

Disraeli and Modern Conservatism

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Disraeli, by Robert Blake, *New York: St. Martin's Press, 1967. xxiv + 819 pp. \$12.50.*

BLAKE'S BIOGRAPHY of Benjamin Disraeli is a brilliant and a solid book which does full justice to its great subject. It succeeds in the difficult task of weaving Disraeli's personal life, political achievement, and literary activity into a remarkably well-integrated narrative; moreover, it far transcends the task of mere biography in portraying this in many ways "un-Victorian Victorian" against the general background of the Victorian age. The book incorporates all the most recent scholarship—no mean achievement in a field where important new publications appear almost every month—but the author has also re-examined Disraeli's papers used by previous biographers; he has found that they omitted discussion of some critical problems and published important documents with significant omissions which they considered "embarrassing" to Disraeli's memory. Though Blake is basically sympathetic to Disraeli, he is free of any kind of squeamishness; above all, he breaks with the "Tory Myth" which too long hero-worshipped Disraeli in a completely uncritical manner. Blake is not concerned with promoting the somewhat Protean legacy of Disraeli, but only with discovering what he was and what he did. To conventional Disraeli worshippers, his book will appear

more iconoclastic, to Disraeli detesters more favorable than is really the case; Blake has simply applied ordinary, hard-headed common sense to a figure too long distorted by friend and foe alike. The best proof of his impartiality lies in his very balanced portrait of Disraeli's great foe Gladstone.

Though Blake has written a long book there are nonetheless several gaps and disproportions in his story. The account of Disraeli's ideas is inadequate since Blake refuses to take them seriously; so important a study of Disraeli's ideas as Professor Graubard's *The Politics of Perseverance* is omitted from the bibliography. Blake's emphasis upon Disraeli as a practical politician no doubt is a salutary corrective to those who have elevated him to the role of a Tory philosopher, but like most revisions it goes a bit too far. The book terminates too abruptly with Disraeli's death in 1881, a questionable stopping point in a statesman whose legacy—however variegated and manipulated by different people for different ends—was as influential and controversial as anything he did in his lifetime. Finally, Blake gives very short shrift to the nineteen years which Disraeli spent as Leader of the Opposition in the House of Commons in the years 1852-58, 1859-66, and 1868-74. The reader learns too little about the difficult problems which confronted Disraeli in the almost equally embarrassing situations when the Opposition differed from the gov-

ernment too little (when Palmerston was Prime Minister in 1859-65) and when it differed too much (during Gladstone's "radical" ministry in 1868-74). Relative neglect of the years out of office also prevents any thorough analysis of the evolution of Disraeli's views on foreign policy—there is much too little information on Disraeli's attitudes toward the Crimean War of 1853-56, the Italian question in 1859, the American Civil War, the Schleswig-Holstein crisis of 1864, and the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. In general it may be said that Blake's greatest strength lies in the narration of the course of British domestic politics—indeed, a certain insularity is the only significant flaw of his book. His frequent introduction of illuminating comparisons is nearly always to English statesmen and situations; he evidently finds foreign comparisons unhelpful in understanding English ways, though—to give only one example—his intrinsically excellent analysis of the working of the British parliamentary system in the multi-party 1850's—with its Conservatives, Peelites, Liberals, Radicals, and Irish parties—could have benefitted by comparison with the multi-party problems of France and Germany in later periods of their history. The discussion of foreign policy problems is usually based almost exclusively on English sources and does scant justice to Disraeli's foreign antagonists.

Such minor flaws and disproportions do not, however, significantly diminish Blake's scholarly achievement. His book is by all odds the best biography of Disraeli ever written. It provides much material for answering the following key questions: how could a man like Disraeli, burdened with so many handicaps on the road to success, rise to the head of the British Conservative Party and make so great an impact upon his age? What were his contributions to English history, and specifically to the Conservative cause? And what light does his career throw on the problems of modern conservatism? Our discussion will be centered on these three problems.

OF THE numerous obstacles confronting Disraeli on the road to success, some were inherent in his circumstances but most were self-created by his personality and his own avoidable follies. He could not help being born a Jew and encountered much anti-Semitism in all stages of his career; fortunately his father's decision to have him baptized—when he was only fourteen before his pride could prevent him from rejecting a step so necessary to his career—at least removed the legal bar to his entry into parliament. (As a religious Jew he would have been excluded until 1858, obviously too late for him to have risen to the front rank of politics.) The anti-Semitism he provoked often had a special sharpness because it was a reaction to his own aggressive and rather tiresome pride, whether in conversation or in his novels; it is much to Disraeli's credit that he championed Jewish emancipation at all times—even in 1848 when he was desperately seeking respectability in the eyes of the Tory squirearchy to qualify for leadership in the Commons—and never disowned his fellow Jews in the manner of many assimilationists.

Disraeli's middle-class origins inevitably stamped him as a parvenu as he tried to force his way into aristocratic politics and society. Blake correctly points out that his family background was "neither obscure, undistinguished, nor poor"; his father was a conspicuous man of letters with a large inherited fortune, lived as a country squire in Buckinghamshire, and sent Benjamin's younger brothers to Winchester. Nonetheless, it was a breath-taking and seemingly utopian ambition for a man of Disraeli's origins to aspire to a leading position in Conservative politics. To pin-point the obstacles in his way, it should be remembered that even Sir Robert Peel, the son of a prosperous manufacturer and MP, with Eton and Christ Church in his background, encountered a good deal of social prejudice among traditional Tory families. Disraeli's

difficulties were not, however, limited to his being a Jewish parvenu; they were compounded by the recklessness of his early life. Some stock-exchange speculations while still in his twenties saddled him with debts for most of the rest of his life, debts increased by his habitual extravagance and made manageable only by a prudent marriage, a number of unforeseeable windfalls, and his great earnings as an author while at the zenith of his political career. His connection with an ill-starred newspaper enterprise, *The Representative*, in 1826 (when he was only 21) antagonized important people like John Murray, the publisher, and J. G. Lockhart, the editor of the *Quarterly Review*. His characterization of these and others in his first novel, *Vivian Grey* (1826) gave Disraeli the reputation of an impertinent young man who unscrupulously "used" all his "experiences" irrespective of the hurt done to the people he had come into contact with. Generally speaking, all his novels proved a liability, for they showed him cynical, flamboyant, and playful with ideas—this at a time when most Englishmen expected their political leaders to be sincere, staid, and above all grave. Disraeli's social conduct also antagonized when it did not amuse the leaders of London society. The scandal connected with his celebrated affair with Henrietta Sykes (wife of a prosperous Berkshire baronet with a large town house in London) in 1833-36 took decades to die down. His affected dandyism with its garish clothes and pompous speech made him a favorite target for ridicule; it is not surprising that Disraeli made an unfavorable impression upon many important people, such as Sir Robert Peel (later his main political foe) and Edward Stanley (later as Lord Derby his political chief for twenty years). Disraeli's only prominent political patron was the somewhat disreputable ex-Lord Chancellor Lyndhurst, who, incidentally, appears to have shared Henrietta Sykes' favors with Disraeli.

To all these handicaps must be added

Disraeli's well-deserved reputation for political opportunism as he tried to enter parliament between 1832 and 1837. His friends sought Whig support for him unsuccessfully in his first election, and he is supposed to have exclaimed: "The Whigs have cast me off, and they shall repent it." Thereafter he oscillated between Toryism and Radicalism, depending upon whether he wooed a rural or an urban constituency, while calling for a National Party to overcome the petty bickering of parties. Disraeli finally settled for Conservatism in 1837, but this did not silence doubts concerning his "sincerity." Disraeli's close friend and ally Lord John Manners wrote as late as 1842: "Could I only satisfy myself that Disraeli believed all he said, I should be more happy; his historical views are quite mine, but does he believe them?" The absurd nostalgia for the past set forth in the "Young England" novels of the 1840's and the grotesque remedies proposed for modern evils—an independent crown, public-spirited aristocracy, etc. made it difficult for men to either take Disraeli seriously, or to believe him to be serious.

It is a tribute to Disraeli's remarkable qualities that he was able to overcome all these handicaps. He possessed above all extraordinary intellectual gifts, which showed both in his oratory and in his pamphleteering. He could generally charm people when he made the effort and always aroused attention even when he did not evoke admiration. He was motivated by a driving ambition which Blake believes was fueled by a deep "psychological wound" going back to his school days when he felt "different" and was not "accepted" by his school fellows—perhaps because of a simple matter like his "dark Jewish complexion"; at any rate he was determined to *dominate* what he felt was an alien and hostile world. His wonderful persistence was demonstrated by his continued effort to get into parliament even after four failures—he finally succeeded on his fifth try. He was undiscouraged when howled down dur-

ing his maiden speech, ending with the famous "I will sit down now, but the time will come when you will hear me!"

In explaining his success it must also be remembered that his vices did not have the inevitably ruinous effect upon his career which they would have had in the later Victorian period. At a time but a decade removed from the Regency, sexual liaisons were not considered shocking for a budding man of the world, and financial difficulties were not uncommon. Open bankruptcy probably would have left a fatal stigma, but Disraeli was able to avoid this by his wealthy father coming to the rescue on two occasions. Dandyism was more likely to amuse the few than to shock the many. His checkered career and multifarious jobs as solicitor's clerk, stock market speculator, and journalist also had the advantage of giving him a broader experience of life than fell to the lot of many of his favored competitors. Finally, his excellent marriage in 1839 to a woman twelve years his senior, while not lacking in ludicrous and mercenary elements, met his emotional needs, gave him a stable domestic life, and lessened his financial harassments.

Disraeli's great gifts were likely to lead to a successful career once he had outlived his youthful follies; it required, however, a most remarkable combination of circumstances, to make it a spectacular career. The foundation of his later leadership was laid by what appeared at the time as a heavy setback—his exclusion from Sir Robert Peel's ministry in 1841 despite importunate pleading by himself and his wife. This exclusion was apparently not due to any special hostility on Peel's part—the Conservative leader simply had too many other claims from men with longer party service than Disraeli's to consider. The exclusion threw Disraeli into despair at the time, but it allowed him four years later to lead a successful party revolt against Peel and to become the ablest man in what remained of the party after Peel and all his able supporters (most notably Gladstone) had seceded. The opportunity for revolt

was created by the widening gap between Peel's essentially middle-class outlook and that of the squirearchical MP's who constituted the bulk of the Conservative Party in parliament; the gap was made unbridgable by Peel's incredible mishandling of his followers, and the doctrinaire and pharisaical character of his newly acquired hostility to the Corn Laws. Disraeli could make his mark as the "conscience" of the Conservative Party in a series of tremendous philippics against Peel—philippics which made Disraeli one of the most prominent members of the House though one of the most hated as well.

In the absence of able competitors he became the intellectual leader of the "gentlemen of England," though cumulative distrust prevented him from formally securing the party leadership in the Commons until 1849. Disraeli's ally and nominal chief Lord George Bentinck, who had given respectability to the revolt of 1846 by his great name, screened him against attacks when he needed it most. Bentinck's early death in 1848 removed the last real obstacle to Disraeli's leadership, though the farcical attempts to prevent his becoming in name what he was already in substance are interesting only in showing the continued prejudice against him. Lord Derby, the Tory leader in the Lords who was also the generally acknowledged party leader, loyally resisted several attempts to "ditch" Disraeli. In short, Disraeli had tremendous luck in the opportunity which offered itself in 1846; but only a man of great ambition would have seized the opportunity, and only one of great abilities could have made it the foundation of a spectacularly successful career.

It must not be thought that Disraeli's difficulties were over when he won the party's leadership in the Commons in 1849, a post he was to hold for 27 years until his elevation to the peerage. Disraeli wanted above all to exercise political power, yet he was destined to spend most of his life in opposition. The brief minority governments of 1852, 1858-59, and 1866-68 were exercises

in "holding on" rather than occasions for great achievements in legislation or foreign policy. It was only in 1874 that he finally obtained a reliable majority, in the House of Commons, and by that time he was an old man of seventy, so plagued by illness that he could govern only by the exercise of his indomitable will.

The tragedy and irony of Disraeli's career are that the events of 1846, which skyrocketed him into the top leadership of the Conservative Party, also placed that party in a minority position for a generation. An essentially "squirearchical" party was contrary to the spirit of the age and the dominant interests of the British community. It had been formed as a rally of the Protectionists, though Disraeli soon abandoned this electoral liability—not without giving new fuel to those who viewed him as a pure opportunist. What was the sense in smashing Peel's government over protection only to abandon protection immediately thereafter, they asked. The obvious road to a renewed majority was rapprochement with the Peelites, yet Disraeli—who was detested by the Peelites more than any other man—stood as an insuperable obstacle in the path of such a rapprochement. The Conservatives would not ditch Disraeli with honor, yet for many years they could not secure a parliamentary majority while he was at their head—not a pleasant position for either the party or Disraeli. To compound Disraeli's frustrations, frequent friction with the party leader, Lord Derby, was inevitable. The latter's power to decide whether the Conservatives should form a government—when invited to do so by the Queen—was not always exercised wisely. Disraeli believed, for example, that Derby should have formed a government in 1855—after Aberdeen's fall—to carry the Crimean War to a victorious conclusion; Palmerston did so instead. It is uncertain, of course, whether a Derby-Disraeli government "could have done the job" in 1855; but it was galling to Disraeli that Derby's decision—not his own—deprived him of any chance to try.

Even after he had arrived at the front bench, Disraeli continued to suffer from certain personal handicaps in the pursuit and holding of power. A cumulative reputation for cynicism, opportunism, and selfish ambition was very hard to live down—although he gradually won some "respectability" through his purchase of a country estate (Hughenden Manor) in 1848, the conferral of an Oxford DCL upon Derby's nomination in 1853, the favor of the court, and the election to some clubs from which he had been blackballed in his rakish days. His total lack of humbug, and real or apparent blindness to moral issues in politics, proved a permanent liability in a pharisaical and sanctimonious age; Disraeli never achieved the solemnity, and never pretended the earnestness, which many Victorians expected from their statesmen. His detachment—as in occasional remarks about "you English—" did not help. Disraeli's aloofness, inscrutability, and unwillingness to give his confidence—except, says Blake, to young men and old women were handicaps in an age in which personal friendships still played a large role in politics; though his fault was neutralized in some degree by his ability to manage men and to conciliate able opponents like Lord Salisbury (who turned from trenchant foe into reluctant admirer and close collaborator). His absorption in the whirl of London society sometimes placed him out of touch with powerful currents of public opinion like the North Country "Nonconformist conscience" to which Gladstone was to appeal with such success in his campaign against the "Bulgarian horrors" of 1876. All in all, it remains remarkable that a man with so many strikes against him could play so conspicuous a role on so large a stage over more than a third of a century.

II

DISRAELI HAS three major political achievements to his credit. He provided

Britain with a great administration for six years between 1874 and 1880, great both in its domestic legislation and in its conduct of foreign affairs. He did much to define conceptions of party loyalty and the constructive role of partisanship in the operation of the parliamentary system. Finally, he transformed the character of Britain's Conservative Party and thereby contributed to its ascendancy for several decades after his death. A few observations may be ventured on each of these points.

Blake rather belittles the legislative achievements of Disraeli's "great Ministry," or at least insists that the Prime Minister took little interest in the work of his domestic ministers. While it is no doubt true that Disraeli was more concerned about foreign affairs than about housing, public health, municipal water works, and the picketing rights of trade unionists, it must be emphasized that he picked the ministers responsible for these "humble" fields—the most important, Richard Cross, was his "personal" discovery and received the Home Office to everyone's surprise; that he gave them free rein to work out legislation; and that he used the government majority to put their proposed bills through parliament. Blake denies any connection between the social measures propagated by Disraeli in his novels in the 1840's and those put on the statute book during his Prime Ministership in the 1870's; it seems unnecessary, however, to postulate such an unnecessary discontinuity. The social legislation of the 1870's shows that Disraeli—in this respect far superior to his rival Gladstone—had considerable understanding of the social problems posed by industrialism, and believed they must be approached through massive state intervention in violation of *laissez-faire* canons. No doubt he gave preference to measures of state intervention which did not cost any money—Blake cites many instances throughout his book of Disraeli's adherence to the "Treasury point of view." No doubt he was hesitant to challenge pow-

erful economic interests at a time when his electoral appeal was based upon opposition to Gladstonian radicalism; no doubt his legislation was too frequently permissive rather than compulsory because he suffered from an obsessive fear that bureaucratic centralization imperiled the traditional liberties of England. After all this has been admitted it remains true nonetheless that Disraeli established a fruitful tradition of Conservative legislation on behalf of the working class through a Public Health Act, an Artisans Dwellings Act, an Agricultural Holdings Act, a Factory Act, a Sale of Food and Drugs Act, and two important Trade Union Acts. "Social Reform" became an honored plank in the platform of the Conservative Party, and when combined with Imperialism and a "Strong Foreign Policy" it gave the Conservative Party a considerable appeal to sections of the working class from Disraeli's day to our own.

Disraeli gave a great impetus to Imperialism although he personally took remarkably little interest in the self-governing empire and described the colonies on one occasion as "millstones around our necks." His personal interest in Imperialism was largely confined to India, and he readily risked a political storm to please his royal mistress by securing for her the Indian Imperial title against much unreasonable Liberal opposition. Concern for the security of India was a primary factor in his foreign policy during the Eastern crisis of 1876-78. Blake's rather unsatisfactory account of this policy deals at disproportionate length with Gladstone's campaign of moral indignation against Foreign Secretary Derby's disloyal relations with the Russian Ambassador Shuvalov and the small mistakes made by Disraeli throughout the crisis. Blake fails to appreciate sufficiently the greatness of Disraeli's achievement and the mastery of diplomatic processes which it revealed—a mastery from which much can be learned even in today's changed world.

Disraeli was clear in his own mind on his objectives: reasserting Britain's prestige shaken by Gladstone's policy of abdication and moral homilies; disrupting the *Dreikaiserbund*; preventing a Russian occupation of Constantinople; and buttressing the Turkish Empire. A believer in *Realpolitik*, he considered Turkish atrocities against Bulgarians no doubt regrettable, but he considered them irrelevant to a statesmanship charged with protecting the tangible political interests of England. (It is clear that he erred in the belief that moral considerations could and should be eliminated completely from *Realpolitik*, and he created needless difficulties for himself by airily dismissing well-authenticated atrocity stories as "coffee-house babble.") He insisted that the requirements of the European balance of power necessitated the revision of the Treaty of San Stefano, which the Russians had unilaterally imposed upon the hapless Turks, at a European Congress. While willing to accept some Russian aggrandizement, he insisted that this must be balanced by the British annexation of Cyprus. Disraeli knew that decisions at international congresses are shaped less by arguments than by the power situation (of which the credible will to utilize power is always a crucial element); hence he called out the reserves, and summoned Indian troops to Malta, on the eve of the congress, even as he had earlier sent the fleet to Besika Bay, and later to Constantinople itself, to add weight to Britain's diplomatic notes. Knowing that Britain was too weak to prevail alone, he worked closely with the Habsburg monarchy whose Balkan interests paralleled Britain's. Recognizing, moreover, that "summit meetings" were bad places for the successful transaction of difficult diplomatic business, he insisted upon settling the core of Anglo-Russian disagreements through conventional secret diplomacy prior to the opening of the congress of Berlin.

There can be little question that from a technical point of view Disraeli's performance was nearly flawless; any criticism

must be directed at the validity of his objectives and at his understanding of some of the elements of the Eastern Question. He probably exaggerated the aggressiveness and the extent of Russia's designs, though in such cases it is best to be prepared for contingencies by putting the worst construction on your foe's motives (even at the risk of this becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy). He certainly exaggerated the "reformability" of Turkey, though it can be argued that the integrity of even an unreformed Turkey was very much a British interest. He never understood the nature of Balkan nationalism and Gladstone's profound conception of a "wall of free nationalities" standing between Constantinople and the Russians; such a wall could assure Britain's political interests better than the effete and brutal Turk, and would conform to the higher interests of humanity. After all this has been said it remains nevertheless true that Disraeli was entirely successful in achieving the objectives he had set out to achieve and in resolving—however temporarily—the Eastern question within the terms in which he understood that question.

In party affairs Disraeli made important contributions to the question of a leader's obligation to his party. His campaign against Peel in 1846 was only partly on behalf of the protectionist principles which Peel had abandoned; it was also—in Disraeli's view—a campaign on behalf of the principle of political honesty. Peel had been elected by the voters of Great Britain in 1841 on a straightforward protectionist program dear to the hearts and pocket-books of members of his Conservative Party. By reversing his program in mid-term he betrayed the party which had elected him leader and laid himself open to the charge of having deceived the electorate. Under these circumstances he had no right to count upon the loyalty of his followers, and in fact courted a party split. Peel's reply to the charges was, of course, that he had—and would always—place his country above his party, he believed in

the traditional view—held before parties became really “respectable”—that the Queen’s ministers must govern in accordance with their best judgment of what constituted the national interest under the specific circumstances of the moment—even if this meant antagonizing their staunchest followers and repudiating party pledges made in a different situation. The problem of what a leader owes respectively to the country, the party, and the electorate is still an open one, as witness President Johnson’s conduct of the Vietnamese War in complete violation of his pledges during the 1964 presidential campaign. Suffice it to say that Disraeli established the point that a leader owes *some* special obligation to his party and that political honesty requires that electoral pledges *ought not* to be lightly repudiated. This point must, of course, like all general political maxims, always be interpreted in the light of any given situation.

Disraeli was Leader of the Opposition in the House for a longer period than any English statesman since Charles James Fox. He coined the famous saying, “The duty of the opposition is to oppose,” and he practiced the general rule that government measures must be opposed, or at least criticized, unless there are very special circumstances to justify what today is called bipartisanship. He believed that all measures benefit by criticism (or at least the threat of criticism) because all are capable of improvement; and he was of course by temperament a partisan fighter. On occasion he was willing to help Gladstone pass a measure disliked by the Liberal Left wing, like the famous Education Act of 1870 (left unmentioned by Blake); but his usual policy was to oppose for opposition’s sake even when he agreed with the principles of a proposed measure. Moreover, he definitely did not believe that partisanship must stop at the water’s edge.¹ He criticized Gladstone’s foreign at least as much as his domestic policy—and his great antagonist paid him back with double interest during the Eastern crisis of 1876-78.

In judging the extreme partisanship of both men in foreign affairs one must, of course, remember that this was a luxury which powerful, secure Victorian England could more readily afford than less favorably placed countries. Whatever the excesses on both sides, there can be no question that the Victorian period—and more especially Disraeli as long-time Opposition Leader—made an important contribution to the view that tough and unremitting opposition—fueled by partisanship and the desire for office—is a useful and reputable aspect of parliamentary government.

Disraeli’s far-reaching opportunism of outlook, which proved in no way incompatible with sharp partisanship, played a great role in his greatest achievement—the “education” of the Conservative Party into a party capable of coping with the problems of the modern age. Blake is no doubt right in ascribing to expediency what more worshipful biographers have seen as the product of long-range design; but motives are of no great importance in evaluating Disraeli’s achievement. He gave Britain the precious possession of a responsible Conservatism which did not hanker after the restoration of an earlier “golden age” and was in fact willing to take the lead in promoting necessary and timely reforms. He explicitly avowed his Reform Conservative outlook on several occasions, while always stressing the deep difference between Conservative and Radical spirit of reform:

In a progressive country change is constant; and the great question is not whether you should resist change which is inevitable, but whether that change should be carried out in deference to the manners, the customs, the laws, and the traditions of a people, or whether it should be carried out in deference to abstract principles, and arbitrary and general doctrines. (p. 432, speech at Edinburgh on Oct. 29, 1867)

It must not be thought that Disraeli consistently adhered to this view, or that he

considered the education of the Conservative Party to be his primary political objective. As Conservative party leader he frequently opposed changes—however beneficial and ultimately necessary—because they were disliked by his followers or contrary to his own prejudices; moreover, he had assumed the leadership of the party in the Commons as a result of leading a reaction against Peel's progressive or reform Conservatism. To turn the party back into a purely agrarian party, and to antagonize the middle-class elements which Peel had wooed so successfully was certainly a retrograde step; before one over-praises Disraeli's educational efforts one must remember that he was responsible for much of the retardation of his child.

Nonetheless, Disraeli did achieve two major "educational" objectives in reconciling the party to a democratic franchise (which he did not pretend to like but considered inevitable) and to social reform (which could be justified both as a tactical necessity and in terms of the *noblesse oblige* of the squirearchy). He went so far as to carry a large extension of the suffrage himself in the celebrated Reform Bill of 1867. Blake belittles the latter achievement by stating that it makes Disraeli deserve "to go down to history as a politician of genius, a superb improviser, and a parliamentarian of unrivalled skill, but not as a far-sighted statesman, a Tory democrat or the educator of his party." (p. 477) This is one of several instances where Blake's revisionism goes too far. Whether or not Disraeli was a Tory democrat, he certainly acted like one; whether or not he intended to educate his party, he certainly committed the party to this and subsequent extensions of the franchise; whether or not he was a farsighted statesman, the effect was to reconcile the party to an inevitable development which many of its members (including himself) rather disliked, but which it would have been suicidal in the long run to oppose. The same can be said of his outlook toward social reform, where he set his party on the right track,

whatever the inadequacies of the specific measures which he introduced.

The proof is surely to be found in his party's ascendancy after his death—in the next twenty-five years (1881-1906) it was in power for seventeen. More important still is the "legacy" which he left to his official successors like Lord Salisbury and his self-proclaimed successors like Lord Randolph Churchill—not to speak of later successors like R. A. Butler and Harold Macmillan, who proudly proclaimed themselves as standing in the Disraelian tradition. Their slogans and electoral appeal have included "Trust the People"—an affirmation of democracy unusual among Europe's Conservatives; "Social Reform"—an important legacy which remained alive even when the party was largely taken over by industrial interests very well satisfied with the *status quo*; "The Empire"—a highly popular slogan for several decades, and in the purified form of "The British Commonwealth" very attractive until the mid-1950's; and a "Strong Foreign Policy"—something which appealed to British nationalism and the belief that Britain had a constructive role to play in world affairs. These slogans were re-enforced, moreover, by a profound conception of human nature which understood the claims of the irrational, the colorful, and the authoritarian in politics. These needs received institutional satisfaction in the organization of the Primrose League, named after his favorite flower and devoted to propagating his legacy.

III

DISRAELI'S LEGACY, as is the case with that of many great political figures, represents only part of the man's outlook. It amounts in fact to a selection which at times approaches a falsification. The "real" Disraeli had many beliefs quite incompatible with his forward-looking legacy—beliefs which were anachronisms, and hence liabilities, and would have proved suicidal if the Conservative Party had been so ill-ad-

vised as to adhere to them. Blake rightly insists that Disraeli—contrary to the view of many of his contemporaries—did consistently believe in certain broad principles, though his conduct was often that of an ambitious careerist, and his curious mixture of cynicism and romanticism aroused distrust among friends and hostility among foes. He believed in what he called the “greatness of England,” and the need of a strong foreign policy to maintain her rightful place in Europe and the world (this became part of the legacy); but he also adhered to a strictly Machiavellian conception of foreign policy which was frankly indifferent to purely moral considerations (a hard-boiled *Realpolitik* which no democratic community, and least of all one leavened by puritanism, will ever accept). In domestic affairs Disraeli identified the “greatness of England” with the ascendancy of the landed class standing at the apex of a hierarchic and pluralistic order of society; he combined this view with a hatred of the centralizing, rationalizing bureaucracy championed by Jeremy Bentham and his followers in the Liberal party and the Radical movement. (Both his love and his hatred became anachronistic in the course of his life and did not become part of the Disraelian legacy.) In his novels, (and to a lesser, but still significant, degree in his life) Disraeli worshipped an independent crown—this contributed to his notorious flattery of Queen Victoria; a public-spirited aristocracy which had little resemblance to England’s real, tough, rack-renting aristocracy; and a national Church solicitous of the people—which had no resemblance to either High Church ritualism or Broad Church rationalism, and only a limited realization in the Low Church evangelicism which he rather clumsily sought to mobilize on behalf of Tory party interests. (This part of Disraeli’s outlook has become an “honorific” rather than a “functional” element in the Disraelian legacy, though affirmation of Crown, Lords, and Church

has remained the stock-in-trade of every Conservative Party conference.)

Disraeli’s advocacy of social reform was strongest in the 1840’s when he wrote *Sybil*; it progressively diminished—though never became extinct—as he wooed middle-class elements for his party, forswore utopian dreams for practical realities, sought to benefit from the reaction against “Gladstonian radicalism,” and became preoccupied with foreign affairs. (The Conservative advocacy of social reform became disproportionately inflated in the legacy.) Disraeli took a completely opportunistic view on the franchise. (This was distorted into “Trust the People” in the legacy.) Over and above all these specific views stands Disraeli’s basic belief that life is an exciting adventure which must be savored but never taken too seriously, and which can never be comprehended by any single philosophy, least of all the rationalist, philistine utilitarianism he encountered in his youth. (This point of view has been shared by most of the leaders of “Tory democracy,” though it is scarcely suited for propagation among the masses inevitably destined to lead humdrum lives.)

Apart from his eternal zest for life, Disraeli’s “real” principles have practically no relevance today, and the political “potency” of his “legacy” has virtually diminished to the vanishing point. What then survives in his career to justify its perennial fascination for modern Conservatives? The answer lies not in his principles but rather in his conduct—or perhaps it should be said in his conduct as governed by principles so general as to become commonplace. Foremost in this connection is his practicing of a basically Reform Conservative outlook: a Conservatism which recognizes the inevitability of changes in the modern world and sees its primary function as one of anticipating, guiding, and “civilizing” changes in such a way as to maximize continuity with the past and to minimize injury to old institutions and values which still retain their vitality. Reform Conservatism—unlike the Conserva-

tism lampooned by John Stuart Mill as the "stupid party"—requires the continuous exercise of intelligence in order to understand historical development; to distinguish between what is incorrigibly rotten (hence to be eliminated) and what can still be saved or even strengthened, through timely reform; and what specific steps are needed in a specific constellation of political forces in order to achieve the best kind of society attainable. It combines the conception of leadership by an elite with consent by the masses, though it is (alas!) necessary for democratic public relations to minimize the former and maximize the latter. It views politics as a wooing of circumstances to achieve the possible, and will always be condemned by both Reactionaries and Radicals as characterized by an opportunist lack of principle. It condemns the Radical conception of politics as the translation of abstract principles into coherent policies, because it distrusts all abstractions and knows that life is not necessarily coherent.

Disraeli is perhaps not the most successful but certainly the most dazzling of modern Reform Conservatives. His improbable career in overcoming fantastic objective and self-created obstacles; his major impact upon British politics for thirty-five years of his life, and at least a half century after his death, and the irresistible vitality of his personality all guarantee that men will long continue to be interested in his career. Blake has succeeded in writing a biography of this complicated man which fulfills nearly every need of the contemporary leader, and will no doubt become and remain the "standard work" for decades to come.

It is worth noting briefly that Disraeli's secret practice was even more remarkable than his open principles. Blake—following the important study of G. B. Henderson (1947)—shows that Disraeli planted a disreputable character, Ralph Earle (soon to become his private secretary) as a spy in Britain's Paris embassy in 1854 and that he regularly received confidential documents from him which he used in his parliamentary opposition to the government; it is highly possible, moreover,

that he also received regular reports from a Foreign Office official who had received rapid promotion in the dying days of the Derby-Disraeli administration of 1852. Worse still, Disraeli believed that the best chance of toppling Palmerston—since there was little difference on domestic affairs between Whigs and Tories—was to be found on a foreign policy issue, as had happened once before in the Orsini case (when Palmerston had been defeated because he had "trucked to France" in introducing a bill to prevent assassination plots against Napoleon III—like that just attempted by Felice Orsini—from being hatched on British soil). Disraeli's sharp partisanship led him into highly questionable conduct when he sent his friend Earle in April 1860 on a mission to Napoleon to encourage the French Emperor to offer resistance to some demands made by Palmerston. "In effect he was inciting Napoleon to pursue an anti-British policy in the hope that the resulting fracas would bring down Palmerston as it had in 1858." (p. 373). The case shows that there were some curious blind spots in Disraeli's much advertised patriotism.

The Breaking of the Seals

The French Revolution; edited by Philip Dawson; foreword by Crane Brinton, *Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967. 181 pp. \$4.95.*

Robespierre; edited by George Rudé, *Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 181 pp. \$4.95.*

IN THE MIDSUMMER of 1789, at the time of his departure for America, Mr. Jefferson believed that the French Revolution had already accomplished its aims. Toward the end of his life, however, he came to the conviction that "we are as yet but in the first chapter of its history." Today we know that the final chapter, which may determine the destiny of the world, has not been written. This may or may not explain why scarcely any other historical epoch has provoked so much prolonged and assiduous research. The exhumation and publication of contemporary documents, official and private, of *cahiers*, petitions, pam-