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The Strange Survival of Liberal England: Political Leaders, Moral Values and the Reception of Economic Debate

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Peter Clarke's influence on the historiography of modern Britain in the last 30 years has been immense. The expansive Clarkean oeuvre stretches from his agenda-setting *Lancashire and the New Liberalism* (1) and pioneering studies of early social-democratic thinkers, through to definitive works on Keynes and Cripps and numerous essays on electoral politics and political economy, not forgetting that firm staple of every undergraduate reading list, *Hope and Glory: Britain, 1900-90*. (2) This volume of essays by former colleagues and students pays tribute to a distinguished scholarly career by expounding and expanding on a theme for which Clarke's name has become a veritable shorthand: the nature and reception of liberal, social-democratic and socialist political ideas since the late 19th century. The result is a Festschrift-style collection which, in the best traditions of the genre, honours the man and his work while directing its core intellectual concerns into new and sometimes unexpected terrains. These scholars share Clarke's preoccupation with what the editors Duncan Tanner and the late Ewen Green describe as 'the relationship between ideas, human agency and politics' (p. 3), a formula which serves as an agreeable point of departure for a set of wide-ranging and thoughtful essays in political and intellectual history.

As Tanner and Green explain in their synoptic introduction, the title of the volume is an inversion of George

Dangerfield's classic 1935 work *The Strange Death of Liberal England*. Famously, Dangerfield argued that Liberalism as a political creed had reached the end of its natural life-span by 1914, brought to its knees by a fatal combination of industrial unrest, suffragette agitation, resurgent Irish nationalism and the apocalypse of total war. Politics subsequently polarised into a two-party system in which socialist ideologues vied with the radical and reactionary defenders of capitalism in a battle to master and assuage the seemingly intractable problems of modern industrial society. Peace, retrenchment and reform, that holy trinity of Victorian Liberalism, found no place within this new ideological order and slowly faded away as the discredited credo of a lost age.

Many historians either endorsed this polarisation thesis in its entirety or, noticing the comparatively mild character of the British case, sought to explain this peculiarity by reference to the subordinate place of ideas within political life. If Britain was largely spared the extremes of fascism and communism, so the argument ran, it was a consequence of her singularly anti-intellectual political culture. Thus was born the notion (which still crops up in popular discourse in the present day) that British politicians are profoundly non-ideological creatures: driven by personal ambition, sectional loyalties or a managerial passion, certainly, but never, unlike their more cerebral continental counterparts, by the power of ideas.

Peter Clarke was one of the first historians to challenge these assumptions in a sustained and convincing manner. This he accomplished in the first instance by delineating the existence of a 'progressive tradition' in late Victorian Britain, which substituted in place of familiar laissez-faire orthodoxies a new evolutionary optimism about the capacity of the modern state for ameliorating social and economic conditions. Nurtured by the two-way traffic of ideas between Liberal intellectuals and the nascent Labour movement and mediated through a complex set of institutional relationships and cultural forces, this tradition blossomed into a rich current of thought and action, guaranteeing the legitimacy and relevance of Liberalism well into the 20th century. Secondly, Clarke pioneered a distinctive form of intellectual biography. Suspending his subjects within a densely-spun web of electoral imperatives, ideological impulses and economic realities, Clarke's work delivered (and continues to deliver) a richness of interpretation lacking in more conventional political biographies and 'high' political narratives, or indeed in the 'forward march' school of labour history.

These conceptual and historiographical issues receive a thoughtful exposition in the editors' introduction, but the essays for the most part, like Clarke himself, wear their theory lightly, electing to demonstrate through grounded, empirical analysis rather than abstract reflection the dynamic interplay of personality, ideas and events. The reception of economic debate in Britain since the mid-Victorian era supplies the broad context for these endeavours, which are loosely grouped into three themed sections and include two enlightening geographical diversions by way of early 20th-century American progressivism and post-war Italy.

Part one on 'economic ideas and political leaders' opens with an elegant essay by Boyd Hilton exploring the relationship between Gladstone and his Chancellor Robert Lowe. Challenging the conventional wisdom which explains Lowe's demotion in 1873 as the result of poor administrative performance, Hilton argues instead for the primacy of ideas, demonstrating that the two men adhered to substantially different philosophies of the role of government. Despite sharing his premier's commitment to the principles of classical political economy, Lowe, Hilton contends, was a child of the Foxite Whigs, believing in state intervention for the purpose of guiding social and moral progress, with discretionary powers delegated to a cadre of trained, 'expert' officials. Gladstone's Tory-Peelite roots, by contrast, instilled in him a faith in rule-based bureaucracies whose operations would not interfere with the cultivation of 'manly independence' amongst the citizenry. Don't be fooled, Hilton warns us, by the *appearance* of agreement over economic theory and policy, as this can mask 'philosophical differences that have nothing directly to do with economics' (p. 37).

There is little danger of committing this latter error while reading the essay by James Thompson which follows, an analysis of the multiple economic theories and ideological positions available to participants in late Victorian and Edwardian debates over wage regulation. Here, the volume moves squarely into Clarkean territory, revealing the complex interchange of ideas between Liberal and Labour thinkers and British and American progressives over such issues as the role of the state in industrial relations, the likely impact of

intervention upon patterns of employment and the rights and obligations of consumers versus those of producers. Thompson's impressively wide-ranging discussion illustrates how arguments over economics were constantly shaped by ethical considerations through, for example, the highly-publicised cause of anti-sweating, although it is perhaps regrettable that he leaves himself no room to reflect upon the implications of the Edwardian legacy for the post-war Lib-Lab relationship.

John Thompson takes up the theme of trans-Atlantic dialogue in an essay which revisits the problem of explaining America's entry into the First World War in 1917. The ideas of British radicals such as J. A. Hobson and H. N. Brailsford were formative in shaping the attitudes of American progressives opposed to US participation, whose arguments typically dwelt upon the insatiable needs of expansive capitalism. This critique evolved during the 1920s and 1930s into a damning indictment of interventionism, providing a basis for the Neutrality Laws of 1935-7 and fomenting popular discontent over the alleged machinations of the private arms trade. Thompson traces the influence of this interpretation in the New Left historiography of the Cold War and Vietnam era, but ultimately takes issue with its core assumptions. He argues instead for a carefully-contextualised, multi-causal account of America's actions in 1917, placing particular weight upon the transformed position of the US economy and the threat to national prestige posed by German submarine warfare. The radical economic critique, Thompson's essay seems to imply, was effective in mobilising progressives during the period of American neutrality, but its usefulness as a framework for historical analysis has proved far less enduring.

In the last essay of this section, Duncan Tanner brings the student of modern British politics back to more familiar ground by offering a fresh perspective on a well-defined historical debate: the economic policy of the second Labour government (1929-31). Tanner combines a concern for institutional dynamics with an attention to the socially-constructed values of individual leaders, in this case Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald and his Chancellor Philip Snowden. Together these men shaped the reception of economic advice during a period which ended in national crisis and the schism of the Labour party. Tanner's meticulously researched essay shelves the more conventional problem of establishing whether viable policy alternatives were available in favour of explaining the Labour government's actual course of action. This he sees as conditioned not only by the economic advice on offer at the time but by the individual orientations of MacDonald and Snowden, formed by the cumulative experience of several decades in the Labour movement and one brief stint in government in 1924. Pointing to the absence of any formal structures for facilitating policy development or harnessing 'expert' advice, Tanner argues that the pre-existing incapacities of the Labour party permeated the Prime Minister and Chancellor's 'way of seeing the economic world' (p. 114). Explaining the economic policy of these crucial years thus entails the careful unpacking of the institutional culture of the Labour party itself.

Tanner's essay provides a fitting segue into part two, which contains three essays on the political reception of the thought of John Maynard Keynes. In the first of these, Richard Toye explores how Labour leaders from Macdonald to Blair absorbed and made use of the Cambridge economist's ideas, borrowing Clarke's important analytical distinction between the 'real' or 'historical' Keynes and his 'Keynesian' followers. Toye shows how socialist intellectuals in the 1930s drew on Keynes's critique of orthodox finance in order to strengthen their own case for a planned economy, while post-war Labour governments defended physical controls - never advocated by Keynes himself - as a necessary counterpart to 'Keynesian' demand management. Toye admirably refrains from holding his subjects guilty of cynically appropriating economic theory, arguing that the framing and interpretation of ideas through political debate is an integral element of the policy-making process, as Keynes himself well understood.

This perceptive observation finds support in Ewen Green's essay which, with agreeable symmetry, traces the Conservative party's engagement with Keynes and Keynesianism in the same era. Demonstrating how Keynes's ideas were recalibrated to fit a series of Conservative world-views, Green traces the Keynesian influence from the radical prescriptions of inter-war Tory dissidents, through the 'consensus' era of Butskellism and finally to the economic thinking of the New Right. Particularly fascinating is the author's account of the challenge issued to Labour's proprietary hold on Keynes by Conservatives during the Thatcher years. Audaciously claiming that Keynes himself had not been a Keynesian, figures such as Keith

Joseph and Nigel Lawson restyled him as the original monetarist, an arguably anachronistic assertion but one which demonstrated the enduring purchase of the great man's name within political and economic debate into the 1970s and 1980s. The essay also provides additional ammunition for Green's earlier thesis, brilliantly sustained in *Ideologies of Conservatism* (2002), by identifying and illuminating yet one more front on which Conservatives proved themselves willing to take on the left in the battle of ideas.

Eugenio Biagini supplies the last of this trio of essays with a fascinating exploration of the reception of Keynes in post-Fascist Italy. The slow and partial diffusion of Keynesian thinking, Biagini argues, cannot be attributed to the alleged insularity or provincialism of Italian political culture following the forced isolation of the Fascist era. Liberal economists in Italy were, in fact, highly conversant with Keynes's ideas during the inter-war years, but the appropriation of aspects of his work by fascist-corporatist thinkers served to strengthen the allegiance of anti-fascist intellectuals to orthodox political economy. Despite the enshrinement of social-democratic values in the Constitution of the new republic in 1947, political advocates of a Keynesian third way within the radical Partito d'Azione and the progressive wing of the Christian Democrats wielded insufficient institutional muscle to embed their ideas in the post-war Italian state. With the defeat of the Keynesian revolution thus clinched almost before it had begun, Biagini's essay offers historians of Britain an illuminating and nuanced account of the trajectory of economic ideas within a political context radically different from that explored in the preceding two essays.

The third and final section on 'Economic Forces and their significance' arguably lacks the thematic coherence of its predecessors with two markedly dissimilar - though equally fascinating - essays. Stefan Collini's intriguing contribution focuses on inter-war perceptions of the relationship between cultural decline and the economic imperatives of 'modern' society. Collini shows how economic crises, Marxist influences, and the spectacle of mass consumer culture prompted many inter-war intellectuals to search for the origins of their present discontent not in the familiar territory of 19th-century laissez-faire ideology, but in the early modern period. T. S. Eliot's notion of a 'dissociation of sensibility' is presented as the foundational text for this critique, but most of the essay is devoted to a detailed analysis of R. H. Tawney's *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (1926), with its central proposition that the unities of the medieval world-view were eclipsed during the course of the 17th century by a conception of economic activity as existing outside the ambit of moral relations. Collini deconstructs the text with virtuosic skill but lacks space to develop the arguably more suggestive observations of the concluding section, particularly concerning the 'rhetorical excess' of this strand of cultural criticism. As the author rightly points out, the declinist perspective largely failed to register the appearance of new institutional and legal frameworks for economic activity during this period. Setting the Tawney critique alongside the ideas of those who detected in the emergent public monopolies and co-partnership initiatives of the inter-war years the seeds of a humanised capitalism would be a fascinating future endeavour.

The final essay of the volume transports the reader from the close examination of a single text to a panoramic survey of the changing political economy of modern Britain. Revisiting his Coffin Lecture of 1999, Barry Supple suggests that the long-run trend of the last century towards an increasing supply of goods and services has raised rather than lowered the moral stakes in play within policy debates. Whether the matter at issue is tariff reform versus free trade, membership of the Common Market or how to pay for pensions, economic arguments, Supple contends, are always freighted with moral baggage because of their unavoidable implications for distributional outcomes. Politicians make active choices - albeit frequently in circumstances not of their own choosing - which create winners and losers; nowhere is this logic more exposed than in the sphere of welfare provision, where humanitarian impulses and demands for social justice become entangled with judgements about what the state can 'afford' and what the economy can bear. Quite apart from its impressive range, Supple's essay is an important inclusion (and fitting conclusion) to the volume because it exemplifies the Clarkean approach in seeking to pull down the disciplinary walls separating economic, political and intellectual history.

As with any volume of this kind, the reviewer is inevitably tempted to pick a fight with the editors over what they have left out. Illuminating and pertinent essays could have been written, no doubt, on the politics of free trade, the economic dimensions of internationalist thought, the role of 'middle opinion' in shaping economic

debate, the rise of corporatism and the marginalisation of more extreme responses to economic crisis in Britain, both of a communist and fascist variety. It is, perhaps, especially regrettable that feminist political economy makes no appearance in these pages, despite the richness of early 20th-century argument and debate concerning equal pay and family allowances. But this is to nit-pick over what is, after all, an inherently selective enterprise, and there is no doubting the intellectual pedigree of the essays making the final cut.

The volume is unlikely to be much-thumbed by undergraduates, but specialists of modern Britain will appreciate the subtlety and nuance of much of what is argued here. As one would expect with a collaborative project of this nature, the volume offers no overarching narrative or startlingly new interpretation of the period other than the very general one suggested in the title: the 'survival' of British Liberalism. In this respect, it might be fruitfully read as a companion piece to Peter Mandler and Susan Pedersen's *After the Victorians* (3), which dwelt in similar fashion upon cultural and intellectual continuities between the late 19th and mid-20th centuries (and, appropriately enough, contained an essay by Clarke himself on Keynes). More generally, the collection attests to the ongoing interest among historians in the resilience of liberal values long after the formal demise of the Liberal party. Above all, the volume adds texture and richness to the basic proposition of Clarke's work - that Britain's moderate political tradition must be understood as an affirmation of the power of ideas within the national culture, rather than as proof of their irrelevance.

Notes

1. P. F. Clarke, *Lancashire and the New Liberalism* (Cambridge, 1971). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. P. F. Clarke, *Hope and Glory: Britain, 1900-90* (London, 1996). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. *After the Victorians: Private Conscience and Public Duty in Modern Britain*, ed. S. Pedersen and P. Mandler (London, 1994). [Back to \(3\)](#)

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