

## REVIEWS

career, he presents a much fuller picture of his character and private life than previous authors. In particular he offers a detailed and sympathetic discussion of Rosebery's sexuality, with reference to the assumption that he was homosexual. The subject went almost unmentioned by Rhodes James who referred to one of the key figures, Viscount Drumlanrig, in a solitary footnote. There is a great deal of circumstantial evidence for Rosebery's homosexuality, and it was believed that as Foreign Secretary and Prime Minister he had a relationship with his private secretary, Drumlanrig. This was a time when Drumlanrig's father, the obnoxious Marquess of Queensbury, was in full pursuit of Oscar Wilde because of his connection with his younger son, Lord Alfred Douglas. In his book, *The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde* (2003), Neil McKenna argued that the reason the authorities pursued Wilde was to satisfy the increasingly unpredictable Queensbury who was threatening to expose Rosebery himself. McKinstry, however, firmly rejects the idea that Rosebery was homosexual, though his counter-arguments

are by no means convincing. He is justified in claiming that there is no unequivocal evidence in the correspondence and diaries. Rosebery, who notoriously refused to allow anyone to open his mail, presumably destroyed anything incriminating. On the other hand, it is equally impossible to prove that Rosebery was *heterosexual*. No doubt he married and had children, but so did Lewis Harcourt and Lord Beauchamp, other notable homosexual Liberal politicians. In the present state of our knowledge one can only advise readers to compare McKinstry's discussion of the evidence with the diametrically opposed view presented by McKenna and come to their own conclusions.

*Martin Pugh was Professor of Modern British History at Newcastle University until 1999, and Research Professor in History at Liverpool John Moores University from 1999 to 2002. He has written ten books on aspects of nineteenth and twentieth century history and is on the board of BBC History magazine. He is currently writing a social history of Britain between the wars.*

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to the Whig-Liberal ascendancy which was to dominate British politics from 1830 to 1886.

This is an eloquent and largely persuasive argument. Hay's strongest suit is his attempt to balance the high political strategy of the great aristocratic families of the Whig party with the increasingly vibrant sphere of extra-parliamentary politics. Indeed, his chief justification for basing the narrative around the Scottish Whig MP, barrister and publicist, Henry Brougham, is the fact that Brougham was the figure who most effectively managed to straddle both these worlds. While the Whigs had failed to establish a strong and charismatic leadership in the wake of Charles James Fox's death and the collapse of the Whig-dominated Talents Ministry in 1807, Brougham's national political strategy made him an increasingly influential figure in the gradual revival of the party's fortunes from 1810. Hay's chief contention is that Brougham harnessed the vibrant political energies of various provincial interest groups to the party politics of Westminster. Where the Whig party had become somewhat hamstrung by its failure to appeal beyond its aristocratic and metropolitan core, Brougham endeavoured to reach out across a range of concerns and allegiances – merchants, manufacturers in the growing towns of the north, religious dissenters and anti-slavery campaigners foremost among them. Herein, among these disparate and increasingly influential sections of British society, lay the mainstay of the Liberal Party's support for most of the nineteenth century.

This book expertly manages to fuse most of the recent trends of nineteenth-century British history historiography into a balanced and illuminating study. Hay's mastery of the high political intrigues and tensions among the leading Whigs does not prevent him from elucidating the formation of the loose, but cogent governing strategy which

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## Transforming the Whigs

William Anthony Hay: *The Whig Revival, 1808–1830* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), in the series *Studies in Modern History* (J. C. D. Clark ed.)

Reviewed by **John Bew**

**W**illiam Anthony Hay's study of the transformation of the fortunes of the British Whig party in the first three decades of the nineteenth century is a welcome contribution to an area of British history which has long been in need of serious reappraisal. In recent years, the work of Boyd Hilton and others has thrown much light on the economic, religious and political dimensions of the

dominant Tory governments of the period. But much less is known about the Whig opposition in these inglorious years in which it was almost continually out of office for nearly five decades. By retracing the workings and strategy of the Whig party at the height of the wilderness years, Hay contends that the changes which occurred within the party from 1808 to 1830 made a significant contribution

was to prove so important to the Whigs after 1830. He restores the purely political without discounting recent literature on the importance of religion, popular political discourse and the language of identity and class. If anything, he has undersold his own achievement in demonstrating how the emergence of a wider British national identity was intrinsically linked to the growth of political consciousness outside Westminster and the exposure of constituency politics to national debates.

While the central thesis is sound, some additional observations might be made. The assumption that the Tories were standing still – relying on patronage, vested interests, or the support of the Crown – when the Whigs were gobbling up popular support, needs clarification. To a significant extent, the fiscal rationalisation under the ‘liberal Tory’ government of the 1820s demonstrated that the Tories were also making important strides in answering some of the most potent of the radical critiques of the previous forty years.

William Anthony Hay

## The Whig Revival, 1808–1830



Indeed, it remains to be seen how successful the Whig ‘revival’ would have been viewed if the Tory government of the late 1820s had not ripped itself apart over the contentious issue of Catholic emancipation. As Hay shows, Brougham suffered several electoral setbacks in his attempt to defeat leading Tories with the force of the press and popular politics alone; the Tory intellectual Thomas Croker of the *Quarterly Review* was a serious and respected rival. Ultimately, it was events beyond the control of the Whigs – above all, the implosion of the Tory governing coalition in the late 1820s, precipitated by the death of Lord Liverpool and a political crisis in Ireland – which brought the Whigs back into power in 1830. Brougham himself, as Hay notes, was unprepared to wait around for the Whig cause to gain enough independent momentum to form an administration in its own right. Indeed, he irritated some of his more purist colleagues by advocating a compromise coalition with the less unpalatable elements in the Tory party. Perhaps the influence of George Canning’s short-lived Tory–Whig coalition government of 1827 on the future development of what was to become the Liberal Party is a theme worthy of further investigation.

While Hay is also successful in establishing Brougham as a key link man between the party politics of Westminster and the interests of various provincial groups, it should be emphasised that this was a two-way process. Brougham’s central significance was as a conduit for, rather than a leader of, extra-parliamentary public opinion. During the years of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, many radicals and dissenters had become disillusioned by the parliamentary process and distant from a Whig party which they saw as opportunistic and aloof. Crucially, these groups had to show themselves willing to be conciliated before the Whigs could attempt to

attract their support. Notwithstanding Brougham’s achievement, then, the precursor of any Whig ‘revival’ was the decision of leading radicals such as Major John Cartwright and Sir Francis Burdett to revive the dormant policy of putting pressure on Parliament from inside and outside Westminster. It was only in this context that Brougham’s pioneering and popularising strategy of ‘petition and debate’ really came into its own.

With recent publications on Admiral Nelson and the fight for the free press, the history of the early nineteenth century is now back in vogue. William Antony Hay has simultaneously produced a valuable contribution to the scholarship of that period and taken a big step forward in uncovering the political foundations of the Liberal ascendancy of nineteenth-century Britain. This is a book that needed to be written and Hay has done an admirable job.

*John Bew is a Junior Research Fellow at Peterhouse, Cambridge. He is the author of Belfast Politics: Thoughts on the British Constitution (University College Dublin Press, 2005).*

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