

Reviews

they should have together, would share in her inheritance on her death. Equally, when she died, many years later, the only remark reported was that Sir Isaac felt she might have lived longer had she heeded his dietary recommendations. Maybe more emotional documents have been lost, or perhaps this was indeed the man, businesslike to the very end.

Holden's Ghosts is a well-researched account of an extraordinary life, and places Sir Isaac clearly and concisely in his wider historical and political context.

A little over-detailed at times regarding political and business machinations, and more colour could have been added with deeper psychological and emotional insights, perhaps revealed by letters. But I am sure many will nevertheless find this a really rewarding read.

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But did Spencer deserve to be called a 'Czar', as the book's title dubs him? Should he be given all the blame for the bifurcation process that the book describes? A broader look at nineteenth-century Lord Lieutenancies may help answer these questions. Most notably, the structural problems resulting in viceroy and prime minister disagreeing over policy is not simply limited to the 1880s. The issues Spencer faced – the lack of support and sympathy from London politicians, the personal financial and physical burdens of the job, the lack of power of the position, the scarcity of resources to run the administration of Ireland, and the harshness of the criticisms of Irish nationalists – were ones also faced with varying degrees of success by Spencer's predecessors in the 1830s, 1840s, 1850s and 1860s. These often exploded into verbal conflict by letter and a tendency for the viceroy to take a course divergent from government in London, as in the 1840s when De Grey and Peel disagreed over the appropriate remedy for the rise of the Repeal movement, or when Bessborough and Russell clashed over the necessary level of expenditure during the famine. However, many other viceroys and prime ministers, such as Heytesbury and Peel, faced similar problems but still maintained a cohesive approach to policy throughout their joint periods of office.

This means that personality may also play a role here. With the context of Gladstone's religious fervour and micromanagement of Irish affairs well-recognised, and self-effacing Spencer finding himself led into arguing for

Autocrat or cipher?

James Murphy, *Ireland's Czar: Gladstonian Government and the Lord Lieutenancies of the Red Earl Spencer, 1868–86* (University College Dublin Press, 2014)

Review by **Charles Read**

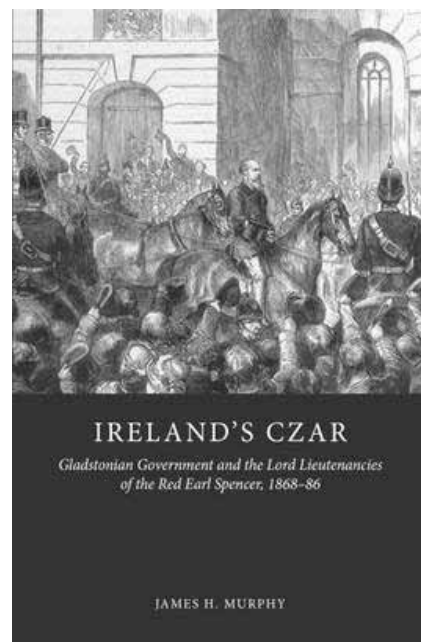
JAMES MURPHY HAS performed historians a great service by shedding light on one of Ireland's less well-known viceroys in his latest book, *Ireland's Czar: Gladstonian Government and the Lord Lieutenancies of the Red Earl Spencer*. This work adds to the recent trend among historians of nineteenth-century Ireland to investigate Dublin Castle administrations in more detail, a move against the grain of much of the existing literature, which focuses on the personalities of politicians in London or those of nationalists outside the Irish government. Although recent biographies of Lord Castlereagh (Chief Secretary, 1798–1801), the 2nd Earl de Grey (Lord Lieutenant, 1841–44) and the 4th Earl of Carnarvon (Lord Lieutenant 1885–86) all mark steps in this direction, the arguments put forward by Murphy about Spencer's effect on the wider politics of the 1880s make this book especially of note.

Indeed, this volume is not a simple narrative of Spencer's career or his doings during his appointments as Lord Lieutenant of Ireland between 1868–71 and 1882–85. As Murphy declares on page 3, 'this book is only in a qualified sense a biography of Spencer'. Neither is it simply a description of political crises, or the day-to-day functioning of government. Instead, it is a lively, detailed, and well-written political history of the period 1868–85 from the perspective of Dublin Castle – and one which calls into question existing interpretations of Anglo-Irish relations in the period

leading up to the Home Rule Crisis of 1885–86.

The first seven chapters of the book describe how Spencer negotiated the thorny issues of his first period of office, such as Irish church disestablishment and the security threat posed by the Fenians, without damaging the political reputation of the Lord Lieutenant.

The rest of the book focuses on the early-1880s, a period less well studied by other historians, but which follows up theories Murphy has already suggested in his previous work. It is argued that Gladstone's policies did not strengthen the Union by means of conciliating nationalist grievances. Instead, this process weakened the Union. The consequence of the contrast between Spencer following more coercive policies in Dublin, and Gladstone more conciliatory ones in London, was, in Murphy's words, 'bifurcated' government. It may have helped Gladstone and his government at Westminster to psychologically distance itself from the Irish executive in Dublin with Spencer as its figurehead, but it also weakened the idea of Britain and Ireland as one country in terms of political culture and identity. In essence, this was the beginning of the end of the Anglo-Irish union. Political affiliation with Britain in popular Irish opinion in the 1880s was damaged by the Gladstone government's deliberate sacrifice of the cultural capital of the Irish executive's traditional authority for his own short-term political ends.



'Czar'-like heavy-handed coercion, a process well described by Murphy, conflict, it seems, was inevitable. Establishing responsibility for the deleterious consequences of incoherent British government in Ireland for the longer-term future of the Anglo-Irish Union could well have been explored further in the book. The political use which Gladstone made of Spencer, finally using his loyalty to ensure his support for home rule, could have been more critically assessed. There is little doubt, however, of the outcome. Murphy convincingly argues that this conflict weakened the case for continued union. And that this also contributed to the Home Rule Crises after 1885 and the subsequent decline of the Liberal Party as Britain's dominant electoral force.

This insight is supported by similarities in other periods. The difficult situation faced by Spencer in advocating his own policy agenda, which he believed to be the right course of action in Ireland, whilst following instructions from London, was also noted as early as 1859 by De Grey, another activist viceroy who clashed with his political superiors in London:

Every act, every decision, every thought or suggestion must be submitted to the government at home, who have to justify everything; the natural consequence of which is that he can hardly take the most insignificant step or sanction the most inferior appointment without previous communication. This is all natural, all right, and all inevitable; but the Lord Lieutenant becomes a mere cipher!¹

Perhaps, in the 1880s, Gladstone actually needed to appoint a cipher willing to take his orders without conscientious dispute. However, a 'Czar' apparently intent on running his own repressive agenda could well have been very convenient for Gladstone. Certainly, the political history of Britain and Ireland could have looked very different if he had taken a different course.

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¹ Transcript of 'Memoirs of the Earl de Grey' [1859] (CRT/190/45/2) Bedfordshire and Luton Archives Sp. 64.

Liberals and Labour

James Owen, *Labour and the Caucus: Working-Class Radicalism and Organised Liberalism in England, 1868–1888* (Liverpool University Press, 2014)

Review by **William C. Lubenow**

TOO FREQUENTLY THE 'labour movement' and 'organised liberalism' (the caucus) are treated as two separate but unified concepts. Dr Owen, in his excellent and stimulating examination of the prehistory of the Labour party between 1868 and 1888, deconstructs these concepts by making two points. Firstly, he exposes the flexible pragmatism of labour activists in working, when and where it suited their purposes, with organised Liberalism. Secondly, he discusses the rhetorical value of 'the caucus.' The concept was a shifting one: labour activists could use it to attack establishment Liberalism when they felt it stood in the way of their political ambitions; establishment Liberals could use it as a device to defend themselves against labour insurrectionists. This study, therefore, modifies, in interesting ways, the 'continuity thesis': that popular radicalism had an ongoing tradition through the nineteenth-century and into the twentieth-century. Owen, in contrast, reveals the cleavages within working-class radicalism and official Liberalism. The point he stresses throughout is that 'place' made a difference: locality, but also the nature of the electoral environment (whether the contests were parliamentary or municipal), made a difference in the ways potential labour candidates conducted themselves in their relationship with organised Liberalism. The upshot was that neither the 'labour movement' nor 'official Liberalism' were fixed and rigid categories organising political experience.

While never taking on board the error that there is no reality independent of language, Owen gives proper weight to use of language as labour activists and members of the caucus addressed each other in their contests for political position. Yet he always engages in this analysis of the connections between the linguistic and the political and cultural environments of party organisations and elections in various places both urban and rural. He carefully shackles the more freebooting elements of what has been called the 'linguistic turn' by scrupulous attention to rigorous methods. To carry out this task Owen has consulted widely and deeply

in the unpublished manuscripts and correspondence of the time: the John Burns papers, the George Howell papers, the Labour Representation League papers, the H. J. Wilson papers; the national and local newspapers; the periodical literature of the time; the published autobiographies of leading and minor figures; and the extensive scholarly literature on the labour movement and Liberalism. Owen's sturdy interrogation of these materials as well as his penchant for examining the local details of political action yields a rich trove of scholarly insights into a perennial historical problem: the ways in which novelty can disrupt and the ways robust agencies can accommodate change, how there can be differences and yet there can be ongoing persistence.

The Second Reform Act introduced a period of what might be called an age of mass politics. It offered challenges and opportunities to the two major parties of state. Both Gladstone and Salisbury embarked upon a series of strategies converting British parliamentary sovereignty to popular sovereignty. It also offered the opportunity for the likes of Joseph Chamberlain to destroy three perfectly good political parties, the Liberal party over home rule and the Conservative and Liberal Unionist parties over tariff reform. It also offered new opportunities (and challenges) to nascent radical and socialist groupings. In the 1880s three socialist organisations – the Social-Democratic Federation, the Socialist League, and the Fabian Society – emerged. But these bodies neither coordinated with each other nor were they internally united on organisational policy. Some members of these groups preferred a parliamentary policy, others an industrial policy. H. M. Hyndman determined to press the SDF into a parliamentary strategy; William Morris and others resigned, regarding this policy as mere political opportunism. Within the Fabian Society Sidney Webb favoured the strategy of permeating official Liberalism, drawing it into socialism. Bernard Shaw, however, regarded the official Liberals as a 'forest of dead trees.' When John Burns, regarded as the first socialist to enter a parliamentary contest,