

The Political Life of Josiah C. Wedgwood: Land, Liberty and Empire, 1872-1943

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Paul Mulvey's study of the radical MP Josiah C. Wedgwood is a labour of love. Beginning as a doctoral thesis at the London School of Economics, this book has been many years in the making. Drawing on a fund of unexplored papers and documents relating to the life of Wedgwood at Stoke-upon-Trent Archives in Hanley, Mulvey lived out the fantasy of so many academics and researchers to enjoy privileged access to underused and unexplored sources in the public domain. The result is an especially rich and nuanced account of one of the lesser figures of early 20th century politics, but one sometimes described as 'the last of the radicals'. The subject of several studies and an autobiography, Wedgwood traditionally remains misunderstood. This makes the use of the papers and archive relating to his career at Hanley doubly important. For the first time Wedgwood emerges as a constituency MP, as a politician, and as an imperial thinker. In short, this is a political biography that offers an impression of Wedgwood in the round, and as a central figure in the last days of radical liberalism. In addition, it places Wedgwood firmly in his context, examining the trajectory of his ideas and political development at a time when the political fortunes of liberalism were in decline, and radicals were often forced into an uneasy accord with the newly emergent Labour Party. Eschewing traditional labels of eccentricity and perversity, Mulvey points out that Wedgwood is an interesting example of a reformer whose ideas were formed in the later part of the 19th century, solidified in the ferment of the years before 1914, and struggled to keep up with the changing pace of politics and world events in the inter-war period. With a less sure-footed guide, this might have provided a tangled and confusing tale. However, Mulvey offers a clear, sharp, and, at times, a very original, analysis of politics during these years, and of the role of Wedgwood within them.

The book is at its strongest in its treatment of Wedgwood's devotion and dedication to the ideas of the American economist, Henry George. In an incisive chapter Mulvey places the land reform ideas of the beginning of the 20th century in context. The land campaign had roots deep in the British past. A traditional canard of much reform opinion, land reformers emphasised the unfair distribution of land ownership, and the monopoly of land by a small, aristocratic elite. Following the visits of the American economist Henry George to Britain in the 1880s, much land reform opinion cohered around the notion of the Single Tax. For many Georgeites, a single tax on the value of land, overriding all other forms of taxation, would unlock the potential of the land, leading to the cultivation of waste, cheaper food, the break-up of the great estates, and the restoration of a small peasant proprietorship. The later aim in particular was a long-held article of faith amongst many reformers in Britain in the 19th century. For many radicals, the ideas of Henry George became something of a millenarian crusade at the beginning of the 20th century, promising an unlimited social transformation. At its more extreme fringe, Georgeites believed that the single tax would end crime altogether and usher in a more just society. Briefly the Georgeite single tax united advanced liberals, traditional liberals, socialists and municipal progressives under its banner. Wedgwood was a high priest of the cult of Georgeite economics. As Mulvey comments, for Georgeite purists like Wedgwood, the reform of the land was almost a 'theological' issue in itself (p. 19). Wedgwood stated that he had no need for any other faith than Henry Georgeism, writing that ever since 1905 'I have known that there was a man from God, and his name was Henry George' (p. 20). Thereafter the one continuous thread that bound his politics and ideas together was devotion to the cause of Georgeite land reform. As Mulvey points out, in the period 1906–14 land reform played a crucial part in the platform of British liberalism. Bearing the historical benediction of liberals like John Bright and J. S. Mill, land reform appealed to the notion of the 'the many against the few' that underpinned the producerist ethos of liberalism, allowed Asquith and Lloyd George to create a counterweight to the conservative wing of the party, while appealing to working-men voters frequently resident in rented accommodation and suspicious of collectivist socialism. Far more of a minority faith after 1919, the notion of a single tax on land nevertheless remained a live issue into the 1930s. In 1931 a land valuation measure supported by Wedgwood featured as a prelude to a land tax in the final budget of the 1929–31 Labour government that was swept away by the crisis in national finances that ushered in the National government.

For Wedgwood, the land and the debates surrounding it were not merely the preserve of British domestic politicians. In this book Mulvey is at his strongest when he outlines the broader imperial agendas that inspired land reform campaigners. Wedgwood's imperial ideas found their point of origin in the example set by Alfred Milner in South Africa. An early member of Milner's Kindergarten, and an admirer of Milner in his youth, Wedgwood spent time in Africa during the Boer War. Like Milner, Wedgwood felt that the British colonies of settlement might be stabilised by the encouragement of yeoman proprietorships that would recreate the vanished and dispersed British peasantry in the further reaches of the empire. In this Wedgwood echoed other rural sentimentalists who discerned simpler values of community, small government and thrifty rustic virtue on the imperial frontier. For Wedgwood, Henry George's ideas were again applicable here. Mulvey points out that the Boer farmers he encountered bore some of the characteristics of the idealised smallowner he hoped would augment agrarian production at home. By the end of the Great War, Wedgwood was offering the single tax as a remedy to troubled colonial economies in northern Nigeria and elsewhere. Thereafter the notion of a small rural proprietorship remained marked in his attitudes to these colonial contexts. Wedgwood's interest in the land also led him in the direction of the Middle East. He was one of those voices who hoped for a Jewish homeland in Palestine with full dominion status within the empire. When he spoke of the Arab peoples of the region as almost feudal in nature, and offered support to the Zionist small producers, the shadow of Georgeite economic thinking fell over the intra-communal, religious and ethnic tensions of the region. A close assessment of the links between Wedgwood and Zionism is omitted by Mulvey from this study, but for the ageing Wedgwood, the armed farmers of the kibbutzim bound together by ties of communal obligation were the culmination of a long Georgeite dream of prosperity and economic inter-dependency. Fascinatingly, and, no doubt, inspired by his interests in the economic theory of George, Wedgwood was one of the first British politicians to recognise the importance and reinvigorated world role of the United States following the decline of Britain's imperial significance

after the end of the Great War.

Wedgwood's career sheds particular light on the political flux of the post-1906 years, and the shifting patterns of alliance that led to the disintegration of the great 19th-century Liberal Party, and its replacement by Labour. Often depicted as a relatively smooth and fluid transition in recent scholarship, Mulvey depicts the reality of the political tensions, and conflicting networks that cut across the Labour/Liberal divide. Wedgwood navigated a number of these fault lines, moving between the polarities of Cobdenite labourism, radical liberalism, socialism, Fabian statism and Red Clydesidism. Moving in the upper reaches of traditional liberal families like the Wedgwoods and the Trevelyans, Wedgwood found himself situated uneasily in a Labour Party where the links and networks that really counted were in the trade union movement. Mulvey's book provides a fascinating case study of the tensions that existed in this alliance for many apostate liberals and the older elite families that had acted as the vanguard of Whiggery in the 19th century. Here more engagement with the work of Eugenio Biagini or of Jonathan Parry might have helped to analyse directly the arguments for and against radical continuity in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.⁽¹⁾ The experience of Josiah Wedgwood suggests a troubled and ill-tempered accommodation of progressive forces within the Labour camp, rather than the harmonious fusion of ideological affinities familiar from previous scholarship.

Mulvey is particularly strong in his assessment of the relationship between Wedgwood's intellectual development, and the history of British radicalism. Throughout his career Wedgwood depicted himself as a custodian of radical memory. Before 1914 he had already researched a parliamentary history of North Staffordshire, and in the post-war years he became actively involved in projects to record and commemorate British parliamentary institutions. After 1927 he was a prime mover in attempts to create a standard histories of parliament, including a historical record of the careers of key MPs. Omitted by Mulvey is Wedgwood's interest in and enthusiasm for the Puritan side in the English Civil War. This placed him firmly in a spectrum of ideas within Whiggery and liberalism that traced the origins of traditional English liberties back to the 17th century and before.⁽²⁾ Mulvey, however, is correct to suggest that Wedgwood's liberalism remained primarily one of individualism and self-reliance, rooted in the ideas of Herbert Spencer. In the face of all evidence to the contrary he continued to see these principles as vindicated by the forces of history until the end of his career. By the height of the Great War this traditional liberalism was increasingly out of step with the organic statism of the New Liberalism and the demands placed on British society by the impositions of mass mobilisation, censorship and internment of enemy aliens. In this sense Mulvey takes a very traditional view when he depicts British liberalism as plunged into a state of crisis by the demands of the 20th century. Here Wedgwood's sin was his refusal to go with the flow. His adherence to the traditional principles of 19th-century liberalism left him in some very strange company indeed. By the 1920s he was one of a number of arch-individualists who clustered around Hilaire Belloc and G. K. Chesterton. Never a school or a movement, like him they offered an increasingly nostalgic vision of rural England, and of the certainties of small rural proprietorships. In contrast to Wedgwood's philo-semitism, however, their politics had taken them in the direction of a resurrected English Catholicism, and anti-semitism. This was effectively a dead end, and is indicative of the relative isolation into which Wedgwood sank in his later career.

If I have one criticism to make, it is that throughout the book more might have been said about the variants of radicalism that pertained in the north Staffordshire area. In this volume Wedgwood emerges more as a national figure, rather than as a local politician. In many ways his political outlook suited the region. The Potteries had a history of vocal dissident politics that remains unexplored by Mulvey. The mix of mining, artisanal workshop culture and low trades union membership in the area created a string of variegated and unorthodox constituencies that often set themselves against the grain of party and political organisation. Wedgwood embodies this reflex and was in a tradition of similar MPs at the time of his first election in 1906 for Newcastle-under-Lyme. The Potteries were also the home of the only Tichborne Campaign MP, Edward Vaughn Kenealy elected in a by-election for neighbouring Stoke in 1875, and Kenealy's later successor, the Lib-Lab MP John Ward, who moved from labourism into anti-Bolshevick politics, becoming a National Liberal in 1919.⁽³⁾ Here was evidence of oscillating populist political sympathies that were unconfined by conventional party machinery, yet resisted the pull towards Labour. Mulvey misses an opportunity to

consider this theme against the background of the changing and fractured electoral loyalties of the post-1906 period.

Sometimes unambitious in his political objectives, and never a major front-line politician, the career of Josiah Wedgwood nevertheless presents a fascinating glimpse into the concerns of those radicals and liberals that sought to navigate the wreckage of the great 19th-century Liberal Party, and survive into the statism of the post-1919 world. After a number of false starts, Wedgwood has at last been well-served by a biography from a politically-attuned historian writing with sensitivity, and a strong sense of period. It is to be hoped that Mulvey's thought-provoking book will generate other political biographies grounded in the experience of the transition from liberalism into labour.

Notes

1. Eugenio Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform: Popular Liberalism in the Age of Gladstone, 1860-1880* (Cambridge, 1992) and Jonathan Parry, *The Rise and Fall of Liberal Government in Victorian Britain* (New Haven, CT, 1993), chapters 11–12. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Blair Worden, *Roundhead Reputations: the English Civil War and the Passions of Posterity* (London, 2010), chapters 6–7. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. For Edward Vaughn Kenealy's by-election campaign in Stoke in 1875, see Rohan McWilliam, *The Tichborne Claimant: A Victorian Sensation* (London, 2007), chapter 7. [Back to \(3\)](#)

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