

that Conservatives such as Arthur Balfour, George Curzon and the fourteenth Earl of Derby are also roped into the ranks of Liberal intellectuals because they illustrate 'processes and procedures associated with liberalism'. This does leave the problem however, that they were not actually Liberals. For all its undoubted merits, perhaps

the book would have been better titled 'Secular intellectuals' rather than 'Liberal intellectuals'.

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## For Gladstone and Henry George

Paul Mulvey, *The Political Life of Josiah C. Wedgwood: Land, Liberty and Empire, 1872–1943* (Royal Historical Society, 2010)

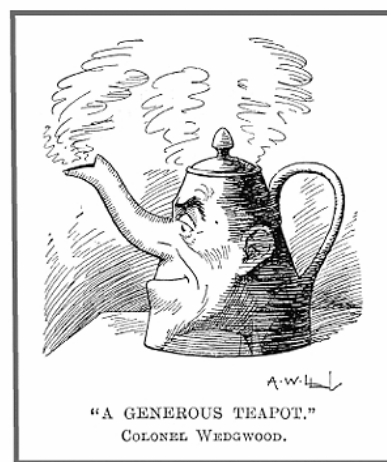
Reviewed by Richard Toye

WHEN JOSIAH C. Wedgwood died at the age of seventy-one, the Canadian journalist J. F. Sander-son recalled an episode he had witnessed four years earlier, at the outbreak of the Second World War. After Neville Chamberlain made his formal declaration of war, the air-raid warning sounded. Wedgwood, at that time a Labour MP (he was ennobled in 1942), refused to follow the crowd into the parliamentary bomb shelter. 'He calmly announced that it was a practice raid because no bombs would fall on London for six months' (*Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, 30 July 1943). Other members argued with him, but he put his money where his mouth was and in due course won his bet. The story illustrates Wedgwood's capacity for independent-mindedness and (at times) sound judgement but also his foolhardy and obstreperous qualities. These help explain both his ability to maintain a longstanding, uninterrupted and quite high-profile parliamentary career (as a Liberal MP from 1906 and as a Labour one from 1918) and his failure to make it to the front rank of politics. He did at one point become a member of the Cabinet, as a Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster in the short-lived Labour government of 1924, but, as Paul Mulvey notes in this excellent book, he had 'little status and little to do' in this role (p. 138) and, as was his habit, showed little collegiality. He was above all an

individualist, making him difficult for historians to place; Mulvey's achievement is, without making exaggerated claims for his significance, to show why he should be taken seriously.

Wedgwood is probably best remembered for his association with three ideas: land reform, progressive reform in India, and Zionism. He remained faithful to the first of these causes after it went out of fashion, adopted the second before it came into fashion, and began advocating the third during the First World War, exactly as it came into fashion. His combination of beliefs, some of which were 'extreme and marginal' (p. 204), may have been idiosyncratic, but Mulvey places him convincingly as one of the last exponents of a once-powerful British tradition: 'He never ceased to believe that the Gladstonian radicalism of his early years, suitably developed by the ideas of Henry George, was the key to human progress and prosperity' (p. 208). Indeed, we are encouraged to believe that it may have been Wedgwood's difficult personality rather than the peculiarity of his ideas that kept him away from positions of greater prominence. Mulvey's judgements on his behaviour are robust, occasionally verging on the brutal. Thus Wedgwood's fruitful efforts between the wars to establish the History of Parliament project is recognised his 'greatest legacy' but also as 'one of his greatest failures'. Mulvey explains: 'while his great

## THE POLITICAL LIFE OF JOSIAH C. WEDGWOOD



LAND, LIBERTY AND EMPIRE, 1872–1943

Paul Mulvey

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energy and enthusiasm created it, his carelessness, bellicosity and sheer lack of management talent alienated the very people that he needed to make it a success' (p. 177). The balance of this assessment, though, is perhaps not quite generous enough, given that History of Parliament Trust, freed from Wedgwood's eccentric methodology and Whiggish ideological proclivities, carries out excellent work to this day.

The book is billed as a political life, but sufficient information on Wedgwood's private affairs is included to illuminate his public career. The book is meticulously researched, enjoyable to read and, at just over two hundred pages, exactly the right length for the subject matter. It can be recommended warmly to anyone interested in the politics of the period.

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