

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).

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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

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

use the treatment of such events to explain the techniques that different politicians exploited to win support for Liberalism. The argument of his trilogy is that domestic, foreign, imperial and Irish issues all involved 'the responsibility of political leaders and the political nation to forge a strong and beneficent national community on healthy principles' (p. 2). Although not the intention of the book, this work cannot be read without provoking thoughts about the contemporary debate on Britishness, or the manner in which our current superpower, the United States, justifies to itself the operation of its foreign policy.

Parry uses the first two chapters to establish his central argument, which is then illustrated in the five succeeding sections, proceeding in a broadly chronological fashion through the major foreign policy threats and opportunities which challenged Liberalism up to its major crisis over home rule in 1886.

Liberal politicians projected an image of England as an exceptional European state,

which, because Europe was more civilised than other continents, was the leader of the progressive world. This exceptionalism was the consequence of a series of Whig/Liberal reforms dating back to the Glorious Revolution that gave Britain a Protestant tradition and a strong constitution, flexible enough to incorporate developing communities who were willing to accept civic responsibilities. England was marked out by providence as a light for the world. By developing the power to restrict monarchical and aristocratic tendencies, government was run in the interests of the whole community, and the avoidance of a standing army meant that taxes could be kept low to the benefit of all sections of society.

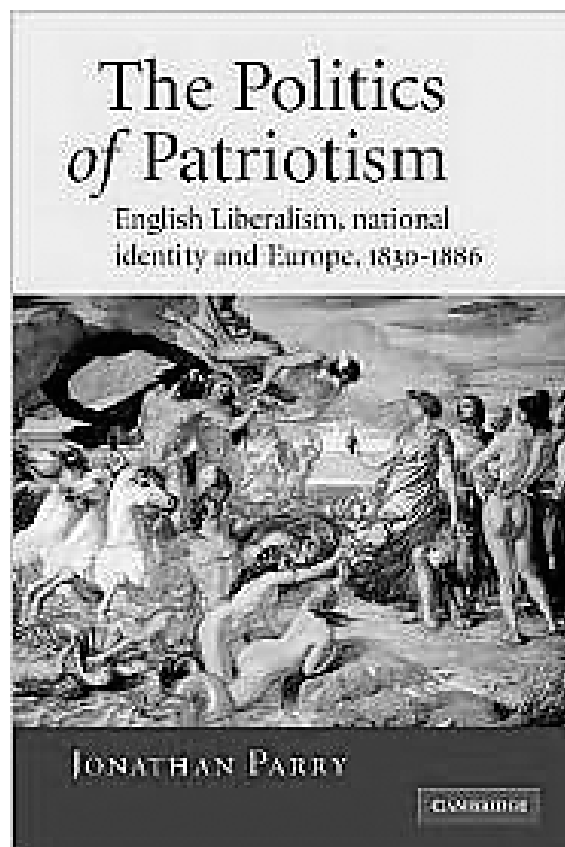
In contrast, the Continental powers tended to be autocratic, militaristic and priest-ridden. Their instability reflected the way in which government was run for sectional interests. Tories could be tarred with their support for these more autocratic regimes. At times when the Continent showed signs of moving towards what the British considered constitutional government, the Liberals could bask in reflected glory. When Europe experienced a bout of revolution, as in 1848, the Liberals could point out the superiority of the British system. Speeches of the Liberal leaders on Continental developments were intended in part to encourage reform in Europe and in part to consolidate support within the UK for Liberalism.

Their world-view gave Liberals a vested interest in European peace, if it could be secured while preserving British honour. A variety of techniques were employed. Free trade enjoyed the support of the whole party; for its Radical proponents such as Bright, peace was one of its natural consequences. Palmerston was

an enthusiast for threatening smaller powers and to playing the larger Continental powers off against each other to prevent any one dominating, reinforcing the image of the Liberals as the patriotic party. By and large, argues Parry, the Tories were less successful in using this strategy, although Disraeli recognised its importance and sought, not wholly successfully, to appropriate patriotism as a defining characteristic of Conservatism.

Parry proceeds to integrate Liberalism's attempt to propagate British moral progress to the world, its providential exceptionalism, with the aspects of Liberalism with which most people are already familiar, such as the search for improvement at home through the activities of civil society rather than government, demonstrating why this proved attractive to certain types of Anglican and Nonconformist groups. The politics of patriotic Liberalism offered these groups the best opportunity to achieve their agenda in both the domestic and international field, while making them grateful for reforms at home even when these failed to meet the expectations of the most fervent.

The episodes that Parry uses to illustrate his argument are not themselves an unusual part of the history of the mid-Victorian era; the novelty lies in the application of his argument and the integration of his perspective on foreign affairs with his analysis of domestic aspects of Liberalism. The period roughly up to the death of Palmerston proved particularly favourable to Liberalism because the Liberal narrative appeared to have a high correlation with events. Thereafter a number of difficulties occur. This is not because, as has sometimes been argued, Gladstone abandoned Palmerston's patriotic mantle for some loosely defined internationalism. Parry believes that



Gladstone was able to use the patriotic card to good effect in his Midlothian campaign against Disraeli's unmanly approach to the Bulgarian atrocities and the Congress of Berlin. Rather, Gladstone was working against a less favourable environment in which it was possible for Liberals to remain true to their philosophy yet arrive at opposing solutions to the most prominent problems.

Two key factors were at work. Firstly, Continental developments were less favourable. The threats from France and technological developments in naval warfare began to undermine Liberal economic and tax policy. Secondly, the Franco-Prussian War undermined the balance of power and was a significant factor in the Liberal defeat at the 1874 election. In addition, Bismarck's more assertive Germany not only sustained pressure on British defence expenditure but also helped to contrive greater Franco-British misunderstandings over Egypt, forcing Gladstone to maintain an occupation of parts of the Turkish empire in which he had intended a short-duration policing action. (It is hard to avoid thinking of Iraq when reading this section, though it is not part of Parry's case.) Secondly, Ireland failed to conform to the Liberal model. Its Catholicism and eagerness

for extra-parliamentary violence was closer to continental models than to the responsible lobbying of those British groups pressing for reform. Parry's book is especially valuable in his analysis of why Gladstone failed to 'pacify' Ireland in 1868, why education was so controversial in the 1870s and why Irish home rule was so divisive in 1886.

Since Parry is seeking to explain both the successes and failings of Liberal politicians over the whole mid-Victorian period, this is a complex work sustained by a mastery of the sources and a sensitivity to the intricacies of the various upholders of Liberalism, particularly of the religious groups which sustained the party. As an explanation of Liberal foreign policy it is valuable, as foreign policy has tended to be seen either from an 'official' or a Conservative perspective, with books on Liberal foreign policy much thinner on the ground. As an additional factor in the analysis of domestic policy it becomes an invaluable aid to the debate among professional historians.

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¹ Yale University Press, 1993. The first of the trilogy is *Democracy & Religion, Gladstone and the Liberal Party 1867-1875* (Cambridge, 1986).

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among the Grand Old Man's admirers has been J. L. Hammond, whose *Gladstone and the Irish Nation* (1938) portrayed the great Liberal Prime Minister in a heroic light, trying to bring justice and peace to Ireland and being frustrated by the representatives of wealth and privilege. By contrast Cooke and Vincent in *The Governing Passion* (1973) saw the 1885-86 home rule crisis as a jockeying for position among the political elite in which short-term political tactics were more important than high principle.

Whatever view they have taken of Gladstone's motivation, recent historians of the Liberal Party have tended to see his adoption of home rule as a wrong turning. Some have argued that embracing home rule was a departure from the traditional Liberal approach of trying to integrate Ireland into the United Kingdom, while others have seen Irish entanglements as a distraction for the Liberal Party from addressing the concerns of the working-class electorate in Britain – in particular social and welfare questions.

One of the many virtues of Dr Biagini's book is that it addresses much more than just the high politics and electoral consequences of the relationship between Irish Nationalism and British Liberalism. This includes questions of party organisation and the wider political outlook both of parliamentarians and grassroots party workers. In doing so he questions the conclusion of many historians that the Liberal Party with its strong Nonconformist influences and the Roman-Catholic-dominated Irish parliamentary party were strange bedfellows. By locating Irish nationalism within the context of European, rather than simply British, liberalism, the author shows how Liberal Radicals and Irish nationalists shared a view of politics that emphasised democratic and constitutional

British Liberalism and Irish Nationalism

Eugenio F. Biagini: *British Democracy and Irish Nationalism 1876-1906* (Cambridge University Press, 2007)

Reviewed by **Iain Sharpe**

THE RELATIONSHIP between Irish Nationalism and British Liberalism in general, and the Liberal Party's attitude towards Irish home rule in particular during the late

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, have been as much a source of controversy among historians as they were among contemporaries of Gladstone, Chamberlain et al. Foremost