

*Origins of the Party*  
by Malcolm Baines

John Vincent:

*The Formation of the British Liberal Party 1857-68*

First published in 1966, this is one of the few great historical classics dealing with the Liberal Party. Despite its age, it is a must for anyone interested in Victorian Liberalism.

As the book of the thesis it marries detail with a fascinating discursive essay which successfully brings together all the different aspects of the mid-nineteenth century Liberal Party; party organisation, the parliamentary party, the rank and file and vignettes of some of the chief Liberal leaders of the decade.

It also still has the capacity to provide refreshing and thought-provoking insights. Vincent stresses the importance of voting Liberal as part of the newly enfranchised craftsman's striving for self-improvement. He also emphasises the importance of a shared perception of history to these Liberal voters in which Bunyan and Cromwell become radical heroes on whose shoulders they stood. By contrast, the parliamentary Liberal party is shown not to be split between radicals and cautious whigs, but to be composed of local time-serving notables; lawyers, factory owners and gentry, lacking in energy and force.

Vincent also draws out the difference and similarities between the various Liberal leaders. Bright is shown to have pursued the destruction of aristocratic privilege, but with little interest in or capacity for social reform. Palmerston's success depended on parliamentary support, administrative expertise and the approval of the 'top ten thousand'. Of particular interest, Vincent concludes that the key difference between the whigs and Gladstone was not policy, but who they appealed to. Gladstone's success rested on how, amplified by the provincial press, he presented the hope of justice in an oppressive world, thereby creating a revolution in rhetoric and public expectation.

The book concludes by judging the Liberals on the 'Condition of England' question, which is the main area where nineteenth century Liberals have been attacked in this century. The Conservatives had nothing better to offer, he considers, while the Liberals believed that the familiar policies of peace, retrenchment and free trade would remedy the 'Condition' in themselves. However, what the Liberals achieved more than anything was the political education of the public in the 1860s, ultimately creating those high expectations by which they themselves have been judged.

*A Real Drag*  
by Tony Little

The break up of the Liberal Party in 1886 over Home Rule for Ireland brought to an end the dominance established after 1832. It created an extraordinary alliance between Whigs, Unionist Radicals and Tories. It cost Liberalism the inevitable successor to Gladstone, in Lord Hartington and its foremost

populariser of social policy in Joe Chamberlain. By coincidence, new biographies of both men have just been published.

Patrick Jackson:

*The Last of the Whigs*  
(Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1994)

Lord Hartington, later 8th Duke of Devonshire, came from a solid Whig family, among the greatest land owners in Britain (and Ireland), with family ties to many of the major figures on the Liberal benches. Once he had decided to take up politics, it was inevitable that he would have a leading part but it was also a role he deserved by his administrative ability. In so many ways, Hartington embodied Whiggism - good, disinterested government; willing, reluctantly, to recognise the need for progress; but protective of the interests of his class.

He entered Parliament in 1857 and took office in 1863, reaching the cabinet in Gladstone's government of 1868-74. When Gladstone retired, hurt, in 1875, he assumed the leadership of the party in the Commons, where he had to put up with considerable insubordination from the Grand Old Man.

Queen Victoria offered Hartington the premiership in 1880 but he refused when Gladstone made clear his unwillingness to serve in a subordinate capacity. He was an increasingly unhappy member of the Liberal Government up to 1885. It is reputed that every member of this cabinet offered to resign at least once. Hartington's principal disputes were with the vacillating foreign policy, especially over the occupation of Egypt and the Sudan.

He was also unhappy with the threat to property posed by Gladstone's Irish land reforms and Home Rule for Ireland. Consequently, he refused to serve in the Liberal government which went down to defeat over Home Rule. His stand rallied a Whig rebellion to which his old adversary Chamberlain supplied a voice, personality and distinctive policy. In the immediate Home Rule crisis, the Tory leader Salisbury offered to serve under Hartington but he again refused the premiership and settled for sustaining the Tories in office. Thereafter he remained an ally of the Tories, taking up office under Salisbury in 1895 but breaking with them over Free Trade in 1903.

Hartington's was a complex personality disguised under a laid back, languid air. He professed boredom with politics but was nothing without it. The heir to an immense estate, he lived on a parental allowance for most of his life. A close friend of the Prince of Wales and his 'fast' social set with whom he pursued shooting and horse racing, he could seem ill at ease in social gatherings. When Chamberlain attacked him as a drag on the wheel of progress, he appropriated the criticism as a boast.

In the years since his death, Hartington's reputation has lived under the shadow of Gladstone, Chamberlain and Salisbury. Jackson's is the first full biography for 80 years. It rehearses the major incidents of the career and yet it does so without illuminating the personality or giving insight into the turning points of his life. An expensive disappointment.