

Railwayman and MP

Adrian Vaughan, *Samuel Morton Peto: A Victorian Entrepreneur* (Ian Allan Publishing, 2009)

Reviewed by **Robert Ingham**

SAMUEL MORTON Peto (1809–89) was Liberal MP for Norwich from 1847 to 1854, for Finsbury from 1859 to 1865, and for Bristol from 1865 to 1868. As a political figure he made little impact, but as a contractor for railways and public works he left a lasting impression on the UK. His firm built numerous London landmarks, including Nelson's Column and the Reform Club, and was substantially involved with the building of the Palace of Westminster. Peto also carried out a number of major railway projects at home and overseas, including developing Victoria Station in London.

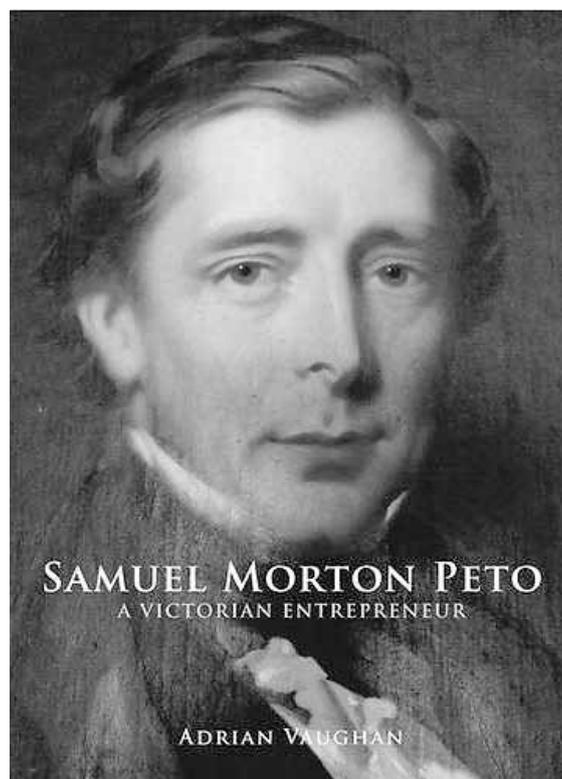
Peto was largely self-made. His father was a farmer, and at fourteen Peto was apprenticed to his uncle, a building contractor, learning the various building trades. When his uncle died, in 1830, Peto and a cousin inherited the business. Concentrating at first on major building projects, Peto took advantage of the railway boom of the 1840s to expand his business. By the 1860s, however, Peto had overextended himself and he was declared bankrupt. His political career was over and his attempts to return to business achieved little. He died in 1889.

Adrian Vaughan's entertaining biography of Peto is a short (190 pages) and lively read, which makes extensive use of privately held family letters. Inevitably, its focus is on Peto's business career, charting the dizzying ascent and sudden collapse of his fortunes. The clarity of the narrative is sometimes lost as Vaughan describes in detail the geographic and commercial arrangements of Peto's various railway projects. The book would have benefited from a glossary so that any reader unfamiliar with the minutiae of mid-Victorian railway companies could distinguish the OWWR from the W&FR. Maps would also be of assistance.

The book's readability is derived from the author's strong views on Peto's life and character. Peto became a Baptist when he married his second wife and was a renowned benefactor of nonconformist churches and the Church of England. Vaughan, clearly not a religious man, regards Peto as a hypocrite, who used the church as a tool for self-promotion and to develop a strong work ethic in his labourers. Similarly, Peto's political career is described by Vaughan as an offshoot of his business life, providing him with contacts, status and influence over the legislation then necessary to build railways. He was an infrequent attender of parliament; broke a promise to his electorate in Norwich to scale back his business interests once he was elected; unseated a good local MP in Finsbury; and had no local connections with Finsbury or Bristol. Vaughan also finds little to admire in Peto's business methods, which were sometimes unlawful, although he was probably typical of his age.

Vaughan argues that Peto was a Liberal because he stood to benefit financially from free trade. There is, no doubt, some truth in this, but Peto was a radical, speaking out for working men in parliament and regarded as a philanthropic employer. His close connection with working men during his apprenticeship seems to have coloured his political outlook: he was no Gradgrind.

Assessing Peto's place in the mid-Victorian Liberal Party is beyond the scope of Vaughan's book. Was he typical of many MPs, in parliament to pursue a business career not to contribute to the government of the nation? Did he consistently vote in the same way as his leaders? Did he only vote whenever he was in town or could he be summoned by the Chief Whip to the most important divisions? These are largely unanswered questions,



although the digitisation of Hansard and the forthcoming digitisation of the *Mirror of Parliament* and the Victorian division lists should help place MPs like Peto in proper context. By combining religious tolerance, commitment to free trade, and concern for working men, Peto would seem to be representative of the party to which he belonged, but whether he helped shape that party or was shaped by it is an unanswered question.

Robert Ingham is the Biographies Editor of the Journal of Liberal History.

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