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Disraeli

and

The Conservative Party from Peel to Churchill

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After reading Disraeli by Robert Blake, it seems that Benjamin Disraeli could be seen as being either a shameless and unscrupulous manipulator who used others to pursue his own selfish ambitions or a clever, astute and pragmatic man of the world who overcame extraordinary obstacles to attain the pinnacle of power in nineteenth century Britain. ✓ Whatever his traits, Blake succeeds in portraying Disraeli as a man who lived life on his own terms and was not afraid to take advantage of opportunities to further his own interests. Blake is blunt in his treatment of Disraeli. Blake shows that as a young man Disraeli was an unabashed social climber who was driven by blind ambition. According to Blake, Disraeli said that he was miserable in his youth because "I was devoured by ambition I did not see any means of gratifying" (page 55). Blake writes how Disraeli "launch[ed] himself into society, not in the most exclusive houses, but into the salons of such people as Lady Blessington, Lady Charlevulle, Mrs. Norton and Lady Cork, who sought to to attract the fashionable up-and-coming figures of literature and politics" (page 73). Disraeli was described as "a dandified young bounder" (page 75).

Another episode that reveals much about Disraeli's character was the publication of his first novel, Vivian Grey, which Disraeli wrote when he was twenty-one years old. The characters in this novel were based upon real ~~life~~ people, some of whom Disraeli personally knew, and who in the novel became objects of ridicule and mockery. As a result of this novel, Disraeli "found himself the object of a series of ferocious personal

attacks" (page 41) and "acquired a reputation for cynicism, double dealing, recklessness and insincerity which it took him years to live down" (page 48). Blake writes that "Vivian Grey haunted Disraeli to the end" (page 49), and no matter how he tried to explain it away, "he could not live it down" (page 49). The writing of this novel reflected a recklessness for which Disraeli paid a price.

Blake gives the impression that as a young man Disraeli was strongly disliked. Blake writes that Disraeli's "extravagant appearance, his mordant wit, his arrogant demeanour and his flamboyant conversation made [him] far from popular in some quarters" (page 80). There was also "no lack of malicious and disagreeable remarks about Disraeli's ancestry" (page 81). The hostility to Disraeli was so great that he was even barred from admission into a social club of which his father had been a founding member. This picture of Disraeli is clearly *it mostly reflects unfavorably on those who dislike him unfavorable.*

Blake suggests that Disraeli's political ambition was fueled by pride. In 1833 Disraeli wrote: "Alas! I struggle from Pride. Yes! It is Pride that now prompts me, not ambition" (page 84). Disraeli also had an inordinate desire to be the center of *attention.* Blake writes: "To create a sensation, to occupy the limelight, to act a part on the greatest stage in the world, these were the springs of action that thrust Disraeli onward. Obscurity, mediocrity, failure, were what he dreaded. To be in Parliament was to be someone" (page 84). It seems that Disraeli's entry into politics was motivated not by any

passionate commitment to any particular issue but by a drive for self-actualization which had nothing to do with party affiliation or ~~any~~ specific political beliefs. Blake shows how Disraeli joined the Tory Party after several unsuccessful attempts to be elected to Parliament (see page 90) and how Disraeli's entry into the Tory party received a boost after he met the former Tory Lord Chancellor, Lord Lyndhurst. Blake also reveals that Disraeli had actually proclaimed allegiance to the Radicals (see pages 87-93, 114-115). Blake summarizes Disraeli's early political position as being as follows: first a Whig, then a strong Radical, then a Radical with a slight Tory tinge, then near-Tory with a slight Radical tinge, and then finally a strong Radical again (page 92). Thus Disraeli became a Tory for reasons that had nothing to do with any particular political principles.

*Convincing*

Disraeli also seemed to have a strong vindictive streak which may have figured heavily in his attack on Robert Peel in 1845 and 1846. Blake shows that Disraeli, who, according to Blake, was "mortified" after having been passed over by Peel for a position in the government, waited for his chance to destroy Peel, which finally came during the debate on repeal of the Corn Laws, a debate which was initiated by Disraeli. Blake writes that "Disraeli had no previous connection with the agriculturalists" and had "tended to laugh at the more fanatical country gentlemen" (page 225). Yet Disraeli used the Corn Laws issue to ~~to~~ excoriate Peel, who had in his possession the letter Disraeli had sent to him soliciting a

*he did not grope from it*  
position in Peel's government (see page 239). It appears that Disraeli may have acted out of spite rather than out of any genuine concern for the needs of the agriculturalists in his desire to destroy Peel.

This appearance of disingenuousness also emerges in his marriage to Mary Ann. Although Blake shows that Disraeli was devoted to Mary Ann, Blake also shows that when the relationship began Disraeli was deeply in debt and Mary Ann had been left with an income from her late husband, who was "Disraeli's rich senior colleague" (page 150) in Parliament. Blake writes "that ... in the first instance, Disraeli's motives were essentially practical" and "that he married her for her money is ... plausible enough" (page 153). But Blake also cites evidence which suggests that Disraeli's motives were not just "purely cynical" (page 153). Thus, although Disraeli probably loved Mary Ann, what initially attracted him to her may have involved less romantic motives.

*presumably her money*

If Disraeli felt rancor toward Robert Peel, he positively despised William Gladstone. Blake writes that Disraeli hated Gladstone (see page 606). According to Blake, Disraeli described Gladstone as an "unprincipled maniac" with an "extraordinary mixture of envy, vindictiveness, hypocrisy, and superstition ... and ... never a gentleman" (page 606). If it takes one to know one, then perhaps Disraeli was also describing himself. Maybe his ongoing rivalry with Gladstone had more to do with personality than with issues, which were merely used as a pretext to vent their animosity toward each other.

Anti-semitism was also an important factor in Disraeli's life. Blake's book notes numerous instances of Disraeli being attacked because of his Jewish origins. Surely these attacks had to engender in Disraeli a hardness of attitude that otherwise may have never developed. Also, perhaps Disraeli would not have been so deeply disliked in some circles if he had not been from a Jewish background. Nonetheless, there can be no doubt that Disraeli's Jewish origins played a significant role in in how he was perceived by others and cannot be ignored when considering Disraeli's career.

In conclusion, Blake provides a picture of Disraeli as being a cynical and unprincipled opportunist who was consumed by blind ambition and pride, but who operated in a social and political environment that was inherently hostile to him. Viewed within this social context, Disraeli's behavior is not surprising. He started out with disadvantages that his political contemporaries did not have. He was born a Jew and he did not come from an aristocratic family, which meant that he had two strikes against him even before his career began. In short, Disraeli was an outsider who had no choice but to fight his way into the ruling elite. That Disraeli succeeded in overcoming the circumstances of his birth to become Prime Minister is a tribute to his tenacity, drive, determination and intelligence, qualities which made him a remarkable figure in history.

*Finely written and analyzed*

In chapter 4 of The Conservative Party from Peel to Churchill, Robert Blake shows how the Conservative party was transformed from a party that was viewed as being unfit to govern into a "national party" with broad-based support, and how Benjamin Disraeli was responsible for that transformation. Blake shows that although the passing of the Reform Act of 1867 did "make the Conservatives a genuine alternative government" and "also gave Disraeli personally a notable boost" (page 109), the Conservatives still did not look like a majority party. Blake points out that although they were no longer the party of protectionism, they were still the party of Protestantism, which made them vulnerable to Liberal attack. In 1868 Gladstone took full advantage of this vulnerability of the Conservatives to push for the disestablishment of the Irish Church. Since the Conservatives were committed to defending the Irish Church, compromise on this issue, according to Blake, "would have fatally split [Disraeli's] rank and file" (page 110). The Liberals reestablished their majority in Parliament and governed until 1874. Blake notes, significantly, that despite the Liberal victory, there "was the beginning of a slow move of both the world of business and that of suburban villadom away from the Liberal party - a move which was to contribute much to the Conservative ascendancy at the end of the century" (page 111). Blake also shows how in 1872 Disraeli exploited the weakness of the Gladstone government in its conduct of foreign affairs, as evidenced by Russia's abrogation of the Treaty of Paris of 1856, settlement of the Alabama claim and

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explained

"Britain's palpable impotence during the Franco-Prussian War" (page 117) by claiming the Conservative party to be the party of empire and 'the patriotic party'" (page 118, also see page 126). This position, coupled with the unpopularity of some of Gladstone's reforms (see page 118), and Disraeli's call for "social and not political improvement" (page 117) enabled Disraeli "to do something that no Conservative leader had done since Peel: to present his party as having not only a distinctive color and style, but also a broad-based appeal" (page 118) to the working class and "to the forces of porpoerty everywhere, not simply the landed interest" (page 118). As a result, in 1874 the Conservatives <sup>won</sup> ~~had~~ a majority in Parliament. "There were 352 Conservatives, 243 Liberals and 57 Home Rulers. The previous election had returned 279 Conservatives and 379 Liberals" (page 119). Obviously a major shift away from the Liberals to the Conservatives had occurred. But in 1880 the Conservatives were again defeated by the Liberals which~~m~~, according to Blake, Disraeli attributed to "hard times" (page 120). Blake writes that there was an "industrial and agricultural depression" during the last two years of Disraeli's ministry (page 120). Despite this defeat, what Disraeli accomplished was to establish the perception of the Conservative party as being "the guardian of patriotism and of national and ✓ imperial unity" (page 128), a claim, Blake shows, that the Conservative party would use again and again "when trying to pin the label of spiritual treason upon first their Liberal then their Labor opponents" (page 130).



Surprisingly, right before the end of the the chapter there is a sentence which ~~is~~ contains an unmistakable political message. This sentence says: "If the 'Left' has so often found itself pilloried as an anti-national party, this is because it has so often contained members who behaved as if they were friends of every country except their own" (page 130). This sentence clearly reveals Blake's political bias and suggests that the purpose of this chapter, and perhaps of the entire book, is to present an historical justification for the position of the present-day Conservative party, at least in the area of foreign affairs.

*Inisightful*