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The Strange Death of Liberal England

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By 1910 England was like a dormant volcano that was soon going to explode. This is the picture of England that George Dangerfield presents in The Strange Death of Liberal England. And Dangerfield shows that an eruption is exactly what happened in England as new groups, long repressed and without any political power, burst onto the scene and made their voices heard. The emergence of these groups and the demands that they made completely overwhelmed the Liberal government, which was rendered impotent in the face of forces it could not control.

*Since
introducing*

It is Dangerfield's position that the program of reform promoted by the Liberal party did not improve the lot of the working man. Dangerfield writes that "for all the reforms of Liberalism, the poor man remained poor" (pages 16, 17). As a result, with the election of 53 Labor representatives in 1906, the Liberal party was no longer the party of the left (see page

10). Thus Dangerfield shows that the Liberal party had lost the support of workers. This development would ultimately have devastating consequences for the Liberal government under Herbert Asquith and for liberalism as a political philosophy. By losing its support among the working class, the Liberals were forced, as Dangerfield shows, to enter into a political alliance with the Irish in Parliament, who wanted Home Rule.

*He says this.
But was
it true?*

Home Rule was an issue that "had been buried with Gladstone; in 1910, it was an academic question, no Englishman cared for it" (page 25). Yet this issue was resurrected by the Liberals, who needed the help of the Irish to stay in power. Dangerfield writes that "Home Rule was on its way.... The Irish party as

good as held Mr. Asquith's I.O.U. - Home Rule was to be paid to them in return for those eight score votes of theirs which had put the Budget through" (page 37). The Irish had supported the "Peoples' Budget" on the strict understanding that Home Rule would follow. Not only was this an act of political desperation, it was also a grave political miscalculation which failed to take into consideration the consequences of promoting a policy that was as volatile as a bomb with a lit fuse. The seeds of anger, bitterness and dissension that the Liberals had sown by linking up with the Irish bore fruit on July 23, 1911. On that date Parliamentary decorum and all pretensions of civility completely disappeared. Dangerfield writes that as Asquith began to speak, "from the seats behind Mr. Balfour came a shout of 'Traitor! Traitor!'. . . . 'Traitor! Traitor!' chanted the Opposition. . . . The Opposition cry was now rising to a hoarse and angry yell. . . . There had been nothing like this since 1893, when members fought with disreputable fists along the floor of the House" (page 56). Asquith was prevented from speaking. Dangerfield writes that "never before, in the history of Parliament, had a Prime Minister been refused a hearing" (page 57). Thus Dangerfield provides a compelling example of how the Liberal Party had lost its ability to govern and was on the path to political oblivion.

But Dangerfield shows that an even more serious ramification of the Liberal government's decision to ally itself with the Irish Home Rulers was that it directly led to the possibility of civil war in Ireland as the Conservatives instigated

Protestant unrest in Northern Ireland to thwart any attempt by the Liberals to make good on their promise to grant Home Rule for all of Ireland. The Conservatives were determined to destroy the Liberal Party and saw the Home Rule issue as the means to accomplish that goal. Dangerfield writes that Ulster hated the Catholics and was opposed to uniting with the rest of Ireland (see page 77). By backing the Protestants in Ulster, the Conservatives could show that the Liberals, the professed lovers of freedom, were hypocrites who were ready to grant Home Rule to Ireland at the expense of the Protestant minority in Ireland (see page 79). Dangerfield writes that "in 1912, the Tories decided that a Parliament controlled by a Liberal majority was a Bad thing" (page 96). According to Dangerfield, the comments of Conservative Party leader Anthony Bonar Law that year in support of Ulster constituted "threats of civil war" (see pages 96, 97). Dangerfield cites a speech made by Bonar Law on January 26, 1912 in which he declared "to support to the end, the loyal minority [in Ireland]" (page 96).

Dangerfield shows how the situation further deteriorated as political polarization escalated and civil war became a real possibility. On July 27, 1912 Bonar Law said that "the Government's policy was part of a 'corrupt Parliamentary bargain' and it had no right 'to carry such a revolution by such means'" (page 106). The Government was subsequently defeated 228 to 206 ^{on} concerning the Financial Resolutions for the Home Rule Bill, but Asquith refused to resign. On October 12, 1913, John Redmond, the Irish nationalist leader, said that the division

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good point

weaken it? Could they really have foreseen its destruction?

wouldn't they always feel this way?

Andrew

of Ireland into two nations "is to us an abomination and a blasphemy" (page 126). Finally, Dangerfield writes how Major General Sir Henry Wilson, Director of Military Operations for the War Office, said that the Army should refuse to obey the Government in any gesture toward Ulster and two newspapers suggested that all Unionists should leave the Territorial Army. And on November 28, 1913, Bonar Law, "in one of the most reckless speeches of his whole career" suggested that a civil war could be avoided if the army refused to fight, (page 137). Dangerfield thus shows how the Liberals were willing to compromise their political principles by putting party before country in order to maintain political power, and became so contemptible that they were unwilling to relinquish power even when they were voted down in Parliament. In this process of political degeneration, the Liberals had become reckless as shown by their decision to align themselves with the Irish. A politically healthy party would have never demonstrated such desperation.

isn't this strong?
weren't the Liberals committed to Home Rules since 1886?

Dangerfield shows that the Liberals also seriously miscalculated on the issue of suffrage. This miscalculation led to the emergence of a radical feminist movement that was willing to resort to violence to attain its goals. The alienation of the feminists from the Liberal Party was consistent with Dangerfield's contention that "the Liberal cabinet was weak because ... it no longer represented an effective Left" (page 140). Dangerfield also asserts that "The Women's Rebellion - the outrageous Suffragette Movement of 1910-1914 - was, like

the Tory Rebellion, the [unconscious] rejection of the moribund, a respectable, a smothering security.... Woman, through her awareness of the possibilities of an abstract goal in life, was, in effect, suddenly aware of her long-neglected masculinity" (page 144). It is one thing to view the radicalization of the suffragette movement as a response to the second-class treatment afforded to women whose demands for political equality were not taken seriously. But to suggest that the women's militancy was a reflection of a "neglected masculinity" (page 146) and that the suffragette movement was a "homosexual movement" is far more difficult, if not totally impossible, to substantiate. Dangerfield's position is sexist in that it is based on the belief that anger and aggression are exclusively masculine traits and that a woman needs to separate herself from men in order to "recover her womanhood" (page 148). This sounds like psychological gobbledygook written by someone who was groping for a pat explanation for why the militant feminists engaged in what was, apparently to the author, unfeminine-like behavior. It is understandable why women became infuriated with Asquith's proposal to introduce a Franchise Bill to do away with all existing suffrage qualifications that would apply to males only (see page 163) and could become outraged by Asquith's statement "that to grant votes for women would be a 'political mistake of a very disastrous kind'" (page 166). However, to attribute the subsequent militancy and violence of the suffragette movement to repressed masculinity is half-baked pseudo-psychological nonsense.

well argued

In the chapter The Workers' Rebellion, Dangerfield reiterates the theme of how the Liberal party no longer represented the interests of the working class. Dangerfield writes how the Liberals failed to take action in response to the Osborne Judgment which barred trade unions from engaging in political activities (see pages 223-225). But of more critical significance was the Liberal government's willingness to enact reforms but not to insist that employees be paid a living wage (see page 226). According to Dangerfield, the government's apparently uncaring attitude to the British worker being underpaid drove the workers to unite, and under the influence of syndicalism, the Trade Union movement became an instrument through which the workers asserted their economic power and rendered the government impotent.

more specific than this

vague?

As in the case of the militant suffragettes, Dangerfield offers a simplistic explanation for why the workers became so violent and contentious. Dangerfield convincingly shows that the period 1910-1914 was a time of tremendous labor unrest in Britain, and cites several major strikes which effected the economy of the entire country. Dangerfield also shows that workers were able to use their economic muscle to finally extort from the government a minimum wage bill for coal miners (see page 293) and cites this as an example of the failure of "Liberalism with its fatal trust in compromise" (page 299). And Dangerfield concludes that "the Government had proved itself helpless to resist any pressure from below" (page 329). But to suggest that the strikes were actually a syndicalist plot

is pure speculation (see page 308). The trade unions were seeking economic gains for their members and not the revolutionary transformation of the economic system. Nevertheless, Dangerfield does show how the emergence of a huge trade union movement rendered Liberalism superfluous, and from that point of view, offers an interesting account of how Liberalism died.

In conclusion, it seems that the title of Dangerfield's book should have been The Inevitable Death of Liberal England. The philosophy of Liberalism no longer fit the conditions that had developed in England by 1914. New groups were demanding a say in their own destinies and under these circumstances the Liberal philosophy, which was rooted in the past, could not have possibly survived, especially in a society that was undergoing rapid change.

Fine essay. It is very sharply written and coherently organized.