

Liberal Intellectuals and Public Culture in Modern Britain, 1815-1914: Making Words Flesh

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This book sheds much light on the ascendancy of liberal values in the 19th century and their role in the transformation of the fiscal military state of the previous century. While using a wealth of secondary literature, including many essays and review articles in literary weeklies and monthlies, William Lubenow charts new and important territory. This centres on the aftermath of the repeal of the Test and Corporation Act and the passage of Catholic Emancipation in 1828 and 1829 respectively; no longer were office holders bound by the formularies of the Anglican Church, even if subscription remained a requirement for matriculation and the holding of senior positions in the Universities of Oxford, Cambridge and Durham until 1871. Lubenow does not deny that liberal values had other sources besides those analysed here; for example, liberal Dissent, the Whig aristocracy, and the economic culture of Manchester (p. 3). However, his rich and tightly argued book shows conclusively how the liberal values that emerged from the loosening of the shackles of confessionalism were instrumental in the reordering of both public and private space.

The book's wide-ranging thesis merits close attention on two accounts: first in terms of the analysis it offers of complex shifts of culture and power in 19th-century Britain; and second, in providing a new basis for understanding some of the inflections in popular liberalism at the beginning of the 20th century. This review will take each aspect in turn.

I

Lubenow's primary focus is on the complex processes by which liberal values became established and expressed. Not least, drawing upon a wide range of hitherto unused private papers, he traces the course of

change at the level of personal interaction between some of the main actors involved. The 'liberal intellectuals' referred to in the title are no specialised breed of individual but include all those who benefited from the new atmosphere opened up by the two Acts, and whose conduct and beliefs changed accordingly. They include Liberal statesmen such as William Gladstone, and also Conservative statesmen like Lord Curzon and Arthur Balfour, as well as those who became early Fellows of the British Academy. They include Wranglers who became physicists, and mathematicians who were well versed in poetry and literature (pp. 40–1), and who became MPs too (p. 46). Such intellectual and professional messiness was the life-blood of the liberalism discussed here, equally protean and intractable.

What brought the subjects of this study into the same liberal fold was adherence to a new set of values. No longer would 'martial valour, birth ... property, patriotism and the law' provide the criteria of 'strength, courage, manliness, and morality' but 'talent, ability, service in the public sphere' (p. 61). The latter required an ethic of restraint and reserve, character and resolution (p. 220). The new set of values was bound up with the fillip acquired by literature as an instrument for exploring the unsettled world of the 19th century. Literary activity spawned a 'common culture' that extended to history and natural history and a continuing interest in religion as the borderland between the material and the spiritual, belief and unbelief became increasingly opaque. At its core was the rejection of biblical literalism, the key to the advancement of both religion and culture (p. 146), as Matthew Arnold made clear in *Literature and Dogma* (1873).

Yet Lubenow emphasises that it was not new social classes who became the embodiment of liberal values but the offspring of the 'placemen, pensioners, and sinecure holders' on which the old confessional state had been built, in particular vicarage dwellers. They became the cornerstone of a new governing class centred on professions currently undergoing a period of rapid growth (pp. 42–3). The multiple ancestral and intellectual connections through which liberal values were forged by this class were faithfully recorded in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, edited by Leslie Stephen (p. 64). If the new society was 'bourgeois', its focal point was associations rather than individuals. With overlapping rather than exclusive memberships, there was no predominant pattern of identity between individuals and the groups to which they belonged (p. 59). Nor was the new society in thrall to aristocratic modes of preferment such as knighthoods and peerages. Despite being tied increasingly to merit rather than birth – much to the chagrin of a rising plutocratic class, as Sir Gorgius Midas in the *Punch* cartoon of 1880 well illustrates – those in professional, especially literary circles had to be prevailed upon to accept such honours, often by Gladstone (pp. 86–7). Tennyson as well as William Harcourt is a case in point.

The phrase 'making words flesh' is a deliberate play upon John 1:14 to denote the conscious bid by a new literary class to stabilize a world experiencing a major loss of certainty. Lubenow illustrates in much fascinating detail the basis of that bid in ancient letters (Greek in particular), mathematics, and modern literature and poetry. Words and numbers alike were employed in the search for meaning that could both interpret and transform the world in accordance with a new, liberal sensibility: what Lubenow well characterises as the 'imaginative courage' to engage in 'imaginative procedures'. This he sees exemplified in James Fitzjames Stephen's insistence on the need to 'see things as they are, without exaggeration or passion', and to judge which of several possible perspectives was the strongest (p. 26). The burgeoning of statistical societies served a new ideal of public knowledge, that which was grounded in probabalism rather than determinism in the same way that Darwin found order in randomness (p. 140). The role of statistics, like that of literature, poetry, and classics, provided security for a new social and cultural world that was plagued by uncertainty.

The shift of authority from church and state to one grounded in personal relations formed the core of a new associative idea, one from which coercion was absent. The shift was not without casualties, as Lubenow demonstrates in the cases of Oscar Browning and William Johnson at Eton (pp. 130–1). Yet he also shows how the culture that Browning and Johnson represented – one that reached outward from the self in accordance with the new vogue of Greek learning – was already well entrenched in the universities. Not least, this was due to contact with German learning. Guided by Hellenism, university dons sought to expand the curriculum and strengthen the Honours Schools, drawing them away from the dogmatic certainties of established religion. No profession was left untouched by the changes, not even the Church, promotion in

which was henceforth linked to learning rather than patronage (p. 47). The rise of the cleric-historian bears this out: William Stubbs, William Holden Hutton, and Mandell Creighton, all made major contributions to historical study from positions in the higher echelons of the Anglican Church.

At the same time, Lubenow emphasises that Hellenism, like literature and statistics, was part of the problem of, as well as being a solution to, a world in which knowledge had fragmented. The effect of liberal values, he maintains, was subversive as well as stabilizing; they were as multidimensional as the knowledge they sought to champion, reflecting a world that was as indeterminate as the social bearings of those who were their champions. The questioning attitude associated with Hellenism in its drive for truth was no guarantee of a world that was whole, as Walter Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1877) makes clear (p. 133). The ambiguity of meaning at the heart of the post-confessional state was intensified as 'intimacy became literary'. The obsessive interest that writers such as Edward Carpenter, J. A. Symonds, and E. M. Forster took in love and friendship becomes much clearer in the light of this book.

The failure of liberal values to implode before 1914 is for Lubenow due much to the establishment of clubs and professional associations as new centres of social authority and debate. Here, he subtly explores the effectiveness of the gentleman's club as a means of containing difference before the era of intellectual specialisation (chapter four). He also tracks the response of liberal intellectuals to two movements – Roman Catholicism and nationalism, Irish nationalism in particular – which strained the values they espoused to the utmost; also, the equally mistrustful response of figures inside these movements to liberalism in turn. He indicates that a significant number of leading lay Roman Catholics with links to the professions increasingly identified with conservatism, as did a significant number of Liberals who deserted Gladstone over Home Rule. Characteristically, however, he points out that the lines of division were never clear cut, and that switches of allegiance – as in Henry Sidgwick's case (pp. 205–6) – were always accompanied by ambivalence and heavy-heartedness.

The inner contradictions that beset liberalism became accentuated after 1914, reaching a nadir in what Lubenow aptly characterises as the 'mental and emotional isolation' of Anthony Blunt and Bertrand Russell's particular search for 'character' and 'authenticity'; while the former betrayed his country, the latter betrayed his wife. Yet, Lubenow maintains, liberal values continued to fashion and refashion civil society in the 20th century through the work of Hobhouse, Beveridge, Keynes, Tawney and the Hammonds.

II

This is an appropriate and convincing conclusion to the book. However, the undoubted debt of modern Britain to liberal values as defined in the 19th century should not obscure the challenge they encountered in the early part of the 20th century, not least from liberal writers and thinkers who wrote for, and engaged with wide constituencies. This can be illustrated by reviews and correspondence in the largest Liberal daily, *The Daily News*. Some of that newspaper's contributors sensed that liberalism had been ill-served by those who had shaped liberal values in the 19th century, and those who now carried the legacy forward.

One such critic was G. K. Chesterton. In 1905 he reviewed a volume of Sir George Otto Trevelyan's undergraduate verse and prose from the 1860s that had just been republished, including 'Horace at the University of Athens' (1861).⁽¹⁾ He had nothing against the youthful college literature that had emerged over the centuries from the bastions of English learning, especially admiring its frivolity. But he emphasised a difference in Trevelyan's brand of frivolity: a lack of detachment. This, he maintained, ensured that Trevelyan's college humour would age less well than that of Charles Stuart Calverley or J. K. S. (James Kenneth Stephen, son of James Fitzjames Stephen). Trevelyan, he remarked contemptuously, wrote as a party politician, an old Whig who was bred in an atmosphere of rationalism and the ethos of the 'gentleman'; as a result, he loved liberty *because* he was an aristocrat, not through any sympathy with the Christian and democratic ideals at its core. Nothing epitomised so well the corruption of Liberalism at the hands of the liberal elite than Trevelyan's dismissal of Radicalism, albeit in the satirical tones of a 'modern Ecclesiastusae' written after the defeat of Gladstone's Reform Bill of 1866. Chesterton concluded the review in bitter, ironical style: when the universities had been restored to the people, they would 'no longer [be]

places of that loveable uselessness that produces Calverley or “Horace at Athens”. Then Sir George Trevelyan’s work will be carefully gathered up, to show to a happier world in which gentlemen will have become unimportant, how good a Liberal a gentleman could be’.(2)

It might be thought that Chesterton was writing from a populist position well beyond the framework of Lubenow’s study. It is certainly of some significance that he did not go to the universities in which liberal values had taken root. However, while far from being to everybody’s taste, he was admired by liberals who were, or had been, associated with these institutions: Arthur Quiller-Couch, A. C. Benson, and A. V. Dicey to name but a few.(3) Moreover, his networks included contemporaries who *had* been educated at Oxford and Cambridge, those such as E. C. Bentley, Conrad Noel and Charles Masterman. They shared much of his alternative set of liberal values in the early years of the 20th century, centred on Christianity and reform.

Masterman, for example, was the literary editor of *The Daily News* from 1903 until 1907, when he was elected Liberal M.P. for West Ham. He had been educated at Cambridge in the 1890s, taking a first class in the Natural Sciences and Moral Sciences Tripos and becoming President of the Union. However, in reviewing the flood of memoirs and biographies of eminent Victorian thinkers that were published in the first decade of the 20th century, his admiration of the intellectual culture in which he had been reared was less than wholehearted. He judged Lord Acton – whose lectures on Modern History he attended – and his collaborator Richard Simpson a disturbing force for all religious believers of their time, not just the Roman Catholic Church which they sought to expose to modern thought.(4) He was no more complimentary about Leslie Stephen; he emphasised the seclusion in which Stephen lived, despite his wide circle of friends and family, first in Cambridge and then in ‘literary London’. Stephen’s vision of tranquility was never disturbed by the ‘confusion and despair represented by the life which lay outside these pleasant places’.(5) A generation on, Masterman judged Matthew Arnold’s critique of contemporary religious ideals and dogmatic theology ‘sterile and meaningless’.(6) Towards Henry Sidgwick, from whom he had learnt much at Cambridge through personal contact, Masterman was more charitable; this was despite Sidgwick’s failure to make an impact outside of the narrow confines of Cambridge. Sidgwick’s saving grace was his refusal to surrender a belief in the immortality of the soul in the absence of any rational ground for such a belief, and the importance he attached to the associated question of how individuals ought to live.(7)

There was clearly a gulf between the liberal values explored by Lubenow, on the one hand, and liberal perceptions of the character and needs of a newly emergent democracy, on the other. This was especially marked in the dispute over the role of religion in state education in the early years of the 20th century. Many, including Chesterton, believed that those who influenced the Education Act of 1902 had betrayed the people. Balfour, he maintained, ably supported by thinkers such as Sidney Webb, had made state education the servant of Anglicanism in order to shore up the ruling class. But, he maintained, the Liberal opponents of Balfour’s Act were no better, despite their claims to represent the popular will; they merely sought to restore the ‘Bible-Reading compromise’ of 1870 that had been promoted by T. H. Huxley and other agnostics in a fit of nostalgia for a ‘dying superstition’.(8)

Chesterton supported a ‘secular solution’ to the conflict in the interests of both Liberalism and religion.(9) In a similar manner, he defended the application of the principle of freedom of belief and expression to secularists; no form of belief should enjoy protection against gratuitous offence. In this he echoed James Fitzjames Stephen’s response to the blasphemy trial against *The Freethinker* in 1883, although in a different spirit: that of democracy rather than consistency. When a tailor and secularist lecturer was prosecuted for blasphemy in 1908, Chesterton condemned the trial, as did the advanced Liberal journalist H. N. Brailsford. Why, asked Brailsford, was this particular prosecution being brought when a Cabinet minister with not dissimilar views – John Morley – had escaped any such charge? Why, moreover, was the trial conducted *sub judice* on the order of a Liberal Home Secretary, Herbert Gladstone? It seemed to Brailsford that there had been one law for freethinkers among the educated classes since the 18th century and another law for those who lacked establishment connections.(10)

Liberal values were strained further in September of that year when Asquith put pressure upon Cardinal Bourne to desist from carrying the Host in the Westminster procession of September 1908. Lubenow gives

an illuminating account of the episode based on the personal reactions of those involved. He touches on the extension of the conflict to the controversy surrounding the King's Declaration in May 1910 following the death of Edward VII (pp. 172–5). Another dimension to this last episode is added by Chesterton's letter to the editor of *The Daily News* on the subject. The requirement that the Crown denounce Roman Catholicism as part of the Coronation oath, he argued, went against the grain of Liberalism; moreover, while Catholics might be content with a compromise – the essence of the Accession Declaration Act passed in August of that year – Liberals could only be satisfied if the entire oath was swept away. In his view it was a purely 'theological test for a purely political officer,' the only remaining such test; it could on no account be compared with the Pope's denunciation of the 16th-century reformers in his recent Encyclical, as many of his contemporaries believed.⁽¹¹⁾ The failure of the Liberal government to remove the requirement that the sovereign profess the Protestant faith emphasised the limits of the 'non-confessional' state that liberal values had ushered in.

These instances underline the halting and contested way in which liberal values were advanced; also, their fragile hold on public culture. It is fitting that Lubenow's book should have been published in the year of Pope Benedict XVI's visit to Britain, the first state visit of any pope since the Reformation. At one level, it is a mark of the progress of liberal values that such a visit should have taken place. But at another level, it is somewhat ironic that it has fallen to a pope to spell out a new threat to liberal values in the guise of an ascendant secularism. In his address at Westminster Hall, he expressed concern at the increasing denial of the 'legitimate role of religion' in the 'public square'.⁽¹²⁾ If a new confessional state is to be avoided, the aspirations and limitations of those who defined an alternative set of values in the wake of the dismantling of the old could be instructive. To this *Public Intellectuals* has opened the way.

Notes

1. G. O. Trevelyan, *Interludes in Verse and Prose* (London, 1905).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. G. K. Chesterton, 'College Fireworks', *Daily News* (hereafter *DN*), 5 October 1905.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Chesterton Papers, British Library.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. C. F. G. Masterman, 'Lord Acton', *DN*, 26 September 1906.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. C. F. G. Masterman, 'Leslie Stephen', *DN*, 8 November 1906.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. C. F. G. Masterman, 'Matthew Arnold', *DN*, 14 March 1904.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. C. F. G. Masterman, 'Henry Sidgwick', *DN*, 6 March 1906; Lubenow, pp. 24–5.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. G. K. Chesterton, 'The two compromises', *The Commonwealth: A Christian Social Magazine*, IX (June 1904), 178.[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. G. K. Chesterton, 'The secular solution', letter to the editor, *DN*, 12 May 1905.[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. G. K. Chesterton, 'Anybody', *DN*, January 11, 1908; H.N. Brailsford, 'On Blasphemy,' Letter to the Editor, *DN*, January 9, 1908.[Back to \(10\)](#)
11. G. K. Chesterton, 'The King's declaration', *DN*, 13 June 1910.[Back to \(11\)](#)
12. Pope Benedict's address to politicians, diplomats, academics and business leaders, 17 September 2010.[Back to \(12\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to respond.

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