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Sir Robert Peel: the Life and Legacy

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Two years after the death of Sir Robert Peel in 1850, Walter Bagehot asked his readers ?Was there ever such a dull man? Can any one, without horror, foresee the reading of his memoirs??(1) This was by no means a rhetorical question, for Peel had prepared three volumes of reminiscences to be published after his death. That concern with the judgement of posterity ? and Peel?s anxiety to shape its deliberations ? forms the keynote of Richard Gaunt?s new study: *Sir Robert Peel: the Life and Legacy*. As Gaunt makes clear at the outset, his book is not ?a new cradle-to-grave biography?. Instead, it ?offers a reinterpretation of Peel?s attitudes to what he was doing in key areas of activity which have subsequently formed the nucleus of his political legacy?, exploring Peel?s ?own attempts to lay the foundations for his posthumous standing in posterity? (p. 5).

This aspect of Peel?s character was widely noted at the time. Horace Twiss complained in 1831 that Peel was ?always thinking of his reputation? (p. 144), and *The Times* thought it ?curious that Sir Robert Peel should so often be under the necessity of stripping to show how clean his linen is? (p. 113). Peel, Gaunt concludes, was

> an extremely ambitious man both for himself and for his subsequent place in history. To that

> extent, Peel?s statecraft was shaped and undertaken with at least one eye to his long-term reputation at the hands of contemporaries and future historians. This process of ?self-fashioning? had a different focus from that undertaken by his great political rival, Benjamin Disraeli, who was concerned with accommodating his self-acknowledged ?genius? to his own age, rather than to that of posterity (p. 5).

Yet if ?Peel was, in many respects, the first historian of his administration? (p. 107), his efforts were not always well directed. As Gaunt shrewdly observes, Peel?s *Memoirs* were essentially defensive, centring on his sponsorship of Catholic Emancipation and the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846. By focusing on these two reversals, ?he refrained from placing those episodes within the broader canvas of his life?, allowing his critics to choose the ground on which his reputation would be contested (p. 152). The effect on his legacy has been enduring. Though Peel was hardly the only statesman to make significant changes of policy, his malleability has been the starting point for almost all subsequent analysis.

Having established this concern for posterity, Gaunt essays the more daunting task of probing Peel?s psyche. Peel, he suggests, was at least as complex a character as those who succeeded him, though his mental life has been less rigorously explored. Given recent interest in ?the Mind of Mr Gladstone?, the ?Self-fashioning of Disraeli? and ?Lord Salisbury?s World?, Gaunt asks, should we not also ?delve in to ?the ego of Sir Robert Peel??? (p. 16).

This is a challenging project and two reservations might be registered at the outset. Peel was morbidly sensitive to any slight upon his integrity and devoted considerable energy to the defence of his consistency. He took for granted, too, that any reasonable man, with all the facts at his disposal, would agree with him; and these tendencies together made him prone both to long exculpations of his conduct and to a smug confidence in the verdict of ?history?. Whether this means that Peel?s statecraft ?was shaped and undertaken? with an eye to posterity is less certain. On Gaunt?s reading, historical justification was not simply a reflex that *accompanied* Peel?s actions, but a motor that influenced and impelled them. This is difficult to prove, and raises some important questions. Did Peel act according to his judgement at the time, and assume that posterity would agree with him, or did a concern for posterity make him act in particular ways, distinct from contemporary pressures?

As for ?the ego of Sir Robert Peel?, Gaunt is probably right that Peel?s inner life is not intrinsically less interesting than that of Gladstone or Disraeli. It is, however, much harder to access. Peel was a notoriously private man and our resources for his inner life are sparse. He left no diary, like Gladstone, and wrote no novels, like Disraeli; nor did he show much penchant for philosophical reflection of the kind in which Lord Salisbury later indulged. As Gaunt acknowledges, ?For a man who played so dominant a role in the government of his age, there is a remarkable and lingering sense of anonymity surrounding Peel? (p. 3).

This places peculiar weight on the psychological observations of his critics. Though often piquant, they rarely knew him well and had agendas and prejudices of which they may not themselves have been aware. It was a commonplace that Peel was excessively ambitious; but as George Canning, John Prescott and almost every female minister since 1945 could testify, such claims are the common currency of politics when individuals attain positions thought to be above their station. For Peel, the son of a cotton manufacturer, the charge was almost inevitable, though it sits uneasily with his return to the backbenches in 1818; his reluctance to dislodge the Whigs after 1835; and his conduct in Parliament after 1846.

To say that a project is difficult, however, is no argument against making the attempt. Gaunt?s approach opens up promising new perspectives on Peel, and this is no mean achievement in a crowded field. Though there is little that will be wholly new to scholars, Gaunt synthesises an impressive array of secondary material and offers some imaginative research of his own. The text is interspersed with cartoons and images of Peel, and Gaunt makes especially good use of poetry. Though often execrable in quality ? ??Sad, sad was the day when misfortune that way/ From health, strength, and vigour had tossed him/ Upon the hard ground to receive his death wound/ Oh mourn!! mourn! Britannia, we?ve lost him?? (p. 196) ? the Victorians?

inexplicable taste for duff verse makes this an important and hitherto neglected resource. The hatred inspired by Catholic emancipation, or the veneration of Peel after his death, may be better illustrated in popular ballads than in pamphlets or scholarly literature.

The book begins and ends with broad survey chapters, exploring ?Sir Robert Peel in historical perspective?, ?The rise (and fall) of Sir Robert Peel? and ?Peel, death and posterity?. The five intervening chapters cover specific areas of policy: Ireland; currency and banking; the Home Office; the Conservative party; and the reform of the tariff. Each is a sustained and closely argued essay in its own right, and there is only space here to summarise them.

Reviewing his Irish policy, Gaunt finds in Peel ?the personification of the Conservative statesman, yielding in the face of necessity in order to retain and secure the fundamentals? (p. 38). He credits Peel with an ?imperialist mentality? (p. 21) first acquired at the Colonial Office, though he suggests that the repeal campaign of the 1840s ?crystallised (as County Clare had done fifteen years before) a materially different response? intended to ?kill O?Connellism with kindness?. For Gaunt, the Devon Commission and its associated reforms mark a significant new departure in Peel?s statecraft: ?The years 1844?6 represent the true ?ripening? of Robert Peel, insofar as his Irish policy is concerned? (p. 34).

The subject of the following chapter, currency and banking, interested Peel rather more than most of his biographers; yet Gaunt argues persuasively for its importance. As Gladstone later noted, Peel?s Bank Charter Act ?was a kind of Baptismal Creed with him? (p. 51), and Gaunt finds in Peel?s dogmatism on the issue a window into ?the heart of Peel?s political character? (p. 42). This chapter is inevitably rather technical, but Gaunt demonstrates the centrality of currency and banking reform both to Peel?s own political thought and to his wider reputation. By 1830, he argues, the currency had become ?a lightning rod of discontent for the government?s opponents and one on which Peel was fatally implicated? (p. 48). Peel?s obduracy on the currency matched Wellington?s on reform, contributing in equal measure to the collapse of the ministry. Gaunt is right to restate the importance of this question, though not all readers will find Peel?s immobility ?a cause for praise rather than censure? (p. 56).

The fourth chapter, on Peel?s tenure at the Home Office, explores the case for Peel as a ?liberal Tory?. Gaunt ably unpicks the rather contradictory assumptions bound up in this idea, noting that Peel won radical plaudits for consolidating the criminal law, but that the creation of the Metropolitan police force fostered a more authoritarian image. On the much-debated question of Peel?s humanitarian credentials, he notes that ?Peel?s criminal law reforms were not designed to result in less punishment but in its more precise and efficient application. It follows from this that there would be no immediate down-turn in capital executions?. Peel, he concludes, ?may not have been a ?great hangman??, but nor was he ?a great humanitarian?. ?Considered a ?liberal? in his willingness to undertake reform of the criminal law, he ?was not liberal enough? to consider codifying it? (pp. 73?4).

Chapter five assesses Peel?s claim to be the founder of modern Conservatism. Like most recent writing, Gaunt downplays Peel?s role in the creation of the Conservative Party and his responsibility for the electoral triumph of 1841. Indeed, he identifies Peel?s discomfort with party as a central element in his career, making him an uneasy figure in the politics of the reformed era. Peel, he notes,

> had never represented a genuinely large or populous constituency himself and had been bred in a political environment where a government enjoying the confidence of the crown and the patronage of the Treasury was almost guaranteed a working majority in the House of Commons. ? It was unreasonable and unlikely to expect that, with a widely known reputation for high-handedness and self-belief, Peel would willingly compromise his entire political existence to date and reinvent himself in the guise of a committed party politician (p. 88).

This, Gaunt argues, was to have ?disastrous consequences? after 1845. Peel had come to power ?through the

mechanism of party; a fact which necessitated that he conform, subsequently, to the political platform upon which that party had been returned?. After 1832, a minister could no longer ?(as in the pre-Reform days) rely upon ?the influence of the crown? and a judicious application of patronage?. ?Flushed with electoral gains?, however, Peel misread his victory ?as a triumph in the face of the Reform Act, rather than a telling example of its operation? (pp. 101?2).

This is a well-established line of argument; but Peel?s tendency to view politics ?as in the pre-Reform days? should not be overstated. Peel was as uncomfortable with some of the older arts of political management as he was with ?party? in its modern sense, and his distaste for the politics of patronage would have been problematic even without the Reform Act. Indeed, with his revolutionary preoccupations and horror of popular violence, Peel may even have exaggerated the transformative effects of the Reform Bill. Obsessed by the volatility of the new electorate and the impetus to popular protest, he embarked after 1832 on a strategy of political tranquilisation, intended to secure the loyalty of the new electors while keeping ?out of view all topics calculated to disturb the public mind, or give to agitators the means of agitation?.(2) It was a strategy directed chiefly towards middle class opinion outside Parliament, and towards ?that class of the people with whom we are brought into no direct relationship by the exercise of the elective franchise?.(3) To a much greater extent than his Whig opponents, Peel was searching after 1832 for a new way of conducting politics, predicated on the conviction that a revolutionary change had taken place in the political order. This undoubtedly stored up trouble with the Conservative backbenches, but it was neither backward looking nor complacent. Given that his successors, who gave a much higher priority to party management, secured fewer than five years in office between 1846 and 1874, slightly less than Peel achieved in a single sitting, the archaism of Peel?s approach does not go without saying.

The final essay covers tariff reform and repeal of the corn laws. Gaunt sees repeal ?in essence as a prophylactic against the potato famine? (p. 35), while stressing that it drew on earlier changes in Peel?s thought:

> In his mind, it was not the adequacy or inadequacy of the 1842 Corn Law, but his understanding of the economic impact of the Corn Laws, and the impossibility of pursuing political principles against their logic, which transformed the situation in much the same way as O?Connell?s election for County Clare had transformed his understanding of Catholic Emancipation. His ?ripening?, in respect of Ireland, the success of his tariff reform policy and the ready availability of the Income Tax as a means of generating a secure stream of government revenue, were the necessary precursors to this change of heart. Consequently, the change in Peel?s thinking can be dated, in the medium term, to 1843 (p. 122).

From this perspective, ?Repeal was very much Peel?s personal policy?, and was ?as much a matter of Peel?s Irish, as his economic, policy? (p. 123). Yet Peel?s indifference to the views of his backbenchers ?not only destroyed the Conservative Party but undermined his own carefully crafted policy of legislation on an equitable, national basis. ? Far from healing social divisions, the politics of Corn Law Repeal actually served to open up a social cleavage between the interests of agriculture and the interests of manufacturing? (p. 126). It did not help that Peel re-narrated the repeal crisis, in the four years after 1846, to give ?colour to the idea that Repeal was the inevitable (and to that extent pre-meditated) outcome of his economic policy as Prime Minister? (p. 105). This was neither true nor politic, for it nourished a sense of betrayal among those who had supported his earlier changes.

For Gaunt, repeal was primarily a matter of Irish statecraft, for it was ?impossible to prove the good faith of the British government to the Irish Catholic majority, whilst quietly allowing them to starve?. ?As Peel informed Charles Arbuthnot, ?the worst ground on which we can fight the battle of true Conservatism is on a question of *food*? ? especially one relating to Ireland? (p. 123). The choice of quotation is curious, for Peel?s letter to Arbuthnot was concerned not with Ireland but with the political situation in Britain, at a time when ?the working classes feel convinced that their wages do not rise with the price of food?.(4) With this in

mind, it is surprising that Gaunt does not address in more detail the justification Peel himself offered most frequently for repeal, and the one that gained most purchase after his death: that repeal was a political strategy intended to disable agitation, which had saved *Britain* ? not Ireland ? from revolution in 1848. In ?the hour of danger?, Peel boasted, his measures had promoted ?loyalty to the Throne and confidence in the justice of Parliament?. The ?permanent adjustment of the Corn Laws? had ?rescued the country, and the whole frame of society, from the hazard of very serious convulsion?.(5)

That claim is certainly open to question, but it became central to Peel?s reputation after 1846. Gaunt notes that *Punch* credited Peel with ?saving the nation?, and references a similar claim by Cardwell in the endnotes (pp. 133, 193); but the sentiment was much more widespread than this in the years following 1848. Repeal, it was asserted, had saved the aristocracy and prevented a social convulsion, by stripping away the one grievance that could have mobilised protest. As *The Times* noted, repeal had not abolished poor harvests but it had broken the connecting link between food shortages and class government. By ?the repeal of the Corn Laws?, it concluded, ?Government has for ever emancipated itself from the unpopularity which used to follow a bad harvest, and effectually removed one of the most prominent and frequently-recurring causes of discontent and sedition?.(6)

This, however, is a matter of judgement; and Gaunt puts his case with some force. There are, inevitably, some minor errors. Peel?s scientific adviser during the famine was Lyon Playfair, not Leon (p. 117); the Aberdeen Coalition was formed in December 1852, not in July (p. 135); and ?help yourself and the sky will help you? is a rather odd translation of ?*Aide-toi et le ciel t?aidera*? (p. 37). If there had been an ?icy *frondeur*? between Peel and Wellington, the Iron Duke would almost certainly have run him through (p. 93). Yet few books are free of the odd mistake, and the general standard of accuracy is high. Taken as a whole, Gaunt is to be credited with an interesting and thoughtful volume, which will serve as a useful introduction to one of Britain?s most enigmatic political figures.

Notes

1. *The Collected Works of Walter Bagehot*, ed. N. St. John-Stevas (15 vols, London, 1965?86), iv, p. 51. Back to (1)
2. Peel to Arbuthnot, 29 September 1841, in *The Correspondence of Charles Arbuthnot*, ed. A. Aspinall (London, 1941), pp. 232?3.Back to (2)
3. *Hansard* 86, 15 May 1846, 706.Back to (3)
4. Peel to Arbuthnot, 7 January 1846, in *Correspondence of Charles Arbuthnot*, pp. 239-40.Back to (4)
5. *Memoirs by the Right Honourable Sir Robert Peel*, ed. Lord Mahon and E. Cardwell (2 vols, London, 1856), ii, p. 313; Peel to Graham, 2 September 1846, in *Sir Robert Peel From His Private Papers*, ed. C. S. Parker (3 vols, New York, 1970), iii, p. 462.Back to (5)
6. *Times*, 31 December 1853, p. 6.Back to (6)

The author is grateful to Dr Saunders for his review and does not wish to comment further.

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