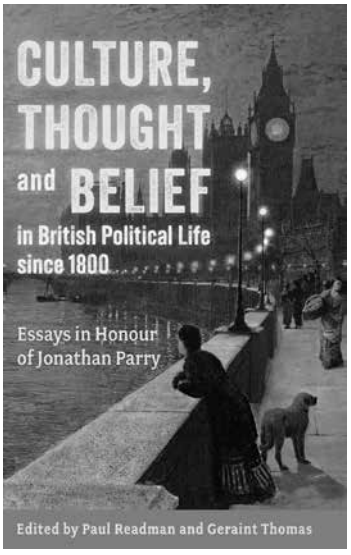
Liberals and Liberalism

Paul Readman and Geraint Thomas (eds.), *Culture, Thought and Belief in British Political Life since 1800: Essays in honour of Jonathan Parry* (Boydell Press, 2024)
Jonathan Parry, *Liberalism* (Agenda Publishing, 2025)
Review by Iain Sharpe

Over a career now spanning more than four decades, Jonathan Parry has been one of the most important and influential historians of nineteenth-century British politics, significantly influencing our understanding and altering our perspectives on that subject. He is best known for his Victorian Liberal politics trilogy;[1] however, another major work addressed British political strategy in the Ottoman Middle East, while he has also been a prolific author of chapters in edited volumes, articles in scholarly journals and a frequent contributor to the *London Review of Books*.[2] He is by any standards a worthy recipient of a festschrift, and it is seems very good timing that this should appear just a few months before Parry's own short history of British Liberalism, which acts as both a synthesis of his previous work on the nineteenth century and an extension of his focus to cover Liberal history up to the present day.



A graduate and later academic of Peterhouse, Cambridge, Parry's work has been regarded as part of the 'high politics' school of history associated with that institution and in particular with the work of Maurice Cowling, under whom Parry studied.[3] Focusing as it did on the upper echelons of political life to the exclusion of social forces, ideology and beliefs, this approach was often considered, caricatured perhaps, as a high Tory one, viewing politics cynically as a series of manoeuvres by a rarified elite to gain and keep power. As Parry's work does not fit that description, he may be considered a second-generation high politics practitioner, his work broadening the canvas to study Liberal politics at parliamentary level.

This has involved close study of the assumptions and worldviews of those engaged in Liberal politics and the intersection between their beliefs and political actions, the point where ideas and intentions meet political reality. In doing this, he has made a case for a greater coherence in nineteenth-century Liberalism as a mechanism for delivering rational, patriotic, efficient government, than had been apparent from previous portrayals of it as a loose array of constantly bickering factions. Parry's approach tends to boost the reputations of Lords John Russell (about whom he has written extensively) and Palmerston, sometimes at the expense of Gladstone, whose religiosity and tendency towards demagoguery was a mixed blessing for the party.

In addition to his own work, Parry has been influential on younger generations of scholars, as testified by the number of times his name appears as a thankee in the Acknowledgements pages of monographs, whether as doctoral supervisor or in some other mentoring role. Perhaps the best testimony to this is the impressive range of scholars who have made such high-quality contributions to this festschrift. If their work covers a diverse range of topics, the book nonetheless has a certain unity through their often-discernible debt to Parry's method.

In their Introduction the editors reflect on the way recent developments in political history, including the greater focus on culture, language and argument, have left the discipline overly focused on ideas, so that 'discourse is often disconnected from people, and their practice of politics'. They set out their aim to address that gap with this volume. It boasts an impressively eclectic range of contributions, opening with an exercise in comparative history from another leading light of Liberal history, Michael Bentley, who contrasts Parry's approach to British Liberal history with that taken by continental scholars to the Liberal history of their own countries, and concluding with Joanna Lewis's fascinating discussion of the 'curious case' of the installation in Denbigh in 2010 of the Victorian explorer H. M. Stanley and the unsuccessful campaign for its removal in 2020 during the Black Lives Matter protests.

There is not space here to discuss every essay in detail, but there is much to enjoy for any student of nineteenth- and twentieth-century British political history, covering a wide range of personalities and topics. A few stood out particularly for this reviewer. Paul Readman, whose work has included discussion of land and landscape, examines how the great public historian G. M. Trevelyan's love of walking affected his scholarship, particularly in his enthusiasm for visiting battlefields and other historic sites he was writing about. While acknowledging the shortcomings of Trevelyan's work when judged against modern standards of historical writing, Readman commends his engagement with landscape in the course of his work, laments historians' over-reliance on textual evidence and argues that those engaged in historical research need to 'think with our feet as well as our heads'.

Trevelyan also appears in Sir David Cannadine's contribution on the historian's relationship with Winston Churchill. Having much in common as Old Harrovians, scions of notable families, fellow public historians, and for a while holding shared Liberal allegiances, Churchill and Trevelyan enjoyed a social friendship before the First World War, but had an increasingly uneasy relationship in later years. Although both transferred their loyalties to the Conservatives in the 1920s, they did so in very different ways. They were divided most of all by temperament, Trevelyan being serious and high-minded, Churchill a 'raffish buccaneer'; Trevelyan a staunch supporter of Baldwin's quiet patriotism, Churchill a constant thorn in his leader's side. Suspicion of Churchill's irresponsibility led Trevelyan to support the Labour government after the Second World War.

Other raffish and buccaneering figures make their appearance in these pages. David Lloyd George's evolving attitude towards Welsh nationalism is explored by Geraint Thomas, who defends the Welsh Wizard from the charge of opportunism in his evolution from a champion of self-government for Wales in the 1890s to an overtly unionist prime minister. In his later career, he championed cultural nationalism rather than any kind of home rule, making him a distinctively Welsh unionist. Thomas attributes this to his experience as an international statesman, wary of both the potential for aggressive nationalism on the part of smaller nations and, contrariwise, of their tendency to become dependent on larger neighbours. One might reflect that, even if the shift can be rationalised, it is most convenient for a politician to champion devolution to a smaller nation as a rising backbencher from that nation then to resist it as prime minister of an imperial power. Yet perhaps what we learn from Jonathan Parry's work, and therefore those who pay tribute to him, is to avoid such reductive cynicism.

Another rakish figure who emerges with enhanced gravitas is Edward VII, whose religious views and practices are discussed by Michael Ledger-Lomas, who sees Edward's reign as 'more than a naughty interval between two sober sovereigns'. Against a background of declining religious

practice, Edward was punctilious in following the forms of religion, advising a niece to 'always go to church, wherever you are'. He was also somewhat ecumenical in his religious practice, attending Lutheran, Roman Catholic and Eastern orthodox services, as well as a wedding at a synagogue, and showing an interest in 'Ottoman mosques', Buddhist shrines, Hindu temples and Parsi cemeteries. It reads almost as if he anticipated the present monarch's stated wish to be 'defender of faiths'.

By contrast, Tory Prime Minister Lord Salisbury, usually portrayed by historians as principled, aloof and austere, a reluctant practitioner of democracy's vulgarities, emerges from a Tom Crewe, somewhat revisionist, portrayal as a rather skilled self-publicist. Crewe highlights how Salisbury consciously developed a celebrity image, adapting to the need for greater engagement with an expanding electorate by embarking on public speaking tours, being willing to stop and shake hands with admiring supporters at stations where his train had stopped, even letting himself be carried on their shoulders, and allowing his face to be portrayed on badges and medals. His political persona, involving plain speaking and mockery of opponents, was a cultivated contrast to Gladstone's quasi-religious style, which could be portrayed as undisciplined and histrionic. Crewe concludes that Salisbury ended up as an 'archetypal modern politician' whose much-vaunted quest for privacy was the result not of reluctance to meet the public, but of the need for some respite from the crowd, given that he was one of the most famous people in the country.

There is much else worthy of note here, among which I would highlight Kathryn Rix's essay on how the reporting of House of Commons division lists in early Victorian Britain increased the accountability of MPs, Philip Williamson's discussion of how political Nonconformity, active and influential in the Victorian and Edwardian eras, did not so much decline in the 1920s as assimilate into a broader political and religious establishment, and John and Paul Bew's critical account of Gladstone's rationale for adopting the cause of Irish home rule – failure to appreciate the extent of Ulster's opposition and an unrealistic expectation for the landed interest to play a leadership role – building on Parry's own discussion of that subject.

A collection such as this depends on the enthusiasms of contributors, so there are inevitably going to be gaps – this Anglo-Scottish reviewer bristled at the almost complete absence of Scotland from a book on British political life – but it is better to celebrate what is here than lament what is missing. As this reviewer is wont to complain at the exorbitant price of even quite accessible academic writing, it is also worth offering a few mild words of praise to the publishers for making electronic copies of the book available at the reasonably affordable price of £26, even if the cost of a hard copy is an eye-watering £115. Given the quality and readability of the contributions on offer, the volume deserves to gain a readership beyond the academy, and at the ebook price one may hope it will.

Liberalism

Professor Parry's book, part of the Agenda Short Histories series, is consciously aimed at a general readership, but has the weight of the author's scholarship behind it. While the title might suggest an overview of Liberalism as a philosophy or political ideology, its focus is specifically on the British Liberal Party, subsequently the Liberal Democrats, since 1832, the date that he considers marks the inception of a discernible Liberal Party in parliament with a clear political mission. It continues Parry's approach of looking at politics at leadership and parliamentary level – there is not much politics from below here.

It takes as its starting point the Great Reform Act of 1832 which, whatever its shortcomings, initiated a political situation where parliament was expected to address and resolve public

grievances. In the short term, it led to the abolition of slavery, municipal, education and penal reform, as well as measures to remove legal disabilities from Catholics and Nonconformists. In the longer term, it meant parliament and government had to engage with and accommodate public opinion. This did not lead to an uninterrupted programme of active and beneficent change. Palmerston became the dominant political figure during the 1850s by adopting an assertively Liberal foreign policy combined with a cautious domestic agenda that offered efficient, disinterested government, but little in the way of reform. Nonetheless, a national conversation continued, led by different elements of the Liberal Party, and a further measure of parliamentary reform in 1867 gave rise to a further activist administration under Gladstone.

In many ways, the dominant theme of this book, which will be no surprise to those familiar with Parry's other work, is a refutation of the idea that the Liberal Party, even in its Victorian heyday, was a party of laissez-faire or unbridled free markets. Rather it was a champion of reform, whose consistent guiding light was a suspicion of and hostility to excessive concentrations of power. Parry points out that, from Sir Robert Peel to Liz Truss, genuine laissez-faire ideologues have found a happier home in the Conservative Party, which is less susceptible to pressure from marginalised groups. On that basis alone, this book should be compulsory reading for Liberals who disown their nineteenth-century political heritage and for those on the political right who misrepresent then attempt to appropriate it.

The book divides into two sections, the longer first part covering the period up to 1914 when the Liberals were one of the two main parties, the second covering the 1920s decline and subsequent struggle for survival then recovery up to the present. On the great question of the decline of the Liberal Party and the rise of Labour, Parry concludes that Liberals were in good shape to fight, and even likely to win, the expected 1915 general election had the First World War not intervened. He attributes the party's decline to a fundamental change in the national political conversation, in the wake of the war, from being essentially about political and institutional reforms to social and economic questions, post-war reconstruction, the role of the state in the economy, and class-based conflict between capital and labour.

Parry's summary in just under fifty pages of the party's history in the 100 years since its decline to third-party status is necessarily sketchy, but he highlights those issues on which Liberals have continued to have relevance, in particular electoral and constitutional reform, devolution, human rights, civil liberties and European integration. These tended to be niche issues, however, and he acknowledges the party's difficulties in carving out a distinctive economic position, highlighting also that, even in the successful 2024 election, the Liberal Democrats shied away from bolder statements of intent about national renewal. It appears to leave hanging in the air a question about how far the party is simply about winning and holding seats in areas where it is better placed than Labour to beat the Tories and how far it is able to articulate a broader vision and sense of purpose.

There are elements of Parry's interpretation that readers, including this one, will disagree with. In my view, he is not quite right to dismiss the *Orange Book* episode as a fuss about nothing and the work of 'provocateurs'. While there may have been an element of that, there were

legitimate criticisms that could be made of the Liberal Democrats' attitude to public services during the Charles Kennedy era, and possibly through to the present. The party could at times appear as a rather old-Labourish, uncritical defender of the public sector, reluctant to disagree with, for example, teaching and medical unions. This attitude was parodied by the Lib Dems' semi-official satirist as 'Liberals against choice'. It was not only hard-core libertarians or professional provocateurs who took the party to task for being excessively statist.[4]

Whichever way, though, this is an excellent, thought provoking yet accessible introduction to Liberal history in Britain over the past two centuries, which can act as both a primer for the uninitiated and an entry point to those who want to read more of Parry's work, and indeed that of the many other historians who are cited and acknowledged here. Both individually and together, these two volumes are highly commended as important contributions to the study of Liberal, and indeed British, political history. ■

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Liberalism and Socialism

Matthew McManus, *The Political Theory of Liberal Socialism* (Routledge, 2025)
Review by William Wallace

What's the difference between a social liberal and a liberal socialist? Matthew McManus's scholarly book claims John Stuart Mill as 'the first liberal socialist'. He develops his theme by examining Marx's critique of liberalism, the writings of Keynes, C. B. Macpherson, John Rawls, Chantal Mouffe, Norberto Bobbio and many others, in what is presented as a work of 'retrieval' of a neglected thread in the history of political thought.

This is very much a book written within the North American intellectual context – by a young Canadian teaching at the University of Michigan – which liberals in Britain and the European continent will find stimulating for that reason. American and Canadian authors are examined in detail, with European thinkers woven into the framework of North American debates. 'Cold War liberalism', McManus argues, dismissed Marxian analysis of entrenched economic power in capitalist economies, condemning all Marxist theories as authoritarian and statist. C. B. Macpherson's critique of 'possessive individualism' rightly criticised American liberalism's neglect of the importance of 'the developmental ethic' and the social context in which human capacities develop, as a necessary balance to 'the acquisitive ethic'. McManus, who describes himself as 'effectively a Marxist Rawlsian or Rawlsian Marxist', sets out to rescue 'left liberalism' from an overemphasis on individual identity and culture, while persuading radicals and Marxists to come together by rediscovering the overlapping roots of liberalism and socialism.

He thus presents an alternative history of political thought to that taught in British universities. He starts, like others, with Hobbes and Locke, underlining the revolutionary implications of liberal ideas, and the contradiction between Locke's defence of property and support for (political) revolution. He then moves on to Thomas Paine, who had more impact on the American colonies than in Britain. He