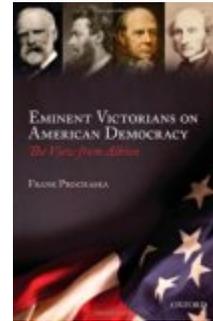


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Transatlantic Reflections: Victorian Views and Modern Insights on American Democracy

Frank Prochaska's latest offering as a uniquely placed mediator between Britain and America, *Eminent Victorians on American Democracy: The View from Albion* (2012) is a succinct, elegantly written and insightful piece. Lest anyone question the necessity of a seasoned cultural, political, and historical interpreter between the two foremost English-speaking tribes on either side of the Atlantic, they need only read this book to disabuse them of such a view. Despite the undoubted brilliance of those "eminent Victorians" examined (John Stuart Mill, Walter Bagehot, Henry Maine, and James Bryce), there are misreadings, unjust characterizations, and willful blindness aplenty in their discussions of the American Constitution, democracy, and Britain's constitutional future. That said, as Prochaska correctly asserts in the opening pages, while they clung to an "Anglo-American exceptionalism" almost as intense as the American exceptionalism they sought to debunk, these Victorian thinkers were not bewitched by proximity to the Constitution of 1787, as were their American contemporaries (p. vi). As a result, he argues, revisiting the analysis of these long-dead giants of British constitutional thought not only casts new light on debates of the Victorian era, but also provides significant insights into the semi-permanent impasse that characterizes modern American politics. John Stuart Mill's commentary on the dangers of partisanship within the American system and the need for "mutual forbearance and compromise" to prevent gridlock, for example, seems particularly relevant at this time (p. 42).

Prochaska pulls no punches in his opening and clos-

ing statements on the Constitution nor does he disguise his and his subject's belief in the clear echoes of British constitutionalism, and even kingship, found in the American settlement of the late 1780s and built upon during the nineteenth century. At the outset, he states: "The United States Constitution, the world's most ancient written Constitution, is a republican substitute for hereditary kingship, and, like kingship, hedged with divinity" (p. 1). A number of those examined, including the comparative constitutional theorist and historian, Sir Henry Maine, praised the U.S. Constitution for its very inflexibility. In Maine's estimation this ensured that the United States more closely resembled the truly balanced government of King George III's Britain, than the very different Albion he perceived changing around him in the 1880s, buffeted by "misguided" demands for reform (p. 74). Were that not enough Prochaska, by reminding us of the historical rootedness of the American Constitution in pre-democratic political thought, effectively questions the very "fitness for purpose" of the sacred text in a modern democratic republic (pp. 141-142).

In a book as dense and rich as this, it is extremely difficult to provide a fair overview unshaped by one's own interests. While attempting to fight such prejudices, I examine four major themes below, namely: Anglo-Saxonism; analyzing America to draw implications for (future) British democracy; the "pigmy-ization" of politics in a presidential republic; and the transformational impact of Lincoln and the Civil War on British analysis.

Prochaska deals head on with the British “proprietary interest” in rejecting American exceptionalism and in finding parallels between the two nations. While skeptical of some of the stretches made, he broadly allows the authors to make their case for such parallels directly to the reader. Through this lens we learn of the collective reassessment of George III, such that at the time of his death he was considered not a tyrant but “a Christian gentleman and decent family man” (p. 16). Further, Mill believed Great Britain and the United States to be twinned, each with great defects from which the other was free and which only study of the other could counter. On a less genial note in Bagehot’s critique of the “folly” of written constitutionalism, the limitations the document placed on “good government” (p. 48), were mitigated only by those “Anglo-Saxon” Americans who forcibly overcame the imperfections of the Constitution (p. 68). Maine similarly made the case that although the American Constitution was “forged from local materials” it “emerged out of the British past, not least its monarchical traditions” (p. 83).

Bryce was undoubtedly the most enthusiastic advocate of Anglo-Saxonism examined, noting that “What success it [the American Constitution] has attained must be in large measure ascribed to the political genius, ripened by long experience, of the Anglo-Saxon race” (p. 96). In part, this can be seen as a result of the post-Civil War period when he emerged as a commentator. While the most convinced advocate of an ongoing shared Anglo-Saxon political heritage, Bryce was the only one of the four figures examined with firsthand experience of the United States. He was also the most successful in propagating his message in America through his seminal 1888 work *The American Commonwealth*. Further he enjoyed unparalleled links with leading Americans of the day, including literary figures (Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow); politicians, judges, and diplomats (Theodore Roosevelt, Oliver W. Holmes, and John Hay); and leading university presidents (James B. Angell of the University of Michigan and Charles W. Eliot of Harvard).

An equally common outlook shared by many Victorians was to view America as a portent of the future of Britain, and Europe more generally. As Prochaska reminds his audience, “In the nineteenth century, Europeans travelled to America rather as western observers travelled to Russia in the 1920s and 1930s, to witness a great political experiment” (p. 19). In this case the great experiment was democracy, and the gold standard of European investigation was Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democ-*

racy in America. While it is too often forgotten in the United States that Tocqueville was an Anglophile and rather inclined to view Americans as “displaced Englishmen” (p. 35), it is important to establish that Victorian commentators provided more than a mere “rehashing” of Tocqueville (p. 123). Mill, for example, while damning the enduring “aristocracies” of skin color and sex (p. 32), primarily viewed American democracy as foreshadowing Britain’s future (p. 46). This was a view that Bagehot largely accepted but despaired of, viewing the injudicious introduction of universal manhood suffrage as leading inexorably to the transformation of Britain into a “worse America” (p. 49). Paradoxically, the conservative Maine was more optimistic, finding in the United States an example where the dangers of mob rule had been successfully tempered by the system of checks and balances established by the founding fathers. Bryce, whose interpretation of democracy was the most societally based, and therefore the most akin to Tocqueville’s, saw the power of an emerging plutocratic class as the greatest threat to American society. Prochaska states that only the taming of the House of Lords and the introduction of universal manhood suffrage, in 1911 and 1918 respectively, marked the end of U.S. politics being viewed as predictive in Britain.

A corresponding evil running alongside concerns over democracy was the “pigmy-ization” of American politics, particularly the presidency. American politicians had long been objects of European scorn, including Tocqueville’s famous comment that “the race of American statesmen has decidedly dwarfed within the last half-century” (p. 30). Mill in his *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861) largely agreed, citing the parade of mediocre presidents between Andrew Jackson and Lincoln as *prima facie* evidence. Others blamed Jackson explicitly for the introduction of the spoils system. Bagehot, like Mill, noted that long periods in which the country endured paralysis, exemplified for many by James Buchanan’s occupancy of the White House, could be easily resolved by linking the presidency to the ability to command a majority in Congress. Bryce went one stage further, claiming that the “natural selection” of parliamentary government was far superior to the “artificial selection” of the U.S. party system, which only served to promote unobjectionable mediocrities (p. 108).

Bagehot’s initial assessment of Lincoln as yet another nonentity provides a convenient link forward to the transformational impact of the Civil War. While Bagehot would later acknowledge Lincoln’s greatness, largely as the latter ruled as “an enlightened, uncrowned monarch”

(p. 63), he claimed that the machinery for selecting presidents remained fundamentally flawed, maintaining that “Success in a lottery is not argument for lotteries” (p. 47). For Mill, meanwhile, Lincoln served to renew his faith in American democracy, as both “a glorious martyr” and exemplar of the best leadership popular government could provide (p. 45). Tellingly, despite Maine’s *Popular Government* being published in 1885, Lincoln is not mentioned in the chapter on his writings, and the Civil War is also all but absent. Bryce believed Lincoln to be a key element in a shared Anglo-Saxon tradition of liberty, stretching from “Magna Charta” to his own time (p. 102). Such an interpretation was supported by his own background as a Gladstonian Liberal and his links to those among the northeastern (Republican) establishment that revered Lincoln’s memory. The abolition of slavery, while the Emancipation Proclamation was damned in colorful language by Bagehot for freeing only those whose freedom Lincoln had no power to enforce, removed for many Victorians a significant obstacle that had prevented greater Anglo unity. Mill believed the conflict held great implications for both democracy and humanity as a whole. Bagehot, while holding that a more flexible Constitution could have prevented the Civil War, was equally emphatic on its impact and believed Lincoln’s assassination “the most significant event since Waterloo” (p. 61).

The above provides only a fleeting glance into the rich content and analysis awaiting the keen reader. To this reviewer what comes across most strongly is the growing intensity of engagement between the two countries and their respective political and intellectual elites throughout the Victorian era. While no simple tale of progress; the piece stretches from the comparatively disengaged and skeptical critique of Bagehot, to the northeastern American elite’s adoption of selective Victorianism. This is demonstrated by the growing power of a shared Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism, advocated in subsequent years by senator from Indiana Albert J. Beveridge, amongst others, and the widespread praise garnered by Bryce’s *American Commonwealth* toward the end of the era.

It is important to remember, however, that “If nationalism and a tendency to self-congratulation blinded Americans to the colonial origins of their political system, history and a tendency to self-congratulation blinded the British to what was unique about America” (p. 132). In short, this is the reason why an expert interpreter, such as Prochaska, is so necessary. At the end of

the book the author’s voice reemerges to offer such key insights.

For Prochaska the central question regarding the U.S. Constitution and the nature of democracy in the United States, both past and present, appears to be the “fitness for purpose” of the document. In considering this he draws on a deep-rooted disagreement between the legal conservatism of Maine and the desire for action advocated by Mill and Bagehot. Prochaska’s position seems most influenced by beliefs developed independently by first Bagehot and then Bryce, namely, that while “Britain’s constitution favoured speed, America’s favoured security” (Bagehot, p. 52) and that in the United States “safety” was valued too highly over “action” (Bryce, pp. 141-142). These views ultimately lead Prochaska to challenge the “unthinking ‘cult of the Constitution’ [which] has left the United States immobilized at important points in history,” and to further add that such veneration has prevented the practical improvement of the system of government. He ends simply on the thought-provoking statement that in the world of U.S. politics too often legal interpretation, rather than formal amendment, has been used to cause or undermine change, and that “It is worth recalling that when it has suited them most of the more memorable U.S. Presidents, including Jackson, Lincoln, and Franklin Roosevelt, disregarded the ‘limited clauses of an old state-paper’ that they professed to revere. For no American politician has the courage to say of the Constitution, as it is said of kings, ‘the King is dead, long live the King’” (p. 142).

As an interloping British observer, this reviewer will not comment further on that particular matter, having likely already shown too much of his hand. Suffice to say that this is a stimulating, erudite, and startlingly perceptive read. Any criticism offered would have to focus on supposed “sins of omission” and would therefore entirely overlook the value of the product presented and the immensity of the effort its production must have required. This is no entry-level freshman text however; a certain familiarity with historical context in both countries is greatly beneficial. One only hopes that this work will be widely read across different subfields and even disciplines. This book is rare, in that it has much to say to many audiences, primarily British and American political historians, practitioners of intellectual history, and even, dare I say it, some political scientists, amongst others.

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