

REVIEWS

the remainder of the century, depicted largely as the helpless victim of circumstance: in the 1920s there was a 'two-pronged pincer assault launched by its political opponents'; in the 1930s the Liberal Nationals were seduced away by the Conservatives; in the Second World War 'it is doubtful whether the party derived any long-term advantage from its occupation of office'; in the 1950s it was squeezed by Butskellism; and even the subsequent revival was built upon 'a purely negative response to one or both of the two leading parties ... Psephologists have identified a relatively small "core" Liberal vote ... and a far larger "sympathy" vote.' There were no real achievements to show for the Lib-Lab Pact, and whilst the Liberal Democrats position themselves to the left of Labour, their voters and target seats are primarily composed of disillusioned Tories.

This pessimism struggles to explain the gradual nature of the Liberal recovery, which as Dutton acknowledges, saw the party in 2001 gain 'its best parliamentary tally since 1929, and the first time ever that the party had increased its vote after a full-term Labour government.' Dutton makes magnificent work of illuminating the Liberals' decline, but accounts for their revival by a series of misjudgements on the parts of their opponents which is now becoming too extended to be credible alone: the Conservatives could have killed the Liberals off in the 1950s but did not, and the Grimond myth sustained them in the 1960s; the main parties polarised and gave them space in the 1970s and 1980s, and although the Ashdown-Blair Project of the 1990s brought short-term results, and awaits a fuller retrospective assessment, 'it remains questionable whether even a fully committed Blair could have taken his party with him.' Underplayed in all of this – though by no means entirely missing – is a recognition that Liberal leaders and activists

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played the limited hand they had better than was acknowledged at the time: the 1950s, for instance, did not simply, as Dutton suggests, 'witness Liberalism moving distinctly to the right' under the influence of Churchill and the Liberal Nationals, but a rational strategy for survival in the pressing circumstances Dutton himself describes so well. Many Liberals, of course, remained profoundly anti-Tory, which is part of why the pressure never paid off.

This is something of a selective account, since Dutton acknowledges in places the 'continuity of Liberal principles', the role of 'key figures ... who managed to convince at least themselves that the Liberal cause was not lost', and the shrewd electoral tactics of 1997 and 2001. It is the very mixed nature of Dutton's explanation which is frustrating to a reader seeking patterns, and it is interesting that

Dutton devotes most of his Conclusion to an assessment of the Liberal Democrats' current position rather than to the search for a single theme in their past. Dutton's place in the debate emerges slowly, but it would be too harsh to use of him Robert Frost's definition of a Liberal as 'a man too good-natured to take his own side in an argument'; he is at worst measured, possibly cautious in his expression of his case. Perhaps he is right, and we are so deafened to the heavy-metal sound of partisanship in Liberal history that we struggle to hear the more elaborate melodies of reasoned, even balanced, argument. Certainly, this will justly be listened to for a long time.

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'Nothing talked of, thought of, dreamt of, but Reform'

Edward Pearce: *Reform! The Fight for the 1832 Reform Act* (London: Pimlico, 2004)

Reviewed by **Dr Kathryn Rix**

Nothing talked of, thought of, dreamt of, but Reform. Every creature that one meets asks, 'What is said now? How will it go? What is the last news? What do you think? And so it is from morning till night, in the streets, in the clubs, and in private houses.' Charles Greville's diary entry for 7 March 1831 recorded the excitement generated by the Whig Government's introduction into the Commons of the measure that was eventually to become the 1832 or 'Great' Reform Act. This legislative landmark in the evolution of the modern British political system had two key elements:

it redrew the electoral map through the extensive redistribution of seats, removing 'rotten boroughs' and giving representation to growing industrial towns such as Leeds, Manchester and Birmingham for the first time; and it extended the franchise to a larger, albeit still limited, number of voters. It was a measure which took a tortuous fifteen months to pass, and Edward Pearce's *Reform! The Fight for the 1832 Reform Act* provides a vivid and engaging account of the events of this period.

Pearce sets the scene with a chapter outlining some of the defects of the pre-1832 system:

the control of seats by aristocratic patrons, or by borough-mongers who sold them to the highest bidder; the limited extent of the franchise; the survival of rotten boroughs such as Old Sarum with a mere seven electors; the over-representation of areas such as Cornwall, contrasted with the under-representation of northern industrial towns such as Oldham. His depiction of 'the old system' is enlivened by examples from contemporary fiction, including the Eatanswill election from *The Pickwick Papers* alongside extracts from less well-known works. The chapter on the demise of Wellington's Tory ministry – the Duke having personally pledged to resist Reform – adeptly conveys the fluidity of party politics during this period.

The bulk of Pearce's account is devoted to a detailed description of the key events of the Reform crisis: the heated debates following the introduction of the new Whig ministry's first Reform Bill; the passing of its second reading in the Commons with a majority of just one vote; the general election of 1831; the Lords' rejection of Reform and the ensuing riots in Bristol, Nottingham and elsewhere; William IV's prevarication on the question of creating additional peers to force the bill through the Lords; the (temporary) resignation of the Whig ministry; and finally a mass exodus of Tory peers from the Lords when they realised that they could obstruct Reform no longer. Although Pearce provides an extremely lucid and coherent narrative, the addition of a chronology would be a useful aid to the reader in understanding this complex sequence of events.

As befits a former parliamentary sketch-writer, Pearce puts the debates in the Commons and the Lords centre stage, with extensive quotations from *Hansard* throughout. He skilfully evokes the atmosphere of the debating chamber, from dramatic events such as William IV's hasty arrival to dissolve Parliament in

1831 to quieter moments such as the second reading of the government's second Reform Bill in the Commons, which Pearce deftly summarises as 'not much more than an exercise in statutory grumbling, a limping jog around a required track with none of the racecourse buzz attending the contest of the first bill' (p. 160). He emphasises the extensive use which MPs made of historical precedents in framing their arguments, and he is careful to give credence to the reasoning behind the anti-Reform case, and to illustrate the diversity of opinions among both pro- and anti-Reformers. It is perhaps because Pearce is so adept at conveying the mood of the nineteenth-century legislators that the more recent historical and cultural allusions with which his text is peppered – ranging from Franklin D. Roosevelt to *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* – tend to jar. There may, however, be some readers who find that such references lend additional colour to the narrative.

The author's parliamentary sketch-writing skills also show in his depiction of the personalities involved in the debates on Reform. He begins with a series of potted biographies of 'the cast': on the Whig side, Lords Althorp and Durham, Earl Grey and Henry Brougham; on the Tory side, Wellington, Robert Peel, John Wilson Croker and Sir Edward Knatchbull; and representing popular politics, the radical Henry Hunt and Thomas Attwood, leader of the Birmingham Political Union. These entertaining pen portraits give a good sense of the characters of some of the leading protagonists, although in some cases – both in these biographies and later in the book – Pearce is tempted to include rather too many asides, which tend to detract from the main flow of the narrative, all the more so when encumbered with unfortunate typographical errors such as the reference to Dickens's *Bleak Horse* (p. 9).

The omission of Lord John Russell from those deemed worthy of a biographical sketch will seem particularly odd to historians of the Liberal Party, given that he was responsible for introducing the Reform Bill into the Commons, and had been a proponent of Reform since the 1820s. Little more than two pages are devoted to the Cabinet's framing of the initial bill, a process which Pearce describes as 'haphazard' (p. 69). This may well be a fair assessment, but he could usefully have devoted more space to consideration of how the measure was shaped not simply by expediency, but also by a long-standing and principled commitment to Reform on the part of Whigs such as Grey and Russell.

Pearce's account of the debates on the Reform Act shows these leading individuals in action: Grey, the reforming aristocrat, endeavouring to win over the Lords; Wellington, determined to resist popular pressure; Lord Chancellor Brougham, 'clever, explosive, devious' (p. 189), a skilful debater (allegedly with



the assistance of mulled port on one occasion). However, Pearce also considers the contribution that less well-known figures made to the debates. He cites to great effect the speech of John Hawkins, a Whig backbencher, dismissing the arguments of 'that class of protagonists ... who always entertain a sincere conviction at any given moment that the present is not the right moment for the discussion of this question, and they arrive at such conviction by this ingenious dilemma. When the people are clamorous for Reform, they tell us that we ought not to concede such a measure to the demands of popular turbulence; and when the people are silent, that silence is proof of indifference and therefore the measure need not be passed' (p. 134).

While Pearce focuses primarily on Westminster, the extra-parliamentary activities of what Hawkins termed 'the people' and what others referred to as 'the populace' or, less sympathetically, 'the mob', are given their place in his account. Pearce's eye for a telling detail – the rough-sharpening of their swords by the Birmingham garrison (so as to inflict more serious wounds on would-be rioters), the request for fifty copies of the Birmingham Political Union's rule-book (so that similar organisations could be set up elsewhere to campaign for Reform) – means that the relatively limited attention he gives to popular politics is nonetheless effective in conveying the mood of the time. His citations from Charles Greville's diary are particularly revealing, and indicate that the forthcoming publication of an abridged version of Greville's diaries (edited by Pearce) will be a fertile source for historians of this period.

Such are the strengths of this lively and interesting work. Whether it greatly advances historical knowledge on the subject is another question. This is certainly not the book for those wanting detailed statistics on the number of voters enfranchised by

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the 1832 Reform Act, or a roll-call of the constituencies disfranchised and created. Pearce's analysis of the impact of the Act amounts to less than a page. He fails to mention key innovations such as the creation of an electoral register, which had a crucial impact on the future development of party organisation. He also ignores other elements of the Act which have attracted more recent interest from historians, notably the issue of 'gender', with the 1832 Act being the first legislation to define the franchise as specifically male.¹ Those wishing to understand points such as the distinction between the potwalloper and the scot-and-lot franchises (which Pearce conflates into one category) or the finer implications of the Chandos clause (entirely absent from this study, although the source of some controversy among academic historians) will also not find much help here. Nor does Pearce engage with any of the secondary literature on the Act, although ending as he does with Sydney Smith's declaration that

'they had accomplished a very great good' (p. 302), it is clear that his account fits in with more recent work which has tended to reassert the significance of 1832 in the face of earlier efforts to downplay its impact.² Nevertheless, for those wanting a readable account of the events surrounding the passage of the 1832 Reform Act, Pearce's work still has much to commend it.

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- 1 See for example Anna Clark, 'Gender, class and the constitution: franchise reform in England, 1832–1928', in James Vernon (ed.), *Re-reading the Constitution: New narratives in the political history of England's long nineteenth century* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 230–53.
- 2 See, for example, Derek Beales, 'The Electorate Before and After 1832: The right to vote, and the opportunity', *Parliamentary History*, 11:1 (1992), pp. 139–50.

The double Duchess and a violently moderate man

Henry Vane: *Affair Of State: A Biography of the 8th Duke and Duchess of Devonshire* (Peter Owen Publishers, 2004)

Reviewed by **Tony Little**

The 8th Duke of Devonshire embodied late Whig politics; he led the Liberal Party for five years and served in both Liberal and Conservative governments. The Duke was only man to be offered the premiership three times, without taking the office, and Henry Vane argues he deserved a fourth chance at the opening of the twentieth century. Louise van Alten was from one of the oldest Hanoverian noble families and fashioned

a career as a British political hostess, with a beauty that won her the hand of two dukes. Yet, outside the circle of historians of the nineteenth century, they are largely forgotten.

In 1852, the twenty-year-old Louise married Viscount Mandeville, who succeeded as Duke of Manchester in 1855. Despite their rank, the Manchesters were not among the richest in the land. The Duke does not appear to have had strong political