

Morley and the Liberal Party

Patrick Jackson, *Morley of Blackburn* (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2012)

Reviewed by **Dr Luke Blaxill**

JOHN MORLEY (1838–1923) was an important if occasionally overlooked figure in late-Victorian Liberal politics. He was a genuine intellectual who achieved high repute in both the literary and political spheres without quite attaining the first rank in either. Morley was editor of the influential progressive journal, *The Fortnightly Review* for fifteen years, between 1867 and 1882, as well as *The Pall Mall Gazette* in the early 1880s. He was also a prolific writer of articles and books, of which the best remembered is undoubtedly his epic biography of his political mentor, friend, and hero, William Ewart Gladstone. Despite his reputation as an intellectual (especially as a Millite classical liberal and anti-imperialist, with controversial agnostic and even anti-religious views), Morley was also a strong party man. He used his positions in the literary world to help advance the interests of the Liberal Party, especially its radical wing where his sympathies firmly lay.

Much of Morley's parliamentary career, which began when he was returned for Newcastle in 1883 (at the comparatively mature age of forty-five), coincided with that unhappy two-decade period in Liberal Party history between the great home rule split of 1886 and the party's re-ascent from 1906 under New Liberalism. The Liberals – shorn of Hartington, Goschen, Chamberlain, Forster, and others – were in opposition for seventeen of these twenty years. From 1886, Morley was one of the few heavyweight Liberals on a sparsely populated deck and, like his contemporary Harcourt, devoted his best years to dogged opposition. He was Gladstone's first lieutenant in the doomed crusade to enact Irish home rule, and was also notable for advocacy of temperance reform, and his strong attack on what he saw as the pig-headed militaristic jingoism of Salisbury and Chamberlain, especially during the Boer War.

Under Campbell-Bannerman's government formed in 1905,

Morley became Secretary of State for India and played a central role alongside viceroy Lord Minto in establishing a fledgling democratic government. In his final years in frontbench politics, before resigning over the declaration of war with Germany in 1914, Morley expressed concern over some of the socialistic aspects of the emerging New Liberalism, especially Lloyd George's People's Budget, and was critical of the early Labour Party. Philosophically, Morley remained to the end very much a mid-Victorian radical inspired by the legacy of Cobden, Mill, and Bright, and was never quite at ease with the statist direction that progressive politics was increasingly taking. Morley's private life was a troubled one. Fragile physical and mental health, a challenging marriage, and prolonged quarrels with family members and political peers (especially Chamberlain and Harcourt) certainly did his career no favours.

Overall, it might be said that Morley was not a man of new ideas, but excelled in adapting and expressing those of others. He was a politician of the moment who was a central engine in progressive politics of his era, achieving fame and high repute as a statesman, writer, platform orator, and parliamentary debater. But somehow his life and deeds did not linger in popular memory. His books (with the exception of his *Life of Gladstone*) were seldom read or reprinted after his death, and he inspired precious few statues, busts, and paintings. In *Morley of Blackburn*, Patrick Jackson has continued his commendable mission of breathing new life into under-studied and passed-over Victorian statesmen like Morley. This is book is the latest in his series of biographies (the others being on Lord Hartington, W. E. Forster, and William and Lewis Harcourt).

Morley of Blackburn is the first biography of Morley for more than 40 years – the last being D. A. Hamer's *Liberal Intellectual in Politics* (Oxford, 1968). It is a dense and thoroughly evidenced volume of

nearly 600 pages and some 1,500 footnotes; Jackson draws upon Morley's private papers, correspondence, and diaries, many of which have only recently become available at the Bodleian Library. The book's other major claim to originality is the detailed consideration it gives to three aspects of Morley's life which are dealt with unsatisfactorily in other accounts – namely his literary career, his involvement with the Irish home rule campaign, and his close relationship with Gladstone.

There is much to commend in *Morley of Blackburn*. Its treatment of Morley and Irish home rule (to which three chapters and over 100 pages are devoted) is thorough and authoritative, as is its analysis of the impact of the writing of the *Life of Gladstone* on Morley himself, and on Liberal politics more generally when it was published in 1903. It also deserves credit for its close attention to Morley's relationship with his Newcastle constituency between 1883 and 1895, and his role in electoral politics at the grassroots and nationally. This is unusual in biographies of British statesmen, which routinely neglect or even entirely ignore elections

MORLEY OF BLACKBURN



A Literary and Political Biography
of John Morley

PATRICK JACKSON

and electioneering in favour of a narrow focus on high-level political manoeuvre, doctrine, and the relationships between elites at Westminster (the so-called 'high political' approach).

Most substantially, *Morley of Blackburn* challenges Hamer's rather critical interpretation, recasting Morley as a more principled and less self-interested figure. His legacy, Jackson argues, was as an influencer and moulder of Liberal opinion, especially during the barren years of opposition, whose impact was greater than his seemingly meagre record of public achievements seem to suggest. Morley's suspicion of government intervention to seek rapid fixes to social problems also emerges more favourably today than it did in works written in the more statist and sociologically influenced 1960s. When Hamer was writing, it was easy to see Morley as a classical throwback and an obstruction to the march of progressivism. While Jackson doesn't do enough to conclusively reclaim Morley's reputation, he has certainly reopened the debate.

The book, however, is certainly not without its shortcomings. The most major is that it contains little that is especially new. The impact of Morley's newly released diaries and papers is a little disappointing. Given that the book (like most biographies from this era) is overwhelmingly evidenced by politician's private papers and correspondence, the 120 footnotes that Morley's papers generate throughout is greatly outweighed by references to several other established collections which have already been heavily mined by historians. The result is that, while an occasional interesting insight and quotation adds the odd jewel to the prose, the Morley that emerges is mostly a very familiar figure. Indeed, some recent biographies (such as Jenkins' work on Gladstone and Kuhn's on Disraeli) have explored the personality and character of the public men who shaped the political landscape of Britain and the empire in this definitive and fascinating age. Despite access to the private papers, and writing that they 'tell us a good deal about their subject's human weakness' Jackson does relatively little to bring the human side of Morley to life. The personality, character, and emotions of

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a clearly complex and fragile man very much take a back seat to a traditional examination of his public acts and political writings.

Partly because of this, many will find *Morley of Blackburn* a heavy read. It is largely a traditional work of 'high politics'. There is nothing wrong with that in itself (indeed, high political works are subjected to much unfair criticism) but the book also relies on a strong pre-existing knowledge of the era, doing relatively little to illuminate and explain the issues and controversies that Morley wrestled with, or the wider political world that he operated in.

Overall, *Morley of Blackburn* is an authoritative and mature work of scholarship, and can reasonably claim to be the most complete and satisfactory biography currently

available. However, it is a dense and occasionally over-focused study that will (especially at this price) be of most interest to professional historians and postgraduate students. Jackson certainly deserves considerable credit for writing an ambitious and thorough book that has helped reclaim Morley's reputation. But a lighter touch and a broader focus would have helped both contextualise and bring to life this important but rather forgotten statesmen for a wider audience.

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Don't buy this book!

Jesse Russell and Ronald Cohn, *Wallace Lawler* (Bookvika Publishing, 2012)

Reviewed by **Graham Lippiatt**

DO NOT BUY this book. You may think you are getting a proper biography of Wallace Lawler, the Liberal MP who won the Birmingham Ladywood by-election in 1969. You are not. What you do get is the information about Lawler which appears on Wikipedia, the free online encyclopaedia. This amounts to the first six pages of this publication and there are a further two pages about the Ladywood by-election itself. The rest of the book consists of other Wikipedia material about Birmingham, parliament, Lawler's predecessor and successor as Ladywood MP and finally, making up most of the content, the Wikipedia pages about the United Kingdom – all with pages and pages of printed notes and sources. To repeat, under no circumstances pay money for this book. Everything it offers has been cloned from Wikipedia, which is of course free online.

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