

The Grand Old Janus, or the Political Legacy of Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881)

Ian Machin, *Disraeli*, London: Longman, 1995, 194 pages

Paul Smith, *Disraeli: A Brief Life*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 246 pages

Since his death in 1881, Benjamin Disraeli has inspired great interest among historians of Victorian Britain. His most recent biographers, Ian Machin and Paul Smith, both provide clearly written, concise, and insightful studies of this most memorable British politician.

Ian Machin's political biography emphasizes the reasons why so many of his peers in parliament -- on both sides of the aisle -- viewed him as an unscrupulously ambitious charlatan. Machin, indeed, appears to agree with this interpretation to a large extent. In his estimation, Disraeli had no consistent purpose save a determination to make a name for himself. Nor did he, according to Machin, possess any firm political principles. Disraeli lived for "political expediency," was "completely without any ideological preconceptions," and "never took up and pursued a policy which might not aid his political interest." He helped depose his own Prime Minister in 1846 -- and thus facilitated his rise to the leadership of the Conservative Party -- because Robert Peel had refused to offer him a cabinet post five years earlier. While a staunch supporter of Empire, parliamentary and social reform in a general sense, he did not himself advocate "systematic" imperial expansion, democracy, or specific pieces of social legislation. The colonial wars which punctuated Disraeli's final years in office resulted from the ambitions of his administrators in South Africa and Afghanistan, not from a love of conquest at Whitehall. Following the passage of the Second Reform Act in 1867, Disraeli appears to have lost interest in parliamentary reform. Finally, his own Home Secretary, Robert A. Cross, commented in 1874 that he "had quite expected that [Disraeli's] mind was full of legislative schemes, but such did not prove the case." The impressive array of social legislation passed between 1874 and 1878 dealing with public health, housing, factory conditions, and labor was largely the work of his cabinet colleagues. This said, is it so shocking to learn that Disraeli, a man who defined "sound Conservative Government" as "Tory men and Whig measures," governed as a Peelite Liberal? Not for Machin. In his view, the oft-cited "conflict between Disraeli and [William] Gladstone was notably the product of their radically different personalities and styles rather than of any profound dichotomy over policy." Disraeli, while perhaps hastening the birth of both the modern Conservative and Liberal Parties, contributed much more to the poetry than to the prose of Victorian politics.

Paul Smith provides a more rounded and less judgmental portrait of Disraeli by showing how his romanticism, his Jewishness, his ties with intellectual movements on the continent, and his novels both reflected and shaped his personality. Smith interprets Disraeli as a dreamer who constantly remade himself, an artist who utilized parliament as his canvas, a gambler who saw politics as a game, and an individual who always lived life to the fullest. If Disraeli was rakish, ambitious, and egotistical, he was also audacious, determined, and, often, brilliant. He reveled in satirizing Victorian society and in the witty *bon mot*, especially when ridiculing his parliamentary opponents. Disraeli also exhibited great political intuition on many occasions -- during the passage of the Second Reform Act in 1867 for instance -- and possessed a keen sense of the drama, color, and style of modern politics. In brief, Disraeli lived his life as a romantic epic. The "adventure he made of his life, by consciously

living it as an adventure" is for Smith, indeed, the "root of Disraeli's appeal." This fact was recognized by at least a few of his contemporaries. One of Disraeli's Liberal opponents, William Harcourt, told him in 1876 that to "the imagination of the younger generation your life will always have a special fascination." And, of course, it does.

On the issue of his importance, however, Smith argues that "Disraeli made little immediate difference to the Conservative party or to British politics." For Smith, Robert Peel brought about his own downfall; William Gladstone's "overbearing arrogance" did much to prevent the Peelites from rejoining the Conservative Party after 1846; and Disraeli became Prime Minister in 1874 as a result of declining Liberal fortunes, not because of his own political acumen. According to Smith, "any [Tory] leader would have lost the elections of 1847 to 1865, [and] it is arguable that almost any would have won that of 1874." Furthermore, Disraeli's core principles -- faith in the Conservative Party, the Crown, the Church, the territorial aristocracy, and the British Empire -- did not induce him to advocate bold measures once he had, as he said, "reached the top of the greasy pole." Disraeli's fundamental belief was that the establishment of a national consensus and the alleviation of class tensions would come not as a result of legislation, but through the power of rhetoric, image-making, popular manipulation, and political flexibility. Herein lies the reason for much of his popularity among twentieth century conservatives from Richard Nixon to Harold MacMillan to Enoch Powell. His career both provides the "aegis of a colourable tradition" and bequeaths "a fund of insights and watchwords on which . . . [conservatives] could draw productively in the future."

In sum, we are left to face the dilemma Disraeli poses each of us: are we to chastise him as an unprincipled, self-serving adventurer, a "politician" *par excellence*? Or should we delight in his wit and verve; respect his self-confidence and determination to succeed; applaud his political pragmatism; and appreciate his realization that in politics, image, often, *is* everything?

Robert Haggard

Rocke, Michael. *Forbidden Friendships: Homosexuality and Male Culture in Renaissance Florence*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.

In *Forbidden Friendships: Homosexuality and Male Culture in Renaissance Florence*, Michael Rocke re-weaves the story of the social fabric of Florence during the fourteenth, fifteenth, and early sixteenth centuries to include the role of sexual relationships among men. David Herlihy and Richard Trexler have previously noted the significance of homosexual behavior in this city-republic. However, Rocke, who teaches history at Syracuse University in Florence, is the first to investigate its pattern thoroughly and to evaluate its significance.

Rocke's work is based on the trial records of the Office of the Night, which the Republic of Florence established in 1432 to prosecute sodomy. Although sodomy was legally defined as any sexual act that would not result in procreation, Rocke argues that the Florentines were particularly concerned about sodomy between men. Combining this trial evidence with records from the Eight of the Watch (Florence's central office for handling criminal activity), the *catasto* or fiscal census of 1480, and family memoirs, he is able to add new details to the picture of the Florentine Renaissance man. His findings support one of the main points Michel Foucault made in his *Histoire de la sexualité*: the concept of "homosexual" as an identity emerged only in the late nineteenth century. In medieval and early modern Italy a male's sexual identity was linked to his role as the aggressor in a