Liberal Unionist Party were more involved in running government than developing their party after 1895. Chamberlain's explosive radical ideas could hurt his friends as much as his enemies, as he demonstrated between 1903 and 1906. The party had failed to establish itself outside its original enclaves and, once it had rejected the idea of reunion with the Gladstonians, it became progressively more problematic to envisage escaping the not always friendly Tory embrace. Cawood suggests that the prolonged engagement from the formation of the 1895 government to the consummation of the merger in 1912 is a tribute to the residual independence of the regional LU parties and the emotional commitment that individuals made to their party no matter how irrational their aspirations had become.

The legacy of Liberal Unionism was not limited to the subtle changes in Conservatism manifest right up till the Second World War, if not beyond, but was also evident in the pioneering campaigning methods the new party employed in its struggle to survive. Dr Cawood hints at the scope for more work that can, and I hope, will be done to explore this. His book is much to be welcomed and from now on those interested in the period will need to engage with his findings.

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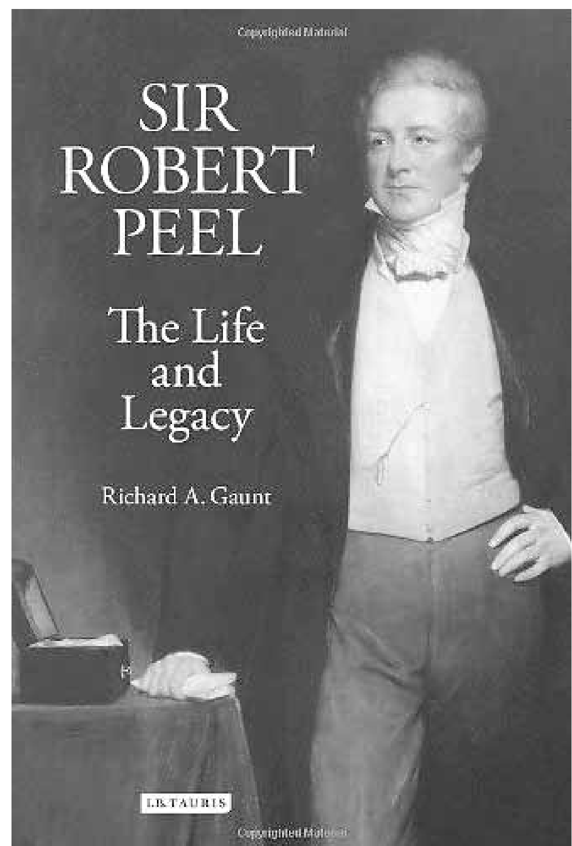
Views of Peel

Richard A. Gaunt: *Sir Robert Peel: The Life and Legacy* (I. B. Tauris, 2010)
Reviewed by **Dr Matthias Oppermann**

It is no longer possible to deny it: Sir Robert Peel was one of the most successful British prime ministers of the nineteenth century. He was the author of a couple of liberal reforms, for example the currency reform of 1819 and the Metropolitan Police Act of 1829. Moreover, he advocated, in 1829 – after having opposed it for a long time – Catholic emancipation, and repealed the Corn Laws in 1846. No prime minister produced a legislative record as comprehensive as Peel's. However, for a long time Disraeli and Gladstone have clouded Peel's image in history. Conservatives wanted Disraeli to be the greatest nineteenth-century prime minister; Liberals prefered to reserve this honorific for Gladstone. Peel, the founder of the Conservative Party who eventually wrecked it by the repeal of the Corn Laws, pleased neither side. At best, he was seen as Gladstone's teacher, as the forerunner of Gladstonian Liberalism.

The first historian to change that picture was George Kitson Clark who challenged, in the 1920s, the Gladstonian reading of Peel's career so well established after his death. He claimed Peel for the Conservative Party, a view that Norman Gash affirmed and widened decades later in his outstanding two-volume Peel biography. Gash, who himself favoured a prudent, pragmatic, and non-ideological conservatism promoted Peel to the rank of 'founder of modern Conservatism'. This new or 'revisionist' judgement resonates in Douglas Hurd's Peel biography of 2007, but it is far from being unanimously accepted. Cambridge historian Boyd Hilton, for example, has challenged it several times since the 1970s. He understands Peel as the contrary of a flexible and pragmatic politician. For him Peel was a dogmatic liberal who shared George Canning's assumed evangelicalism that drove him to embrace free trade and economic liberalism for ideological reasons. Unnecessary to say that Gash condemned this view lock, stock and barrel, and that the debate as to whether Peel was a conservative or a liberal continues to this day. As a consequence, a book that seeks an answer to this question would be timely.

Richard A. Gaunt's interesting new work *Sir Robert Peel: The Life and Legacy* is not such a book. Gaunt discusses the various facets of Peel's political career and tries to address the question of Peel's principles and convictions. However, he finally shrinks from being explicit about them. He finds virtue in the different interpretations and does not let the reader know where he stands personally. In fact, his book is neither an extended biography nor at least an exploration of Peel's political thought, but, rather, an informative account of the multifarious ideas that contemporaries and historians had about Peel. Gaunt rarely quotes Peel himself. Where he recounts what Peel actually did, he does not assess him, but prefers to point to all those who talked or wrote about him from the beginning of his political career on. Though this produces a fascinating picture of the evolving images of one of Britain's most eminent nineteenth-century politicians, it is not the best way to understand this politician's genuine intentions and ideas. This approach is not suited to offer, as Gaunt announces to do, 'a reinterpretation of Peel's attitudes to what he was doing in key areas of activity which have subsequently formed the nucleus of his political



legacy.' Attacking the question whether Peel's reforms as Home Secretary, especially the establishment of the Metropolitan Police, were signs of his liberalism and humanitarianism, Gaunt for example discusses the interpretations of several historians and concludes that none of them is completely compelling. Yet he does not take up a position of his own. If Hilton is wrong in assuming Peel to have been motivated by an evangelical belief in the natural harmony of every political order, what then was Peel's motivation? Gaunt does not say. Indeed, there is no 'reinterpretation' in this book, and the reader must wonder why the author did not make a stab at a close reading of Peel's speeches and letters as the only way to understand his 'attitudes to what he was doing'.

Gaunt thus missed a good chance to draw a little bit nearer to the thought of this important but somehow enigmatic politician. A close reading of Peel's writings could have led him to underline even further that all existing interpretations are flawed in one way or another. On the one hand, Norman Gash was right to criticise Hilton for ascribing ideas to Peel that were essentially his own and not Peel's: this non-ideological statesman, who used the word prudence in his letters nearly as often as Edmund Burke had, was not a dogmatic economic liberal driven by evangelicalism. On the other hand, where Hilton overstretches the role of ideas, Gash has too little use for them. That Peel was marked by moderation and prudence does not necessarily mean that he was merely a Conservative in the party sense. It is difficult to assess Peel in terms of this party label. Looking at Peel with continental eyes, I daresay that he was the quintessential model of the fusion of liberalism and conservatism that the French and Germans think to be typical of nineteenth-century Britain. For a better understanding of Peel and his actions, therefore, we should resort instead to the history of ideas in a broad sense rather than to party history. Like Canning, Peel was a nineteenth-century successor to the 'Old Whig' tradition, a politician in the wake of Burke and Robert Walpole.

But this is a perspective Gaunt is not interested in. By the end, he gives the impression that all attempts to classify Peel within a longer tradition are in vain: 'To designate him a false "Tory", a renegade "Conservative", a "Liberal Tory", a "Liberal Conservative" or a proto-Gladstonian Liberal, is to play, semantically, with the career of a shrewd, ambitious and complex political operator and try and give it helpful characterisation within a sometimes limited political vocabulary.' Nevertheless, more than one hundred years ago, the writer and Liberal MP Herbert Woodfield Paul showed in *Men and Letters* that it is indeed possible to characterise Peel in a balanced but significant manner: 'He was the father of modern Conservatism and of modern Liberalism. He was too great for one party.' Peel was a kind of conservative liberal or, to be more exact, a liberal with a conservative disposition in the Oakeshottian sense. And though he founded a party as an instrument for his ambition, he never was a confirmed party man.

'He was the father of modern Conservatism and of modern Liberalism. He was too great for one party.' Peel was a kind of conservative liberal or, to be more exact, a liberal with a conservative disposition.

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Son of the Grand Old Man

Ros Aitken, *The Prime Minister's Son: Stephen Gladstone, Rector of Hawarden* (University of Chester Press, 2012)
Reviewed by **Ian Cawood**

The sons of prime ministers are almost fated to endure lives of disappointment and relative failure. David Lloyd George's son, Gwilym, went on to be the most forgettable Home Secretary of the post-war years, while Winston Churchill's shadow managed to eclipse the careers of both his son and grandson. Of all eminent Liberal families, only the step-brothers Austen and Neville Chamberlain exceeded their father, Joseph, in the seniority of their appointments, but even their careers ended in ignominy, with Austen one of the few Conservative leaders never to become prime minister and Neville one of the few who ought never to have been allowed to do so. William Gladstone, at first glance, seems a relatively benign political parent in comparison, as his youngest son, Herbert, was apprenticed as private secretary to his father before going on to be a highly influential chief whip, a moderately successful Home Secretary and the first governor general of the new Union of South Africa. An enthusiastic supporter of the superb Gladstone's Library in Hawarden, Ros Aitken, has, however, revealed a much less complimentary side to Gladstone, the family man, in her biography of Stephen Gladstone, the G.O.M.'s second and eldest surviving son.

Ros Aitken is a model of the highly experienced history teacher who has never let the renowned snobbery of British academics dissuade her from engaging with serious archival research. Not for her, arcane and jargon-ridden musings on such sophistry as the 'otherness' of Stephen's familial identity; instead she painstaking describes all of Stephen's long life in a well-researched and nuanced picture of aristocratic life of the nineteenth century. Superb pen-portraits of the academic failings of the public school system, the residual popular anti-popery that blighted the careers of high churchmen such as Stephen and the sacrosanct importance of letter writing, create a micro-study of upper-class Victorian attitudes, behaviours and preoccupations.

Stephen emerges as a rather tragic character, full of doubt as to his role as a domestic clergyman, constantly pushed into preferments beyond his capabilities, largely as his father had always wanted to take holy orders and, like so many frustrated parents, he vicariously overcame his disappointments