



ASSESSING NEW BOOKS ON ENGLISH AND AMERICAN LITERATURE OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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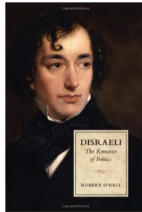
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DISRAELI: THE ROMANCE OF POLITICS



By **Robert O'Kell**
(Toronto, 2013) x + 595 pp.
Reviewed by **Richard Aldous** on 2015-08-14.

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Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881) continues to fascinate the British political imagination. George Osborne, the UK Chancellor of the Exchequer (finance minister), when presenting the first Conservative budget in nineteen years this July, could hardly have made the relationship clearer. "From a one-nation Government," he declared, alluding to Disraeli's portrait of the "two nations" of the rich and the poor, "this is a one-nation Budget that takes the necessary steps and follows a sensible path for the benefit of the whole of the United Kingdom." Well-known as a committed student of history, Osborne has a portrait of Disraeli in his study at 11 Downing Street, so the reference was hardly accidental. It directly links the current administration to the nineteenth-century architect of Tory Democracy. Even Ed Milliband, leader of a Labour party roundly beaten in the 2015 election, tried to steal some Disraelian clothing by claiming that Labour was now the "one-nation" party.

More than 200 years after his birth, Disraeli remains popular partly because he is so utterly quotable. In the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, he has more than eighty entries, well ahead of his nearest prime ministerial rival, Churchill, who gets only into the fifties. Whether it's "There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics," or "There is no gambling like politics," or even "No man is regular in his attendance at the House of Commons until he is married," Disraeli, it seems, can always provide the *mot juste* for any occasion.

Then there is the undoubted power of his story. The first (and only) culturally Jewish prime minister of Britain, his unlikely rise to power and dextrous ability to impose his will on political society remains one of the greatest feats of the Victorian era. No wonder the Queen, who became a devoted fan, wrote in wonder to her daughter, "Mr Disraeli is Prime Minister! A proud thing for a Man 'risen from the people' to have obtained! And I must say, really most loyally; it is his real talent, his good temper ... wh. have brought this about" (Hurd, *Disraeli*, qtd. 214).

But perhaps above all else, it is the power of Disraeli's imagination blended with his mastery of political maneuver that bring us back to him time and again. More than any other British prime minister, Disraeli was a man of ideas. Although he achieved early fame as a novelist, we often forget that he remained a writer throughout his life. He didn't write fiction while in office, he said, because "I never cd. do two things at the same time; at least two wh. required creative powers" (Hurd, *Disraeli*, qtd. 327). So when Disraeli was preoccupied with politics, it consumed him. Yet at other times, he returned always to writing, even producing late, bestselling novels such as *Lothair* (1870) and *Endymion* (1880)--each published after a period as prime minister. At his death in 1881, an unfinished novel, *Falconet*, lay on his desk.

This lifelong commitment to ideas and the life of the mind ensured that when he played the political game (and few if any played it better, as Maurice Cowling demonstrated in *1867: Disraeli, Gladstone and Revolution* [1967]), his tactical cynicism was always underpinned by a broader intellectual framework. For Disraeli there was always some "there" there.

Disraeli has been extremely well served by his biographers. The sprawling official life by Money Penny and Buckle (1929) is a treasure trove of correspondence and jottings blended into the narrative ("We have done our best to make the two great rivals immortal," Gladstone's official biographer, John Morley, wrote approvingly to Buckle after reading it). Robert Blake's magisterial biography was published in 1966. Since then, some outstanding work has been published on Disraeli's early life (by Jane Ridley) and on his marriage (by Daisy Hay), and we have had fine biographies such as those by Paul Smith, John Vincent and Stanley Weintraub. But in the end Blake's *Disraeli* is the modern biographical work against which all others are still judged.

Robert O'Kell, Professor of English Emeritus at the University of Manitoba, tacitly acknowledges this fact by ceding the political ground to Blake. On one reading of the book this seems a weakness, for O'Kell brushes off events that most biographers would consider fairly central. He notes, for example, that "Robert Blake and other biographers have sifted the external information on the circumstances of [Disraeli's] boyhood years, and there is no need to repeat the process here" (5). So he gives just a few pages to the first twenty years of Disraeli's life, and even great political events get short shrift: fewer than twenty pages to the period after 1846, when Disraeli had made his name by destroying Sir Robert Peel, to 1867, when he passed the Second Reform Act. This book, then, is not for anyone who enjoys the cut and thrust of high politics. Such readers would better turn to Blake (obviously) and the fine recent biography by the former British foreign secretary, Douglas Hurd, and Edward Young (London, 2013).

But to dwell on the political *lacunae* of this thoughtful, lucid, well-researched book is to miss its point. For this is essentially a literary life of Disraeli--one that succeeds in showing that his books were the wellspring of his political life, not a diversion from it.

In his introduction, O'Kell himself describes the book as "not just a demonstration either that Disraeli's fiction is a gloss on his politics or that the politics, defined broadly, as all those enterprises which attempt to realize social and political ambitions, is an explanation of the fiction. Rather, both are shown to be enactments of the same urgencies and purposes. The political career, like the fiction, is an invention, and seen in the light of their imaginative patterns the fiction and the political career provoke a fuller understanding of the nature and significance of Disraeli's remarkable career" (8).

In other words, this is a study of Disraeli's imagination. So while the 1867 Reform Act gets just two pages, the major novels are given their own substantial chapters. The result is that Disraeli's literary output, often probed as an interesting diversion from the main political business of his life, instead becomes the engine of Disraeli's entire life and career, and a means to understanding his world.

The chapter on *Lothair*, for example, not only analyzes the novel from a literary perspective but also brilliantly sets it within the context of Victorian debates and Disraeli's own life. The religious themes of the novel, particularly the relationship between Roman Catholicism and national allegiance, are teased out of the text and read in light of the frenzy caused in 1868 when the 3rd Marquess of Bute--one of the wealthiest peers in Britain--converted to Roman Catholicism.

By taking Disraeli's writing seriously, then, O'Kell throws new, important, and interesting light on "The Chief." There is, however, a bitter aftertaste to reading the book today. As a scholar at a Canadian university, O'Kell is part of a fine Disraelian tradition exemplified by The Disraeli Project at Queen's University, Kingston. That project has produced ten fine volumes of annotated Disraeli letters, published by the University of Toronto Press, that have proved invaluable to scholars such as O'Kell (and this reviewer too for that matter). However, with half of Disraeli's 12,000 extant letters still unpublished, and with the all-important volume on Disraeli's second ministry yet to be started, [Queen's University has shut down the project](#) after more than forty years in residence. That is a palpable blow for Victorian studies.

The university's founder and Disraeli's great patron, Queen Victoria, most surely would not have been amused. And neither should we.

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