I.B. TAURIS

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Dawns and Downfalls of the British Left

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Kenneth O. Morgan is one of Britain's leading modern historians. He is a Fellow of the British Academy, Honorary Fellow of The Queen's College and Oriel College, Oxford University, and entered the House of Lords in 2000. He is the author of over 30 books, including *The People's Peace: Britain since 1945; Modern Wales: Politics, Places and People* and *The Twentieth Century*.

Elizabeth, avec toute ma tendresse

Preface

Fifty years ago, I was taking my first tentative steps as a professional historian: I had just been appointed to a temporary (word emphasised in my contract) research post at the then University College of Swansea. My research topic was politics and society in late-Victorian and Edwardian Wales, and I could not have been more fortunately based than in Glanmor Williams's History department. But the book that made the greatest impression upon me then was on American history, written by a professor named Richard Hofstadter at Columbia University. It was entitled *The Age of Reform*, and had been published in 1955, subsequently winning the Pulitzer Prize. I hoped to teach and research on American as well as British history at Swansea, if possible, and Hofstadter's book I found endlessly exciting. In fact, it was a disenchanted, highly controversial critique of the Populist and Progressive movements in whose shadow American intellectuals of the New Deal generation had grown up. And yet, as Hofstadter wrote, his criticisms came from within, out of the traditions with which he felt most comfortable. They were the more telling for that.

As luck had it, Hofstadter's book was in my hand luggage when I first stepped off the boat in the United States, in New York Harbour in July 1962, to spend a year on a fellowship at Columbia. At that time, customs and immigration officials were mainly anxious to keep out Communistic (rather than obscene) literature. The aggressive (and no doubt overworked) man on the quayside seemed disinclined at first to let through either me or Hofstadter's book to pollute the minds of the American young. *The Age of Reform* seemed to him a dangerous left-wing tract (though actually its main thrust was to highlight the illusions and ambiguities of the Progressive left). Time passed. Then I mentioned, almost in desperation, that Hofstadter might be all right because he was based at Columbia in the very heart of the island of Manhattan. The customs man suddenly unfroze, smiled, announced that Columbia was where some family relative was at school, and wished me well. So I avoided Ellis Island and spent the next 14 months on the upper West Side most happily. In fact, I notionally had Hofstadter as a kind of supervisor during my time at Columbia. It did not work out ideally, partly because Hofstadter was personally distant and only seldom came into college, partly, I am sure, because of my own nervousness in putting historical

points to the great man, as a mere beginner in American history. *The Age of Reform* was in any case by then being severely criticised in its methodology and judgements by other distinguished historians, including that famous historian of the South, C. Vann Woodward. Hofstadter's work had a rough ride in the very first *New York Review of Books* published during a long New York newspaper strike early in 1963, and its authority was now somewhat tarnished.

Nevertheless, Hofstadter and his book (indeed, all his equally controversial books) remain memorable for me. This was neither because of his research methods nor because of his conclusions. He ignored those manuscript and other primary sources which are the staff of life to the rest of us: he wrote privately that 'the archive rats' simply drained the excitement out of their subject. He turned to more speculative social sciences rather than the objective evidence when he wrote of 'paranoid styles' and 'psychic crises'. His treatment of Populism and Progressivism, much influenced by his own experience as an ex-Communist liberal intellectual during the McCarthy era, was so severe as to be destructive. And yet the literary sparkle and sheer intellectual brilliance of his analysis of US reform movements have inspired my own historical efforts ever since, in evaluating Britain's own Ages of Reform. So this collection of shorter pieces, focussing on the British progressive left over the past 200 years, written mostly since 1990 but with a far longer ancestry, is a delayed, but I hope not too inadequate, tribute to the abiding influence of this complex scholar who died of leukaemia at just 54, one of the very few truly great men I have met.

The first section of this book covers aspects of Liberalism, mainly within the Liberal Party. I look at the 1832 Reform Act which still seems to me to deserve a place in the Liberals' Valhalla, and at Gladstone, an Oxford/Anglican traditionalist who became ever more radical with age and gave moral leadership to a democratic mass movement, as much because of the Irish Home Rule split as in spite of it. I also look at the popular impact and media presentation of the Boer War (re-christened the Anglo–South African War during a centenary conference at which I spoke in Pretoria), a moment of modernity both in domestic politics and in repelling a rampant racist imperialism. Those brave Liberals and early socialists who crusaded against 'methods of barbarism' on the Veldt were much in my mind when I spoke in parliament in 2003 against the invasion of Iraq, undertaken amazingly by a Labour government: I venture to include this speech in the book. I have much to say on David Lloyd George, our most radical prime minister and almost single-handedly responsible for the progressive social thrust of the New Liberalism, and on the 1906 Liberal government which for its boldness outdid every other

centre-left government we have known other than that of Attlee. Lloyd George, when I began working on him in the early 1960s, had become a public whipping-boy, condemned across the political spectrum for causing a collapse in public and private virtue. Fortunately, a combination of the opening up of his papers in the Beaverbrook library in 1967, under the memorable custody of Alan Taylor, and a liberating 'permissiveness' which blasted away much of the hypocrisy of bourgeois Puritanism, saw Lloyd George's reputation as a radical reformer amply restored. There were very dark phases in his career – the Black and Tans in Ireland, the flirtation with Hitler – but then Gladstone, too, is besmirched by Egypt, and Churchill by India. At any rate, Lloyd George now has his statue put up in Parliament Square, a 'dynamic force' in bronze set up alongside five static Tories, a general and a right-wing King.

I am much gratified that I had something to do with this rehabilitation myself, starting with my first (very short) book on L.G. as a Welsh radical back in 1963, going on to writing his entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography* (2004). It seemed sadly ironic that the Liberal Democrats, at a debate in Brighton in September 2007 in which I participated, voted heavily for the 'greatest ever Liberal' being John Stuart Mill, a great philosopher but a cautious, apprehensive democrat, who never ran anything, was a hopeless MP, lost his seat in 1868 in a Liberal near-landslide, and led numerous admirable crusades most of which failed. Clearly Lloyd George who actually ran the country in peace and war and served in government for 17 years had no chance against him (Gladstone and Keynes ran equally badly, incidentally). For much of its history, the Liberal and (often) Labour left, has been undermined by high-minded, elitist distaste for power, and the Brighton vote rather illustrated it. I also look at some wider contexts of British Liberalism, the links with France and with Germany, and Lloyd George's attempts to harmonise relations with the two. A final essay in this section discusses the much ignored role of British Liberalism as a beacon for Hofstadter's Progressives across the Atlantic. Toynbee Hall and the London County Council were Edwardian Britain's version of thirties Communism as an inspiration for radicals. Progressivism was a unique ideological strand in the so-called special relationship, perhaps as important as diplomacy or war.

The second section covers a later long phase of reform, dominated in one way or another by the Labour Party from the end of the First World War onwards. Here I try in places to explore Labour's ideas. This is an elusive enterprise, despite the ideological force of the Webbs, the Coles, Tawney, Laski and Crosland, and the left-wing intelligentsia more generally, memorably depicted by John Vincent as treading the rolling road from Bush House to Golders Green like Chaucer's pilgrims, en route for

a new Jerusalem in NW 3. Certainly British socialism has been singularly protean. It has been much more than what Herbert Morrison called 'what a Labour government does', yet adopting the various guises (or disguises) of ethical fellowship, workers' power, planning, equality, modernisation, nationalism and much else. Each had its place in the sun, before darkness descended. By the new millennium, the Labour Party, of which I have been a member since 1955 throughout a surfeit of black defeats and pinkish dawns, could scarcely be called a Socialist Party at all. I particularly examine nationalisation, the epitome of the socialist idea in 1945, but now almost the left's last, worst choice even at a time of capitalist collapse, and the refusal of the centre-left to reject a hereditary monarchy suffused in the symbolism of class. Some external perspectives also come in – great successes such as the ending of Empire and more positive relationships with Europe from Gaitskell to Blair; less happily, the 'special relationship' with the US, largely the work of Labour governments, with creative outcomes under Bevin and, to a degree Wilson and Callaghan, but with a catastrophic denouement in Iraq.

There are also Labour's heroes, an inescapable feature of the cultural landscape of a 'people's party' that denies having a cult of great men. On one of the greatest, Keir Hardie, I wrote a full biography. Of the others, Nye Bevan still seems to me a prophetic figure, simplistic in his economics, yet still audaciously relevant in his social and cultural insights, the paradigm of what it meant to be a socialist. Michael Foot, who, like Jim Callaghan earlier, asked me to write his life, is always identified with internal division and a catastrophic election campaign in 1983. The 'donkey jacket' at the Cenotaph was his Turin shroud. Foot was not really a theorist, certainly not an economist of any kind, he had no affinity for power, and much of his career was taken up by negative crusades against his party's leadership. And yet, in his seriousness about words and ideas, his concern for culture, high and low, and above all an abiding passion for history, inherited from his Liberal father, he represents to me many of the nobler values which the left has cherished. As an octogenarian, his campaign on behalf of bombarded Croatians was as moving as the 86-year-old Gladstone's on the massacred Armenians a century before. Writing about Foot and Callaghan, naval patriots of Plymouth and Portsmouth, born to Drake's Drum and the Pompey Chimes, gave new excitement to my career after academic exile as a vice-chancellor, and rekindled my idealism as well. Both Callaghan and Foot, in their different ways, had a strong sense of history. It was a message which New Labour fatally neglected.

Much of our recent past has seen times of destructive disillusion for the British left. At the time of writing the government of Gordon Brown,

an introverted though highly gifted man, seems to be driven by misfortune and the media into electoral and ideological collapse. The British left in 2009 has seriously lost momentum, even vision or purpose, after 12 years in office. Socialist priorities like the redistribution of wealth or social equality and libertarian ones like individual freedom under the law are flouted. Our political culture, once predictably bi-polar, now seems far more miscellaneous than at any time since 1945, with liberals, nationalists, Greens, UKIP and even the dangerous BNP striving for support. The political and constitutional system (very much including the voting system) commands less respect than for generations, for reasons that go far beyond the recent scandals of MPs (and some peers') expenses. Nevertheless, single-issue pressure-groups of miscellaneous idealists, even a huge mass protest like the Iraq march in which I took part in March 2003, are no substitute for a strategy for power, even though this strategy may now demand a confluence of parties and movements (probably aided by electoral reform) as its basis. This is too critical a moment to be tribally dogmatic about the varying shades of meaning attached to such protean terms as liberal and progressive. I am not by instinct or inclination a propagandist, and cherish the critical disciplines of the objective professional historian which I have been throughout my career. But I always naturally belong in left field – social democratic with a strong leavening of Liberal democratic republicanism on civil liberties, and respect for Plaid Cymru as it expands the cautious aspirations of 'unhistoric' Wales, and also strongly Green and pro-European, along with an instinctive global fraternalism. If the 2010 general election were to throw up some form of Progressive co-partnership or even a rainbow coalition of the liberal left, I would be perfectly content. The British left has been my torment and my joy, ever since Richard Hofstadter and my Swansea comrades inspired me to write about it. History should be, among other things, about the politics of hope, and I hope it justifies this book.

Kenneth O. Morgan
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October 2009

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Liberals

Chapter 1

The Great Reform Act of 1832

When I became a member of the Reform Club, I knew that it was a requirement to subscribe to the principles of the Great Reform Act. I did not, however, know that you also had to lecture on it! My historical research has invariably been far removed from the events of 1832. Indeed, my most substantial recent work has been a biography of a living former prime minister, Lord Callaghan. It is perhaps tempting to reflect fancifully on Lord Grey's 'winter of discontent' or to imagine the Duke of Wellington asking 'crisis, what crisis?' It is true that Lord Callaghan and the Duke of Wellington do have two things in common – Irish ancestry and the fact that their administrations were both defeated on a vote of confidence in the House of Commons. But there any point of contact comes to an abrupt end.

Even so, all historians of modern Britain, whatever their area of specialism, are aware of how the Great Reform Act casts its mighty shadow over the political history of this country. It was a major point of transition. It showed the emerging force of public opinion. It illustrates the beginnings of mass democracy. It was the greatest triumph in modern times of the people over what William Cobbett famously christened 'the Thing'. The Reform Club is right to celebrate it in the millennium year, and the Act is well worth re-examining all over again.

(i)

For many decades, it seems, the Great Reform Act has had bad reviews. In the hundred years following its passage, it was the object of almost uncritical veneration from authors writing in the old Whig-Liberal tradition. It was indissolubly linked with the immortal memory of Charles James Fox, with the passionate philippics of Lord Macaulay, and the literary glories of the Macaulay/Trevelyan dynasty. George Macaulay Trevelyan's biography of 1920 hailed Lord Grey, the hero of 1832, as a patrician popular tribune, a kind of Tony Benn *avant la lettre*, a man whose career went far to 'ennoble the annals of statecraft'.[1] This was the Whiggish tradition with which I grew up as a schoolboy in the late 1940s. But in the years since then historians seem to have settled on a far more critical judgement.

There have been two main, albeit very different, schools of criticism of the Reform Act, conservative and radical. With regard to the first, many

historians have emphasised that the effect of the Great Reform Act was not change, but continuity. They have stressed that not much changed; the climactic events of 1832 were almost much ado about very little. This notion of continuity is a natural one for the craft and outlook of the professional historian. Indeed it is a theme that thrusts itself before us in the contemporary political world. For myself, as I look across the House of Lords, I cast my gaze on a distinguished and active figure on the Liberal Democrats benches. He is Earl Russell, the great-grandson of Lord John Russell, the politician who actually introduced the Reform Bill in the Commons in March 1831. But an awareness of continuity can also merge into an ethic of conservatism and this needs to be critically addressed.

The argument advanced two major themes, political and social. It emphasised that after 1832 the political system changed only modestly. With reason did Charles Wood, one of Grey's closest ministerial associates, observe in 1831 that the Bill was 'anti-democratic and pro-property'.[2] Alternatively, Lord Brougham declared that 'By the people, I mean the middle classes, the wealth and intelligence of the country, the glory of the British name.' No democrat he. It has been noted that there were more electoral abuses after 1832 than there were before. After all, there were many more different ways of being qualified for the franchise. Greater complexity meant greater abuse, and greater demands on the ingenuity or cunning of the political solicitors and others involved in determining the legal qualifications for the franchise in the new age of voter registration. There were just as many small boroughs, and just as much, if not more corruption. Dickens's Eatanswill, after all, describes the electoral system from a post-1832 perspective. Seventy 'proprietary' boroughs, owned by a single magnate, remained intact, and indirect control was more rampant still. In some boroughs, the electorate went down rather than up after 1832. Overall, it is agreed by historians that there was no immense change in the electorate. Frank O'Gorman has calculated that the percentage of adult males with the franchise went up merely from 14 per cent to 18 per cent, hardly a revolutionary transformation. Leslie Mitchell has rightly pointed out that the Act looked backwards: it was more concerned with 'exorcising the ghosts of the 1780s and 1790s than with laying the foundations of the Victorian order'.[3] Lord Macaulay in his *History of England*, as is well known, linked the Reform Act of 1832 with the Glorious Revolution of 1688 as a 'preserving revolution', a strategic controlled change that was intended to conserve.[4] No further change would be needed in any future that anyone could conceive. As everybody knows, Lord John Russell became known as 'Finality Jack' for advancing the view that 1832 was 'a final settlement'.