

HISTORICAL CONNECTIONS

POPULAR POLITICS IN NINETEENTH- CENTURY ENGLAND



ROHAN McWILLIAM

Popular politics in nineteenth-century England

Popular Politics in Nineteenth-Century England provides an accessible introduction to the culture of English popular politics between 1815 and 1900, the period from Luddism to the New Liberalism. This is an area that has attracted great historical interest and has undergone fundamental revision in the last two decades. Did the Industrial Revolution create the working-class movement? Was liberalism (which transcended class divisions) the key mode of political argument?

Rohan McWilliam brings this central debate up to date for students of nineteenth-century British history. He assesses popular ideology in relation to the state, the nation, gender and the nature of party formation, and reveals a much richer social history emerging in the light of recent historiographical developments.

Rohan McWilliam is Lecturer in History at Anglia Polytechnic University, Cambridge.

Historical Connections

Series editors

Tom Scott *University of Liverpool*

Geoffrey Crossick *University of Essex*

John Davis *University of Connecticut*

Joanna Innes *Somerville College, University of Oxford*

Titles in the series

The Decline of Industrial Britain: 1870–1980

Michael Dintenfass

The French Revolution: Rethinking the Debate

Gwynne Lewis

The Italian Risorgimento: State, Society and National Unification

Lucy Riall

The Remaking of the British Working Class: 1840–1940

Mike Savage and Andrew Miles

The Rise of Regional Europe

Christopher Harvie

Environment and History: The Taming of Nature in the USA and South Africa

William Beinart and Peter Coates

Population Politics in Twentieth-Century Europe: Fascist Dictatorships and Liberal Democracies

Maria Sophia Quine

Medicine in the Making of Modern Britain, 1700–1920

Christopher Lawrence

Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany: The Fascist Style of Rule

Alexander J. De Grand

Politics and the Rise of the Press: Britain and France, 1620–1800

Bob Harris

Catholic Politics in Europe 1918–1945

Martin Conway

Popular politics in nineteenth-century England

Rohan McWilliam



London and New York

First published 1998 by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2002.

© 1998 Rohan McWilliam

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book has been requested

ISBN 0-415-18675-7 (hbk)

ISBN 0-415-10841-1 (pbk)

ISBN 0-203-04842-3 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-203-20858-7 (Glassbook Format)

In memory of my niece
ELSPETH MONICA McWILLIAM-BAGLEY

Contents

<i>Series editors' preface</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	x
Introduction	1

Part I The old analysis

1 Reinterpreting the Queen Caroline case	7
2 From the old analysis to the new	14

Part II New directions

3 The peculiarities of politics	33
4 A polity-centred history? Rethinking the state, the franchise and party formation	39
5 The culture of popular radicalism I: populism, class and the constitution	53
6 The culture of popular radicalism II: gender and socialism	71
7 The nation and politics I: patriotism	81
8 The nation and politics II: popular conservatism	90
Conclusion: towards post-revisionism	98
<i>Notes</i>	102
<i>Bibliography</i>	117
<i>Index</i>	123

Series editors' preface

Historical Connections is a series of short books on important historical topics and debates, written primarily for those studying and teaching history. The books offer original and challenging works of synthesis that will make new themes accessible, or old themes accessible in new ways, build bridges between different chronological periods and different historical debates, and encourage comparative discussion in history.

If the study of history is to remain exciting and creative, then the tendency towards fragmentation must be resisted. The inflexibility of older assumptions about the relationship between economic, social, cultural and political history has been exposed by recent historical writing, but the impression has sometimes been left that history is little more than a chapter of accidents. This series will insist on the importance of processes of historical change, and it will explore the connections within history: connections between different layers and forms of historical experience, as well as connections that resist the fragmentary consequences of new forms of specialism in historical research.

Historical Connections will put the search for these connections back at the top of the agenda by exploring new ways of uniting the different strands of historical experience, and by affirming the importance of studying change and movement in history.

Geoffrey Crossick

John Davis

Joanna Innes

Tom Scott

Acknowledgements

Whilst I bear sole responsibility for the contents of this book, I have benefited immensely from the support and criticism of others. Malcolm Chase, Matthew Cragoe, James Epstein, Robert Gray, Simon Gunn, Michelle Hawley, Matthew Hendley, David Nash and Frank Trentmann all gave up time to read portions of the manuscript. My thanks go to the editorial board of the 'Historical Connections' series and particularly to Geoffrey Crossick who not only invited me to write the book but has provided me with characteristically acute comments. I also thank Heather McCallum at Routledge for her patience with a book that must have looked as though it would never arrive. My parents I hope know how much I treasure their love and support. The final debt is to my wife and fellow historian, Kelly Boyd. Commenting on the manuscript was the least of her contribution.

Full publication details are only supplied for works published since 1945.

Introduction

This is a study of the culture of English popular politics between 1815 and 1900. Principally concerned with political identity, it will argue that the investigation of ideas should not be divorced from social context or experience. This is an area that since the Second World War has attracted immense historical interest but which has recently undergone a great deal of change. The purpose of this book is to introduce readers to new debates in the field and to suggest ways in which it might be developed further.

The title is apparently simple, covering the period from Luddism to the New Liberalism, but it needs to be unpacked. I deliberately use the term ‘popular politics’ as opposed to ‘working-class’ politics because many political ideas were not peculiar to one class or another but were trans-class. Although I persist in believing that class was a fundamental form of social identity in the nineteenth century, this book holds that a narrow focus on class consciousness is not a sufficient explanation for the form and language of politics because there were other kinds of social identity that were often equally important. For example, Chapter Five examines the ways in which popular politics can be seen as a series of debates about the meaning of the constitution. The ‘nineteenth century’ of the title is perhaps not satisfactory as this study looks back to the defining experiences of the 1790s and also forward to 1914 (as well as to the politics of the recent past). Given the lengthy time span, this book does not purport to be exhaustive in treatment. Instead, it focuses on those aspects of popular politics characterised by a remarkable continuity in terms of language and ideas. As for my use of ‘England’ as opposed to Britain, this is a recognition of the fact that British history is the story of four nations. Much of what I have to say is relevant to the non-English parts of the United Kingdom. However, I have inserted the name ‘England’ in the title mainly for reasons of accuracy. This book is essentially about

English politics but I also recognise that the term 'English history' conceals a diversity of regional (and other) experiences. Moreover, it should be said that many of the ideas and feelings presented here were not peculiar to England. Radicalism was very much the product of an Anglo-American dialogue in the later eighteenth century and there were comparable developments in Europe. It should also not be forgotten that Britain had a large empire which meant that political ideas always had a wider context.

More troubling perhaps is the definition of 'politics' which I take to mean the ways in which the distribution of power within society is understood and debated. This involves formal politics (such as electioneering and organisations such as political parties) but it also includes the less formal world of popular culture. This study is written in the belief that the common people have an intellectual history every bit as rich and important as the elite thinkers normally scrutinised by academics.

The study is organised as follows. Chapters One and Two introduce readers to the historical orthodoxies concerning nineteenth-century popular politics as they had developed by about 1880 (what I call the 'old analysis') and discuss the ways in which these orthodoxies have been challenged since then. Chapters Three and Four consider the new 'polity-centred' explanations for popular politics which require attention be paid not only to class but also to the nature of the state, the franchise and party formation as determinants of political culture. Chapters Five and Six explore the ideology of popular radicalism and consider alternatives to explanations based on class consciousness. Chapters Seven and Eight go into detail on one such alternative, national consciousness, and examine something often ignored by historians, popular conservatism. The Conclusion suggests ways in which the debate might be taken forward. Throughout, I am concerned to introduce readers to the texture and practice of popular political culture and to show what the field looks like after a period of vigorous revisionism. The traditional agenda of scholars in this field is now out of date and the arguments of many revisionists must be taken seriously. However, the old agenda is not altogether irrelevant and contains many perspectives lacking in recent writing. This study is intended to address the interpretive gap and for that reason I dub my approach 'post-revisionist'. This is very much a book about historiography, examining the ways in which historians construct their explanations. In this spirit, the book commences with a case study of the Queen Caroline affair that reveals the changing pattern of historical interpretation.

As we move away from the world of the Victorians, it may appear that their conflicts and achievements are no longer relevant in our

global village with its information superhighway. This book is, however, written in the belief that the political arguments of the last century, the struggles that were won and (often) lost, the debates on democracy and the question of where power was to reside in society, remain as relevant in these days as they ever did.

Part I

The old analysis

1 Reinterpreting the Queen Caroline case

In 1820 Britain was rocked by one of the most bizarre episodes in its political history. This was the year that saw the death of George III. A far cry from the tyrannical despot that he had appeared in the early years of his reign, the king was considered by many to be the father of his people, a benevolent farmer who resembled the national emblem of John Bull. As the king withdrew from public life with old age and 'madness' (or rather, porphyria), his popularity had increased. By contrast, the new king was remarkably unpopular. The Prince Regent was reckoned by many to be a libertine whose lechery rendered him unfit to lead the nation. Exception was taken to his treatment of his wife, Caroline of Brunswick. The pair had married in 1795 mainly to persuade Parliament of the new-found respectability of the bankrupt Prince whose debts required payment. Their marriage was a disaster. Neither could abide the other and rumour had it that they spent only their wedding night together after which they went their separate ways. Caroline moved to the Continent in 1814 where it was believed she took an Italian lover, Bartolomeo Bergami, and, on one occasion, visited the brothel of the Dey of Tunis. In 1820, the new king, George IV, attempted to prevent her becoming queen.

Radical opinion was infuriated by his decision. Sympathy for Caroline had existed as early as 1796 when there were reports of their separation. In 1813, the agitator William Cobbett had taken up her cause when the Prince attempted to stop her seeing their daughter. With the coronation imminent, Caroline insisted on her right to be crowned queen. Alderman Matthew Wood, Whig MP for the City of London and a leading champion of Caroline, travelled to the Continent and persuaded her to return home. At Dover she received an enthusiastic reception from the crowd. Negotiations with Lord Liverpool's government to arrange a settlement broke down and George then demanded that she be put on trial for adultery through a Bill of Pains and Penalties. Not only radicals but the public generally