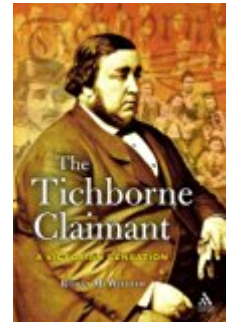


**Rohan McWilliam.** *The Tichborne Claimant: A Victorian Sensation.* London: Hambledon Continuum, 2007. xiv + 363 pp. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-85285-478-2.



**Reviewed by** Peter Mandler

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It is easy to explain why the plebeian movement which arose in the 1870s to support the Tichborne Claimant was for so long studiously ignored by labor historians. The Claimant was an embarrassment; his supporters hardly better. An obese East End butcher emigrated to Australia and then returned claiming that he was Sir Roger Tichborne, baronet and Hampshire landowner presumed lost in a shipwreck. In this claim he was supported by a raggle-taggle army of romantics, obsessives, demagogues, and opportunists, led at its peak by a disbarred lawyer named Edward Kenealy who believed he was the "Twelfth Messenger" of God in a line that began with Adam and included Jesus, Mohammed, and Genghis Khan. Jailed for perjury, the Claimant ended his life in the 1890s even more impoverished than when he began it; he was found dead in cheap lodgings, gout-ridden and near starvation, on April Fool's Day 1898. Though he lingered awhile in popular memory, today he survives only in the slang words "tich" and "tichy," used to describe, ironically, a little thing or person. The whole story was profoundly unedifying to the heroic narratives of labor history--it contributed neither to the

struggle for democracy nor to the struggle for socialism; its plebeian adherents seemed credulous at best, confused at worst, not worthy candidates even for the vote (much less state power). Indeed, its ingredients were so various and so bizarre as to resist narrativizing altogether. The Tichborne Claimant simply made no sense.

Only when the heroic narratives of labor history break down can we see that the story of the Tichborne Claimant *does* have a narrative sense of its own. It was self-evidently a narrative sense that appealed to huge numbers of late Victorian workers, in large part *because* of its variety and outlandishness. But it takes a historian with a sufficiently capacious imagination, and a deep understanding of the whole of Victorian culture, to see that; the Claimant has, finally, had a bit of posthumous luck in finding just such an historian in Rohan McWilliam.

McWilliam argues that the Claimant's narrative can best be understood as a melodrama, a dramatic form then still in the mainstream of popular culture. The often deliberately melodramatic nature of the movement explains its height-

ened and suddenly shifting emotions, its political messages, and its mixed character as a movement, a mood, a spectacle, and a music-hall turn. It was not necessary to believe in the Claimant to "support" him, certainly not to enjoy him. Even as a fraud himself he offered many of the same moral and political arguments that plebeian melodrama in the cheap papers and theaters did. There were those in high places whose selfishness and arrogance caused them to conspire to cheat "the people" out of their rights, even to deny them something as simple and basic (and as historically English) as "fair play." This applied to most of the Tichborne family (though not Sir Roger's mother, who--before her death relatively early in the story--appeared to support the Claimant), and to the bulk of the Establishment, which mocked the Claimant, then pursued him through the courts, and ultimately imprisoned him for perjury. Even if you didn't believe in the Claimant, you might feel sympathy for him as the underdog in this ill-matched contest with the mighty power of the state. The bare transcripts of his trials, if mildly doctored and properly "annotated," could easily read just like the melodramas of plebeian innocence vs. aristocratic rapine familiar from print and stage. If he was a true aristocrat, he was obviously a good egg--a sportsman, a bit of a swell, who didn't mind rubbing shoulders with publicans and costers; if he turned out to be just a cockney butcher, still he had put on a good show, and never deserved Newgate, Pentonville, Millbank, and Dartmoor (he spent a spell in each).

McWilliam reminds us that anti-state radicalism was at the heart of popular politics in the 1870s and 1880s. The Claimant's cause resonated with the opponents of vaccination, of the Contagious Diseases Acts, of compulsory education, of temperance and taxation. As Gladstonian Liberalism became more closely associated not with *laissez-faire* but with a certain amount of statist meddling, this plebeian anti-statism often found it easier to ally with Toryism than with Liberalism. "Early" Tichbornism was more "constitutional"

and more Liberal; "late" Tichbornism more chaotic and more Tory. McWilliam does not really ask why it never took on an independent political existence of its own. Why did it take a mountebank like Kenealy, and a spectacle like the Claimant, to bring all these threads together? But, then, as McWilliam amply demonstrates, the followers of the Claimant were not necessarily interested in a political movement. The broad appeal of the Claimant lay not just in his moral and political significance, but in his entertainment value as well--his heyday coincided with a great leap forward in commercialized leisure, and his movement was headquartered in pubs, music halls, circuses, and theaters rather than debating chambers and town halls. It is entirely appropriate that his name found its permanent place in our vocabulary through the intermediary of "Little Tich," the music-hall comedian. This is what made the Tichborne movement unlike any conventional political movement--or, rather, what made it *not* a political movement at all. You could walk into a Tichborne meeting--a Tichborne performance--and laugh and cry in sympathy with the Claimant, then walk out again and forget the whole thing.

Understandably, McWilliam does not dwell on the ephemerality of the Tichborne experience, nor does he consider very closely the exasperation with Tichborne of more politically "serious" elements in the working class. His purpose is to illustrate the rich variety of late Victorian popular culture and to explain how so much of it was caught up--if only briefly, and precariously--with the Tichborne story. In doing so, he has not only *told* us that story in its full delirious glory for the first time, but he has showed us how much "sense" it did make to contemporaries, and in doing so has made a genuinely important contribution to our understanding of popular consciousness--truly, a rescue of popular experience from the condescension of posterity.

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