences in Scotland and Wales. But Oaten deserves credit at least for raising a series of good questions. Let's hope that the hung parliament that might provide the answers isn't too long coming.

Duncan Brack is the Editor of the Journal of Liberal History.

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.

No one likes us, we don't care

Leslie Mitchell: *The Whig World 1760–1837* (Hambledon Continuum, 2005)

Reviewed by **Tony Little**

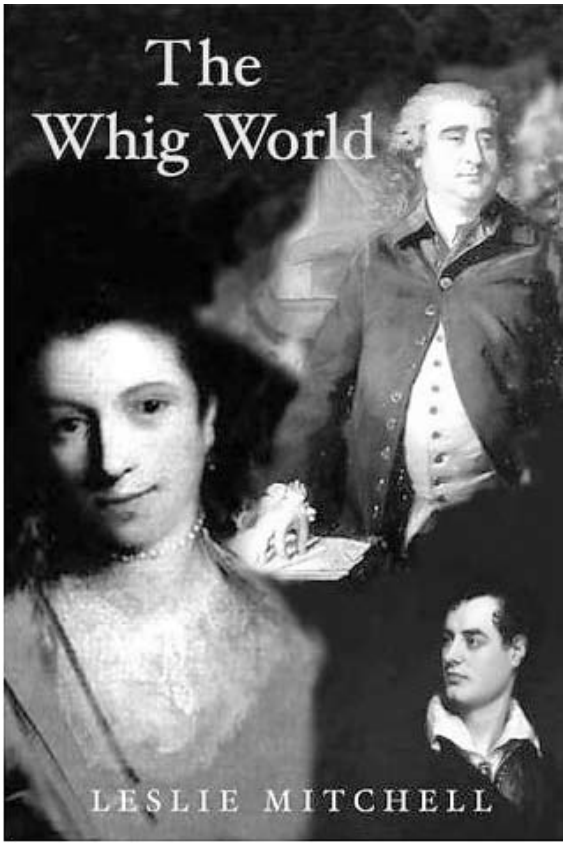
At the beginning of his final chapter, Leslie Mitchell claims that 'Whiggery is no more' (p. 175). And like many extinct creatures, by their disappearance the Whigs have created something of a mystery, which continues to intrigue Liberal Democrats, who claim the Whigs as part of their ancestry but who 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'.[1] 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

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 tyranny of both kings and mobs, while the Whig belief in progress allowed for the expansion of the groups who could be embraced by the system, promoting reform rather than the counterproductive Tory tendency to resistance.

In his final chapter Mitchell argues that this process of incorporation took politics beyond the control of the Whigs. As the franchise widened, and as two world wars destroyed the Whig programme of gradual reform, they themselves became an irrelevance. But as he recognises, globalisation, democracy and industrialisation were 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.

Tony Little is the Chair of the Liberal Democrat History Group.

1 G. W. E. Russell, *Social Silhouettes*, 1906, cited in Duncan Brack & Robert Ingham (eds) *Dictionary of Liberal Quotations* (Politico's, 1999).

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.

Promoting progress everywhere

Jonathan Parry: *The Politics of Patriotism: English Liberalism, National Identity and Europe 1830–1886* (Cambridge University Press, 2006)

Reviewed by **Tony Little**

The dominance of the Liberal Party in the mid-Victorian period is often viewed in terms of class or perhaps interests. The Tory party had the support of the rural communities and the Anglican Church. It generally sought to avoid change while inevitably having to give way before the pressure of events and, if embracing change, did so in order to minimise its impact. The Liberals had the support of the growing manufacturing classes and the Nonconforming religious groups who welcomed change and the reform of a system that held them back and repressed their rights. Such a summary is not only a gross simplification but merely restates the problem at one remove. Why were these groups attracted to Liberalism, and why were Liberals able to create a persistent majority within the electorate and within the Commons, if not the Lords? Why did this majority evaporate so quickly in 1886?

Jonathan Parry has devoted much of his career to answering these questions, though perhaps he may not choose to express them in quite this form. *The Politics of Patriotism: English Liberalism, National Identity and Europe 1830–1886* is 'the last of a trilogy of books which have attempted to shed light on the political strategies and ideological profile of the Victorian Liberal Party' (p. 2). However, it is a trilogy of very different books, and those unfamiliar with the period might be advised to read his *The Rise and Fall of Liberal Government in Victorian Britain*[1] before tackling this latest contribution, as that book gives both an outline of the major events of the period and something of Dr Parry's perspective on the principal players. *The Politics of Patriotism* assumes a familiarity with the events which it seeks to illuminate.

The current volume has two objectives. The main focus in traditional narratives has been on domestic policy, free trade, the reform bills, the secret ballot, church reforms and introduction of state education. Foreign policy gets second billing, with much of the attention paid to Empire and Ireland, which was in reality more an aspect of domestic policy during a period when Ireland was governed by the Act of Union no matter how much it strained at its fetters. In an era of peace disturbed only by unequal colonial battles and the inconclusive Crimean debacle, where is the interest in foreign policy? Dr Parry wishes to argue not only that European events had a major impact on Liberal policy and politics but also to