H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

G. I. T. Machin. *Disraeli (Profiles in Power).* London: Longman, 1995. $56.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-582-09806-0; $30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-09805-3.

Reviewed by Barry M. Doyle (University of St. Andrews, Scotland)
Published on H-Albion (August, 1995)

Benjamin Disraeli is probably the most romantic of all British politicians - flamboyant, eccentric, distinctly un-British. Like the nation's other favourite Tory, Winston Churchill, he was determined, long-serving, weak on party, strong on power and idolized by the public, particularly after his death. Yet when it comes down to it, both men were rather poor Prime Ministers whose ministries left little of lasting importance in comparison to the records of less romantic figures such as Gladstone or Attlee. But it is Disraeli who is loved and remembered, his romance accentuated by the tendency of historians to link his fortunes inextricably with those of William Gladstone, with the latter appearing boring, pedantic and characterless in comparison (see comments of Frederick Ponsonby quoted on pages 4-5). Although he does not entirely explain this appeal to the public imagination, Ian Machin does show that Disraeli's achievement in rising to the leadership of the Conservative party and the country was quite remarkable given his inauspicious beginnings as the son of a comfortable London-Jewish family. For, as the author points out, success in nineteenth century politics required talent, money, education and patronage, and Disraeli could muster only two of these advantages - talent and the patronage of a Tory aristocrat who provided his entre into Parliament.

Thus, whilst he would have been comfortable in either party, luck drew him into the Conservative fold. However, once there it was his determination to 'reach the top of the greasy pole' which encouraged him to remain in a party with those whose views he rarely shared, but whose personnel offered the least opposition to his prime ministerial ambitions. For, Machin asserts, it was his the lust for power which drove him on.

To Disraeli, the prospect of gaining power was always superior to any demand to vindicate ideals or to maintain loyalty to leaders. (165) His life, it would seem, was a constant struggle to get and keep power. As a result of this conviction, the book is organized around the theme of struggle, with the phases of Disraeli's life divided up into: 'Struggle in Youth', 'Struggle with Peel', 'An Uphill Struggle' and the lengthy 'Struggle with Gladstone' parts I and II. Within these chronological chunks, the author is more or less interested in assessing his subject's views on economic, social, electoral and imperial policy. In addition - reflecting the author's own interests - he dwells on a number of religious controversies as well as emphasizing Disraeli's interest in Judaism and his own Jewishness, which though personally important to the Conservative leader, never proved to be politically significant. Overall, Disraeli emerges as a liberal whose underlying philosophy differed little from Gladstone or Peel and whose commitment to any coherent policy position was determined first and foremost by the personal or party advantage to be gained. Thus, despite his 'One Nation' and 'Tory Democracy' reputation, he was not a great or consistent social reformer and even when in power, he left much of the policy formulation to colleagues. Nor, contrary to the impression created by Crystal Palace and his 'Forward Policy', was he much of an Imperialist before the 1870s. In economic policy he was essentially a liberal who only used protection as a stick with which to beat Peel, dropping it as soon as he possibly could. In fact, it would seem that only on electoral reform did he indicate any enduring commitment to one line of policy - the enfranchisement of the respectable urban working-class - and even here his interest waned following the successful passage of the 1867 Act (arguably his greatest achievement). On religious issues his position varied according to circumstances (for example his attitude to Church Rates) and in general it would seem that the stance adopted on any given issue was pre-determined by the opportunity it provided to embarrass the Whigs and/or Gladstone or secure a party advantage by some unholy alliance with the radicals.

Given this driving ambition to secure political power, Disraeli is an obvious candidate for a volume in Longman's 'Profiles in Power' series where he shares a roster with, among others, Elizabeth I, Juarez, Napoleon III, Ataturk, Castro and, inevitably, Churchill (though not

Gladstone!). The volume is based on a synthesis of the main secondary sources and on the author's own research into the relationship between religion and politics in nineteenth century Britain. At just over 160 pages of text, the book is a manageable size and is fairly easy to read, although there is occasionally some odd phrasing. In addition to the text there is a brief chronology, a short bibliographical essay and a very full index. As a subject, Disraeli probably does merit an up to date, concise biography which summarizes the large, but mostly rather dated, body of work relating to his career. The history of the Conservative party is poor, especially in comparison to the literature on the Liberal and Labour parties, so anything which adds to the limited study of this subject ought to be welcomed. But this welcome must be qualified, not least by questioning whether the biography -and particularly a biography of such an atypical politician -is the best way to study even the high politics of the mid-nineteenth century.

The thesis adopted by the author adds to this problem, for as this biography rests firmly on explaining Disraeli's rise to power by reference to the strength of his personal ambition, it does little to illuminate the wider political culture within which he operated. Although it shows how Disraeli came to be wedded to the Conservative party, it does not explain why the members of that party were willing to accept an eccentric, middle class, Anglicized jew as their leader. Neither does it do much to extend our understanding of why the British Conservative party developed a fundamentally liberal ideological position after the 1846 split, nor does it say much about the overall importance of the middle class in British politics at this time. Although there is extensive discussion of Disraeli's relationship with the aristocracy and gentry and of his need to court the support of the working class after 1867, there is really very little about Disraeli and the middle class or the part he may have played in continuing Peel's mission to mould the Conservative party into a broadly based party of property owners.

Overall, this is an adequate summary of Disraeli's life which asserts a strong general thesis designed to debunk the popular myth that Disraeli was the father of a form of One Nation Tory Democracy. Although it requires some basic knowledge, it is generally easy to read and follow and would certainly be manageable as a supplementary undergraduate text for courses on nineteenth century Britain or the history of the Conservative party.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Barry M. Doyle. Review of Machin, G. I. T., *Disraeli (Profiles in Power).* H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. August, 1995.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=138

Copyright © 1995 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.