

Journal of Liberal

HISTORY

A liberal for all seasons?

David Dutton

A Liberal for all seasons? Percy Alport Molteno, 1861–1937

John Ayshford

John Stuart Mill A neo-Athenian republican

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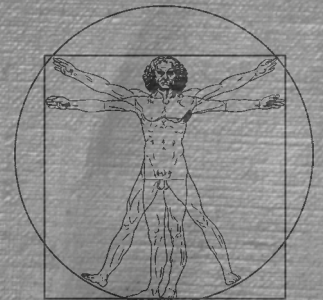
The two Davids: Owen versus Steel Meeting report

Malcolm Baines

Gopnik, *A Thousand Small Sanities* Review

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Lester, Boehme & Mitchell, *Ruling the World* Review

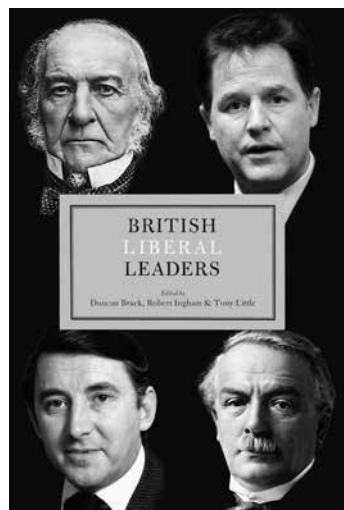


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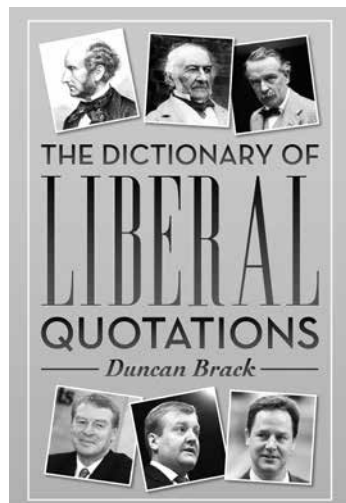
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Dictionary of Liberal Quotations



'A liberal is a man or a woman or a child who looks forward to a better day, a more tranquil night, and a bright, infinite future.'
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Liberal Democrat History Group

The Liberal Democrat History Group promotes the discussion and research of topics relating to the histories of the Liberal Democrats, Liberal Party, and SDP, and of Liberalism. The Group organises discussion meetings and produces the *Journal of Liberal History* and other occasional publications.

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Liberal History News

Summer 2022

Editorial

Welcome to the new-look *Journal of Liberal History*! After almost thirty years publishing in A4 format, we've decided to try a more compact size. This is the same format now used by a wide range of magazines, including *History Today*; we believe that it will be easier to read, both in print and online, particularly on a tablet.

Of course we want to know what our readers think of it, so we'll be running an online survey in the autumn – look out for the link in the next issue.

In September, Liberal Democrat conference returns in person for the first time for three years. We hope to see many of our readers there, either at our two fringe meetings (see back page) or at our exhibition stand.

Duncan Brack (Editor)

Obituary: Ronnie Fearn

Ronnie Fearn was a very unusual Liberal politician. Even how he joined the Southport Liberals and very soon became a local candidate was typically novel and direct. After the big Labour electoral advances after the Second World War, and the concurrent weakness of the Liberal Party, a number

of local Liberal associations made electoral arrangements, formal or informal, with the Conservatives to get straight fights in a number of wards and thus preserve a semblance of a Liberal presence. Southport was different and, faced with the overwhelming Conservative domination of the town council, from the mid-1950s it increasingly divided the fifteen wards with the local Labour Party to ensure successful straight fights in most wards.

Around Ronnie Fearn's home were a number of Labour-fought wards, and he saw this as an opportunity. I began my active Liberal politics in Southport and, working in the town centre, one of my daily tasks was to pick up

and deal with the post at the nearby Liberal office. In early 1961, I opened a letter from one Ronnie Fearn. He had noted that the next-door ward to his home had no Liberal candidate and stated that he would like to fight it for the party, even though he was not at that point a Liberal member. I signed him up and gently explained to him that it was the party's strategy to leave the ward in question to Labour. As it happened, in May 1963, with the retirement of a sitting Liberal councillor, he became the candidate for his home ward which he duly won – and held for the following fifty-two years.

Essentially, once he had decided he was a Liberal, he was entirely loyal to the party and



had little interest in the nuances of policy. He was well known in the town for his work with voluntary organisations, including his involvement with the All Souls Church amateur dramatic group whose annual pantomime played to full houses at the town's main arts centre theatre. He was a natural entertainer and he used his naturally camp voice to great effect. Ronnie's starring role as the dame were keenly enjoyed. His local fame and popularity stood him in good stead at the 1970 general election at which he stood in at the last minute when the adopted candidate withdrew. Nationally it was a disastrous election for the party, but Ronnie managed to increase the Liberal vote by 10 per cent.

He fought the three subsequent general elections but, in 1983, the local party, in a contested selection, chose a more politically focused candidate who, despite increasing the Liberal vote, failed to win the seat. Ronnie returned for the 1987 election and, again confounding the pundits, won – the party's only gain in England. In 1992 he yet again went against the national trend and lost. He persevered and regained Southport in 1997. Retiring from the Commons in 2001 he managed to bequeath enough of his personal vote to John Pugh for the latter to hold the seat. Ronnie was made a life peer in 2001 and retired from the Lords in 2018.

Ronnie was renowned as an optimistically canvasser, and colleagues delighted in

recounting that having been on a doorstep at which the elector told Ronnie in rather colourful terms that he always voted Conservative and then set the dog on to him, Ronnie said to his colleague, 'I think I'll have to put him down as a "possible".' John Pugh commented at Ronnie's funeral that, 'He was

by no means a typical politician and if there is a book written about how to become an MP or a Lord, Ronnie never read it.'

Ronald Cyril Fearn, Lord Fearn, Liberal politician, born 6 February 1931, died 24 January 2022.

Michael Meadowcroft

Letters to the Editor

Shirley Williams

If I could add a coda to both Dick Newby's obituary of Shirley Williams (*Journal* 112) and to Michael Steed's letter (*Journal* 113), attention should be drawn to her last parliamentary election. This was Cambridge in June 1987.

A Liberal City Councillor at the time, I became Shirley's local aide. Our group held the balance of power at the Guildhall and was riding high. The Alliance worked well in Cambridge and surroundings. Our campaign attracted SDP loyalists from across the country, including stars such as Richard Attenborough and David Puttnam. Bill Rodgers, David Steel and David Owen (a bit grumpily) came to canvass for us and joined a packed 'Ask the Alliance' rally in the recently converted Corn Exchange. Clement Freud came loyally from Ely.

Shirley fought a tough campaign in typical good humour and enjoyed the support of her soon-to-be husband Dick Neustadt. In mid-campaign Shirley

and I flew in a tiny plane to help Roy Jenkins defend his seat at Glasgow Hillhead. He reported 'friendly waving at nodal points' in the constituency – and supplied me with a bottle of claret, two glasses and a corkscrew for the journey home – which turned out to be via Luton at an ungodly hour.

In the event, we lost. Robert Rhodes James, the Tory historian, was a liberal, pro-European, anti-Thatcherite MP. Our Labour opponent was the young leader of the Labour group on the Council, Chris Howard. Rhodes James won 40.0 per cent of the vote, Williams 30.6 per cent and Howard 28.3 per cent. The students were Labourish.

Had she won, I have no doubt that Shirley would have run for the leadership of a united Alliance party – outpacing both Owen and Paddy Ashdown. In defeat, she was philosophical. The loser was the country.

Andrew Duff

Liberalism under strain

David Dutton continues to chart the political voyage of one MP through the changing currents of Liberalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Part 2: 1914–37. (Part 1, 1861–1914, was published in *Journal of Liberal History* 113, winter 2021–22.)

A Liberal for All Seasons?

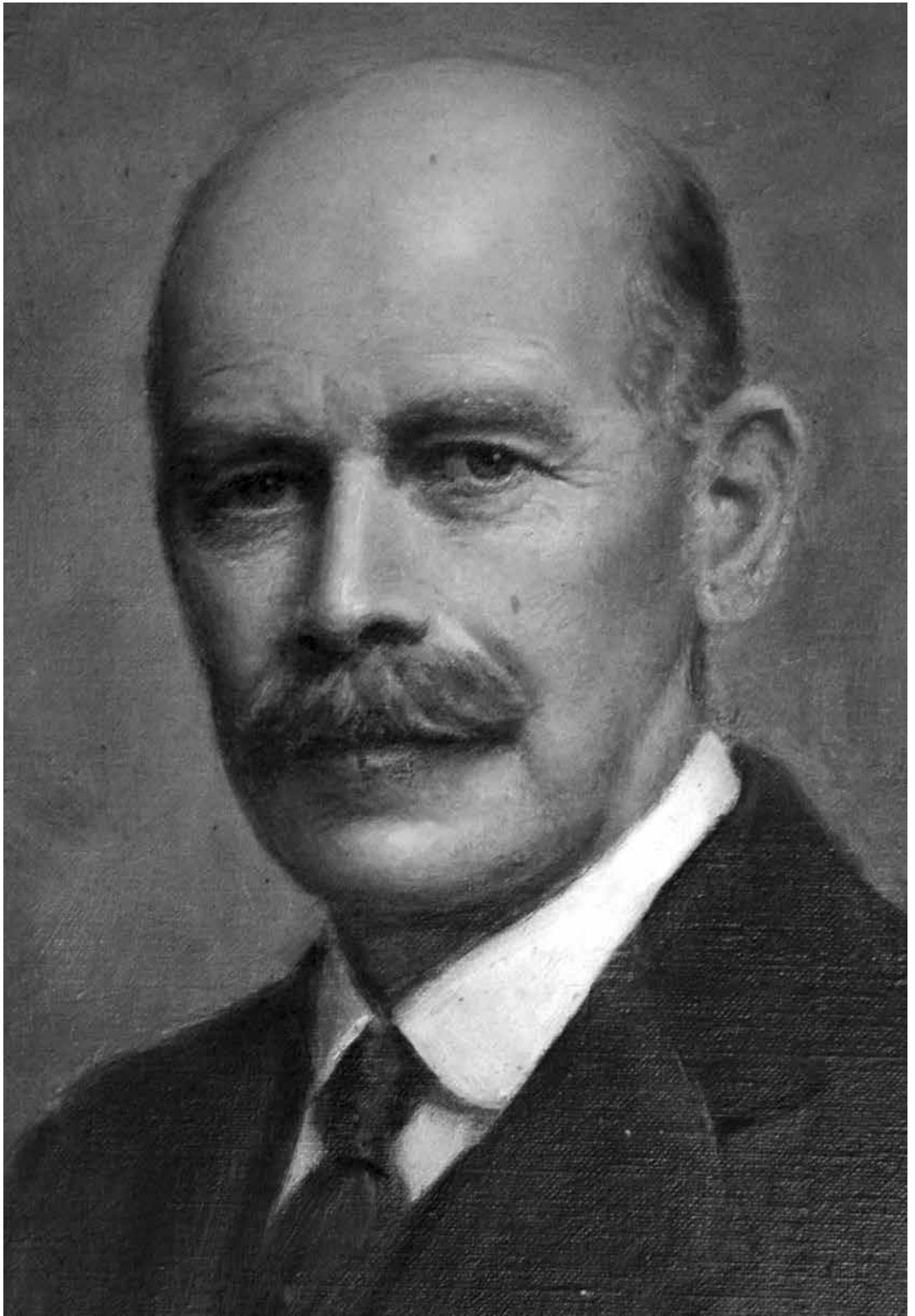
Percy Alport Molteno, 1861–1937

THE GERMAN VIOLATION of Belgian neutrality certainly eased matters for Asquith's government – 'a heaven-sent excuse for supporting a declaration of war'¹ – and for some of the Liberal dissidents. But Molteno knew better. As he told John Merriman, former prime minister of Cape Colony, 'we have been dragged in quite unnecessarily and automatically by arrangements made with France years ago of which the House and the country knew nothing'.² Strikingly, Liberals of Molteno's way of thinking interpreted what had happened in terms of the party divisions of earlier years. Hirst told his sister that war had come because 'the Liberal Imperialist Junta practised a deception on the Cabinet'.³ 'I thought the Liberal League was dead', exclaimed Arthur Ponsonby, but 'it has triumphed after all'.⁴

Away from the febrile atmosphere of Westminster in August 1914 and with time for reflection, Molteno later set down his thoughts on what had happened. He began with a statement of faith: 'I had always felt the greatest objection to War as an outbreak of unbridled violence and the greatest threat to the existence of

our civilisation as we know it'.⁵ Molteno had had no direct experience of war himself. But as a youth he had heard from his elder sisters of the devastation caused by the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71. Later on, his brothers had been closely involved, not only in trying to avert war in South Africa but, when those efforts failed, in seeking to remedy the worst hardships that had been incurred. James Molteno, as a lawyer, had sought justice for those accused under martial law of being rebels and of aiding the Boers. Meanwhile, Betty and Caroline Molteno had worked to get humanitarian aid to Boer women and children detained in Kitchener's concentration camps.⁶ As a result, he developed a detestation of war in all its manifestations. When, at the end of the First World War, his younger brother offered the benign if platitudinous observation that perhaps some good would come of the sacrifices that had been made, Molteno reacted sharply:

Percy Alport Molteno,
12 September 1861 – 19 September 1937
(painting: <https://www.moltenofamily.net>)



A Liberal for All Seasons? Percy Alport Molteno, 1861–1937

I regret that I cannot in any way share such a feeling. Human nature wants some consolation of this kind and hopes it may be so, but it is only because it seeks to salve its wounds. In my opinion no good worth having can ever be purchased by such awful human sacrifices, and no good subsequently attained can ever sanctify or justify their death.⁷

Even in 1914 Molteno anticipated that this latest conflict would have catastrophic consequences:

It is more dangerous than ever because our material progress and command over Nature has been enormously developed by modern science without a corresponding moral development, so that the most recent achievements of science have created forces which are being used to mould weapons by which our civilisation may be utterly destroyed. We are like children entrusted with dangerous arms.⁸

Only too soon, such fears were confirmed. Casualty lists in the autumn of 1914 were some of the worst of the whole war. ‘Many personal friends have already been killed’, Molteno wrote to his brother, ‘and every day brings fresh lists. It is a terrible spectacle for the twentieth century to see the most civilised nations engaged in this death struggle.’⁹

Molteno then explained that the Gladstonian foreign policy of ‘freedom of entanglements in the quarrels of other powers’ had always appealed to him as the guiding principle of British diplomacy. After entering parliament, he had associated himself with movements designed to reduce armaments and to this end had attended a variety of inter-parliamentary conferences. He had believed the Liberal government endorsed the same policy. Indeed, nothing was said ‘by Grey, Asquith or anyone to warn us of liabilities being incurred, which should have been known to Members of Parliament who were asked each year to vote the strength of our armed forces; otherwise Parliamentary control is a farce’. Consequently, he had been ‘shocked beyond measure’

when Grey, in his 3 August speech, enumerated a list of commitments obliging Britain to support France ‘in a way we could not get out of’. Molteno concluded that parliament had been ‘grossly deceived’ and ‘hopes of peace had been ruined without our knowledge, or consent’.¹⁰

This was a telling indictment, but not for public consumption. Opposing the Boer War had sometimes been difficult; opposition to war in the patriotic climate of 1914 was even more hazardous. Molteno’s private observation that all the ‘so-called statesmen and diplomatists of Europe, with hardly an exception, deserve to be hanged’ was unlikely to evoke widespread approbation.¹¹ As he told his constituents, ‘In the face of . . . the greatest disaster which could befall this country and the world, it would be altogether impossible and wrong to enter upon controversy. We must act as a united people.’¹² In any case, at this stage of the conflict, there was no organised opposition for Molteno to join. The resigning cabinet ministers, Morley and Burns, seemed reluctant to take the lead; the Union of Democratic Control, formed in September, held no appeal granted its strong Labour/socialist component. His closest associate remained Lord Loreburn, with whom he was in regular contact throughout the war. It was a significant friendship. By early 1915 Loreburn was in contact with Colonel Edward House, President Woodrow Wilson’s special envoy.¹³ Through such channels the president was encouraged to think that there was a body of moderate opinion that would welcome American sponsorship of a negotiated peace. For the time being, Loreburn agreed with Molteno that, while men such as Grey, Asquith, Lloyd George and Haldane could never be trusted again and that ‘the moment war was over their action should be exposed’, nothing could be done publicly while the conflict continued which would reveal any divisions to the country.¹⁴

Molteno, a long-term champion of fiscal rectitude, was inevitably worried by the financial strain imposed by Britain’s war effort. ‘You will notice the gigantic figures of our expenditure’, he wrote after Lloyd George delivered his budget statement in May 1915. ‘The burden will

become stupendous if this war goes on much longer.’ The course of the conflict offered no scope for optimism. ‘So far as the military position is concerned, I see nothing to terminate the war at present.’¹⁵ In May, Britain’s last Liberal government came to an end when Asquith formed the first wartime coalition. Molteno was baffled by the course of events, and the prime minister’s attempt to explain his actions to the parliamentary party merely compounded his confusion.¹⁶ Molteno’s biographer sensed the ‘decease of the old Gladstonian Liberal Party along with the political and economic freedom which it had maintained for over half a century’.¹⁷ But the resulting removal of Churchill from the Admiralty was for Molteno certainly ‘an unmixed blessing’.¹⁸ Nonetheless, he was concerned by the new government’s apparent willingness to extend its war aims to include those of Britain’s allies. ‘Are we to be asked to continue the war until all these questions are settled?’¹⁹ Further discussions with Loreburn resulted in agreement on the need for first a Congress of Europe to settle details of European

peace and then a Congress of all the Powers to guarantee the peace of the world.²⁰

Soon Molteno’s attention fixed on the activities of Lloyd George. It was clear, he confided to his diary, that the ex-chancellor and now minister of munitions was ‘going over to the Tories’, including their support for compulsion and conscription. ‘Sir Edward Grey being disabled temporarily,²¹ he sees his chance of getting the Premiership with the aid of the Tories, and he is pushing his chances for all they are worth. He is trying to force the hand of the Coalition on compulsion and conscription.’²² Molteno was somewhat premature in his assessment of Lloyd George’s ambitions – Asquith would retain the premiership until December 1916 – but the mention of conscription was significant. Here was an issue which, if pursued, would require parliamentary sanction and force Molteno into open opposition. His efforts since August 1914 not to appear out of step with the government would not survive this ultimate challenge to his Liberal principles – a man’s right to decide *for himself* whether he would fight, and quite possibly die,

Percy Molteno (left) at his silver wedding with daughter Margaret, Kathleen Murray, the Rev. Athol Gordon, wife Bessie Molteno (two unidentified in back row), Islay Bisset and Jervis Molteno; Glen Lyon, September 1914 (photo: <https://www.moltenofamily.net>)



A Liberal for All Seasons? Percy Alport Molteno, 1861–1937

for his country. ‘If conscription is proposed’, he wrote, ‘we shall have serious differences both in the country and the House of Commons.’²³ The eponymous McKenna Duties, introduced by the new chancellor in September, signalled a further threat to Molteno’s fundamental beliefs. He found it ‘most disappointing’ that ‘Liberal statesmen should ... do so much to facilitate the conversion of Great Britain into a Protectionist, Conscriptionist, and Militarist Power’.²⁴

It was, then, no surprise to find Molteno in the vanguard of opposition to the Military Service Bill of January 1916. The conscription of single men was, many Liberal MPs concluded, a price that had to be paid, granted the never-ending demand for more troops at the front. Herbert Samuel, MP for Cleveland, explained his decision to support the bill ‘against all my predilections, against my strong bias in favour of voluntary service, by the hard, cold logic of facts’.²⁵

His efforts since August 1914 not to appear out of step with the government would not survive this ultimate challenge to his Liberal principles – a man’s right to decide for himself whether he would fight, and quite possibly die, for his country.

Not so Molteno, who spoke of the bill striking at ‘fundamental liberties’, bringing in Magna Carta (1215) and the Petition of Right (1628) to support his case.²⁶ He was one of forty-one MPs, including twenty-eight Liberals, who opposed the bill’s second reading.

While the conscription issue helped flush out the extent of Liberal opposition to the government’s conduct of affairs, prompting also the resignation of the home secretary, John Simon, its greatest impact for Molteno was on his constituency base. The staunchly Unionist *Dumfries Courier* did not mince its words:

Of a stiff and perverse habit of mind anyhow, he entrenches himself ... behind the plea that in opposing the Bill he is acting consistently with ‘Liberal principles and traditions’, the supporters of the Bill, on the contrary, acting

inconsistently. Apparently, he has made up his mind to stand by those abstractions regardless equally of circumstances and of consequences. We do not indeed know that he will be prepared to go the length of actually burning at the stake for them, but ... he is quite prepared to risk for them the interests of the nation, to whose cause, as the Government assures us, the Bill is essential.²⁷

The reaction of the *Courier* was perhaps unsurprising. More damaging, and perhaps not fully appreciated by Molteno himself, was a rebuke from the Dumfriesshire Liberal Association and, a few months later, the withdrawal of the usually reliable support of the *Dumfries Standard*, for long the cheerleader for Liberalism in South-West Scotland.²⁸ Two motions were passed unanimously at a meeting of Molteno’s constituency association in January 1916. The first criticised

the sitting member by implication. It expressed ‘unabated confidence’ in Asquith, welcomed the creation of a ministry ‘representing all political parties’ and expressed the hope that the unity of the nation,

which the coalition represented, would be fully maintained and the war ‘vigorously prosecuted to a victorious conclusion’. The second motion was more personal, observing ‘with great regret’ Molteno’s votes against the Military Service Bill, in opposition ‘to the opinion of the vast majority of his supporters’. It trusted that henceforth Molteno would give the government ‘generous support’ in all measures necessary to prosecute the war.²⁹ The MP, however, was undeterred. When in May the government sought to extend conscription to married men, Molteno again voted against the measure at third reading. Now it was the turn of the *Standard* to pounce:

Mr Molteno has chosen to maintain his personal consistency and defy the constituency. In these circumstances it is desirable that a clear understanding should be arrived at

regarding their future relations ... While no one would seek to do violence to [his] conscience ... it would be the height of unreason to expect that 9000 electors would be content to suppress their own opinion in order to return again to Parliament a gentleman, however estimable and able, who deliberately and consistently opposed them.³⁰

Such criticism merely emboldened Molteno on his chosen course. That October, he helped Francis Hirst, previously editor of the *Economist*, to launch a new weekly newspaper, *Common Sense*. Sold for just tuppence, it soon became the leading mouthpiece for those critical of the way the war was being conducted. Conscription's impact on the domestic economy reassured Molteno that he had been right in opposing its introduction:

It has disorganised our whole system. There is a grave shortage of steel, and munitions are beginning to suffer. The railways cannot keep up their services, as locomotives cannot be repaired, much less built. Ships cannot be discharged for want of labour.³¹

Molteno also campaigned against Britain following Germany's example in bombing 'open towns and undefended places', which he viewed as 'murder of the foulest type without even military advantage'.³²

Worse, from Molteno's perspective, followed. In December 1916, as he had predicted, a 'palace coup' resulted in Asquith's replacement as prime minister by Lloyd George. Majority historical opinion has been reasonably indulgent towards this development. The issue was essentially the need to establish a more efficient war directorate than anything of which Asquith appeared capable. But, for Molteno, the change was all about Lloyd George's unbridled ambition, facilitated by the right-wing press:

Now we have had a Press revolution. The Constitution is suspended at the bidding of Lord Northcliffe,³³ with the aid of his henchman Lloyd George, who has been working

with him for nearly two years, sacrificing every Liberal principle, intriguing against Asquith, and finally ousting him to take his place like the cuckoo ... Now we have a Ministry of extremists.³⁴

Though Molteno believed that, under Asquith, 'the British Empire [had] suffered disaster and humiliation unprecedented in all its history', Lloyd George's coalition offered no improvement.³⁵ The new premier's espousal of a 'knock-out blow' made it no more likely than its predecessor to win the war and even less likely to secure peace. Lloyd George's failure to respond positively to Woodrow Wilson's peace-feelers at the end of 1916 was, Molteno believed, a great mistake. The military situation was extremely unpromising, the conflict in danger of degenerating into a war of exhaustion. As European politicians made public the promises made to them in exchange for participating in the war, Molteno was near to despair. 'With such aims', he asked Loreburn, 'can we wonder that the war goes on!' Furthermore, 'if such were the Settlement, what hope is there of a lasting peace, and what cant to talk as if the Entente had no aggressive aims and merely fought for Liberty and Justice!'³⁶ Meanwhile, he continued to worry about the economic predicament, working with Godfrey Collins, Liberal MP for Greenock, and others to secure a parliamentary committee that would scrutinise government spending and the conduct of individual ministers and officials. For once, his efforts were rewarded and in July 1917 the Unionist leader and now Chancellor, Andrew Bonar Law, agreed to create a select committee on national expenditure.

Though Molteno's views on the war never became mainstream, still less was he ever in a majority, 1917 did witness a growing mood, less strong than in France or Russia but perceptible nonetheless, of war-weariness and pessimism about Britain's chances of victory at an acceptable cost. Writing to Gordon Harvey, Liberal MP for Rochdale, in November, Molteno remarked on the number of men who had now lost faith in Lloyd George, suggesting that some

A Liberal for All Seasons? Percy Alport Molteno, 1861–1937

were ready to take action. The problem, as before, was the lack of a prominent figure to lead such a movement. Asquith was a non-starter. Not only had he seemingly attached himself to Lloyd George's 'knock-out blow' policy; Molteno could not see how he could save the country, granted the failure of his two governments and abandonment of Liberal principles.³⁷

Quite suddenly, however, a possible standard-bearer emerged in the unlikely person of the Marquess of Lansdowne, the former Unionist foreign secretary and, until December 1916, a member of Asquith's coalition. Molteno's close colleague, Loreburn, had been corresponding with Lansdowne since early 1916, impressing upon him the disastrous consequences of a prolonged war. The two men, despite years of opposing one another in the upper house, enjoyed good personal relations. But on this matter Lansdowne seemed unconvinced and, until the end of October 1916, he publicly upheld the government's policy of fighting to the finish. In November, however, he circulated a memorandum to the War Committee, asking it to consider whether Britain would ever be able to dictate to Germany the sort of peace terms that might be theoretically desirable. The government did not respond favourably and, not surprisingly, there was no place for Lansdowne in Lloyd George's re-shaped administration formed in December.³⁸ Thereafter, Lansdowne made no further moves for almost a year, but in mid-November 1917 he explained his thinking to Wilson's envoy, Colonel House, and then went public in an explosive letter to the *Daily Telegraph* which appeared on 29 November.³⁹ Lansdowne argued that the war was destroying British power and that the elusive quest for outright victory would achieve nothing that could compensate for the losses that 'winning' would entail. Indeed, 'its prolongation will spell ruin for the civilised world, and an infinite addition to the load of human suffering which already weighs upon it'. Instead, he called for Germany to be invited to open peace negotiations based on a limited, but realistic, programme of allied war aims.

Molteno immediately sensed the possibilities opened up by Lansdowne's initiative:

Lansdowne's letter is a sign that volcanic forces have been let loose. He has risked his popularity with his Party and all his old connections to say what he considers vital for his countrymen to hear and ponder. Will you consider what we can do under the circumstances ... He has had the courage to break the ice. We should not let him be destroyed in detail.⁴⁰

Richard Holt hoped Lansdowne's letter would 'lead to reason in our Government. It will certainly let loose a lot of tongues.' He had already brought together around a dozen MPs, including Molteno, 'all very dissatisfied, [who] decided to welcome "intelligent, patriotic and active opposition"'.⁴¹ The wider impact of Lansdowne's intervention was evident in Wilson's 'Fourteen Points' issued on 8 January 1918 as the basis of a future peace and even in Lloyd George's relatively moderate pronouncement on war aims to the TUC three days earlier.⁴² The newspaper magnate, Lord Riddell, heard of a dinner at which Lansdowne's letter was discussed, attended by Lansdowne, Loreburn, Morley, Hirst, Colonel House and, somewhat surprisingly, Lord Curzon, a member of the war cabinet.⁴³ Meanwhile, Hirst employed *Common Sense* to promote Lansdowne's 'peace letter' as part of a broader movement for a negotiated settlement: 'Every man whose moral and intellectual equipment is up to the average ... will feel in reading Lansdowne's letter ... that a way has at last been opened towards peace.'⁴⁴

In late January 1918 Molteno was part of a delegation of MPs, peers and others who called at Lansdowne's London home. Loreburn presented an illustrated address in which signatories thanked Lansdowne for putting before the country an alternative to the government's present course. There followed a series of meetings at the Essex Hall on the Strand, bringing together Labour and Liberal politicians who tried desperately to turn Lansdowne's ideas into a mass movement. Meanwhile, in the Commons on 7 March, Molteno came as close as he decently could to calling for a change of government on

the grounds of the manifest incompetence of the present incumbents.⁴⁵ But Lansdowne himself held aloof from the meetings that continued to use his name. At 72 years of age, he was reluctant to head a new political movement and, in any case, felt uneasy about too close an association with some of his putative left-wing colleagues.

Lansdowne's trepidation was compounded by significant developments in the war itself. Very quickly, his moment passed, much to Molteno's dismay. On 21 March the Germans launched their spring offensive, a desperate effort to win the war before ever-increasing American involvement turned the balance decisively in the Allies' favour. This only became possible with the collapse of Russian resistance in the East, and the crushing terms of the resulting Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (3 March 1918) hardly presented Germany as a country with which it would be possible to reach a moderate, negotiated settlement. For the next few weeks, it became more a question of Britain's survival than of attaining the sort of peace for which Molteno longed. Briefly, Germany came closer to outright victory than at any time since the autumn of 1914. For Molteno, then, the agony continued, compounded by the loss in April of his son-in-law, George Murray, killed on the Western Front:

As our mutual friend, Lord Loreburn, often says: 'We are living in a mad house.' Men's judgments are no longer sane on this matter ... The German methods have been horrible in many cases, but are the logical outcome of Militarism.⁴⁶

The enemy advance was not sustained. Turned back at the Marne in mid-June, the increasingly demoralised German armies were thereafter incapable of further offensive action. The Allies now had the initiative. After a rapid series of victories, it finally became possible to think of victory, if not quite in Lloyd George's terms of a 'knock-out blow', certainly of a decisive nature.

Again, this was not conducive to the peace of reasonableness and moderation upon which Molteno had set his sights. Throughout the summer and autumn, he did what he could to support President Wilson who offered, he believed, the best hope of a sensible and durable conclusion to the conflict. As the end came into view, Molteno had, necessarily, to pay more attention to domestic politics. 'Men are drifting away to Labour and to other groups', he complained, 'for want of a Liberal lead.'⁴⁷ To meet this need, he and Gordon Harvey strove to reorganise the National Reform Union, which had remained free from the official Liberal Party's control.

Without total enthusiasm, Molteno prepared to defend his parliamentary seat. But he failed to recognise the difficulties of his position. In the first place, he seems to have given insufficient thought to the uncertainties created by the

Without total enthusiasm, Molteno prepared to defend his parliamentary seat. But he failed to recognise the difficulties of his position.

considerable extension of the franchise, including for the first time women voters over the age of 30 who qualified under the local government regulations, brought about by the Representation of the People Act (1918). (As recently as 1917 Molteno had opposed female suffrage in the Commons.) Nor did he appreciate the damage done to his local base by his wartime conduct, especially over conscription. This reduction in support was compounded by the loss, through death, of such important local backers as his election agent, James McGowan, and the *Dumfries Standard's* editor, Thomas Watson. But most importantly, recent boundary changes meant that the seats of Dumfriesshire and Dumfries Burghs would now be combined in a single constituency. Molteno believed that, as the sitting member for the larger seat, he had prior claim to the combined constituency, leaving his position 'impregnable ... as between Liberals'.⁴⁸ Such reasoning was in line with normal practice, but failed to take into account the fact that John

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Gulland, the Burghs MP, had been appointed Liberal chief whip on the sudden death of Percy Illingworth in January 1915.

At a joint meeting of the two Liberal associations on 23 October, called to choose a candidate for the election many now believed to be imminent, the voting was fifty-four for Gulland and thirty-one for Molteno.⁴⁹ The latter complained that wartime transport restrictions had disproportionately limited the county's representation at the meeting, and he determined to stand for election with or without party endorsement. Within days of the Armistice on 11 November, Lloyd George called a general election, Britain's first for eight years. Molteno made plans to open his campaign in Sanquhar on 21 November. Three days earlier, however, he heard that the Unionists had selected Major William Murray who, having previously contested both the county and the Burghs, was 'the strongest candidate they could bring forward'. Furthermore, Murray would be standing not just for the Unionists but for the whole coalition.⁵⁰ In the circumstances and realising that his own candidature would split the Liberal vote and thus hand the seat 'to the corrupt and scandalous Coalition', he quickly withdrew from the contest.⁵¹ In reality, without the 'Coupon' of endorsement issued to favoured candidates by Lloyd George and Bonar Law, it is unlikely that even a united Liberal vote could have saved the seat for the party.

Molteno declined invitations from Liberal associations in three other Scottish seats and took no part in the campaign. He was bitter at the turn of events:

The Liberal Party is suffering now for the betrayal of all its vital principles by its Leaders, who went over bag and baggage to the enemy. The moral basis of Liberalism has fallen out of the bottom of the ship, which is now becoming engulfed.⁵²

When all the votes were counted, it became clear that independent Liberalism had been reduced to around thirty MPs in the new parliament.⁵³ Molteno's Commons career, which began with

the party's greatest ever triumph in 1906, thus ended amidst its most catastrophic defeat to date.

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At the time of losing his seat, Molteno was still under 60 years of age. He lived on for two decades but was now increasingly confined to the periphery of Liberal politics. Nonetheless, his Liberal principles remained remarkably consistent. Despite all that had happened over the previous four and a half years and notwithstanding the parlous state of the party to which he still owed allegiance, Molteno began 1919 on a note of defiance. 'Liberal principles are as necessary as ever and likely to reassert themselves', he wrote to the like-minded Richard Holt who had stood unsuccessfully in Eccles at the recent general election. But where would Molteno turn for salvation? Lloyd George, locked inside a Conservative-dominated coalition, was clearly beyond the political pale. But neither was Asquith, himself defeated at the election, a viable alternative:

There was no moral basis in the Liberal case as put by the Leaders at the last election and I can only think that Asquith had his eye on being at the Peace Conference and was therefore unwilling to fight. But still even if he had, he had given away beforehand the whole Liberal case.⁵⁴

But there was no question of Molteno jumping ship and joining another party, as did some of his close wartime associates. The Conservatives, with the prospect of further moves towards Protection, held no attractions; equally, he was too much of an individualist ever to be drawn to Labour. As he had written before the War:

When the Socialist millennium comes, and the State, in accordance with socialist formula, has all the means of production, distribution and exchange in its own hands, it will settle wages, prices etc. And in my opinion universal poverty, not universal well-being, will be the result, as the most precious of all

man's possessions will be denied to him, viz his own individual liberty and his individual initiative.⁵⁵

Instead, Molteno determined to fight on for his particular brand of Liberalism: 'I think some of us ought to come together and draw up a manifesto.'⁵⁶

The most pressing issue for Molteno in 1919 was the terms of peace to be presented to Germany and its allies. With strikes breaking out at home and famine widespread on the continent, he was not optimistic.⁵⁷ As he explained: 'This is the fruit of the policy of the Knock-Out-Blow, in course of delivering which Europe has been sent crashing over the precipice.' He judged that the only hope 'of getting anything decent out of the Peace Conference is that [Woodrow] Wilson is in charge'.⁵⁸ But Wilson's voice

in the Paris peace negotiations proved less dominant than had once seemed probable and Molteno came, perhaps unfairly, to regard him

as a weak figure.⁵⁹ On 22 March Molteno signed an open letter calling on the allied governments to ensure the restoration of peace and prosperity by supporting free trade. Echoing his earlier efforts in South Africa, he pleaded before a meeting on colonial mandates, convened at Sunderland House to consider the fate of Germany's confiscated colonies, that provision should be made for the education of indigenous populations, who should not be barred from joining their chosen trade or profession. When, however, details emerged of the terms to be presented to Germany, Molteno sadly concluded that 'they are not terms for a durable peace'.⁶⁰ He judged that the settlement satisfied only the wishes of the French premier, Georges Clemenceau, who had declared that he had 'lived for 40 years for this day of vengeance'.⁶¹ As late as January 1922, Molteno was still insisting that the Paris Peace Settlement afforded 'less chance of stability than any of the Treaties which terminated other great periods of warfare'.⁶²

Throughout 1920, Molteno's criticism of the Lloyd George coalition figured prominently in

the pages of *Common Sense*. He was particularly concerned over the possibility of a new Anglo-French alliance which might entangle Britain in another continental war.⁶³ No longer a full-time politician, he devoted more of his time to philanthropic interests. In November 1921 he attended the opening ceremony of the Molteno Institute of Parasitology in Cambridge, generously endowed by Molteno and his wife. Progress in this area was, he understood, vital if Africa was ever to break out of its poverty. But Molteno had not abandoned the British political scene altogether and, in the autumn of 1921, he renewed his efforts to make Gladstonian-style foreign policy an accepted article of Liberal faith in the post-war world. By early 1922, there seemed to be evidence that Asquith's party, no matter its parlous electoral position, was moving in a direction more

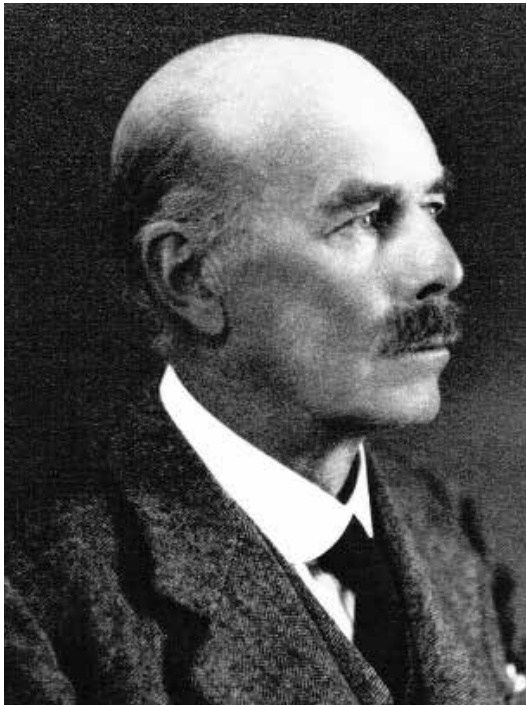
'The Liberal Party is suffering now for the betrayal of all its vital principles by its Leaders, who went over bag and baggage to the enemy.'

congenial to him. The problem was that those developments that enthused Molteno filled other Liberals with dismay. The party was apparently deserting the New Liberalism of earlier years. The academic and Liberal activist, Ramsay Muir, later summed up the party's stance at this time:

What was left of the Liberal party was a merely negative and querulous faction, mumbling the shibboleths of the xix cent. and not even capable of understanding the change of orientation implicit in the pre-war legislation and demanded by the postwar situation. Liberalism stood for nothing but complaints of L.G. and therefore it sank to futility ... It had to be given a 'constructive programme' ... as a means of keeping its soul alive.⁶⁴

As historian Michael Bentley concludes, 'All too plainly Liberalism was out of date.'⁶⁵

Molteno was in frequent correspondence with Viscount (Herbert) Gladstone who, after serving as governor general of South Africa (1910–14),



Molteno in the 1930s (photo: <http://www.moltenofamily.net>)

had resumed his career at Liberal Party headquarters. What, Molteno asked him, 'is to be the foreign policy of the Liberal Party? Is it to revert, after a disastrous period of aberration, to the doctrines laid down by your father, which have always appeared to me to be fundamentally correct?'⁶⁶ Gladstone replied encouragingly: 'I find myself in full agreement with your views ... My father was dead against entangling undertakings with individual Powers and did his best to get movement in right direction out of the Concert of Europe.'⁶⁷ Molteno now gathered twenty-four signatories, including wartime associates such as Richard Holt, Leif Jones⁶⁸ and Lord Beauchamp, to a formal letter demanding a foreign policy based on Gladstonian principles and the League of Nations, rather than alliances and balance of power diplomacy. In his published response, Asquith stated that the party accepted the guiding principles laid down by W. E. Gladstone at West Calder and suggested that the League embodied its practical aims.⁶⁹

Against this background, Viscount Gladstone encouraged Molteno to stand in the election that quickly followed the fall of Lloyd George's government in October 1922. Montrose Burghs, John Morley's old seat, seemed a suitable choice but, on visiting the constituency, Molteno had first-hand evidence of the broader problems facing a party still split between the adherents of Asquith and Lloyd George. The prospective candidate reported: 'there was no organisation, no unity, no enthusiasm, and no means of getting one's views before the electors and the press.'⁷⁰ Molteno quickly withdrew from the contest. His most significant contribution to the ensuing campaign was to write to the *Manchester Guardian* to object to a recent speech in which Edward (now Viscount) Grey had called for the adoption of continuity and a non-party foreign policy. Molteno interpreted this as a thinly veiled attempt to resurrect the approach that had got Britain into war in 1914, by removing the House of Commons and the electorate from any meaningful role.⁷¹

Molteno was pleased to see Bonar Law's Conservative government abandon the idea of an Anglo-French alliance, but he was not entirely enthused when Liberalism's divided factions came together in 1923, because reunion involved the readmission of Lloyd George to the party's upper echelons. But at least it made it possible to present a united front in defence of free trade when Law's successor, Stanley Baldwin, called a surprise general election to secure a mandate for tariffs. Late in the day, Molteno accepted an invitation to contest the constituency of Kinross and West Perthshire. Unsurprisingly, his election address emphasised the virtues of free trade: 'Our efforts should be directed not to the increase of barriers on international trade but to their removal, so as to facilitate the economic recovery of all Europe.'⁷² But he also championed the League and called for further reductions⁷³ in public expenditure and taxation, while reiterating his interest in agriculture and land reform. Molteno campaigned vigorously in appalling weather, addressing sixty meetings in twelve days, but was narrowly beaten by the Unionist candidate, the Duchess of Atholl.⁷⁴

A hung parliament resulted in the formation of Britain's first Labour government. The new administration's decision to remove the McKenna Duties, which had first sullied Liberal free trade purity back in 1915, met with Molteno's approval. But he opposed the draft Pact of Mutual Guarantee because it would operate outside the orbit of the League Covenant.⁷⁵ Ramsay MacDonald's minority government lasted less than a year before being defeated in what Molteno regarded as an 'unnecessary' election.⁷⁶ He turned down an invitation to stand again in West Perthshire and also rebuffed an approach from the Liberal association in Chertsey, partly out of concern over Lloyd George's mounting influence in the Liberal hierarchy. Around this time, Richard Holt noted a dinner attended by Molteno at the home of Sir Herbert Leon, former MP for Buckingham, 'the common bond being detestation of Lloyd George'.⁷⁷

The 1926 general strike precipitated further Liberal tensions with the principals, Asquith (now ennobled as the Earl of Oxford, having lost his seat in 1924) and Lloyd George again finding themselves in opposing camps. 'You will notice the quarrel that has developed between Mr Lloyd George and Lord Oxford', Molteno wrote:

I hope it may mean that the former will be cleared out of the Liberal Party; but it rather looks as if he wants to stick to it, no other Party will have him, and the fund he controls gives him a large amount of power over candidates.⁷⁸

Significantly, writing to another correspondent, Molteno added that, while wanting Lloyd George out of the party, 'this does not mean that I am satisfied with Lord Oxford'.⁷⁹

A serious stroke finally compelled Asquith to step down from the Liberal leadership in October 1926. Francis Hirst, Molteno's biographer, found little to praise in the retiring leader's record. His words, in response to Asquith's farewell message, reflected Molteno's thinking as much as his own:

Lord Oxford did not touch on the real causes of Liberal decay and national disaster – the substitution of imperialism, the Anglo-French-Russian Alliance and his own reversal of Cobdenite and Gladstonian foreign policy which had resulted after four years of ruinous war in the victorious but disastrous Peace of Versailles.⁸⁰

With Asquith gone, little remained to prevent Lloyd George from taking complete control of the party. Molteno and Hirst both joined the Liberal Council, which claimed to represent a pure, uncorrupted form of Liberalism. They did what they could to encourage the candidatures of Liberals who refused to have anything to do with the Lloyd George Fund. Many, both at the time and since, believed that Lloyd George offered Liberals their one chance of political revival and the later 1920s did see a progressive energy and dynamism, largely lacking since before the First World War. But Molteno was having none of it: 'I entirely disapprove of Lloyd George and think nothing of his plan for employment in one year for all the unemployed. It is a physical impossibility, and is only misleading everybody, and will tend to retard the real recovery.'⁸¹ With Lloyd George espousing the collectivist ideology of John Maynard Keynes, Molteno defiantly restated his individualist faith, joining the board of the Individualist Bookshop Limited, of which he remained a director until his death. His belief in the virtues of a free-market economy was confirmed by a six-week tour of the United States which he and Hirst made in the autumn of 1926. Not all aspects of American society impressed him, but he was struck by the effectiveness of the world's largest free-trade area, created within the forty-eight states of the Union. 'New hopes for civilisation and for wider prosperity seemed to open out if only the marvellous expansion of American wealth and the peaceful aspirations of American statesmen could be brought to bear on the world.'⁸²

Molteno took the disappointing outcome for the Liberal Party of the 1929 general election – 23.4 per cent of the vote but only fifty-nine seats in the new parliament – as confirmation of his beliefs:

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To me it seems the Liberal Party has lost its soul; it made no moral appeal to the country; it relied on money, advertisements and arts of that kind; it threw overboard one of its main planks, economy. Lloyd George himself is ... a preferentialist; there is not a word about Free Trade in any of his speeches; he has suddenly adopted a milk and water socialism.

The party's day would come again, but 'it must be a real, honest, genuine Liberal Party, true to its principles through thick and thin, not abandoning them when they seem unpopular at the moment'.⁸³

Molteno continued in this vein for the rest of his life, wary of the minority Labour government of 1929 to 1931 and of the National Government which succeeded it, but still deeply suspicious of the direction in which Lloyd George had sought to steer the Liberals. When, in 1930, George spoke out against 'dumping', many concluded that he would now probably opt for tariffs if the situation demanded it. Molteno certainly smelt a protectionist rat, proposing a resolution at a meeting of the Free Trade Union that his speech was 'destructive of the Free Trade position' and that Liberal MPs should dissociate themselves from it.⁸⁴ He rightly saw that the aim of the Conservatives in the National Government was to force an election to introduce tariffs and wrote to Prime Minister MacDonald begging him not to agree to a dissolution of parliament. When, nonetheless, MacDonald gave way to Tory pressure, Molteno's prediction of future developments was exaggerated, but not entirely mistaken. The Conservatives, he wrote, 'are making use of MacDonald who will come back merely as an individual with no power in the Cabinet of getting his way, and he will then be thrown aside as soon as it suits them'.⁸⁵ When the Conservatives, now the overwhelmingly dominant force within the restructured National Government, duly introduced a system of Imperial Preference, Molteno judged that 'the country has been cheated and turned over to Protection without the subject having been properly accepted and discussed ... so that it is really a fraud on the electorate'.⁸⁶ Yet in reality free trade

had lost much of its moral purchase on both the country and the Liberal Party. While many still regarded it as a potential economic tool, fewer now viewed it as an article of quasi-religious faith.⁸⁷ For Molteno, on the other hand, it retained its fundamental importance, a guarantor of economic prosperity but also a vital underpinning of peace between nations.

As the 1930s progressed, political attention turned increasingly towards the worsening state of international relations. Many viewed a second war against Germany within a single generation as a distinct possibility. Molteno was as determined as before 1914 to avoid such a catastrophe. From 1932 he worked closely with Lord Lothian, who as Philip Kerr had served under Milner in South Africa before acting as Lloyd George's private secretary from 1916 to 1921. Molteno and Lothian strove, largely without success, to moderate Liberal foreign policy as it became, under the leadership of Archibald Sinclair, increasingly proactive and interventionist.⁸⁸ Molteno was entirely against the League assuming the role of international policeman and resorting to force. Not surprisingly, he strongly objected to the publication in 1936 of the party's policy statement 'Peace or War'. Though this called for the removal of trade barriers and a reduction in armaments, it also stated that the League must consider the use of armed force if economic sanctions failed to produce the desired results. Molteno pressed for a new treaty to replace the flawed Versailles settlement and sought to ensure that Britain steered clear of the sort of entanglements which, he continued to believe, had fatally compromised its freedom of action in the crisis of 1914. To Lord Meston he wrote:

I do hope it may be possible to arrange that the Liberal Party should not be committed to intervention in the great struggle which is boiling up between Fascism and Communism on the Continent, nor to pressing for a policy which would entangle us further in the quarrels of the Continent by way of the further use of force, whether by the League of Nations or through alliances.⁸⁹



Percy Molteno with his grandchildren, Iona, Patrick and George Murray, c. 1930 (photo: <http://www.moltenofamily.net>)

A few months before his death, Molteno wrote to *The Times*. His purpose was to list the occasions upon which Hitler had made offers of peace. They represented, he claimed, ‘a number of opportunities ... for forwarding the conclusion of real peace in Europe, and the restriction of the race in armaments’. It was unclear to him why, with the exception of the Anglo-German Naval Agreement of June 1935, ‘no advantage had been taken of these opportunities’.⁹⁰ These were the sort of sentiments Molteno might have expressed, in very similar terms, in the 1890s or in 1912. At one level, the widely shared desire to avoid war – at almost any price – was entirely admirable. But the later 1930s were not simply a rerun of the last days of peace before the outbreak of the First World War, still less of the sorry tale of deteriorating Anglo-Boer relations two decades earlier. Nazi Germany was qualitatively different from the Wilhelmine Reich; appeasement of it was ultimately futile and wrong-headed. In Molteno’s defence,

it should be added that these truths were much more obvious by 1945 than they were in 1937, when Neville Chamberlain’s government made appeasement the cornerstone of its policy. Nonetheless, it was to the benefit of his long-term reputation that Molteno died in Zurich at the age of 76 on 19 September 1937, before it became fully apparent that he was on the wrong side of history.

At his death, Molteno’s views on international affairs were recognisably still those of the young man who had striven in the 1890s to avoid the outbreak of hostilities in South Africa. His attitude towards domestic issues showed a similar consistency. In his biographer’s words:

He was always alive to the dangers of public extravagance and to the encroachments of bureaucracy on the domain of private competitive industry ... He may be classed as a supporter of individualism against socialism, of personal liberty against State control, and

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of free competitive markets against internal and external protection.⁹¹

Yet this virtue of consistency was also Molteno's failing. He had not changed; the world around him and the Liberal Party had. In time, many of his views would enjoy renewed currency. In his own day, however, Molteno's voice in the affairs of Liberalism had come to appear isolated and outdated. For all that, his loyalty to the creed, or at least his understanding of it, was unflinching, and not just in a theoretical sense. When the report of the Meston Committee into party organisation led to the replacement of the National Liberal Federation by the Liberal Party Organisation in 1936, Molteno joined the new body and contributed generously to its funds. And, until his death, he still paid a £600 annual subscription to the Scottish Liberal Federation.⁹²

Since the late 1970s David Dutton has written or edited seventeen books and authored more than a hundred articles and chapters, almost all covering various aspects of British political and diplomatic history in the twentieth century.

Postscript

Francis Hirst completed his biography of Molteno before the outbreak of the Second World War. By the time of its completion, however, the Molteno family decided that publication should be delayed. Once the war began, Molteno's rigid commitment to free trade alongside an individualistic society and his strong support for appeasement were seen as out-of-date and inappropriate. His readiness to place the best possible construction on the pre-war conduct of Hitler and Mussolini, however admirable Molteno's intentions, bordered on the embarrassing. The war also led to a paper shortage, thus affording a practical argument against publication for the foreseeable future. At around 350,000 words, the biography is overlong; its 'life and times' approach and general interpretation dated and in need of significant modification. Furthermore, Hirst's understanding of Liberalism

was too close to Molteno's own to make him an ideal biographer. He it was who advised the then Liberal leader, Archibald Sinclair, in March 1937 to distance himself from Churchill, whose 'exaggerated views on the threat of Hitler and Mussolini were abhorrent to many Liberals'. In addition, wrote Hirst, the government's then level of expenditure on armaments, far less than it later became, was imposing an intolerable burden of taxation on the hard-pressed British taxpayer. [G. De Groot, *Liberal Crusader: The Life of Sir Archibald Sinclair* (London, 1993), pp. 125–6] Nonetheless, Hirst's work has been indispensable in the preparation of this article, giving easy and valuable access to a large number of Molteno's papers, the originals of which are housed in the archives of the University of Cape Town.

- 1 This is the retrospective judgment of Frances Stevenson, Lloyd George's secretary and mistress. F. Lloyd George, *The Years That Are Past* (London, 1967), pp. 73–4.
- 2 Molteno to Merriman 14 Aug. 1914, cited in Newton, *Darkest Days*, p. 11.
- 3 F. Hirst to M. Hirst 1 Nov. 1914, cited in *ibid.*, p. 12.
- 4 Ponsonby to Dolly Ponsonby 5 Aug. 1914, cited in Marlor, *Fatal Fortnight*, p. 154. The Liberal League (founded March 1902) was an organisation of Liberal Imperialists with Rosebery as president and Asquith, Grey and H. H. Fowler as vice-presidents.
- 5 Molteno, 'My Views on the Origin of the War', n.d. but circa 1925, cited in Hirst, *Man of Principle*, pp. 440–41.
- 6 I am grateful to Robert Molteno for these insights into the influence of Molteno's siblings.
- 7 Molteno to Wallace Molteno 1919, cited in Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 540.
- 8 Molteno, 'My Views on the Origin of the War', cited in Hirst, *Man of Principle*, pp. 440–41.
- 9 Molteno to Charlie Molteno 11 Sep. 1914, cited in *ibid.*, p. 445.
- 10 Molteno, 'My Views on the Origins of the War' n.d. but no earlier than 1925, cited in *ibid.*, pp. 440–1.
- 11 Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 446.
- 12 Molteno to editor, *Dumfries and Galloway Standard and Advertiser* [hereafter *Standard*] 8 Aug. 1914.
- 13 P. Devlin, *Too Proud to Fight: Woodrow Wilson's*

- Neutrality* (London, 1974), p. 279.
- 14 Molteno, diary 4 Jan. 1915, cited in Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 448.
- 15 Molteno to Charlie Molteno 5 May 1915, cited in *ibid.*, p. 457.
- 16 Molteno's bafflement was widely shared. See, for example, the diary of Cecil Harmsworth, Liberal MP for Luton. A. Thorpe and R. Toye (eds.), *Parliament and Politics in the Age of Asquith and Lloyd George: The Diaries of Cecil Harmsworth, MP, 1909–1922* (Cambridge, 2016), p. 188.
- 17 Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 460.
- 18 Molteno to Frank Molteno, 21 May 1915, cited in *ibid.*, p. 460.
- 19 Molteno to Gordon Harvey, Jun. 1915, cited in *ibid.*, p. 496.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 497.
- 21 Grey was suffering from deteriorating eyesight. Worried that he might go blind, he was keen to resign, but his withdrawal was resisted by Asquith. Instead, to ease the strain on his sight, he began to absent himself for a week or ten days each month or six weeks, leaving the Foreign Office in the hands of Lord Crewe, the Lord President of the Council.
- 22 Molteno, diary 10 Jun. 1915, cited in Hirst, *Man of Principle*, pp. 464–5. Such rumours about Lloyd George's ambitions were evidently circulating widely at this time. See Cecil Harmsworth diary for 17 Jun. 1915, Thorpe and Toye (eds.), *Parliament and Politics*, p. 190.
- 23 Molteno to Barkly Molteno, 2 Jun. 1915, cited in Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 469.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 478.
- 25 Hansard, HC (series 5) vol. 77, col. 1149.
- 26 *Ibid.*, cols 1540–51.
- 27 *Dumfries and Galloway Courier and Herald* editorial 26 Jan. 1916.
- 28 The newspaper's editor, Thomas Watson, a long-time ally of Molteno, had died in April 1914.
- 29 *Standard*, 26 Jan. 1916.
- 30 *Standard*, editorial 6 May 1916.
- 31 Molteno to Charlie Molteno, Dec. 1916, cited in Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 506.
- 32 Molteno to H. J. Tennant, under-secretary at the War Office, 17 Jun. 1915 and to Asquith 18 Jun. 1915, cited in *ibid.*, p. 491.
- 33 Proprietor at the time of, among other newspapers, *The Times* and the *Daily Mail*.
- 34 Molteno to Merriman, n.d., cited in Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 509.
- 35 *Ibid.*
- 36 Molteno to Loreburn, 4 Sep. 1917, cited in *ibid.*, p. 514.
- 37 Molteno to G. Harvey, 3 Nov. 1917, cited in *ibid.*, p. 514.
- 38 S. Kerry, *Lansdowne: The Last Great Whig* (London, 2017), pp. 262–3.
- 39 C. Seymour (ed.), *The Intimate Papers of Colonel House*, vol. 3 (London, 1926), p. 237. Lansdowne's letter is reproduced in full in Kerry, *Lansdowne*, pp. 284–9.
- 40 Molteno to G. Harvey and R. Holt, 1 Dec. 1917, cited in Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 515.
- 41 Liverpool Record Office, Holt MSS, 920 DUR 1/10, diary 3 Dec. 1917.
- 42 Lloyd George's tone owed something to his desire to persuade the TUC to release more men for the army. A decade later, however, House admitted that Lansdowne's proposals had offered significant inspiration for Wilson's 'Fourteen Points'. Kerry, *Lansdowne*, p. 297.
- 43 Lord Riddell, *War Diary 1914–1918* (London, 1923), p. 298.
- 44 *Common Sense*, 1 Dec. 1917.
- 45 Hansard, HC (series 5) vol. 103, cols 2196–203, especially col. 2201.
- 46 Molteno to Lord Pentland, 26 Jul. 1918, cited in Hirst, *Man of Principle*, pp. 522–3.
- 47 Molteno to G. Harvey, 11 Aug. 1918, cited in *ibid.*, p. 524.
- 48 Molteno to David Paterson, 18 Oct. 1918, cited in *ibid.*, p. 529.
- 49 *Standard*, 26 Oct. 1918.
- 50 Molteno to D. Paterson, 18 Nov. 1918, cited in Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 531.
- 51 Molteno to Archibald Kirkpatrick, 21 Nov. 1918, *Standard*, 23 Nov. 1918.
- 52 Molteno to Lord Morley, Dec. 1918, cited in Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 533.
- 53 Full result in Dumfriesshire: William Murray (Coalition Unionist) 13,345; John Gulland (Liberal) 7,562.
- 54 Holt MSS, 920 DUR 14/27/245, Molteno to Holt, 28 Jan. 1919.

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Liberal philosophy

John Ayshford examines how, inspired by the republic of classical Athens, John Stuart Mill believed that individuals' freedom, virtue and flourishing were dependent upon their active participation in democratic government as citizens.

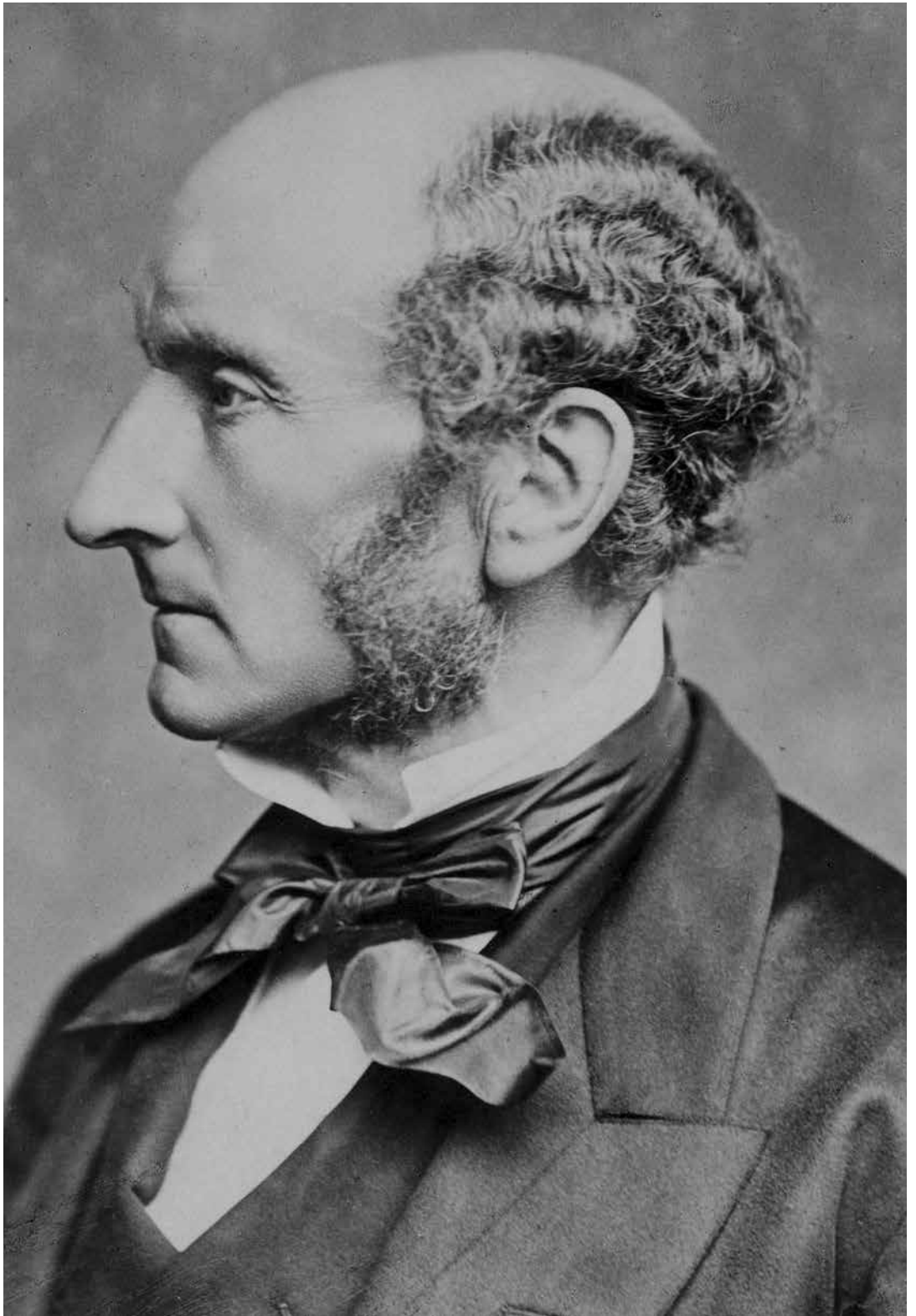
John Stuart Mill: A Neo-Athenian Republican

DESPITE HIS BEING one of the greatest political philosophers in British history, it remains troublesome to discern the thought of John Stuart Mill. Indeed, how Mill has been interpreted has historically been subject to change. As Stefan Collini has illustrated, in the decades following his death, Mill was transformed from being portrayed as an alien doctrinaire thinker by many to one who was emblematic of the English political tradition.¹ The issue of deciphering Mill in part stems from the fact that he is invoked by figures from across the political spectrum. As Richard Reeves, a biographer of Mill, has written: 'Mill has been claimed ... by pretty much everyone, from the ethical socialist left to the laissez-faire, libertarian right'.² Moreover, the difficulty of comprehending Mill is further compounded by the fact that his thought was shaped by a truly heterogeneous assortment of people and influences. These ranged from his intense education to the ideas of conservative romanticism and utopian socialism, his interaction with great European intellectuals and leaders and his intriguing relationship with

Harriet Taylor Mill. Jose Harris succinctly illustrates the issue in her entry on Mill in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. As she explains: 'pinpointing Mill's precise identity on the political spectrum was a problem in his lifetime and has been so ever since'.³ It is perhaps for this reason that he still attracts the unrelenting interest of historians. Multiple collected essays and academic companions on Mill have been published since the 1990s.⁴ There is even an ongoing project by the University of Alabama and the University of Oxford to painstakingly document and digitise the thousands of annotations made by Mill in his gigantic collection of books.⁵

Notwithstanding the difficulties that trouble the location of Mill's thought, it is the contention of this article that Mill should be understood as a republican thinker and that this should lead us to reflect on the nature of liberalism. I argue that Mill, inspired by the republic of classical Athens,

John Stuart Mill (1806–73), 1865 (John Watkins, London Stereoscopic & Photographic Company; © National Portrait Gallery, London)



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believed that individuals' freedom, virtue and flourishing were dependent upon their active participation in democratic government as citizens.⁶ This view of Mill, however, would strike many as a complete misreading. Republicanism, particularly of the type which draws on classical Greek civilisation, if anything, appears to be a creed totally at odds with Mill's thought and liberalism. It is often portrayed as a communitarian doctrine which has little regard for the private affairs of individuals and demands that citizens slavishly dedicate themselves to the public good. This difference is vividly demonstrated by the republican idea of the 'General Will' envisaged by the Swiss philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. For Rousseau, who was heavily influenced by ancient Greece, the General Will was the binding democratic decision made by citizens of a republic; those who refused to obey it due to their own separate individual and supposedly selfish 'will', would, in Orwellian fashion, 'be forced to be free.'⁷ Republicanism, in short, seemingly stands in stark contrast to Mill's ideas as a father figure of liberalism; it suppresses individuality and condones the hobgoblin which liberals fear, the tyranny of the majority.

This common interpretation of a major gulf between liberalism and republicanism stems in part from the classic lecture, *Two Concepts of Liberty*, delivered by the famous liberal philosopher Isaiah Berlin in 1958. In the lecture Berlin, who cited Mill many times, demarcated liberty into

This common interpretation of a major gulf between liberalism and republicanism stems in part from the classic lecture, *Two Concepts of Liberty*, delivered by the famous liberal philosopher Isaiah Berlin in 1958.

two separate senses, negative and positive freedom. According to Berlin, freedom in its positive sense as self-rule which entails the ability to participate in government had 'little to do with Mill's notion of liberty'. Instead, Berlin championed Mill as a prophet of negative liberty, or the freedom of the individual from any external interference.⁸ For Berlin, Mill, as a leading

figurehead of classical liberalism, had astutely recognised that democratic rule had the potential to be far more tyrannical than emancipatory. Quoting Mill's *On Liberty*, Berlin asserted that democratic self-government was not 'of each by himself' but instead 'of each by all the rest'.⁹ In fact, Berlin claimed that the existence of negative freedom as espoused by Mill was not dependent upon democracy, as it could clearly trample upon the liberties of the individual as much as any autocracy. In Berlin's view 'a liberal-minded despot' would therefore pose no issue for Mill:

the despot who leaves his subjects a wide area of liberty may be unjust, or encourage the wildest inequalities ... but provided he does not curb their liberty, or at least curbs it less than many other regimes, he meets with Mill's specification.¹⁰

In addition, the idea of a supposed dichotomy between liberalism and republicanism has been propagated in more recent years by the political theorist Philip Pettit and the historian Quentin Skinner. Pettit and Skinner in the 1990s outlined the republican idea of liberty which they posited against Berlin's conception of negative liberty. They illustrated how for republicans people are enslaved if they are at the mercy of – or, in republican terms, dominated by – another more powerful person. While one may live without interference (and enjoy negative freedom) one is

not truly free, as one's liberty is entirely dependent upon the whim of someone else. For republicans, real liberty, or freedom from domination, is thus only secured when the citizens

of a state are ruled not by an unaccountable dictator, but by themselves. This idea of freedom was, however, according to Pettit and Skinner, supplanted by the classical liberal or negative conception of liberty. The popularisation of this conception of liberty by utilitarians such as Jeremy Bentham, Mill's 'philosopher grandfather', and by the nineteenth-century Franco-Swiss

liberal Benjamin Constant, meant that the republican understanding of liberty, which had existed long before liberalism, was superseded.¹¹ A close examination of Mill's thought demonstrates, however, that in contrast to these influential accounts, he believed that individual freedom and human flourishing were inextricably intertwined with democratic government. Given Mill's canonical status, this disparity demands that we should review how we understand liberalism.

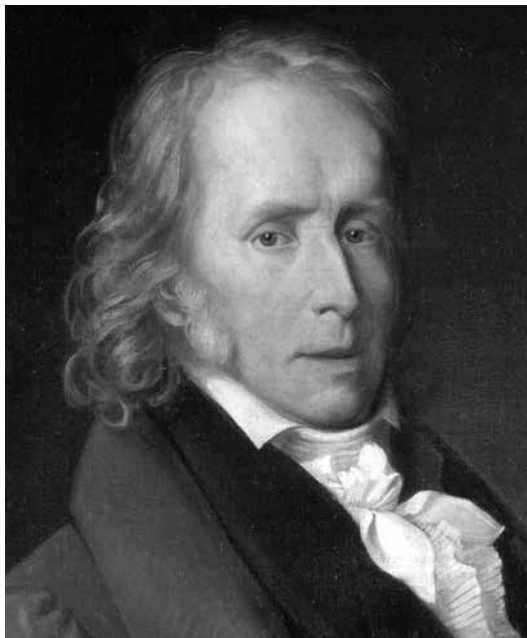
This article is not the first to challenge the apparent dichotomy between republicanism and liberalism. There have been several studies which have demonstrated the strong republican element within Mill's thought and British Liberalism. H. S. Jones, for instance, pointed out how the republican notion of virtue shaped Mill's 'ideal of character' and how, furthermore, Berlin's account of Mill did not capture this.¹² Gregory Claeys, in his comprehensive examination of Mill's thought, *Mill and Paternalism*, claimed that Mill's ideas made him 'indisputably... a radical republican'.¹³ Another notable piece was Eugenio Biagini's 2003 article 'Neo-Roman Liberalism'. Biagini not only provided a succinct overview of the republican values imbedded in the thought of Victorian liberal thinkers, but also demonstrated how popular liberalism was intertwined with the multitude of mid-Victorian volunteer associations which represented a resurrection of the republican idea of a citizen army.¹⁴ Alongside this existing historiography, the article posits Mill not only as a republican but one who belongs to the neo-Athenian tradition.¹⁵ In this respect it shadows and builds upon the work of Nadia Urbinati and another essay composed by Biagini, 'Liberalism and Direct Democracy', written at the turn of the millennium.¹⁶

Freedom from subjection

Mill, in contrast to Berlin's assertion that he was unmoved by dictatorship as long as the individual was not interfered with, could not countenance autocratic rule. He detested the despotism and militarism of authoritarian European leaders. Indeed, Mill called for a citizen-army, akin

to those in the republics of the United States and Switzerland, to protect liberty in Britain from belligerent continental tyrants, ready to return to peaceful civilian life after a conflict to prevent it becoming a domestic source of despotism.¹⁷ He had, as Reeves writes, an 'unquenchable' loathing of Emperor Louis Napoleon III. Upon hearing the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war in 1870, for instance, Mill angrily exclaimed his regret that the Italian nationalist Orsini had failed to assassinate him earlier.¹⁸ Mill's disdain for despotism was also inherently prevalent in his writing and constituted an underlying theme in his work. Mill, in stark contradiction to Berlin's interpretation of him, staunchly held the republican belief that no one could be free under a despot, no matter how generous they were to their subjects. Mill articulated the republican principle that freedom was conditional upon the citizens themselves deciding the laws under which they were governed. This republican concept was a core theme of *Considerations on Representative Government*, Mill's main political treatise, for instance. Mill, in order to demonstrate that representative democracy was 'the ideally best form of government', provided a retort in *Considerations on Representative Government* to what he considered 'a radical and most pernicious misconception' that 'despotic monarchy' was the superior type of government. Mill contended that even if there could be a 'superhuman' ruler who could manage all affairs of society, in such a situation, however, people would have their development stunted from want of participation in government. As such Mill imagined that the despot could choose to mitigate such stagnation by opting to become a constitutional monarch in order to afford the people a substantial role in government 'as if they governed themselves'. The despot could further allow freedom of speech too 'as would enable a public opinion to form and express itself on national affairs'. Such freedoms, Mill asserted, however, would be solely dependent upon the temperament of the despot who could choose to relinquish them immediately if they decided not to tolerate criticism or dissent towards their rule. Despite the

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Liberal philosophers; Benjamin Constant (1767–1830), 1820; George Grote (1794–1871), 1824

possibility of a paucity of interference and the affordance of liberties, Mill demonstrated in *Considerations on Representative Government* his fundamental belief that subjects under a benevolent despot were nothing more than ‘slaves’.¹⁹

Mill’s dislike of domination was not only a feature of his mature thinking either. Indeed, Mill as a teenage utilitarian radical decried the domination of the poor by the aristocracy. In a debate in August 1824 on parliamentary reform Mill lambasted the inefficacy of the British constitution in securing the liberty of individuals. Mill pointed to how the landed elite in Britain were in a position whereby they could freely ‘oppress’ their tenants ‘almost without restraint ... on the most frivolous of pretexts’. Equally, at the same time, Mill was also keen to underscore that no security provided by the government against bodily harm or theft, however, was worthwhile if no security was afforded against it dominating its citizens:

look at the government of Napoleon Bonaparte: if security from robbery and murderers constituted good government, there

never was a better government than his ... Why do we call Bonaparte’s government a bad one? Because if person and property were secure against individuals, they were not secure against the despot.²⁰

Mill’s critique of domination was not just limited to the political sphere but also addressed the despotic relation between husbands and wives in the nineteenth century. Mill had strong feminist inclinations from his childhood, and these were augmented by his relationship with his wife Harriet Taylor Mill.²¹ Indeed, Mill expounded his critique of domination most fervently in *The Subjection of Women*. Even Skinner, amongst other scholars, for instance, recognises that freedom from domination is at the heart of the text. Skinner has remarked that the work ‘draws on a wholeheartedly republican conception of freedom to excoriate the domination and dependence suffered by women in mid-Victorian England’.²² Mill published the text in 1869 having written it originally in 1860, waiting to publish it ‘when it should seem likely to be most useful’, having tried in vain as an MP to realise

the attainment of female suffrage in 1867.²³ It echoed many of the ideas raised in Harriet Taylor Mill's essay *Enfranchisement of Women*, which was published anonymously in the *Westminster and Foreign Quarterly Review* in 1851. Whilst the work was Harriet's own, Mill had collaborated with her in drafting its principal arguments.²⁴

In *The Subjection of Women* Mill argued that women were not free but in a state of slavery. Whilst this subjection had evolved 'into a milder form of dependence' their current state of bondage ultimately derived not from free deliberation concerning the most fit form of relation between the sexes, but from the physical inferiority of women which allowed men to coerce them. Over time this physical inferiority had transformed into their inferior legal and social status in society. As Mill stated: 'the inequality of rights between men and women has no other source than the law of the strongest'.²⁵ Here Mill was resonating Harriet's assertion 'that those who were physically weaker should have been made legally inferior, is quite conformable to the mode in which the world has been governed'.²⁶ This inferior status, Mill noted, placed women in a state of domination. They were not allowed to pursue any action without their husband's consent, whose watchful eye they were under nearly every moment of every day. Mill thus concluded that while slaves were treated in a far less humane way to wives, 'no slave is a slave to the same lengths, and in so full a sense of the word, as a wife is'.²⁷

In addition, Mill argued that women did not have any means of redress to relieve this domination. For Mill the fact that the wife was not even afforded the 'insufficient alleviation' of being able to leave her master for a better one, was additional testament to how women were in a worse position than slaves who could in some instances force their master to sell them if too maltreated.²⁸ Furthermore, as they had no right to vote they had no say in how they were governed and any safeguards they were afforded under the law were thus dependent upon the will of enfranchised men; to which Mill rhetorically noted: 'and we know what legal protection the

slaves have, where the laws are made by their masters'.²⁹ Mill's staunch belief that women could not rely on the protection of men and therefore needed the vote was a core tenet of his feminism which he had held since a young age. Mill had disagreed, for instance, with his father who believed that women did not need the vote as they shared the same interests as men.³⁰ Indeed, Mill raised this argument in the House of Commons when he proposed an amendment to the bill which would become the Reform Act 1867 to include the enfranchisement of women. Mill asserted that for the same reasons working men could not be in any way represented by their employers and needed the vote to protect their interests, so did women need the vote to provide 'other protection than that of their men'.³¹

Given Mill's vehement dislike of domination regardless of whether it manifested in the political or family sphere it naturally followed that, in illustrating the plight and domination of women, Mill painted the husband throughout *The Subjection of Women*, as Harriet had done in her essay, as a despot, the wife being their subject.³² Indeed, in noting that Mill construed the family as a dictatorial 'miniature polity', Claeys argues that the work was heavily influenced by Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792).³³ In a reiteration of the argument he made in *Considerations on Representative Government*, Mill likened the wife to a subject living under a tyrant with the wife being 'entitled to nothing except during the good pleasure' of her husband.³⁴ Mill further elaborated on the comparison by describing how the good nature of the husband, like that of a tyrant, was no protection from subjection and ill-treatment. Whilst Mill recognised that there could easily be a loving bond between husband and wife, in his eyes, however, this had little difference between the attachment of slaves to their masters in antiquity whose devotion would stretch so far as to sacrifice themselves to save their master despite their often-cruel treatment.³⁵ Despotism of any kind was arbitrary regardless of whether the husband or tyrant chose to withhold some of their terrible powers. As Mill argued:

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not a word can be said for despotism in the family which cannot be said for political despotism. Every absolute king does not sit at his window to enjoy the groans of his tortured subjects ... The despotism of Louis XVI was not the despotism of ... Caligula; but it was bad enough to justify the French Revolution, and to palliate even its horrors.³⁶

Moreover, Mill was anxious to stress that, whenever despotism of any kind was defended, be it between slaves and their master, subjects and their dictator, or between a wife and her husband, the despotic relation was depicted as one of happy deference and paternal benevolence. In Mill's words: 'we are presented with pictures of loving exercise of authority on one side, loving submission to it on the other'. There was absolutely no guarantee, however, that power would be exercised in such a benevolent way. There was no test, Mill noted, for instance, before marriage to ascertain whether the husband could be judged worthy to wield such power over the wife. To Mill there were innumerable terrible men, 'little higher than brutes', who could treat their wives in despicable ways with impunity. Whilst Mill recognised that 'absolute fiends are as rare as angels', such licence to despicably treat women showed the depths of their domination. As Mill wrote: 'in domestic as in political tyranny, the case of absolute monsters chiefly illustrates the institution by showing that there is scarcely any horror which may not occur under it if the despot pleases'.³⁷ Only when women were granted equal rights and liberties to men and thereby freed from marital despotism could their deplorable subjection end.

Freedom, virtue and flourishing

Contrary to Berlin's reading Mill held a strong attachment to freedom from domination. No matter how well-intentioned a despot could be, be they a King or a husband, given that any liberties their subjects enjoyed could be taken away in an instant, individuals under their yoke were in a state of slavery in all but name. Mill's

republicanism, however, was not just limited to freedom from arbitrary rule. Mill also held the traditional republican belief that humans become far more virtuous, and flourish, when they participate enthusiastically in government as equals. When citizens collectively governed themselves, they would reach a higher plane and come to see others as associates and actively seek to realise the good of their fellow-citizens. As Mill wrote, the citizen would 'feel himself one of the public, and whatever is for their benefit to be for his benefit'. In Mill's mind when people energetically participated in public affairs they became 'very different beings, in range of ideas and development of faculties, from those who have done nothing in their lives but drive a quill, or sell goods over a counter'. Ordinary, routine private life and work based on self-interest did nothing to enlighten the individual.³⁸

These ideas also pervaded Mill's feminism as well. Mill likewise contended that, because women had no say in how their lives were governed nor any role in public affairs, they could not develop into the rational and virtuous citizens he wished to see them become. As Mary Lyndon Shanley writes: 'Mill shared Aristotle's view that participation in civic life was enriching and ennobling activity, but Mill saw that for a woman, no public-spirited dimension to her life was possible'.³⁹ Reiterating the ideas which he and Harriet had formulated earlier, Mill argued that the exclusion of women from public affairs left them with no concern for the community, caring only for what was best for their family, and that this in turn led them to sap the civic virtue of their husbands.⁴⁰ If women were granted the vote, on the other hand, their faculties alongside their concern for others outside the family would be considerably expanded.⁴¹

Furthermore, Mill's vision of an ideal marriage mirrored that of a republic as a free association of equals. According to Mill, such an association, even more than citizenship, 'would be the real school of the virtues of freedom ... a school of sympathy in equality, of living together in love, without power on one side or obedience on the other'.⁴² Indeed, one of Mill's

best descriptions of the ‘ennobling influence’ of free collective self-government is used in *The Subjection of Women* to laud the enhancing effects women would experience in being treated as free and equal partners to men:

the nerve and spring which it gives to all the faculties, the larger and higher objects which it presents to the intellect and feelings, the more unselfish public spirit, and calmer and broader views of duty, that it engenders, and the generally loftier platform on which it elevates the individual as a moral, spiritual, and social being – is every particle as true of women as of men.⁴³

To summarise, Mill professed that self-government would ensure the liberty of individuals from domination, cultivate their public-spirit-edness, and allow them to blossom. Mill’s thinking in this respect was undoubtedly influenced in part by his reading of Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*, but the real source of Mill’s republicanism, however, lay in his love of ancient Greece, specifically the history of the republic of Athens.⁴⁴

The Athenian origins of John Stuart Mill’s republicanism

Throughout his life Mill had a real affinity with ancient Greek history. Indeed, the study of classical Greece was central to his upbringing. Mill disclosed in his *Autobiography* that, given how young he was, he could not remember when he first started learning Greek. Between the ages of eight and twelve he had consumed works ranging from the philosopher Aristotle, the historian Thucydides and the playwright Aristophanes.⁴⁵ In adult life, whilst relieved of his father’s straining education, Mill’s interest in ancient Greece would not fade and he would go on to write many works and reviews on the subject.⁴⁶ The jewel in the crown

of his love affair with ancient Greece was Athens. Athens ‘eclipsed’ all other city-states of classical Hellenistic civilisation. In Mill’s own words: ‘all the Greek elements of progress, in their highest culmination, were united in that illustrious city’.⁴⁷ Naturally it followed that Athens would have a major influence on his thought; and by analysing how Berlin viewed democracy in the ancient republic of Athens compared to Mill it is possible to further illuminate the discrepancy between Berlin’s assessment of Mill as a proponent of negative liberty and Mill’s own actual neo-athenian republicanism.

Berlin’s account of negative liberty as expressed in his lecture *Two Concepts of Liberty* was also inspired by Benjamin Constant, who he placed alongside Mill as one of the ‘fathers of liberalism’.⁴⁸ Constant, in a lecture delivered in Paris in 1819, delineated liberty into that of the moderns and that of the ancients. Having experienced the Jacobin dictatorship which eulogised classical virtues, he wanted to extol the freedoms afforded to the individual in modern liberal states. He illustrated that while the liberty of the moderns was the freedom to enjoy one’s affairs undisturbed, the liberty of the ancients pertained to self-government, and that the private lives of individuals were totally subject to the community. The practice of ostracism in Athens, for instance, demonstrated that ‘the individual was much more subservient to the supremacy of the social body in Athens, than he is in any of the free states of Europe today’.⁴⁹ Constant’s speech underpinned Berlin’s belief that negative lib-

He illustrated that while the liberty of the moderns was the freedom to enjoy one’s affairs undisturbed, the liberty of the ancients pertained to self-government, and that the private lives of individuals were totally subject to the community.

erty was a modern concept, not found in classical civilisation, and was one which provided far greater freedom than the very limited (positive) freedom of collective rule.⁵⁰ Furthermore, Berlin too drew on the historic example of ancient

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Athens to demonstrate the value of negative liberty. For Berlin, people in Athens alongside other Greek cities were conceived not as individuals, but as communitarian beings whose lives were unquestionably entwined with the polis. Examining the famous Funeral Oration of the fifth-century BCE Athenian statesman and general Pericles, Berlin argued that people in Athens were not really free at all but totally subject to the city-state having 'no claims against it', yet owing it absolute loyalty. Ironically mirroring Mill's point that slaves and wives could love their overlords despite being completely at their mercy, Berlin stated that Pericles was celebrating the allowance of a tolerant atmosphere in Athens because there was no need to coerce men into certain moulds in order to make them sacrifice themselves for the state because they would do it out of devotion. As such Berlin asserted that Pericles and his fellow Athenians simply had no understanding of individual rights. Berlin explained instead that the true conception of freedom: 'that men need an area ... within which they can do as they please', i.e. 'the notion of freedom from state control', was only later conceived by the leading liberals of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Constant and Humboldt, finding 'its most eloquent champion in John Stuart Mill'.⁵¹

Mill too had his understanding of freedom informed by ancient Athens, but he had a fundamentally different view of the liberty of the ancients to Berlin. Whereas Constant and Berlin castigated ancient or positive liberty in order to critique Jacobin and Communist dictatorships, Mill in contrast, just as he had upheld the French Revolution against the ire of Tory historians, extolled the greatness of the Athenian republic in order to bolster the cause of democratisation in Britain.⁵² In fact, Mill's defence of Athens was part of a wider debate between conservatives and radicals over ancient Athenian democracy following the French Revolution, with its history being used as a political football to either lambast or uphold the Revolution and democracy. Indeed, Mill labelled the anti-democratic Spartans, the arch-rivals of the 'nobler'

and 'wiser' Athenians during the Peloponnesian war, as the 'hereditary Tories and Conservatives of Greece'.⁵³ Notably, there was, for instance, a rather public literary mêlée between the Tory *Quarterly Review* and the Radical Benthamite *Westminster Review* in the 1820s over Athenian Democracy.⁵⁴ Nowhere, however, was this debate better illustrated than in the works on Ancient Greece by the historians William Mitford, who had been a Tory MP, and George Grote, a friend of Mill and Philosophic Radical who had been influenced by James Mill and Bentham. Mitford's *History of Greece* was published as five volumes between 1784 and 1810 and his second volume which appeared in 1790 sketched 'many parallels between the direct and radical democracy of ancient Athens and the French Revolution'. Mitford asserted that the Athenian republic was prone to demagoguery, corruption and irrational decision-making.⁵⁵ Mitford's histories were thus clear warnings against further democratisation 'explicitly designed to prevent England from following the path followed by France'.⁵⁶ Mill, who was just as 'Greece-intoxicated' as Grote, according to his friend Alexander Bain, thoroughly enjoyed reading Mitford's history several times as a child, but was warned by his father of its anti-democratic bias. Mill was alerted to 'the Tory prejudices of this writer, and his perversions of facts for the whitewashing of despots, and blackening of popular institutions'.⁵⁷ In response to Mitford's oeuvre, Grote wrote a critique of it in 1826 in the *Westminster Review*, in which he lambasted Mitford's work for being laden with 'political bias ... without disguise or mitigation'. Grote accused Mitford of distorting and omitting historical evidence to glorify monarchism and of arbitrarily deriding democracy without justification especially in the volumes which followed the French Revolution.⁵⁸ This first rejoinder followed his embarkation in 1823 on writing a history which would rebut Mitford's assessment and defend the reputation of Athenian democracy. Mill would come to review Grote's *History of Greece* twice in 1846 and 1853 in the *Edinburgh Review*. On analysing his second review, in which Mill exalted Athens, it

becomes clear that Mill, in this climate of fierce debate, infused what he saw as the qualities of the ancient Athenian republic into his conceptions of liberty and democracy elucidated in his later and most famous works.⁵⁹

Whilst Berlin believed that it was ‘a gross anachronism’ to locate individual liberty ‘in the ancient world’, both Grote and Mill in his review of Grote’s work saw it as a staple element of Athenian democracy which was responsible for its glory.⁶⁰ As Biagini writes, ‘far from being an illibertarian republic, Grote’s and Mill’s Athens was the home of civil liberties’.⁶¹ Like Berlin, both Grote and Mill were drawn to Pericles’ Funeral Oration, Mill even went as far as to quote it in his second review. Indeed, Mill’s father had shown Mill how famous orations provided ‘insight ... into Athenian institutions’.⁶² Mill, following Grote, was anxious to convey to his readers that the oration demonstrated that civic virtue coexisted perfectly with individual liberty in Athens. As he wrote:

in the greatest Greek commonwealth, as described by its most distinguished citizen [Pericles], the public interest was held of paramount obligation in all things which concerned it; but, with that part of the conduct of individuals which concerned only themselves, public opinion did not interfere.⁶³

Mill remarked how this speech fundamentally challenged older accounts’ understanding of liberty in the ancient world (such as Mitford’s and Constant’s). For Mill, ‘Athenian democracy had been so outrageously, and without measure, misrepresented’. Mill asserted that Pericles’ Funeral Oration, as Grote had ‘not failed to point out’, dislodged ‘what we are so often told about the entire sacrifice, in the ancient republics, of the liberty of the individual to an imaginary good of the state’.⁶⁴ Mill’s understanding of ancient Athenian democracy, as outlined in his review of Grote, had a substantial influence in

informing his most famous later works. From analysing his veneration of the Athenian republic, we not only see how Mill’s thinking differed from Berlin’s famous interpretation, but at the same time gain a richer account of some of his most influential ideas which in turn prompts us to contemplate how we perceive liberalism.

The Athenian ideal

Mill’s admiration for ancient Athens is omnipresent throughout his principal texts. As Biagini has asserted, ‘the common thread’ connecting Mill’s seemingly varied thought ‘was a version of the ‘classical republican’ model which held the key position in Mill’s liberalism’.⁶⁵ Reeves makes a similar observation, writing that ‘much of his political philosophy can be seen as an attempt to recapture what he saw as the best features of Athenian democracy, for an industrial world’.⁶⁶ Understanding this not only allows one to comprehend the disparity between Mill’s republicanism and Berlin’s championing of him as a hero of negative liberty, but also affords the insight that Mill’s conception of an exemplary liberal democracy was based upon the Athenian republic.

A seeming underlying tension in Mill’s work is the clash between his individualism and support for popular government. Whilst he extols democracy, Mill seems equally to warn of the dangers of democratic government encroaching on the individual. As discussed above, Berlin quoted Mill’s point in *On Liberty* that democratic government was not ‘of each by himself’ but rather ‘of each by all the rest’ to stress the value of negative liberty.⁶⁷ Indeed, when the entire passage is read in full, Mill is reiterating de Toc-

As Biagini has asserted, ‘the common thread’ connecting Mill’s seemingly varied thought ‘was a version of the ‘classical republican’ model which held the key position in Mill’s liberalism’.

queville’s warning of the threat posed by the tyranny of the majority.⁶⁸ This apparent disparity



The Athenian Assembly, as imagined by Philipp von Foltz (1805–77); Pericles delivering his funeral oration to the Assembly.

dissipates, however, when placed in the context of Mill’s wish to model democratic government on Athens. Whilst the threat of the tyranny of the majority had emerged following the creation of large modern democracies, a healthy republic composed of engaged, virtuous and enlightened citizens modelled on Athens held the key to securing individual freedom.

As discussed above, at the centre of Mill’s republicanism was his desire for individuals to actively participate in their own government together. In doing so Mill believed that people, beyond securing their political freedom, would flourish becoming far more virtuous and wiser. This reasoning, which formed such a core component of Mill’s thought, drew heavily from his understanding of ancient Athens:

the practice of the dicastery and the ecclesia raised the intellectual standard of an average Athenian citizen far beyond anything of

which there is yet an example in any other mass of men, ancient or modern. The proofs of this are apparent in every page of our great historian of Greece [Grote].

The involvement of individuals in their own governance would give them an ‘education which every citizen of Athens obtained from her democratic institutions’ and render them, as mentioned above, ‘very different beings, in range of ideas and development of faculties’.⁶⁹ Furthermore, Mill believed that this transformation fostered by engagement in public affairs would also make individuals respectful of the interests and liberties of others. In short, the public good would be strongly pursued by all, but everyone would have an equally potent attachment to the freedom of individuals, just as Mill imagined was the case in Athens where ‘freedom from social intolerance’ was ‘combined with ... a lively and energetic participation in public affairs’.⁷⁰

This constituted what Mill called the exercise of ‘rational freedom’ which he comprehensively outlined in *The Subjection of Women*:

when they have learnt to understand the meaning of duty and the value of reason, they incline more and more to be guided and restrained by these in the exercise of their freedom; but they do not therefore desire freedom less; they do not become disposed to accept the will of other people as the representative and interpreter of those guiding principles. On the contrary, the communities in which the reason has been most cultivated, and in which the idea of social duty has been most powerful, are those which have most strongly asserted the freedom of action of the individual – the liberty of each to govern his conduct by his own feelings of duty.⁷¹

Mill further echoed this thinking in his treatise *Utilitarianism*. Through creating a cooperative association of equals, democracy enlightened people and greatly enhanced their virtue, with individuals becoming ever more eager to protect the wellbeing and freedom of others:

Society between equals can only exist on the understanding that the interests of all are to be regarded equally ... In this way people grow up unable to conceive as possible to them a state of total disregard of other people’s interests. They are under a necessity of conceiving themselves as at least abstaining from all the grosser injuries, and (if only for their own protection) living in a state of constant protest against them ... Not only does all strengthening of social ties, and all healthy growth of society, give to each individual a stronger personal interest in practically consulting the welfare of others; it also leads him to identify his feelings more and more with their good ... Every step in political improvement renders it more so, by removing the sources of opposition of interest, and levelling those inequalities of legal privilege between individuals or classes,

owing to which there are large portions of mankind whose happiness it is still practicable to disregard. In an improving state of the human mind, the influences are constantly on the increase, which tend to generate in each individual a feeling of unity with all the rest; which feeling, if perfect, would make him never think of, or desire, any beneficial condition for himself, in the benefits of which they are not included.⁷²

For Mill the liberties of individuals would not be crushed by democracy; instead, their freedom was dependent upon it. A republic in the vein of Athens composed of a virtuous and active citizenry would create the conditions for maximising individual freedom. In Mill’s view ‘self-restraining government’ was impossible ‘unless each individual participant feels himself a trustee for all his fellow citizens... certainly no Athenian voter thought otherwise’.⁷³ As Biagini writes, Mill’s ‘liberal’ paradise was not only compatible with the full implementation of the ‘republican’ ideal of a perpetually deliberating *demos*, but, in fact, it *required* it.⁷⁴ Urbinati concurs, asserting that Mill’s theory of democratic government revived the ancient idea of *eleutheria*, the concept of being free both at the political and at an individual level.⁷⁵

Mill’s belief, inspired by his understanding of the ancient republic of Athens, that individual freedom was inherently tied to lively democratic participation also affords a more nuanced understanding of some of Mill’s most profound ideas which lie at the heart of liberalism. For example, it permits a contextualised understanding of his delineation of actions into self-regarding and other-regarding ones as detailed in *On Liberty*. In promoting a society where the individual was totally ‘sovereign’ in affairs which only concerned themselves, but also one which encompassed ‘a great increase of disinterested exertion to promote the good of others’, Mill was again imagining a democracy in the guise of ‘the greatest Greek commonwealth’ for nineteenth-century Britain. Here, the public good was to be held in the utmost importance, but equally the

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individual's private concerns were to be left alone.⁷⁶ Unlike Berlin, who contended that Mill aspired for 'the maximum degree of non-interference compatible with the minimum demands of social life', Mill's neo-Athenian 'doctrine' of individual freedom was not, as he penned in *On Liberty*, one of 'selfish indifference, which pretends that human beings ... should not concern themselves about the well-doing or well-being of another, unless their own interest is involved'.⁷⁷

In sum, Mill wanted modern society to replicate Athens' respectful environment of tolerance in order to promote the conditions for progress.

Inspired by Athens, Mill linked civic virtue and individual freedom together like bees and honey.

Furthermore, Mill's stress in *On Liberty* on allowing geniuses who were inherently minorities to 'breathe freely in an atmosphere of freedom' in order to foster progress was also clearly influenced by his reading of Athenian democracy.⁷⁸ In his review Mill, concurred with Grote's argument that it was the respectful atmosphere garnered by the virtuous and freedom-devoted active citizens of the republican city-state which allowed it to become a 'centre of enlightenment'.⁷⁹ Mill quoted Grote to underscore his assessment:

'the stress which he [Pericles in his Funeral Oration] lays upon the liberty of thought and action at Athens, not merely from excessive restraint of law, but also from practical intolerance between man and man, and tyranny of the majority over individual dissenters in taste and pursuits ... brings out one of those points in the national character upon which the intellectual development of the time mainly depended ... the peculiar promptings in every individual bosom were allowed to manifest themselves and bear fruit, without being suppressed by external opinion, or trained into forced conformity with some assumed standard: antipathies against any of them formed no part of the habitual

morality of the citizen ... society was rendered more comfortable, ... more instructive, and more stimulating, all its germs of productive fruitful genius, so rare everywhere, found in such an atmosphere the maximum of encouragement'.

As Grote concluded, individual liberty belonged 'more naturally' in a healthy democracy like Athens.⁸⁰ Additionally, Mill elaborated on

Grote's remarks and, in doing so, further foreshadowed his argument in *On Liberty* that, without individual freedom, society would stagnate owing

to what he called 'the despotism of custom'.⁸¹ Directly echoing his later remarks in *On Liberty*, Mill wrote that genius would be 'fatally stunted in its growth' unless it grew in the right 'soil'. According to Mill, Grote, drawing on Pericles, had 'pointed out' that such favourable conditions existed in Athens; the tolerance of the Athenian 'made Athens illustrious' whilst the modern era was one of 'mediocrity'.⁸² This was the case because, in Grote's words, as quoted by Mill, 'the intolerance of the national opinion' severely curtailed 'individual character'.⁸³ Indeed, Mill indignantly further wrote in his review of Grote's work that in modern society, in contrast to Athens, 'no one is required by opinion to pay any regard to the public, except by conducting his own private concerns in conformity to its expectations'.⁸⁴ In sum, Mill wanted modern society to replicate Athens' respectful environment of tolerance in order to promote the conditions for progress. This ideal starkly contrasted with Victorian society where attitudes towards the public good and the private affairs of the individual were the antithesis of what Mill aspired for.

The ancient republic of Athens was thus a font of inspiration for Mill and, by understanding how it influenced his thought, we can gain a richer, contextualised account of his major ideas. Before we consider what implications this may have for how we understand liberalism,

however, it should be clarified that Grote and Mill did not manipulate the history of Athens to forward their political ideas as Mitford did. James Kierstead writes, for instance, that while Grote's interpretation of Athens 'was partly a result of his own milieu in liberal London is undeniable', Grote's sympathy towards democracy and his rigorous historical analysis allowed him to provide a far more accurate account of Athens than previous works by royalist conservative historians such as Mitford. Indeed, some contemporary scholars argue that it is still a valuable account of ancient Greece. T. H. Irwin even described it as 'the pre-eminent modern history of Greece in English', unsurpassed by any contemporary work.⁸⁵ Moreover, Mill did not frivolously or uncritically review Grote's work. He would revisit primary sources in order to scrupulously assess it. Mill, for instance, 'reread all of Homer', to prepare for his first review and rightly challenged Grote's interpretation of the chronology of the construction of the *Iliad*.⁸⁶ Most importantly, however, whilst he aimed to refute the Tory account of Athens, Mill did not misconstrue it anachronistically as a liberal utopia. Whilst Mill wished that 'the Athens of Pericles could have lived on', he was certainly under no illusions regarding the existence of slavery and the oppression of women in the ancient polis.⁸⁷ Despite having a huge admiration for the city-state, Athens was not Mill's Shangri-La.

Reflecting on liberalism

Argument over the nature of liberalism rages and will do continuously, and, as this article illustrates, Mill will always be at the heart of this debate. Notwithstanding the fact that Mill comprises just one thinker within the giant pantheon which constitutes the liberal ideological canon, the neo-Athenian ideals of Mill, in addition to demonstrating that liberalism and republicanism are not mutually incompatible creeds, lead us to reflect on what it means to be a liberal. The case of Mill illustrates that being a liberal by no means entails, as critics of liberalism (especially those who might point to Berlin) might

claim, being apprehensive towards popular rule and unaware of subtler forms of oppression, and subscribing to an individualism which places self-indulgence over the community. As Mill's thought demonstrates, vibrant individuality and the realisation of one's full potential, which are at the heart of liberalism, can go hand in hand with democracy and an unwavering dedication to upholding the personal freedom of others. Being a liberal can mean being both a citizen and an individual. This article is not alone in making this assessment of Millian liberalism either; Claeys writes that Mill wanted to develop the 'virtue of individuals, and their willingness to become more sociable and less self-interested beings without at the same time losing their individuality'.⁸⁸ Reeves remarks too how Mill 'wanted a society in which individuals had the freedom and strength to pursue their own goals, along with the virtue and character necessary to sustain collective life'.⁸⁹ Lastly, beyond stimulating discussion on what it means to be a liberal, Mill's neo-Athenian republican ideals present the outline of a healthy liberal and democratic society composed of equal and prospering associates. His vision offers a means to help remedy the deleterious effects of patriarchy, and the strange yet nonetheless true combination of selfish atomism and conformity of contemporary society.⁹⁰ As such, whilst some may potentially disagree with his portrayal of Athens, we can only profit from revisiting the ideas of Mill.

John Ayshford has a Master's degree in history from the University of Manchester. He recently co-curated an exhibition on the leading Liberal – later Labour – social reformers Ernest and Shena Simon, which is being displayed around Manchester this summer and autumn. The exhibition traces their lives and the history of Wythenshawe, Manchester's garden city which the Simons played a major role in developing.

- 1 Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual life in Britain, 1850–1930* (Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 320–2, 338–40.
- 2 Richard Reeves, *John Stuart Mill: Victorian Firebrand* (Atlantic Books, 2007), p. 8.

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- 3 Jose Harris, 'Mill, John Stuart', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 5 Jan. 2012.
- 4 See: John Skorupski (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Mill* (Cambridge University Press, 1998); Nadia Urbinati and Alex Zakaras (eds.), *J. S. Mill's Political Thought: A Bicentennial Reassessment* (Cambridge University Press, 2007); Georgios Varouxakis and Paul Kelly (eds.), *John Stuart Mill – Thought and Influence: The Saint of Rationalism* (Routledge, 2010); Christopher Macleod and Dale E. Miller (eds.), *A Companion to Mill* (John Wiley & Sons, 2017).
- 5 <https://millmarginalia.org/>
- 6 I label Mill as a republican, not in the sense of being simply anti-monarchical, but as someone who feared tyrannical rule by unaccountable leaders and instead advocated citizen self-government.
- 7 Rousseau's concept of the General Will, in contrast to the common interpretation outlined above, can be understood as being far less tyrannical. Rousseau later outlines in *The Social Contract* that the General Will only decides on matters that affect the whole community or issues of *general* concern and not on the private matters of individuals. See: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract: or Principles of Political Right* (Wordsworth Editions, 1998), pp. 14–18, 31–3.
- 8 Isaiah Berlin, 'Two Concepts of Liberty', in Henry Hardy (ed.), *Liberty* (Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 169–70, 177–78, 207–09.
- 9 John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (1859), in John M. Robson (ed.), *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, 33 vols (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963–1991) (Henceforth CW), xviii, p. 219, in Berlin, 'Two Concepts of Liberty', pp. 208–9. The Collected Works are available at the *Online Library of Liberty*: <https://oll.libertyfund.org/title/robson-collected-works-of-john-stuart-mill-in-33-vols>
- 10 Berlin, 'Two Concepts of Liberty', pp. 176–78.
- 11 Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 4–5, 17–19, 41–50; Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 22–30, 60, 77–84, 96–9, 113–16.
- 12 H. S. Jones, 'John Stuart Mill as Moraliser', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 53 (1992), pp. 287–308.
- 13 Gregory Claeys, *Mill and Paternalism* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 170–72.
- 14 Eugenio Biagini, 'Neo-Roman Liberalism: "Republican" Values and British Liberalism, ca. 1860–1875', *History of European Ideas*, 29 (2003), pp. 55–72.
- 15 Biagini, 'Neo-Roman Liberalism', pp. 61–3, 66. Also see: Kyriakos N. Demetriou 'George Grote and John Stuart Mill on Classical Republicanism', in Kyriakos N. Demetriou and Antis Loizides (eds.), *John Stuart Mill: A British Socrates* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 176–206.
- 16 Nadia Urbinati, *Mill on Democracy: From the Athenian Polis to Representative Government* (The University of Chicago Press, 2002); Eugenio Biagini, 'Liberalism and Direct Democracy: John Stuart Mill and the Model of Ancient Athens', in Eugenio Biagini (ed.), *Citizenship and Community: Liberals, Radicals and Collective Identities in the British Isles, 1865–1931* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 21–44.
- 17 Georgios Varouxakis, *Liberty Abroad: J.S. Mill on International Relations* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 163–71. See especially: John Stuart Mill, 'Political Progress', 4 Feb. 1867, CW, xxviii, pp. 128–30.
- 18 Reeves, *John Stuart Mill*, pp. 313, 464.
- 19 John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government*, CW, xix, pp. 399–402. Mill makes a similar argument in *On Liberty*. See: *On Liberty*, pp. 306–8.
- 20 John Stuart Mill, *Parliamentary Reform*, [2] Aug. 1824, CW, xxvi, p. 282.
- 21 Letter from John Stuart Mill to Paulina Wright Davis, 11 Dec. 1869, CW, xvii, pp. 1670–1.
- 22 Quentin Skinner, 'On the Liberty of the Ancients and the Moderns: A Reply to my Critics', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 73 (2012), p. 131; Gustavo Hessmann Dalaqua, 'John Stuart Mill's Republican Feminism', *Kalagatos*, 15 (2018), pp. 16, 20.
- 23 John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography* (1873), CW, i, p. 265.
- 24 Harriet Taylor Mill, *Enfranchisement of Women* (1851), CW, xxi, pp. 393–415; Jo Ellen Jacobs, *The Voice of Harriet Taylor Mill* (Indiana University Press, 2002), p. 218.
- 25 John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women* (1869), CW, xxi, p. 264.
- 26 Taylor Mill, *Enfranchisement of Women*, p. 399.
- 27 Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, pp. 284–5.
- 28 Mill, *ibid.*, pp. 285–6.
- 29 Mill, *ibid.*, p. 301.
- 30 Mill, *Autobiography*, p. 107.

- 31 John Stuart Mill, 'The Admission of Women to the Electoral Franchise', 20 May 1867, CW, xxviii, p. 158.
- 32 Taylor Mill, *Enfranchisement of Women*, p. 410.
- 33 Claeys, *Mill and Paternalism* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 202.
- 34 Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, p. 292.
- 35 Mill, *ibid.*, p. 286.
- 36 Mill, *ibid.*
- 37 Mill, *ibid.*, pp. 287–8.
- 38 Mill, *Representative Government*, pp. 411–12.
- 39 Mary Lyndon Shanley, 'Marital Slavery and Friendship: John Stuart Mill's The Subjection of Women', *Political Theory*, 9 (1981), p. 236.
- 40 Taylor Mill, *Enfranchisement of Women*, p. 411–12; Mill, 'The Admission of Women to the Electoral Franchise', pp. 155–6; Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, pp. 329, 331–2.
- 41 Mill, 'The Admission of Women to the Electoral Franchise', p. 157.
- 42 Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, pp. 294–5.
- 43 Mill, *ibid.*, p. 337.
- 44 Mill in his second review of de Tocqueville's work in 1840 discussed his account of how American citizens were enlightened by 'the administration of nearly all business of society by themselves'. Foreshadowing what he later wrote in *Representative Government*, Mill asserted that through engagement in public affairs the citizen was made to feel 'that not only the common weal is his weal, but that it partly depends upon his exertions'. Indeed, in *Representative Government* Mill called 'to witness the entire contents of M. de Tocqueville's great work' to convince those who doubted the enlightening effects of participation in government. See: John Stuart Mill, *De Tocqueville on Democracy in America* [II] (1840), CW, xviii, pp. 168–9; Mill, *Representative Government*, p. 468.
- 45 Mill, *Autobiography*, pp. 9, 15.
- 46 See: CW, xi.
- 47 John Stuart Mill, *Grote's History of Greece* [II] (1853), CW, xi p. 315.
- 48 Berlin, 'Two Concepts of Liberty', p. 207.
- 49 Benjamin Constant, *The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with that of Moderns* (1819), <https://oll.libertyfund.org/title/constant-the-liberty-of-ancients-compared-with-that-of-moderns-1819> [accessed on 20/02/2021]. Interestingly some of the ideas Constant raised in his lecture actually resemble those of Mill's. Constant recognised that not having a say in government left one totally at the mercy of those who had political power. He also praised the enlightening benefits of self-government.
- 50 Berlin, 'Two Concepts of Liberty', pp. 176, 207.
- 51 Isaiah Berlin, 'The Birth of Greek Individualism: A Turning-Point in the History of Political Thought', in Henry Hardy (ed.), *Liberty* (Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 294–302, 318–19.
- 52 Mill, *Autobiography*, p. 135.
- 53 John Stuart Mill, *Grote's History of Greece* [I] (1846), CW, xi, p. 303.
- 54 Jennifer Tolbert Roberts, *Athens on Trial: The Anti-democratic Tradition in Western Thought* (Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 231–234.
- 55 W. W. Wroth, 'Mitford, William', revised by J. S. Taylor, in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 23 Sep. 2004; Leo Catana, 'Grote's Analysis of Ancient Greek Political Thought: Its Significance to J.S. Mill's Idea about "Active Character" in a Liberal Democracy', *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 28 (2020), pp. 558–9, 561.
- 56 James Kierstead, 'Grote's Athens: The Character of Democracy', in Kyriakos N. Demetriou (ed.), *Brill's Companion to George Grote and the Classical Tradition* (Brill, 2014), p. 168.
- 57 Alexander Bain, *John Stuart Mill. A Criticism: with Personal Recollections* (Longmans, Green, and Co., 1882), p. 94; Mill, *Autobiography*, p. 15.
- 58 George Grote, 'Fasti Hellenici', *The Westminster Review*, 5 (1826), pp. 269–331.
- 59 Biagini, 'Liberalism and Direct Democracy', p. 25.
- 60 Berlin, 'The Birth of Greek Individualism', p. 319.
- 61 Biagini, 'Liberalism and Direct Democracy', p. 33.
- 62 Mill, *Autobiography*, p. 23.
- 63 Mill, *Grote's History of Greece* [II], pp. 317–19.
- 64 Mill, *Grote's History of Greece* [II], pp. 319, 329.
- 65 Biagini, 'Liberalism and Direct Democracy', p. 22.
- 66 Reeves, *John Stuart Mill*, p. 178.
- 67 See endnote 9.
- 68 Mill, *On Liberty*, pp. 218–19.
- 69 Mill, *Representative Government*, pp. 411–12. The dicastery was the judicial system in which Athenian citizens would participate as jurors. The ecclesia was the Athenian democratic assembly.
- 70 Mill, *Grote's History of Greece* [II], p. 319.

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- 71 Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, p. 336.
- 72 John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, CW (1860), x, pp. 231–32.
- 73 Letter from John Stuart Mill to George Cornewall Lewis, 20 Mar. 1859, CW, xv, p. 608.
- 74 Biagini, 'Liberalism and Direct Democracy', p. 34.
- 75 Urbinati, *Mill on Democracy*, p. 6.
- 76 Mill, *On Liberty*, pp. 224, 277; Mill, *Grote's History of Greece part [II]*, p. 319.
- 77 Berlin, 'Two Concepts of Liberty', p. 207; Mill, *On Liberty*, pp. 276–7.
- 78 Mill, *On Liberty*, pp. 267–8.
- 79 Mill, *Grote's History of Greece [II]*, p. 316.
- 80 George Grote, *History of Greece*, 12 vols (John Murray, 1846–1856), vi (1851), pp. 200–2, in Mill, *Grote's History of Greece [II]*, pp. 319–320. The quote is abbreviated.
- 81 Mill, *On Liberty*, p. 272.
- 82 Mill, *Grote's History of Greece [II]*, pp. 320–321; Mill, *On Liberty*, p. 267.
- 83 Grote, *History of Greece*, pp. 200–2, in Mill, *Grote's History of Greece [II]*, p. 320.
- 84 Mill, *On Liberty*, pp. 219–220; Mill, *Grote's History of Greece [II]*, p. 319.
- 85 Kierstead, 'Grote's Athens', pp. 162–5; T. H. Irwin, 'Mill and the Classical World', in *The Cambridge Companion to Mill*, pp. 424, 428.
- 86 Irwin, 'Mill and the Classical World', pp. 423–4; Reeves, *John Stuart Mill*, p. 178.
- 87 Mill, *Grote's History of Greece [II]*, pp. 314–315, 321, 324.
- 88 Claeys, *Mill and Paternalism*, p. 217.
- 89 Reeves, *John Stuart Mill*, p. 9.
- 90 Republican ideas also permeate Mill's socialist writings. His vision of a future economy based on democratic cooperatives offer teachings for progressives of all shades to learn from. See in particular: 'On the Probable Futurity of the Labouring Classes', in *Principles of Political Economy* (1848), CW, iii, pp. 758–96.

A Liberal for All Seasons? Percy Alport Molteno, 1861–1937

Continued from page 21

- 55 Molteno to Merriman c. 1910, cited in Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 381.
- 56 Holt MSS 920 DUR 14/27/245, Molteno to Holt, 28 Jan. 1919.
- 57 Molteno was kept abreast of the hardships on the continent by Herbert Hoover who, as America's Food Administrator, led relief efforts in Europe. Molteno had befriended Hoover when the latter was living in London during the war. Now, in 1919, Molteno set up and endowed the Vienna Emergency Relief Fund to address the problems of hunger and deprivation at the heart of the old Habsburg Empire.
- 58 Molteno to Frank Molteno, late Jan. 1919, cited in Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 540.
- 59 *Ibid.*, p. 543.
- 60 *Ibid.*
- 61 Molteno to Charlie Molteno, 16 Sep. 1919, cited in *ibid.*, p. 545.
- 62 *Manchester Guardian*, 24 Jan. 1922.
- 63 Hirst, *Man of Principle*, pp. 548–9. The debate over a possible Anglo-French Alliance is discussed in G. Hicks (ed.), *Conservatism and British Foreign Policy, 1820–1920* (Farnham, 2011), pp. 189–213.
- 64 University of Liverpool Library, George Veitch MSS D40/15, Muir to Veitch, 25 Oct. 1928.
- 65 M. Bentley, 'The Liberal Response to Socialism 1918–29', in K. D. Brown (ed.), *Essays in Anti-Labour History: Responses to the Rise of Labour in Britain* (London, 1974), p. 47.
- 66 Molteno to H. Gladstone, Jan. 1922, cited in Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 561.
- 67 Gladstone to Molteno, 11 Jan. 1922, cited in *ibid.*, p. 562.
- 68 Liberal MP for Westmorland North 1905–10, Rushcliffe 1910–18 and Camborne 1923–4 and 1929–31.
- 69 Hirst, *Man of Principle*, pp. 564–5. Speaking at West Calder on 27 Nov. 1879, as part of his famous Midlothian Campaign, Gladstone enumerated six 'right principles of foreign policy'. These are listed in R. Shannon, *Gladstone: Heroic Minister 1865–1898* (London, 1999), pp. 238–9.
- 70 Molteno to Charlie Molteno, 7 Nov. 1922, cited in Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 558.
- 71 *Ibid.*, p. 558.
- 72 *Ibid.*, p. 572.

- 73 A committee on national expenditure was appointed in August 1921 under the chairmanship of Sir Eric Geddes. Its reports (the so-called Geddes Axe) recommended swingeing cuts in government spending.
- 74 Full result: Katharine, Duchess of Atholl (Unionist) 9,235; P. A. Molteno (Liberal) 9,085.
- 75 *Manchester Guardian*, 24 Jul. 1924; Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 574.
- 76 *Ibid.*, p. 577.
- 77 Holt MSS, 920 DUR 1/10, diary 13 Dec. 1924.
- 78 Molteno to James Molteno, 27 May 1926, cited in Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 581.
- 79 *Ibid.*, p. 581.
- 80 *Ibid.*, p. 594.
- 81 Molteno to James Molteno 1929, cited in *ibid.*, p. 599. Speaking in Manchester on 1 Mar. 1929, Lloyd George had declared that a Liberal government could ‘reduce the terrible figures of the workless in the course of a single year to normal proportions’. Shortly afterwards, a party pamphlet entitled ‘We Can Conquer Unemployment’ proposed a massive programme of public works to soak up the unemployed.
- 82 Hirst, *Man of Principle*, pp. 592–3.
- 83 Molteno to G. S. Barbour, 1929, cited in *ibid.*, p. 599.
- 84 *Ibid.*, pp. 602–3; P. Sloman, *The Liberal Party and the Economy, 1929–1964* (Oxford, 2015), p. 63.
- 85 Molteno to James Molteno, 7 Oct. 1931, cited in Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 605.
- 86 Molteno to James Molteno, 16 Mar. 1932, cited in *ibid.*, p. 607.
- 87 F. Trentmann, *Free Trade Nation* (London, 2008), *passim*.
- 88 R. Grayson, *Liberals, International Relations and Appeasement: The Liberal Party, 1919–1939* (London, 2001) provides an authoritative account of the party’s debates on foreign policy in the inter-war era.
- 89 Molteno to Lord Meston, Sep. 1936, cited in Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 627.
- 90 *The Times*, 4 May 1937.
- 91 Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 582.
- 92 Scottish Record Office, Lothian MSS, GD40/17/367, Findlay to Lothian, 4 May 1938; Hirst, *Man of Principle*, pp. 628–9.

Reports

The Two Davids: Owen versus Steel

Fringe meeting, Liberal Democrat autumn conference, 17 September 2021, with Sir Graham Watson and Roger Carroll. Chair: Christine Jardine MP.
Report by **James Moore**

ONE OF THE signs of getting old is when events that seem to be part of recent memory become part of the historical record. 1987 was my first election as a Young Liberal activist and the first of many political

disappointments. The Alliance came third again and won just twenty-two seats. For many, the election was defined by the difficult relationship between David Steel and David Owen – two men who apparently went fishing together and wore

the same ties, but seemingly couldn’t agree on defence policy or who they might work with in a coalition government.

After the 1987 election, the split between the two men became all too obvious. Steel was accused of trying to ‘bounce’ the Alliance into a new merged party. Owen was accused of ignoring the wishes of his own SDP members. Within two years, the merged Democrats (we weren’t allowed to call it a ‘party’ or use the term Liberal) were represented by an asterisk in the opinion polls and were fighting David Owen’s ‘continuing SDP’ in parliamentary by-elections.

Was this all inevitable? A meeting of the Liberal

Report: The 1992 general election

Democrat History group asked the people that were there at the top table. Sir Graham Watson (Steel's former Head of Office) and Roger Carroll (Owen's former SDP Communications Director) debated the difficult relationship. Even after all these years, interpretations differed.

For Watson, it wasn't so much Steel versus Owen as Owen versus Steel. Steel had enjoyed a warm relationship with former SDP leader Roy Jenkins, but Owen proved a much more difficult political partner. Steel was the hands-off leader, apparently little interested in detail and policy. Owen was the micro-manager who demanded to check every press release and every public statement. When the leaders went off in separate battle buses after the 1987 manifesto launch, the Alliance's fate was already sealed. The Alliance was already failing, and the campaign was a car crash.

Carroll remembered a rather different story. Focusing on an alleged feud between the two Davids was, for Carroll, 'a wild exaggeration'. It certainly didn't compare with other famous political feuds such as that between Winston Churchill and Rab Butler or even, in more recent times, Gordon Brown and Tony Blair. Rather than being a failure, Carroll viewed the Alliance as a 'huge success' in terms of the support it attracted and only the electoral system prevented this success being represented in larger

numbers of MPs. He could not recall Owen ever attacking Steel in private and put any differences down to more philosophical and policy divisions on a small number of issues.

There did seem to be some consensus on the question of whether the two leaders had the same vision of the Alliance. Owen, in particular, saw his party as part of a modern European social democratic tradition and quite different to the older Liberalism of David Steel. While he recognised there were many points of convergence, they were not qualitatively identical. This fundamental difference became very important after the 1987 election.

Inevitably, the notorious 1986 Liberal Assembly, where Liberal Party members were perceived by the media to have ripped up Alliance defence policy, was an important point of tension. However, it is important to recognise that Steel was as angry about this as senior members of the SDP. The person most criticised for his role in this incident was Paddy Ashdown, who did not make himself popular in the Parliamentary Liberal Party for his rebellious leanings on defence.

The question of the impact of TV's *Spitting Image* on public perceptions of the two leaders was also remarked upon. The fact that a promotional company produced squeaky dog chews featuring Steel's puppet in Owen's top pocket demonstrates just how pervasive this image became (and,

yes, I still have mine). Carroll made the point that Owen was much angrier about this than Steel, precisely because he felt it would make him unpopular amongst Liberal members and make the everyday operation of the Alliance more difficult.

Not very much was said on the details of the merger period, although one can't wonder if Steel's decisiveness in pushing for merger so quickly after the election was shaped by the perception that Owen was perceived by the public as the dominant partner in the Alliance. Perhaps he also misread Owen, believing Owen's ambition to return to government would overcome his commitment to the SDP.

Other differences became evident in later years. Owen's more critical approach to the EU began during the early days of the 'continuing' SDP and was a reflection of his Atlanticism. He was later to endorse the Labour Party at general elections, perhaps believing it could indeed become the European social democratic party he had always wanted. Carroll speculated about whether they ever spoke again as they crossed paths within the walls of the House of Lords. Sadly, one doubts if even the Liberal Democrat History Group will ever get them to share the same platform again.

Almost thirty-five years on from 1987, it is difficult to look back to this period of our political youth with anything other than sadness. Both men were

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)

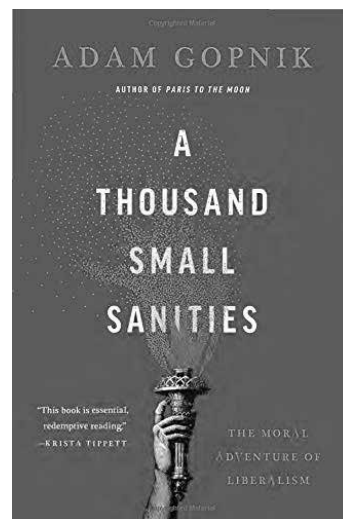
Review by **Malcolm Baines**

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

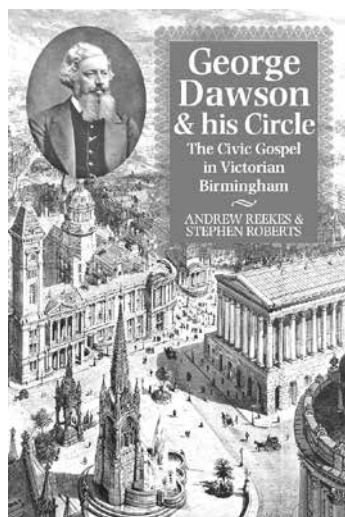
'Everything to Everybody'

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.



of Birmingham and the Library of Birmingham, funded by the National Lottery, which marks Birmingham's hosting of the Commonwealth Games in 2022 is based on his message 'Everything to Everybody.' It also explains the publication of this curious collection of biographical studies of those who either worshipped at Dawson's Church of the Saviour, or who were inspired by his message that 'a great town exists to discharge towards the people of that town the duties that a great nation exists to discharge towards the people of that nation.'

Although there is much new research on comparatively unknown figures such as William Aitken, Samuel Timmons and Edward Taylor, there is, as the authors acknowledge 'a certain amount of unavoidable repetition' between the biographical chapters. This is somewhat wearisome, especially when a description of the mosaic on the front of the

Council House is repeated within ten pages. This might be more forgivable, if certain episodes in the lives of the individuals described were not notably omitted. Rather than creating 'a more democratic system', Benjamin Harris's Birmingham Liberal Association was actually accused of being 'dictatorial and tyrannical' by W. J. Davis, the leader of the Brass Workers' Union. John Jaffray's 1892 knighthood may have been described as earned by his public work, but only in his own newspaper, the *Birmingham Mail*. Most knew that it was given by outgoing Conservative Prime Minister Lord Salisbury for his funding of the nascent Liberal Unionist party, which had kept the minority Conservative party in power for seven years.

The introduction to this collection admits that 'white males dominate this book's narrative' and does attempt to address this with a chapter on the little-known Marie Bethell Beauclerc, Dawson's secretary, written by Nicola Gauld, author of an excellent recent study of the Birmingham Women's Suffrage Movement. However, in light of Anne Rodrick's 2004 revisionist study of the civic culture of Victorian Birmingham, in which she argued that the paternal actions of the Corporation were still aimed at the 'deserving' poor, who were expected to show due fealty to their masters, the collection did need, at least, to consider

that the 'Civic Gospel' was largely designed for the benefit of upper-middle-class businessmen. After all, the physical embodiment of the gospel of 'Improvement' in Birmingham, Corporation Street, was a Parisian-style boulevard with theatres, shops and winter gardens, which was built by demolishing 653 slum homes of the poor, with less than 100 houses built by the council to rehome them in the following ten years. In 1901, the *Birmingham Gazette* published a horrifying description of 'Scenes in Slumland' and asked 'what wonder that drink becomes a second refuge? What wonder that the innocent are soon contaminated and that crime and violence are so rampant?'

More seriously, for a history of Victorian culture written in the twenty first century, there is little evidence in the collection of an awareness of the post-colonial critique of the 'Civic Gospel'. Terms such as 'culture', 'mission' and 'citizens' are used rather too freely and uncritically, without an appreciation of the exclusionary nature of these labels, as Catherine Hall and others have explored. Although Andy Green probably went too far in claiming that Dawson 'had paved the way for a later breed of ruthless empire builders in Birmingham that included, of course, Joseph Chamberlain', it must be acknowledged that Dawson held views on race that many in modern Birmingham would find repugnant. At the 1862

unveiling of a statue to the abolitionist, Joseph Sturge, Dawson commented on Sturge's fondness for 'negroes, and all sorts of low and unlovely people.' Green contends the Dawson's enthusiasm for Shakespeare, which he promoted across the world, was actually part of 'a rigid belief in Anglo-Saxon superiority and civilisation.' He supported this claim that Dawson shared the racist views of his mentor, Thomas Carlyle, by quoting comments that Dawson made to a local newspaper during his visit to the United States in 1874 regarding the inability of black people to educate themselves and the superiority of European races. As a result of reading this article, Professor Ewan Fernie, who heads the 'Everything to Everybody'

project, cancelled plans for a restoration of Dawson's statue and used the funds to commission a series of murals at local primary schools, designed by the pupils and a local arts collective. In light of this decision, it is something of a mystery why Professor Fernie contributed such a hagiographic chapter on Dawson to this collection, but then one cannot see much of an audience for this very dated text outside the city that still clings to its imperial heroes.

Dr Ian Cawood is Associate Professor in British Political and Religious History at the University of Stirling. His latest book is The Many Lives of Corruption: The Reform of Public Life in Modern Britain c1750–1950 (Manchester University Press, 2022).

Zealand), conquest (India) or free trade, based on economic dominance and informal rule (China and parts of South America). The British Empire faced a range of pressures from interests as varied as slave owners, anti-slavery campaigners, Christian missionaries, capitalists and colonial settlers. Governing it meant a sense of constant anxiety whether due to fear of rebellion from within or encroachment from without by rival European powers. There was no golden age of imperial stability.

The complexities of imperial governance are vividly illustrated by the authors of *Ruling the World*: eminent imperial historian Alan Lester and his research assistants and co-authors Kate Boehm and Stephen Mitchell. Rather than writing another narrative history of the British Empire in the nineteenth century, they focus on the practicalities and challenges of governing the empire from the vantage point of the colonial office in three significant years, 1838, 1857 and 1879, described respectively as the years of 'freedom', 'civilisation' and 'liberalism'.

There is a degree of irony in the choice of terms. To a large extent the Indian Uprising of 1857 was a trigger for the abandonment of attempts by the imperial government to impose British 'civilisation' on India, while 1879 saw imperial wars in South Africa and Afghanistan that were the antithesis of liberalism. In

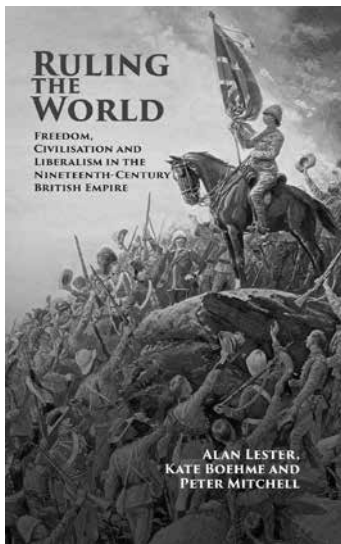
The complexities of imperial governance

Alan Lester, Kate Boehme and Peter Mitchell, *Ruling the World: Freedom, Civilisation and Liberalism in the Nineteenth-century British Empire* (Cambridge University Press, 2021)

Review by **Iain Sharpe**

ONE OF THE COMMONEST images that comes to mind when the British Empire is mentioned is the map of the world, supposedly hung on every classroom wall, with large swathes – up to a quarter of the world – coloured red or pink. It conjures up the idea of the empire as a unified

entity, with large swathes of territory across the globe being ruled directly from London. In fact, it was varied and diffuse in how and when its territory had been acquired and in how it was governed. Imperial territories came in different forms, whether those of settlement (Canada, Australia, New



fact, the author's designation of that as the year of liberalism is forced, given that it was the only one of the three covered in this book where there was actually a Conservative government. I am sure that Disraeli or Salisbury had few enough pretensions to liberalism. Yet the broad approach of focusing on three separate years over a forty-year period is an inspired one, enabling the authors to convey a sense of the immediate pressures involved in maintaining an empire, while still offering a longer view of how the empire changed over time due to changes in culture, geopolitical conditions or technological advances.

The real strength of the book is in its detailed portrayal of the pressures and range of issues faced by those charged with imperial governance. It is based on considerable archival research, particularly in the Colonial Office and India Office records. But this is no

dry administrative history. The authors bring to life the background and personalities of the key figures involved in imperial administration – indeed they helpfully include a cast of characters as an appendix. Most prominent among these is James Stephen, permanent under-secretary at the Colonial Office in from 1836 to 1847 and the central figure of the first and longest section of the book, dealing with 1838. Described as a 'shy workaholic', Stephen was the evangelical Christian son of an anti-slavery campaigner. Stephen had drafted the complex bill that became the Act of Parliament abolishing slavery in the Dominions over the course of a weekend – one of two occasions in his life where he worked on the Sabbath.

In 1838, Stephen was preparing for the emancipation of slaves across the British Empire – the 1833 Act abolishing slavery having deferred their full freedom until after former slaves had served a period of 'apprenticeship'. In many ways, 1838 marked a high point of humanitarian concern for the British Empire's non-white subjects. Cases of brutal treatment of native peoples by white settlers especially in New Zealand, Australia and South Africa led to the creation of a Parliamentary Select Committee on Aborigines in 1835, which produced a celebrated report two years later. In 1838, the Aborigines Protection Society was founded and for a brief time measures to protect the land and freedom of

native peoples from brutality and land grabbing by white settlers seemed to hold sway.

Yet it was also a time when pressure from white settlers for colonial self-government was building. Following settler rebellions in Canada the previous year, the metropolitan government commissioned a report by the Earl of Durham which recommended the grant of responsible government. A land grab by settlers in Cape Colony was thwarted by the London government, while attempts to protect aboriginal populations in Australia and New Zealand provoked demands for self-government to be free of interference from the imperial government. Despite his strong humanitarian credentials, Stephen was forced to balance a range of competing pressures and always subject to the demands of realpolitik.

In practice, indigenous populations almost always lost out to white settler interests. For the government in London, the latter had to be kept sweet in order to keep them within the empire. At the same time, contemporary demand for economy and the reality that settlers had the advantage of being on the spot made it impossible for the metropolitan government to control them directly. Demands for colonial self-government proved too costly to resist and granting it could be presented as advancing political freedom, even if in practice such freedom was limited to white populations.

Research in Progress

If you can help any of the researchers listed below with sources, contacts, or any other information, please contact them. To include other research projects in progress, contact the Editor (see page 3).

Sir Robert Torrens (1812–84)

I am looking for the papers of Sir Robert Torrens, who was elected to Parliament for the Borough of Cambridge in 1868, representing the Liberal Party. He lived for many years in South Australia, where he developed the land titles system that still bears his name. He moved to England in the 1860s, where he remained until his death (1884). Most of his papers from his 'Australian' period are held in Adelaide (South Australia). But I have been unable to find any repository of his 'UK' papers. Torrens was confident of his place in history, and (in my view) would have ensured that his UK papers and correspondence were preserved for posterity. Any suggestions welcome. *Peter Butt, Emeritus Professor of Law, University of Sydney; peter.butt@sydney.edu.au.*

Radical 19th century Lancashire Liberals

I am writing a book on Lancashire culture and identity, which will include a chapter on Lancashire Liberalism in the 19th century. I am particularly interested in radical liberals – Thomas Newbigging, Tom Livsey, Samel Compston, Solomon Partington (mostly from the Rochdale, Rossendale and Bolton areas) – but would welcome any other suggestions and pointers to ongoing work. *Professor Paul Salveson; paul.salveson@myphone.coop.*

Russell Johnston, 1932–2008

Scottish Liberal politics was dominated for over thirty years (1965–95 and beyond) by two figures: David Steel and Russell Johnston. Of the former, much has been written; of the latter, surprisingly little. I am therefore researching with a view to writing a biography of Russell. If any readers can help – with records, other written material or reminiscences – please let me know, either by email or post. *Sir Graham Watson, sirgrahamwatson@gmail.com; 9/3 Merchiston Park, Edinburgh EH10 4PW.*

Professor Reginald W. Revans, 1907–2003

Any information anyone has on Revans' Liberal Party involvement would be most welcome. We are particularly keen to know when he joined the party and any involvement he may have had in campaigning issues. We know he was very interested in pacifism. Any information, oral history submissions, location of papers or references most welcome. *Dr Yury Boshyk, yury@gel-net.com; or Dr Cheryl Brook, cheryl.brook@port.ac.uk.*

Emlyn Hooson and the Welsh Liberals, 1962–79

The thesis will assess Hooson's influence on the Welsh Liberal Party during this period by paying particular attention to the organisation, policy process and electoral record under his leadership. PhD research at Cardiff University. *Nick Alderton; aldertonnk@cardiff.ac.uk.*

Liberal song and the Glee Club

Aiming to set out the history of Liberal song from its origins to the days of the Liberal Revue and Liberator Songbook. Looking to complete a song archive, the history of the early, informal conference Glee Clubs in the 1960s and 1970s, and all things related. *Gareth Epps; garethepps@gmail.com.*

Anarchism and Liberalism 1880-1980

Some anarchists were successfully influential in liberal networks, starting with many New Liberal networks around the beginning of the 20th Century. My thesis focuses on this earlier period but I am interested in anarchist influences on liberalism throughout the twentieth century. If any readers can help with informing me of their own personal experiences of anarchist ideas or works in liberal networks or relevant historical information they might have I would greatly appreciate it. *Shaun Pitt; shaunjpitt@gmail.com.*

Liberal Democrat History Group at Liberal Democrat conference, Brighton

Shirley Williams: Liberal Lion and Trailblazer

Shirley Williams, SDP co-founder and former leader of the Liberal Democrats in the House of Lords, was one of the UK's best-loved politicians. Discuss her life, beliefs and legacy with **Lord Stoneham** and **Mark Peel** (author, *Shirley Williams: The Biography*). **1.00pm, Saturday 17 September**; Consort Room, Grand Hotel.

Was the coalition a mistake? Why did we fail to stop Brexit?

Launch of a new book by husband-and-wife team **Vince Cable** and **Rachel Smith**: the inside story of Vince's role as cabinet minister and party leader in the turbulent decade of the 2010s. **1.00pm, Sunday 18 September**; Charlotte Room, Grand Hotel.

This was by no means the only area where the belligerent urges triumphed over benevolent ones. Britain's increasing attachment to free trade from the 1830s onwards was supposed to be a doctrine of peace. Yet, as the first and second Opium Wars in China (1839–42 and 1856–60) demonstrated, resistance to such supposedly

peaceful intentions could be met with violence. Similarly, geopolitical considerations led Britain to be always fearful of threats to the empire, leading to two disastrous wars in Afghanistan at the beginning and end of this period. While notions of freedom, liberty and liberalism were more than just fig leaves for justifying imperial

rule, they were accompanied by power politics and violence that undermined any claim that they were guiding values of empire.

Dr Iain Sharpe was a Liberal Democrat councillor in Watford for thirty years until 2021. He studied history at Leicester and London Universities and is a long-standing member of the History Group.

Think history

Can you spare some time to help the History Group?

The Liberal Democrat History Group undertakes a wide range of activities – publishing this *Journal* and our Liberal history books and booklets, organising regular speaker meetings, maintaining the Liberal history website and providing assistance with research.

We'd like to do more, but our activities are limited by the number of people involved in running the Group. We would be enormously grateful for help with our publications, website, meetings, publicity and promotion.

If you'd like to be involved in any of these activities, or anything else, contact the Editor, **Duncan Brack** (journal@liberalhistory.org.uk) – we would love to hear from you.

