

## 'Competition, individualism, responsibility, invention and patents'

Tony Holden, *Holden's Ghosts: The Life and times of Sir Isaac Holden – inventor, woolcomber and radical Liberal MP* (Kindle edition, 2015)

Review by **Simone Warr**

**H**OLDEN'S GHOSTS IS a biography of the Victorian, radical liberal, Nonconformist, wool-combing magnate Sir Isaac Holden, written by his descendant Tony Holden; in order to avoid confusion I will henceforth refer to Isaac Holden as 'Sir Isaac'.

The 'ghosts' of the title refer to a local Bradford nickname for the male night workers employed in Sir Isaac's factories on a casual, evening basis. Such workers, along with the regular day workers, endured extremely harsh conditions, being poorly paid and often working in temperatures of 120 degrees Fahrenheit for a sixty-hour week. Women continued at work to within a week of childbirth, commonly returning just two weeks afterwards. The very title of the book expresses Sir Isaac's seemingly paradoxical nature, readily acknowledged by the author; for whilst he was a self-made man of humble origins who prided himself on his philanthropy and political attempts to extend the franchise, Sir Isaac also later opposed factory reforms such as the Nine Hours Bill, which hoped to reduce the working hours of women and children from sixty to fifty-four hours a week. Further, the press reported that he lived simply, whilst occupying a magnificent Italianate villa, surrounded by extensive parklands, in the vicinity of dire poverty.

However, Holden's analysis of Sir Isaac's core beliefs indicates that little paradox existed in reality, for like many of the manufacturing aristocracy of the time, Sir Isaac's central beliefs were based on individualism and free trade. 'The animus of my public life in politics,' the author quotes Sir Isaac as saying, consisted of 'rights, liberty and independence; collectivism would destroy liberty tomorrow without individualism.' And Sir Isaac stated that his business philosophy comprised 'competition, individualism, responsibility, invention and patents.' Thus Sir Isaac's political and philanthropic interests, such as voting reforms, Irish home rule, the disestablishment of the church, and national secular education were entirely in line with his prized notion of individual liberty, along with a degree of equality of opportunity. Equality, in eventual individual

status and wealth, need not necessarily follow this ideal.

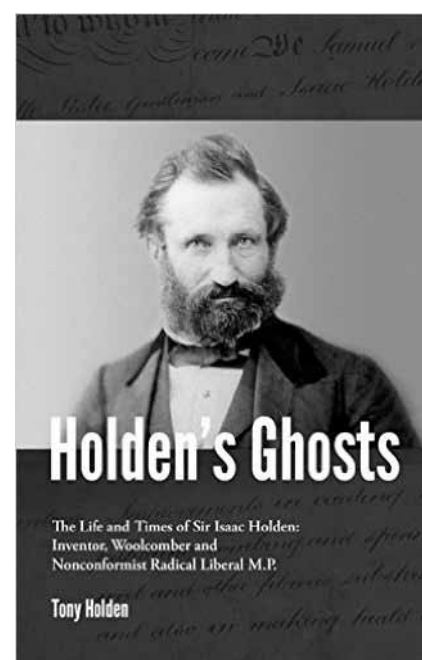
According to Holden, Sir Isaac justified the harsh working conditions and wages, current during his lifetime, by adhering to Adam Smith and David Ricardo's Wages Fund Theory. This theory contended that a limited pot of potential wealth or profit exists, with shares in this diminishing proportionately with the number of workers it has to be shared amongst. However, as the author points out, no final pot actually existed, and wages were in fact at the discretion of the employer. Despite being the son of a farmer and lead miner, and empathising with the need to reduce miners' hours, in the 1890s Sir Isaac voted against the coal miner's Eight Hour Bill, again by applying Wages Fund Theory, stating that if working hours were reduced without a similar reduction of hours in continental jobs, the competitive edge of British business would be lost.

The story of Sir Isaac is an extraordinary adventure of a man of great courage and resilience, a poor boy made more than good, becoming a hugely powerful and wealthy businessman and politician. Beginning as 'a draw boy to two hand weavers', with fluctuating educational opportunities, he later became a teacher of classics and chemistry, claiming to have invented Lucifer matches, then progressed to bookkeeping, eventually becoming an inventor, patent holder and entrepreneur holding an extensive business monopoly. Remarkably, his success began in his forties, however, it got off to a rocky start when, having saved for years to build his own enterprise, fate struck several, cruel blows in the form of a railway share crisis between 1847 and 1848. This unfavourable economic climate contributed to Sir Isaac's first business folding, whilst his wife of fifteen years also died from tuberculosis in 1847. Left with four children, instead of retreating into debt and grief, Sir Isaac took the risky option of beginning a wool-combing business in 1848 revolutionary France, along with his new partner Samuel Cunliffe Lister. Success was achieved through a combination of technical improvements

in the form of a new wool-combing device, the square motion wool-combing machine, and strategically buying up the patents of the opposition, in effect largely creating a monopoly, much echoing the rise of today's multinationals, and a trend towards a kind of business-based feudalism. Who originally invented or perfected to usefulness the square motion wool-combing machine, remained a bone of contention for many decades between Sir Isaac and his business partner.

Before his time Sir Isaac, a health fanatic, promoted a mostly minimal, vegetarian diet supplemented by a small amount of meat, fresh air and regular exercise. It seems to have paid off, for he became a multimillionaire businessman, by our current standards, in late middle age, was elected to the House of Commons aged fifty-eight, and served there intermittently until he was eighty-eight, becoming a baronet aged eighty-six, and dying with his full faculties at ninety.

This book was clearly a labour of love for the author; however, whilst Sir Isaac's life is clearly fascinating, more psychological and emotional insight into the man himself would have made it easier to empathise with Sir Isaac's ups and downs. The loss of Sir Isaac's first wife in 1847, and simultaneous business failure, was factually reported without any sense of the devastation he must have felt, and even his letters of courtship to his second wife seemed rather businesslike. It seems Sir Isaac spent much time trying to persuade her to alter her will, so that he, his former wife's offspring, and any



## Reviews

they should have together, would share in her inheritance on her death. Equally, when she died, many years later, the only remark reported was that Sir Isaac felt she might have lived longer had she heeded his dietary recommendations. Maybe more emotional documents have been lost, or perhaps this was indeed the man, businesslike to the very end.

*Holden's Ghosts* is a well-researched account of an extraordinary life, and places Sir Isaac clearly and concisely in his wider historical and political context.

A little over-detailed at times regarding political and business machinations, and more colour could have been added with deeper psychological and emotional insights, perhaps revealed by letters. But I am sure many will nevertheless find this a really rewarding read.

*Simone Warr is a PhD student in Modern British History at the University of Cambridge. She is currently researching issues involving religion, politics, democracy and citizenship in the nineteenth century.*

But did Spencer deserve to be called a 'Czar', as the book's title dubs him? Should he be given all the blame for the bifurcation process that the book describes? A broader look at nineteenth-century Lord Lieutenancies may help answer these questions. Most notably, the structural problems resulting in viceroy and prime minister disagreeing over policy is not simply limited to the 1880s. The issues Spencer faced – the lack of support and sympathy from London politicians, the personal financial and physical burdens of the job, the lack of power of the position, the scarcity of resources to run the administration of Ireland, and the harshness of the criticisms of Irish nationalists – were ones also faced with varying degrees of success by Spencer's predecessors in the 1830s, 1840s, 1850s and 1860s. These often exploded into verbal conflict by letter and a tendency for the viceroy to take a course divergent from government in London, as in the 1840s when De Grey and Peel disagreed over the appropriate remedy for the rise of the Repeal movement, or when Bessborough and Russell clashed over the necessary level of expenditure during the famine. However, many other viceroys and prime ministers, such as Heytesbury and Peel, faced similar problems but still maintained a cohesive approach to policy throughout their joint periods of office.

This means that personality may also play a role here. With the context of Gladstone's religious fervour and micromanagement of Irish affairs well-recognised, and self-effacing Spencer finding himself led into arguing for

---

## Autocrat or cipher?

James Murphy, *Ireland's Czar: Gladstonian Government and the Lord Lieutenancies of the Red Earl Spencer, 1868–86* (University College Dublin Press, 2014)

Review by **Charles Read**

JAMES MURPHY HAS performed historians a great service by shedding light on one of Ireland's less well-known viceroys in his latest book, *Ireland's Czar: Gladstonian Government and the Lord Lieutenancies of the Red Earl Spencer*. This work adds to the recent trend among historians of nineteenth-century Ireland to investigate Dublin Castle administrations in more detail, a move against the grain of much of the existing literature, which focuses on the personalities of politicians in London or those of nationalists outside the Irish government. Although recent biographies of Lord Castlereagh (Chief Secretary, 1798–1801), the 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl de Grey (Lord Lieutenant, 1841–44) and the 4<sup>th</sup> Earl of Carnarvon (Lord Lieutenant 1885–86) all mark steps in this direction, the arguments put forward by Murphy about Spencer's effect on the wider politics of the 1880s make this book especially of note.

Indeed, this volume is not a simple narrative of Spencer's career or his doings during his appointments as Lord Lieutenant of Ireland between 1868–71 and 1882–85. As Murphy declares on page 3, 'this book is only in a qualified sense a biography of Spencer'. Neither is it simply a description of political crises, or the day-to-day functioning of government. Instead, it is a lively, detailed, and well-written political history of the period 1868–85 from the perspective of Dublin Castle – and one which calls into question existing interpretations of Anglo-Irish relations in the period

leading up to the Home Rule Crisis of 1885–86.

The first seven chapters of the book describe how Spencer negotiated the thorny issues of his first period of office, such as Irish church disestablishment and the security threat posed by the Fenians, without damaging the political reputation of the Lord Lieutenant.

The rest of the book focuses on the early-1880s, a period less well studied by other historians, but which follows up theories Murphy has already suggested in his previous work. It is argued that Gladstone's policies did not strengthen the Union by means of conciliating nationalist grievances. Instead, this process weakened the Union. The consequence of the contrast between Spencer following more coercive policies in Dublin, and Gladstone more conciliatory ones in London, was, in Murphy's words, 'bifurcated' government. It may have helped Gladstone and his government at Westminster to psychologically distance itself from the Irish executive in Dublin with Spencer as its figurehead, but it also weakened the idea of Britain and Ireland as one country in terms of political culture and identity. In essence, this was the beginning of the end of the Anglo-Irish union. Political affiliation with Britain in popular Irish opinion in the 1880s was damaged by the Gladstone government's deliberate sacrifice of the cultural capital of the Irish executive's traditional authority for his own short-term political ends.

