

giants on the political stage, with many admirable personal qualities combined with a sometimes-violent determination to succeed. Both had substantial political success in their earlier lives and, although very different personalities, were widely admired across the political spectrum. The rush to merger effectively ended the careers of both. Steel was blamed, perhaps unfairly, for chaotic aspects of the negotiations and the infamous 'Dead Parrot' policy statement that was set aside almost as soon as it had been published. Owen's attempt to revive the SDP was never likely to be successful within a first-past-the-post electoral system. His excellent book on hubris, published some years later, seemed almost an exercise self-diagnosis. He could never fully re-embrace Labour, perhaps knowing many of its members would never re-embrace him. Ironically, it was the man both blamed for the 1986 Liberal Assembly fiasco, Paddy Ashdown, who would eventually pick up the pieces and lead the remnants of the Alliance to a partial revival. Yet, somehow, for that Young Liberal of 1987, things would never be quite the same again.

Dr James Moore is a lecturer in modern history at the University of Leicester. He is a former Liberal Democrat councillor and parliamentary candidate and a member of the executive of the Liberal Democrat History Group.

Reviews

Life applied to a political theory

Adam Gopnik, *A Thousand Small Sanities: The Moral Adventure of Liberalism* (Riverrun, 2020)

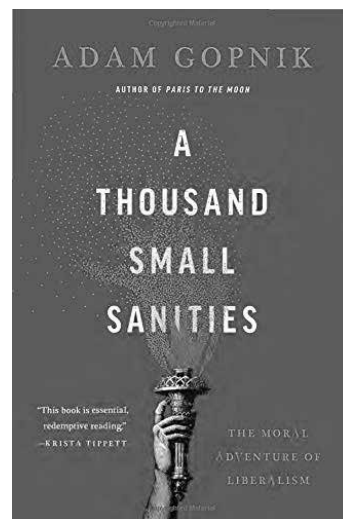
Review by **Malcolm Baines**

ADAM GOPNIK IS a well-known staff writer at the *New Yorker* and his book *A Thousand Small Sanities* reflects that. It's an entertaining and very readable response to the move by US politics to the extremes after 2016, couched as an attempt to persuade his teenage daughter that liberalism is the best credo for her to follow, rather than constitutional conservatism, right-wing populism or socialism. As such, it's not really a work of history but more a polemic, with many literary and philosophical references to liberalism but not so many historical ones.

Gopnik begins by demonstrating that the liberal tradition extends beyond eighteenth-century enlightenment philosophy to a commitment to reform and liberty. There is a fascinating discussion of the relationship between J. S. Mill and Harriet Taylor that is a salutary reminder of the often-overlooked importance of the latter – the author of *On the Subjugation of Women* – to Liberal thought. Gopnik uses the story of their relationship

to show how the concepts of 'humanity', 'tolerance', and 'self-realisation' are also crucial to an understanding of liberalism. Also significantly, his polemic contains responses to the criticisms of this ideology that the alternative creeds put forward and this is what makes it a good primer for anyone seeking to understand global liberalism and what it stands for in the twenty-first century. However, it is therefore rather sketchy on British liberalism, its history and identity.

One of Gopnik's arguments is that liberalism engages with



Reviews

messy reality in the way that its rivals do not. He uses the metaphor of the rhinoceros when compared to the unicorn to contrast practical liberalism with the impossible utopianism of the competitors. He sets out the liberal thought of many of the world's greatest philosophers, including Montaigne and Adam Smith. Gopnik also contrasts the success of the liberal commitment to reform with the failure of the Soviet and Chinese revolutions to improve people's lives. He argues convincingly that liberals believe in continuous reform and that this distinguishes them from conservatives. Gopnik discusses the difference between liberals of process such as George Eliot and liberals of principle like Taylor and Mill. He illustrates what he means by liberals of process through a review of how the London sewers were created in the mid nineteenth century. That characteristic is also demonstrated in his opinion by George Eliot's great liberal novel *Middlemarch* and the way that its plot and characters unfold.

Much of the book, as you would expect, looks at liberalism from a US perspective and as such it is a useful introduction to the topic for British readers.

As I indicated above, Gopnik also analyses the reasons for the opposition of both the right and the left to liberalism. His big picture is that liberalism to him is a belief in reason and reform; the right attacks its over-reliance on reason; the

left condemns its false faith in reform. His commentary on liberalism's rivals is very fair and measured and will give any reader a good insight into how the proponents of those ideologies think and the values they regard as important. One of the few points in the book when Gopnik refers to classic British Liberal history is when he tries to distinguish Liberals and Conservatives by looking at and comparing the characters and temperaments of Gladstone and Disraeli. He entertainingly discusses how Gladstone, despite being a conservative-minded man of pious intentions, became a liberal because of his distaste for privilege, whilst Disraeli was the opposite, despite his background – realising that an appeal to national pride could be an effective vote winner for Conservatives.

Gopnik also looks at the different authoritarian critics of liberalism – from triumphalist, theological and tragic perspectives. However, the examples cited are mostly American, German or French. To date, authoritarianism has not really been part of British political thinking. He then goes on to rebut those arguments from the perspectives of political experience, religious toleration as a birthplace of faith, and of hope as a response to despair.

Having dealt with the criticism of the right, Gopnik now turns to the left. He says that the left considers that only revolution and not reform can lead to lasting change in favour of

justice and equality. Again, the arguments range across the globe – the horrors of King Leopold's Congo contrasted with the pleasure-seeking civilisation of belle époque Brussels. Gopnik cites Marx as the most formidable criticism of liberalism because he stripped away the language of universality and showed the pure power relationships beneath. He goes on to consider the left's attack on liberalism from the viewpoint of identity politics, rejecting the claim of liberalism to be colour blind and neutral between different groups.

The writing continues throughout to be very entertaining. At one point, Gopnik highlights a tragic rule of twenty-first century life – that the right tends to act as though the nineteenth century never happened; the left as though the twentieth century didn't. There is also a good description of privilege and what that means in the contemporary world, but from a rather north American perspective. The tense subject of free speech and the limits to it, from both a liberal and a leftist viewpoint, are also examined. A liberal believes that we should do everything we can to reinforce diversity of opinion whilst a leftist thinks the rights not to feel threatened or to have to tolerate intolerable views are more important.

Gopnik ends with a rallying cry to liberals to make liberalism live again by becoming passionate, patriotic and public minded. He questions the

assumptions of US liberals (and perhaps of British liberals too?) that private enterprise is better than the public sphere at producing social goods, asks for a renewed focus on public education especially for the earliest years as a way to promote a liberal society, and tries to revive the reader's confidence that national health insurance, the ending of gun violence and higher education accessible to all can be achieved. He closes with a panegyric to liberalism: 'liberalism isn't a political theory applied to life. It's what we know about life applied to a political theory ... liberalism ... continues to produce those thousand small sanities in often

invisible social adjustments, moving us bit by bit a little bit closer to a modern Arcadia.' An entertaining and informative read; I would recommend it. It's not really a history but rather a superb piece of polemic that makes a good case for liberalism as the ideology that the reader should follow as well as providing them with the arguments to respond to the counter blasts of both left and right.

Malcolm Baines is head of tax for the UK construction arm of a major French multinational and wrote a D.Phil. thesis on 'The Survival of the British Liberal Party, 1932–1959' at Exeter College, Oxford in the late 1980s.

In Birmingham, however, one struggles to see much evidence of interest in the cause. A petition, organised by the Birmingham Anti-Racist Campaign, to remove statues which 'glorify those linked with slavery and British colonial history' has received a mere 653 signatures. Although the University of Birmingham did hold a seminar to discuss the problematic legacy of its first chancellor, Joseph Chamberlain, its clock tower, its staff bar, one of its newest halls of residence and even its undergraduate financial support scheme are still named after the ardent imperialist and architect of the Second Boer War. When I organised the centenary conference to mark the 100th anniversary since the death of Joseph Chamberlain in 2014 and chaired a number of papers critical of Chamberlain's politics and personality, it was clear that many people in his adopted city still regarded any criticism of 'our Joe' as akin to blasphemy.

Although Chamberlain's imperial enthusiasms are finally being called into question (albeit rather reluctantly) by organisations such as the Chamberlain Highbury Trust, George Dawson's reputation as an advocate of popular education, social reform and the father of the 'Civic Gospel' with which late Victorian Birmingham is identified, appears, at first glance, to be less problematic. This is certainly why a major cultural project run by the University

'Everything to Everybody'

Andrew Reekes and Stephen Roberts, *George Dawson and His Circle* (Merlin Press, 2021)

Review by **Ian Cawood**

WHEN ONE WALKS around British cities in 2022, one is instantly made aware that the civic spaces that have been uncontested for decades are now increasingly the site of bitter arguments between those who seek to question the appropriateness of monuments to certain historical figures and those who regard any interference with the physical heritage of a city as a damaging attempt to 'rewrite' history. The toppling of the statue of Edward Colston in Bristol in 2020 was

the most dramatic outcome of this disagreement, while protests against the statue of Cecil Rhodes in Oxford and that of Henry Dundas, Lord Melville, in Edinburgh, have led to the installation of new plaques, offering a less celebratory assessment of these figures. In Edinburgh, the city council has established a 'Slavery and Colonialism Legacy' review which is asking its citizens to decide what should be done to address issues of historical injustice, including the option to remove certain statues to museums.