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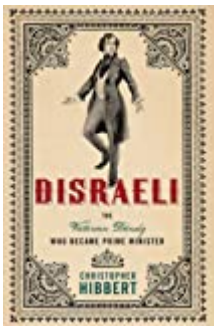

Christopher Hibbert. *Disraeli: The Victorian Dandy Who Became Prime Minister.* New York and Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. xi + 401 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4039-7270-5.

Reviewed by Walter Arnstein (Department of History, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign)

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Disraeli with the Politics Left Out

In the course of the past four decades, Christopher Hibbert has become the most prolific and the most readable of England's "popular historians." His subjects have ranged as far afield as Renaissance Italy, mid-nineteenth century India, and early modern China. He has surveyed the histories of London, Rome, and Venice, and he has provided a full-scale overview, *The English: A Social History, 1066-1945* (1987). In recent years, he has also produced biographies of Samuel Johnson and Charles Dickens, as well as "personal histories" of Admiral Horatio Nelson, the Duke of Wellington, King George III, Queen Victoria, and King Edward VII. Such works can be depended on to have been based on broad reading, to be well-documented and carefully indexed, and to prove eminently readable.

His most recent biography is also well-documented, carefully indexed, and altogether readable; but Disraeli, a largely chronological account divided into forty brief chapters, is not one of Hibbert's more successful works of popularization. For one thing, there already exist numerous other well-written popular studies of the remarkable Victorian novelist and politician, for example, AndrÃ© Maurois's *Disraeli* (1928), Hesketh Pearson's *Dizzy* (1951), and Sarah Bradford's *Disraeli* (1982). For another, Hibbert makes no claim to originality in this new study; he justifies it with neither preface nor introduction. Instead he bases his work, to a large degree, on the original classic *Life of Disraeli* by William Flavelle Monypenny and George Earle Buckle (6 vols., 1910-1920; new and revised ed., 2 vols, 1929).

He also cites a few of the *Benjamin Disraeli Letters*, published for the years up to 1856 by the University of Toronto Press (6 vols., 1982-1997) as well as other recent and relevant biographies of Disraeli and his fellow Victorians. Thus he draws on Stanley Weintraub's *Disraeli: A Biography* (1993) for the most extreme anti-Jewish squibs published in Disraeli's own lifetime. He also summarizes, without evaluation, Weintraub's most controversial contention–that during the mid 1860s, Disraeli illegitimately became the father of both a son and a daughter. The presumed mother of the first was a well-known Victorian hostess; of the presumed mother of the second, we are told no name and only that she was both French and Jewish.

A number of minor errors have crept into the book; e.g., the reference to "Melbourne" should be "Malmesbury" (p. 204); the reference to the Duke of Connaught should be the Duke of Cambridge (p. 227); and the reference to 1881 should be 1880 (p. 351). When utilizing appropriate secondary works, Hibbert often fails to reconcile the inconsistencies. Thus, on an admittedly minor matter, Disraeli tells us that, at Hatfield House, the Marquess of Salisbury's daughters happily provided "a distraction both for Salisbury and myself" as they sang "all the airs of *Pinafore*" (p. 338). Yet six pages later Disraeli deplored "a burlesque–the sort of thing I hate." Indeed he had "never seen anything so bad as *Pinafore*" (p. 344). Admittedly, Hibbert might also have added that the Gilbert and Sullivan operetta deliberately caricatured (as Sir Joseph Porter, K.C.B.) none other than W. H. Smith, the member of Disraeli's cabinet who at that time served as "the monarch of the sea, / The ruler of the Queen's Navee"!

In his new study, Hibbert is at his best in depicting the Regency world in which Disraeli grew up and in which he defined himself as an eloquent Byronic youth who shared with his hero the willingness, for a time, to wear exotic clothes, to travel in distant lands, and successfully to write (in his own distinctive manner) novels and letters if not poems. As the initial consequence of unwise foreign investments, the youthful dandy also suffered from a plague of debts that bedeviled him until the final decade-and-a-half of his long career.

Hibbert is also reasonably successful in summarizing Disraeli's relations with women, including his wife (the eccentric Mary Anne), Queen Victoria, and several of his other regular correspondents. In his novel of 1837, *Henrietta Temple*, Disraeli obviously reflected his personal experience: "A female friend, amiable, clever, and devoted, is a possession more valuable than parks and palaces, and, without such a muse, few men can succeed in life, none be content" (p. 296). Even if Disraeli is often described as an outsider (in ethnic background, in his failure to have attended either a "public school" or a university, and in some of his affectations), at least during the second half of his life he very much partook in the world of the Victorian aristocracy.

According to Hibbert's sub-title, the author's purpose is to explain how the one-time dandy "became prime minister." In this respect, he largely fails. Any reader of this biography who is not already fully conversant with the world of Victorian politics and with British foreign, military, and imperial policy, will often find puzzling Disraeli's career as presented here. Hibbert does not truly explain why and how Disraeli, an initially faithful member of Prime Minister Robert Peel's Conservative party, became Peel's most fiery political enemy. He never bothers to refer to the manner in which the Conservative party came to be divided between Peelites and Protectionists. He does not explain the political context of the "Minority Governments" led by Lord Derby (with Disraeli as second-in-command) in 1852, 1858-59, and 1866-68. The long-time Gladstone/Disraeli rivalry is similarly bereft of explication. So is the Berlin Conference of 1878, the first such summit meeting ever attended by a British prime minister.

Analogously, Hibbert tells us much about Disraeli's style as a parliamentarian and as a public speaker outside Westminster. Yet whether the topic was Ireland or Chartism, the franchise rules or social reform, hardly ever does Hibbert provide even the briefest summary of what Disraeli actually said. Thus, remarkably, he tells the story of a man who for thirty-two continuous years served as either the leader of the opposition in the House of Commons or the leader of the government in the House of Commons or (for a total of seven years) the prime minister of the United Kingdom and the British Empire–while he leaves the politics out. Both Disraeli's virtues and limitations are often well observed, but the context is simply not there.

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