

Byronic genius and turbulent priest

Benjamin Disraeli was the most implausible prime minister of the nineteenth century. A Jew, a dandy and a rake, he ran up prodigious debts and wrote scandalous novels to pay them off. He slept with aristocratic women while defrauding their husbands; got drunk with Turkish officers, and plotted in Paris with the King of France. It was a life of sex, drugs and Roquefort; a Byronic fantasy played out at the heart of the British establishment. Fancying himself a literary genius, he hailed his own novels as “the perfection of English prose”, and he approached the political arena like a playwright composing his characters. The dour and dumpy Victoria was recast as “the Faerie Queen”, while Sir Robert Peel became “a burglar of others’ intellect”. His great rival, William Gladstone, was a “madman”, “intoxicated with the exuberance of his own verbosity”; a man with “not a single redeeming defect”. As his successor, Lord Salisbury, once put it, Disraeli was “not really false; but he has such a perfect disregard for facts that it is almost impossible for him to run true”.

If Disraeli was the Byronic genius of Victorian politics, Gladstone was its turbulent priest. Politics, for Gladstone, was a holy war, fought out beneath the eye of the Almighty. His rhetorical style was drawn from the great Evangelical preachers, and he bestrode the political

ROBERT SAUNDERS

Dick Leonard

THE GREAT RIVALRY
Gladstone and Disraeli: A dual biography
240pp. I. B. Tauris. £22.50.
978 1 84885 925 8

Douglas Hurd and
Edward Young

DISRAELI
Or the two lives
320pp. Orion. £20.
978 0 297 86097 6

world like a biblical prophet. Disraeli thought him a hypocrite and a charlatan. Gladstone saw in his opponent an almost diabolical force, bent on corrupting and debauching the public conscience.

Yet the “Asian Mystery” and the “Grand Old Man” had more in common than either realized. Both were essentially populists, carrying public affairs out of Parliament and into the country. For Gladstone, the masses stood as the conscience of the nation, and at times of crisis he toured the country in a series of revivalist crusades. One working man recalled, years later, how he had stood “spellbound” at the feet of “the great orator”, captivated by “the music and magnetism of the wonderful voice”. “I was only conscious of the presence of a great human personality under whose spell I was . . . I felt lifted into a holy region of politics, where Tories cannot corrupt or Jingoism break through and yell”.

Disraeli would have found this absurd; but he, too, had a semi-religious conception of politics. Man was born, he believed, “to adore and obey”; the function of leadership was to give him something “to worship”. Disraeli was no democrat: he was sceptical of elective institutions and once suggested that “the tendency of advanced civilisation” was to “absolute monarchy”. But he was nonetheless a Tory populist: he believed not only that the institutions of Church, Crown and aristocracy were popular, but that they served no useful purpose if they were not. As he told his party in 1848, “The proper leaders of the people are the gentlemen of England. If they are not the leaders of the people, I do not see why there should be gentlemen”.

As their latest biographers demonstrate, the fascination with Gladstone and Disraeli extends far beyond academe. As a novelist and erstwhile diplomat and Conservative Cabinet minister, Douglas Hurd shares with Disraeli a taste for straddling the worlds of politics and literature. His co-author, Edward Young, has worked as a speechwriter for David Cameron, while Dick Leonard is a distinguished journalist and former Labour MP. What, then, do they add to the already substantial literature on these figures?

The answer, unfortunately, is “not much”. Leonard’s dual biography is essentially a distillation of older, more authoritative studies, and offers very little that is new. There are so many quotations from previous writers that the early chapters, in particular, feel like the literary equivalent of a mix tape. Like a pagan priest calling down the protection of his gods,



W. E. Gladstone and Benjamin Disraeli

Leonard seems reluctant to make even the most anodyne statement without first invoking some higher power. “In Roy Jenkins’s words”, we are assured, Gladstone “took to Eton like a duck to water”.

Leonard commends his book to “the general reader” and to “students of history and politics”; yet both would be better directed elsewhere. For the former, the biographies by Robert Blake and Roy Jenkins are at least as readable and certainly more authoritative, and the attempt at a joint biography has previously been essayed by Richard Aldous. A book that synthesized Blake and Jenkins with more modern writing on the Victorian era would perform a useful service; but, with the exception of *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, there is not much evidence that Leonard has read the more recent scholarship. The result is a tepid reheating of some very tried and trusted recipes.

Hurd and Young have a clearer sense of purpose and a stronger controlling argument. They present their biography of Disraeli as a myth-busting exercise, intended to strip away the inflated claims made for Disraeli as a One Nation Conservative and a “Tory Democrat”. The authors were “particularly encouraged” in this endeavour by the work of John Vincent and Jane Ridley, whose superb biographies were similarly irreverent of established orthodoxies. The fact that twenty-three years have passed since Vincent’s book and eighteen since Ridley’s reminds us that this particular historical tide has been flowing for quite some time. In consequence, there is little in the newer volume that will surprise.

The argument is in fact rather orthodox. Disraeli, we are told, “held few principles which he was not ready to alter for the sake of tactical gain”. He viewed his ideas “like a collection of silver” – intended more for display than for everyday use. When it suited him to do so, “Disraeli opened this storehouse, took out a handful of ideas and tested them”. He then “put the ideas back in the cupboard for another day”. His triumphs were the products of tactical genius, not of deep philosophical conviction. Neither a Tory Democrat nor a One Nation Conservative, Disraeli’s true legacy “is not political but personal”; for he was “marvelously witty at a time when pomposity was treated as a virtue”.

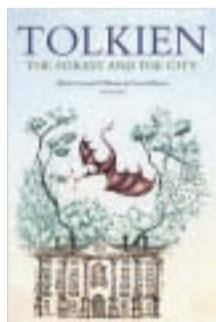
For a purportedly myth-busting exercise,

this is pretty conventional fare. Convinced, as they are, that Disraeli’s ideas were of only instrumental value, the authors see little need to explore them in much depth. In consequence – as they say of Disraeli’s novels – “the protagonist fails to come alive”. The treatment of the One Nation theme, in particular, seems unnecessarily dogmatic. It is, of course, true that Disraeli “rejected the idea of a more classless society”, but the suggestion that he thought “the two nations” to be “so different that there can be no meeting point” between them seems to misunderstand his intentions. A theme of Disraeli’s early writings was the idea that rich and poor could be brought closer together, not by dissolving class boundaries but by celebrating the imaginative sympathy between different ranks and orders. Disraeli’s insistence that the monarchy, the aristocracy and the Church were fundamentally popular institutions, which could win, without apology, the affection of the masses, held out a vision of Conservatism that was genuinely different from that of Robert Peel or Lord Derby. In this respect, the Primrose League established in Disraeli’s memory – with its lantern shows, its jousting tournaments and its cheerful celebration of social hierarchy – did embody an authentically Disraelian idea. Its populist inegalitarianism remained an important influence on Conservatism throughout the twentieth century.

Hurd and Young’s volume is more extensively researched than Leonard’s, and the authors make good use of the ongoing edition of Disraeli’s letters. There are also some useful extracts from Disraeli’s private papers. But Hurd and Young also largely ignore recent academic writing on the period, which makes some of the arguments appear rather dated. Nor is the transition in styles from one author to another entirely smooth. At one moment, Isaac Disraeli’s eyes are “entombed in round metal spectacles”; at another, Victoria’s favoured servant is a “somewhat random Highlander”.

The result is a respectable and competent survey, but one that is unlikely to displace the competition. In the current political climate, with both Ed Miliband and Boris Johnson claiming the Disraelian mantle, a fresh look at Gladstone and Disraeli would be both timely and welcome. The definitive popular biography, however, still remains to be written.

FOUR COURTS PRESS



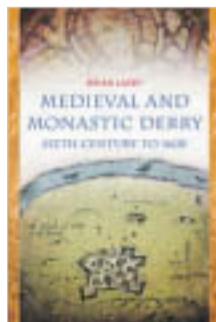
Tolkien

The forest and the city

H. Conrad-O'Briain
& G. Hynes, eds

New! An exploration of the interaction of culture and nature in J.R.R. Tolkien's writings by some of the world's finest Tolkien scholars.

248pp. Hbk. £50
ISBN 978-1-84682-429-6

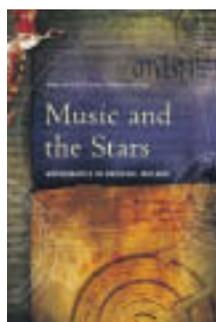


Medieval and Monastic Derry
Sixth century to 1600

Brian Lacey

New! The first comprehensive study of medieval Derry in the context of contemporary secular politics.

128pp; ill. Hbk. £19.95
ISBN 978-1-84682-383-1



Music and the Stars
Mathematics in medieval Ireland

M. Kelly &
C. Doherty, eds

New! Experts introduce and explore the remarkable history of mathematics in medieval Ireland.

272pp; ill. Hbk. £45
ISBN 978-1-84682-392-3