Readman questions this, pointing out that much Liberal rhetoric was about putting the land on a business footing and also about land reform as a democratic measure – a continuation of the Liberal commitment to creating class harmony. While state intervention in land ownership and tenure was clearly not compatible with hard-line laissez-faire economics, such views had always had rather less purchase on the Liberal Party than is often thought. Liberal commitment to land reform therefore represented continuity rather than a new departure. Of course, Conservative opponents tried to present Liberal land legislation as socialist in intent and effect. However, partly as a shield against such accusations, the Liberals were careful to situate their reforms within a tradition of Englishness, looking backwards both to the pre-enclosure times and to some extent to the 'popular system of self-government' that applied in villages in Anglo-Saxon England.

Liberal attitudes to land reform contrasted with those of both Conservatives/Unionists and socialists, in terms not only of practical solutions, but also of the historical precedents they cited. Many traditional Conservatives were sceptical of any attempt to widen access to land, regarding such things as an attack on property rights and an unviable way of organising agriculture. However, the widening of the franchise following the 1884–85 reform acts and the accession to the Conservative ranks of the Liberal Unionists meant that a simple defence of the status quo was no longer a realistic option. Instead, Unionists, driven in part by Jesse Collings, an acolyte of Joseph Chamberlain, sought to widen land ownership through the revival of the yeoman class of peasant proprietors that had existed before the enclosures. This approach had briefly held attractions for Liberals too, but the latter had concluded that it would merely widen social divisions by strengthening the ranks of landed proprietorship, rather than giving all classes access to the land. Socialist writers such as Robert Blatchford and H. M. Hyndman likewise had their distinctive perspective. They stressed medieval traditions of 'Merrie England', of land being held in common by the people, and regarded the Reformation and dissolution of the monasteries as the moment when the land was stolen from the people. In contrast with Liberals and Conservatives, their preferred solution was land nationalisation rather than widening access to the land for individuals.

While each party offered different solutions to the land questions, the common thread was that all sought to present historical precedents that provided a patriotic dimension to their plans.

While each party offered different solutions to the land questions, the common thread was that all sought to present historical precedents that provided a patriotic dimension to their plans. The importance of patriotism as a factor in British politics is often overlooked, perhaps because it is so much easier to focus on concrete 'issues' rather than abstract 'themes'. Dr Readman therefore breaks new ground in discussing the land issue within the context of Englishness and national identify.

Inevitably, though, in breaking new ground, the book suggests questions as well as answering them. The most important of these concerns the intention behind the politicians' use of patriotic rhetoric. It is no surprise that patriotism was a feature of debates over land reform – for politicians seeking to win votes it is probably a good idea to articulate an uplifting view of the land and people they seek to govern. But patriotic rhetoric can be used in different ways: for example, as an offensive or defensive weapon or to reassure or inflame popular opinion. During this period, the Unionists clearly used empire and national defence to question others' patriotic credentials as well as to establish their own, and Liberals struggled to counter this. One wonders whether Liberal and socialist patriotic language over the land question was motivated by a genuine wish to contrast their own patriotic vision with that of their Unionist opponents. Alternatively, it may simply have been a means of shielding themselves against accusations of introducing alien revolutionary ideas into British politics. Was patriotism a motivating factor in views of the different parties or merely a rhetorical device? One hopes that the publication of Dr Readman's excellent book will trigger further debate among historians on these and other issues concerning the role of patriotism within political discourse.

Iain Sharpe is working on a PhD thesis on the Liberal Party in the early twentieth century at the Institute of Historical Research, University of London. He is leader of the Liberal Democrat group on Watford Borough Council.

A tale of two symbols

Frank Trentmann, *Free Trade Nation: Commerce, Consumption and Civil Society in Modern Britain* (Oxford University Press, 2008)

Reviewed by **Tony Little**

Among Liberal Democrat activists traditions are in conflict. The legatees of the classical liberalism of Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill, gathered round the contributors to the *The Orange Book*, dispute with the inheritors of New Liberalism, who published *Reinventing the State*. Battle has been joined in fringe meetings at the party's federal conferences but also surfaces in conference resolutions, most notably in September 2006 when the neo-New Liberals were prominent in the debate on whether the party should retain a 50 per cent income tax rate, not for its revenue potential but as a totem of the party's concern for the less well-off. The clash is evident whenever the party's Shadow Chancellor, Vince Cable, suggests that freer trade might be in the interest of less developed countries.

An Edwardian Liberal would find most of this split incomprehensible. Ministers responsible for the implementation of the New Liberal ideas after 1905 were convinced believers in classical liberalism and, equally, proponents of classical economics. It might even be argued that some of the celebrated elements of the New Liberalism, such as the People's Budget of 1909, were the result of expediency rather than planning. Would Lloyd George's income and land tax proposals have been so radical if he had not had to fund a naval arms race as well as old age pensions?

Edwardian Liberals were fervent believers in free trade, and I use the word fervent advisedly. Frank Trentmann's *Free Trade Nation* is the story of the defence of free trade in the first decade of the twentieth century and the undermining of the old order during and after the Great War of 1914–18.

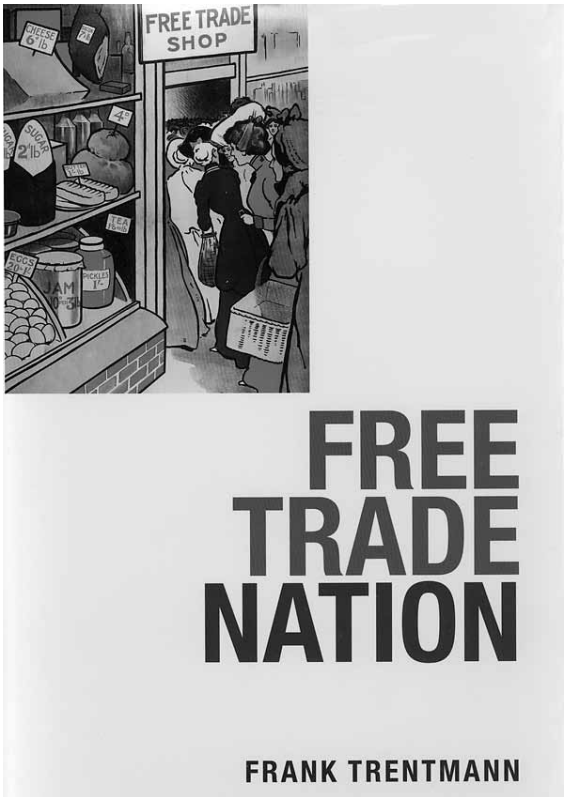
Free trade was central to Victorian Liberalism. It was the factor which first brought together the elements of what became the Liberal Party. It split the Tories so badly in 1846 that they were out of power for a generation and only clawed their way back after disowning protectionism. The British political establishment accepted unilateral free trade as official policy for the remainder of Victoria's reign, despite some chuntering from the Conservatives and misgivings about the protectionism adopted in America's growing economy and the newly created Germany, which both threatened British manufacturing supremacy.

Joe Chamberlain crushed the cosy consensus in 1903 when he spoke in favour of giving preference to imports from the colonies, imitating the German customs union across the British Empire, and simultaneously providing the funding for old age pensions. Chamberlain's proposals initially split Balfour's government, an alliance of Conservatives and Liberal Unionists, contributing to its landslide defeat in 1906. Curiously, as Trentmann makes clear, Chamberlain's plans were not wholly welcomed by the Empire. The white settler colonies were often themselves protectionist, to shelter infant industries, or, as in the case of Canada, more concerned with nearer neighbours than with the distant mother country. Nevertheless, his panacea came gradually to dominate Tory thinking, and free trade was a significant factor in the remaining elections before the Great War.

Trentmann does not give the details or a comprehensive narrative of the Chamberlain proposals. Rather he is concerned with the reaction to them. And it is here, in the first half of the book, that Trentmann is at his most valuable, by illuminating the popular campaigns and explaining the rationale behind them.

When I learnt economics, many years ago, we were introduced to free trade through the model of a simplified two-country, two-product world market. As the assumptions behind the model were modified it remained the conclusion that trading was in the best interest of both countries, even if one could make both products more cheaply than the other. Tariffs made the products more expensive and damaged both employment and consumers. The models can be made more complex and more dynamic but today the arguments of those proposing reducing trade barriers are largely conducted in the rational logical style of the economist. The passion and emotion of the trade protesters is dismissed as misguided and harmful to the interests of those on whose behalf the students demonstrate. Consequently, free trade does not engage the interest of the consumer and there is no popular lobby in its favour.

Edwardian Britain was very different. Pro- and anti-free traders set up displays in high street stores. Parades and tableaux were organised. Trentmann has incorporated photographs of the shops, of the participants in the tableaux or plays, and of the everyday campaigners haranguing passers-by in the streets. Packed mass meetings lasting up to two and a half or three hours were held with songs sung and hecklers infiltrated into the opposing camps. Indeed, free trade lectures were so popular that they were organised by their hundreds in the popular seaside resorts in the



holiday season, sometimes in defiance of local by-laws. Naturally posters, pamphlets, parodies and cartoons played their part, but, perhaps more surprisingly, recently developed technologies were pressed into action. In one constituency a pantechnicon van, adapted to show early propaganda films, attracted large crowds. Elsewhere, moving pictures of party leaders speaking were synchronised with gramophones, and lectures were routinely illustrated by magic lantern slides. The more enterprising organisers projected images on the outside walls of buildings. One of the strengths of Trentmann's book is the use of a fraction of this wealth of propaganda material as illustrations in the text and, at least in the hardback edition, as colour plates in the centre of the book.

The use of high street shops illustrates that much of the campaigning was aimed at the end user of imports and suggests that the 'citizen consumers' acknowledged their dual role. One of the difficulties for the modern campaigner against tariff protection is that while it is relatively easy to identify the producers who might lose from free trade, whether small African farmers or aspiring British manufacturers, consumers rarely see their purchasing

as something through which they interact with government. Edwardian free traders were able to encapsulate the threat to the consumer by the first of Trentmann's symbols, the white loaf. Inadvertently gifted to the Liberals by Chamberlain, the threat to the price of bread, a significant part of the working-class diet, dominated the debate and few speakers neglected to bring large and small loaves to clinch their case. Other components of the breakfast table played their part in homely illustrations to rouse the passions of the voters, while elderly members of the audience were primed to reminisce about the 'hungry [Eighteen] Forties', when Britain had the Corn Laws. Passions were roused to the extent that a riot occurred in Wycombe, which ended with the trashing of a protectionist 'Dump Shop'.

But, as Trentmann argues, it would be a misunderstanding to analyse Liberal commitment to free trade as a cynical exploitation of consumer fears. Cobden's Anti-Corn Law League was not seeking merely to cut the price of cereals. It undermined the influence of the largest landowners who dominated politics as a specially privileged producer interest. Cobden and Bright promoted trade to secure world peace and undermine the aristocratic system of diplomacy with its vested interest in competition between nations and the expansion of empires. Under the Liberals, the state had become not the handmaiden of an elite but a disinterested or neutral umpire in a pact with all citizens represented under a gradually widening franchise. Taxes were levied fairly on all, through a mix of income and indirect taxes rather than disproportionately on the poor through charges on basic necessities. Free competition should work in favour of all groups in all nations.

However, it was this moral case for free trade that was its undoing. The Liberals won the 1906 election and both the elections of 1910 with free trade as an important part of their armoury. But after World War I popular support faded and with it support for Liberalism. Trade clearly had not preserved world peace. Winning the war was not achieved by letting free competition allocate resources. The national interest required that Britain be self-sufficient in some commodities, whatever the economic theory of comparative advantage suggested. Trades disrupted by the war and its aftermath required protection to survive. Cartels and mergers, securing economies of scale, could, arguably, produce more efficiently than old-fashioned smaller firms.

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Each of these developments peeled away free trade supporters, including lifelong Liberals. In future, the state would be more active: no longer the umpire but a player in securing cooperation among producer interests, epitomised by Trentmann's second symbol – milk. The white loaf was demonstrated to be deficient in food values – wholemeal bread was better and wasted less of the wheat made scarce by war. Milk, on the other hand, was not only vital but required the assistance of active government to secure its purity, to prevent profiteering and to organise cooperatives of appropriate magnitude along the supply chain.

Gradually the number of exceptional treatments built up until, when the depression of 1929 struck, free trade no longer had a popular foundation, and when Chamberlain's son, Neville, pronounced the obsequies, few mourned its passing.

The second part of Trentmann's book deals with this decline of free trade, with a coda about modern trade talks made even more relevant by the financial crisis and the temptation towards beggar-thy-neighbour policies that occurred after his text was written. He has focused on the details of the various bodies that considered post-Great War trade, and on the elite thinkers, such as Keynes, who provided the intellectual underpinning for the changing climate. While these chapters lack the novelty of the material on the popular endorsement of free trade, Trentmann has produced a valuable guide to the process by which an argument, and the party that promoted it, were at first sustained and later undermined. What changed was not the economics but the public engagement with an ideal.

Tony Little is Chair of the Liberal Democrat History Group.

Edwardian Liberalism

H. V. Emy, *Liberals, Radicals and Social Politics, 1892–1914* (Cambridge University Press, 1973; reprinted 2008)

Reviewed by **Ian Packer**

When this book was first published in 1973 it appeared at an opportune moment. Only two years previously, Peter Clarke's *Lancashire and the New Liberalism* had ignited a wide-ranging debate about the nature and fortunes of Edwardian Liberalism. Clarke had argued that the pre-1914 Liberal Party was in good health and showed few signs of the rapid decline that was to set in after the Lloyd George–Asquith split of 1916 and which was to lead to the party's replacement by Labour as the main anti-Conservative force in Britain. The key to Clarke's case was his contention that Edwardian Liberalism had embraced social reform, and so outflanked the embryonic Labour Party as the obvious choice for working-class voters. Ross McKibbin's *Evolution of the Labour Party, 1910–24* (1974) responded by claiming that Labour's appeal was based on its identity as a working-class party, whatever policies were pursued by the Liberals, and that Labour's organisation and electoral performance were growing strongly before 1914.

Emy's book made an important contribution to the sometimes fierce debate that ensued between Clarke's and McKibbin's viewpoints. *Liberals, Radicals and Social Politics* is a study of political ideas at the national level in