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Richard W. Davis. *A Political History of the House of Lords, 1811-1846: From the Regency to Corn Law Repeal.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008. viii + 382 pp. $60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8047-5763-8.

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The Duke of Wellington famously told Thomas Creevey in 1818 that "Nobody cares a damn for the House of Lords; the House of Commons is everything in England and the House of Lords nothing." [1] Wellington's later political career belied the claim, and Richard Davis's fine study of the House of Lords during a pivotal era demonstrates with compelling detail why students should care to understand its workings. The study of Parliament carries a vaguely antiquarian air which conveys the underlying sense that historians answered the big questions generations ago before moving into more promising fields. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Projects like the History of Parliament Trust's work to create a comprehensive guide to the members, activities, and constituencies of the English and United Kingdom parliament underlines the centrality of Parliament in political life while pointing to avenues for additional research. The volumes on the House of Commons provide a valuable reference, but little as yet has been done on the House of Lords. Davis thus brings erudition developed over a long career to the task of filling an important gap in the historical literature.

Davis argues persuasively that the period from the establishment of the regency in 1811 through repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 marked a distinct epoch. Leaders lacked either the tools of patronage that had greased eighteenth-century relationships or the party discipline that emerged during the later nineteenth century. Persuasion and management held the key to passing measures through either house of Parliament, and the Lords had a dynamic of its own that required deft handling. If attendance was often slim and debates boring--as contemporaries themselves noted--Davis points out the House of Lords still provided an arena for airing grievances of all sorts. Governments had to respond to critics with more than just votes to pass their measures and defeat those of opponents. As one historian remarked of the Commons, silence by ministers "broken only by the tromp of marching feet into the lobby" encouraged the suspicions that divisions reflected something other than the confidence of the parlia-

ment or the wider public.[2] Measures had to be defended in both houses, just as their members had to be managed.

Four of the five prime ministers during the period in question sat in the Lords, making proceedings there of added interest. Davis stresses the fact that the 1832 Reform Act did not change the actual powers of the House of Lords, which remained one of two equal houses through which measures had to pass. He explores developments by tracing confrontations over a series of questions from 1811 through 1846, many of which involved contentious differences over religion or political economy. Religion had obvious implications during a period in which the Church of England lost its political monopoly. Political economy also had consequences as society adjusted to changes brought by urbanization and industrial growth, along with tensions between mercantile and landed interests. Both religious and economic questions tended to blur party lines, especially during the 1820s and 1830s, but confrontations over defining issues from Catholic Emancipation to the Corn Laws also determined party configurations long after the matter itself had been settled. Lord Liverpool's ability to manage government business in the House of Lords for roughly fourteen years set him apart. Lord Grey's success with the 1832 Reform Act marked an important achievement, that his Whig successors never quite managed. Wellington's skill as an opposition leader, tempered by loyalty to the Crown and a commitment to the public good, made him more than a match for Lord Melbourne.

A key part of the House of Lords' importance lay in its efforts to connect with the wider society. Particularly after the agitation surrounding the 1832 Reform Act, its members appreciated the need to engage public opinion. Davis points out that they made themselves acceptable, and even on occasion popular. Lord Liverpool's vantage point in the Lords gave him a more cautious view of foreign policy than Castlereagh, not least because the opposition used debates as a platform from which to appeal beyond Westminster. Here the study of high politics intersects with more recent approaches to rhetoric and public opinion and their interaction with policy decisions. Davis emphasizes how peers reached beyond their own numbers during a period of expanding newspaper circulation and detailed coverage of parliamentary debates. On some issues, notably religion and the policy implications of political economy in the 1830s, peers showed a better grasp of public sentiment than their counterparts in the Commons. But they also shaped opinion through their actions and by serving as a venue for airing grievances. Even before the period in question, peers kept a watchful eye on public opinion. Lord Grenville warned them in 1807 that, having twice rejected measures to abolish the slave trade, the public looks now to the House of Lords for a resolution. Even where peers resisted pressure on political reform, the shrewder among them realized that their power dependence upon their ability to remain within the broad current of opinion. Davis points out that a bill rejected in one house was a bill rejected, but a measure passed by one house and rejected in another risked constitutional crisis, especially if it were blocked more than once. Knowing when to give way and when to stand made the difference between effective opposition and embarrassing defeat. Wellington had a shrewd sense of where public opinion stood, and Davis shows him to have been a more effective opposition leader than his tenure as prime minister would suggest. Indeed, he makes a plausible case that Wellington and the Tories peers had a better sense of where the public stood on religion and other questions than Whig governments after 1832. Hence their effectiveness in blocking measures despite the momentum held by a ministry in power.

Davis recovers a political world long neglected while bringing aspects of early nineteenth-century history into sharper focus. His book reminds students that the House of Lords provided more

than the decorative function Walter Bagehot attributed to the dignified elements of the English constitution. On that ground alone, it makes a notable contribution to our understanding of parliamentary government.

Notes

[1]. Sir Herbert Maxwell, ed., *The Creevey Papers: A Selection from the Correspondence & Diaries of the Late Thomas Creevey, M.P.,* 2 vols. (London: John Murray, 1903), 1:297.

[2] . J .E. Cookson, *Lord Liverpool's Administration, 1815-1822: The Crucial Years* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1975),7.