

Alex Windscheffel. *Popular Conservatism in Imperial London 1868-1906*. Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2007. xi + 260 pp. \$85.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-86193-288-7.



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Alex Windscheffel's study of London forms part of a burgeoning field of New Political History, which analyzes popular conservatism in the late Victorian era. In such works, the "linguistic turn" features prominently and discourses play key roles in establishing politicians' authority to represent the public. This scholarship has also emphasized the essentially localized culture of political communities.[1] Windscheffel's monograph follows the recent publication of Marc Brodie's study of politics in London's East End, *The Politics of the Poor: The East End of London, 1885-1914* (2004), a work that does not engage substantively with the "linguistic turn." Consequently, *Popular Conservatism in Imperial London* offers a prescient opportunity to assess the value of the New Political History in exploring the world of Victorian popular politics.

A key absence from Brodie's work is the role of party activism in establishing political identities in London; Windscheffel provides a useful corrective in this regard. Chapters 2 and 3 demonstrate the complexities of popular conservatism in the capital. He argues cogently that due to the

mixed composition of constituencies, we should be cautious in differentiating between plebeian and middle-class "Villa Tory" identities. For example, criticisms of alien immigration were expressed by conservative politicians across the city, and were not the sole preserve of East End populist Tories.

Windscheffel's subsequent exploration of the organization of conservative activism in chapter 4 is less effective. Brodie's analysis of electoral registers indicates that the London electorate was highly mobile and unstable. In Windscheffel's monograph, we get little understanding of how such organizations as the Primrose League responded to this phenomenon, and whether they relied on long-term residents for their core membership. Presumably, the continuities in election appeals across the city, which Windscheffel highlights, helped stabilize conservative identities and enabled the party to appeal to a mobile electorate. However, the differing relations between Primrose League habitations and party associations within the boroughs suggest that this process may have been more complex. As Brodie highlights,

the working population during this period was anything but static. It would be fascinating to know more of how activists' interactions with local political organizations were affected when they moved to other areas.

Perhaps the most effective and certainly the most original part of Windscheffel's book is the chapter on politicians' utilization of London's imperial identity. He provides a fascinating discussion of how differing Unionist politicians, such as Henry Morton Stanley and Mancherjee Merwanjee Bhowanagare, constructed discourses, presenting themselves as defenders of imperial interests. The Liberal Party was, in turn, able to contest Unionist languages of patriotism. As Windscheffel notes, the result of the "Khaki Election" of 1900 was ambivalent. Despite placing the defense of British subjects in South Africa at the core of its election campaign, Unionists only made a net gain of one seat in London. Chapter 7 is an example of the New Political History at its most effective; Windscheffel integrates an in-depth study of popular discourses into wider debates outside the traditional parameters of the field. Bernard Porter's work is not explicitly addressed within the text. Nevertheless, Windscheffel's study of imperial discourse within popular politics acts as a useful corrective to Porter's *The Absent-Minded Imperialists* (2004), which dismisses the idea that empire had a substantive role within British popular culture.

Matthew Roberts's study of the masculine identity of a Leeds politician, W. L. Jackson, provides another recent example of how historians can reinvigorate political history through engaging with emerging fields of analysis. Jackson's projection of a restrained masculinity was key to his development of an effective cross-community electoral appeal.^[2] Windscheffel makes less satisfactory use of gender history. The book would have benefited from engagement with the excellent work of Kathryn Rix, which has questioned the effectiveness of the conservatives' social ap-

peals during the 1890s, which had been at the core of their appeal to women.^[3] Windscheffel asserts that the Primrose League Ladies Grand Council was a more authoritative and active body than previously supposed; this assertion is potentially groundbreaking revisionism. However, he provides little indication of how its directives were actually received on the ground. Windscheffel also notes that male conservatives were hostile to an expansion of women's roles in local politics around the turn of the century. My own ongoing research would suggest that this was a transient phenomenon. In fact, the Edwardian period witnessed a flourishing of Unionist women's activism within London's municipal elections, closely linked to the tariff reform movement. It became common for women to speak in support of municipal reform candidates and play a substantial role in the organization of their campaigns.^[4]

Windscheffel's well-researched monograph features several of the advantages and some of the problems of recent studies of the New Political History. Most important, it demonstrates how political alliances had to be actively constructed and were in a continual process of challenge and change. Windscheffel also reaffirms the centrality of local identity and organization to the late Victorian polity. In his chapter on imperial identity, he moves beyond familiar themes of scholarship on popular conservatism and demonstrate how we can benefit from interacting with other disciplines of history. Windscheffel provides some intriguing examples of how conservative politicians appealed to local identities. Nonetheless, like much recent work, we get less sense that this book responds in a novel way and in a sustained manner to Jon Lawrence's plea for historians to analyze how parties constructed a "politics of everyday life."^[5] Frank Trentmann's recent analysis of free trade culture in Edwardian Britain (*Free Trade Nation: Commerce, Consumption and Civil Society in Modern Britain* [2008]) provides a good exception to this trend, moving beyond the familiar theme of politicians' construction of a "politics

of place" to analyze how liberals created a popular culture based on consumption. As Trentmann argues, the campaign was rooted in appealing to the public as citizen-consumers, placing the everyday concerns of the household budget at the heart of its discourse. With the publication of Windscheffel's monograph, substantial studies are now appearing to complement Lawrence's pioneering work on late Victorian conservatism. However, they need to develop a greater understanding of the everyday interactions between politicians and "the people," beyond the formal structures of party organization, if they are to fundamentally reshape our view of popular politics.

Notes

[1]. See, for example, Jon Lawrence, *Speaking for the People: Party, Language and Popular Politics in England, 1867-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Frans Coetzee, "Villa Toryism Reconsidered: Conservatism and Suburban Sensibilities in Late-Victorian Croydon," in *An Age of Transition: British Politics 1880-1914*, ed. E. H. Green (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 29-47; and Matthew Roberts, "'Villa Toryism' and Popular Conservatism in Leeds, 1885-1902," *Historical Journal* 49, no. 1 (2006): 217-46.

[2]. Matthew Roberts, "W. L. Jackson, Exemplary Manliness and Late Victorian Popular Conservatism," in *Public Men: Masculinity and Politics in Modern Britain*, ed. Matthew McCormack (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 2007), 123-142.

[3]. Kathryn Rix, "The Party Agent and English Electoral Culture, 1880-1906" (PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 2001), 186-239.

[4]. David Thackeray, "British Popular Conservatism and the Radical Right, c.1910-1922 (PhD diss., University of Cambridge, in progress).

[5]. Jon Lawrence, "The Dynamics of Urban Politics, 1867-1914," in Jon Lawrence and Miles Taylor, ed., *Party, State and Society: Electoral Be-*

haviour in Britain since 1820 (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1997), 79-105.

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