

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO

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IN midsummer, 1830, George the Fourth died. Nobody mourned him, not even the men of fashion, who for a generation or so had copied the style of his waistcoats and slippers, fleeced him mercilessly at the gaming tables of Brooks's or Raggett's, or drunk themselves stupid in his company. Some of these excellent gentlemen, unable to stand the pace, had already set off themselves in search of a better world, but those that remained were strangely indifferent at the passing of their late patron and dupe. The editors of the news journals were silent too, or else very uncomplimentary, but that was only reasonable, for to them George was a bully who had forbidden them to publish stories of his merry-making, thereby robbing them of many choice bits of news. For their part, the townsmen and villagers of the kingdom, unattached to the royal person by these strange bonds of fealty, were glad to pay the bills of his extravagance and be done with him. The crown passed to William, Duke of Clarence, who had three years before been declared heir apparent. William did not look much like a king either. His youth had been spent in the Royal Navy, where he had been a true Brunswick, gay, spending and drunk, and now at the age of sixty-five, half blind, a little stupid and eccentric, he was to learn hastily the rudiments of politics. Cicero began the study of Greek literature late in life, and Solon in old age used to say "Every day that adds to my life, adds to my learning," but everybody knew that William had neither the scholarly grace of Cicero nor the mature wisdom of Solon. In our own day the prospect of having such a king would not be very disturbing, but then the ship of state might very well go down if the admiral did not know his business. At this point Fate cleared the air. It was customary then to dissolve the parliament upon the death of the king. That accident brought the few thousand voters of the two islands to the polls during July and August to elect 575 members to the new House of Commons. It prepared the way for the fall of the Tory ministry in November. It set the Whigs in power, after nearly fifty years of opposition. It put reform in the forefront of public policies, and opened the battle for the Reform Bill of 1832. So what at first appears to be a very casual event, the

death of one mediocre king and the coming of another, is really the starting-point of much subsequent history. It is the end of the Georgian era, and the opening of a period during which reform was carried into many of the veins of national life. What part did the new king take in this extraordinary revolution? Was he a sincere Liberal, or were his ministers only bad schoolboys who drove their new master to a state of desperation? Why did the Georgian tradition come so abruptly to an end? Who were these Georgians really? These questions have been unanswered for a century, and probably must remain so, but they invite us to look more closely into the history of that strange, eventful year.

I.

The last generation of Georgians fell under the unfortunate influence of their prince. It might seem unusual that George should have cast such a spell upon his contemporaries, for he reigned only ten years, and was known to most of his intimates as "Prinny", had he not served often as Prince Regent while his father suffered spasms of insanity. As it was, the people of the kingdom were usually unconscious of this sinister influence; nevertheless they gambled and drank, swore and fought with all the gusto of the visitors to Carleton House. The Prince, seeing his manners copied so generally, came at once to the conclusion that he was popular. Was he not an intimate of the politicians, Fox and Sheridan? Did not the mob cheer him occasionally as he drove about town? Undoubtedly. "So," said George turning to one of his ministers, "no prince was ever so idolized by the people of this country."

One of his boyhood tutors, the Bishop of Lichfield, said that the young Prince of Wales would become either the most accomplished gentleman or the most degenerate blackguard in Europe. Was he not right? At any rate, the gentlemanly accomplishments seem to have pretty well hidden from the moment he burst upon society. Living in the newly furnished Carleton House, with an income always over £50,000 a year, he had but one worry in life—how should he amuse himself? Even that problem was apparently solved by his too indulgent mother who provided him with a wife, the beautiful Princess Caroline of Brunswick. But the Prince preferred to find his own amusement, and that he did in true Georgian fashion with tankards and dice, game-cocks and prize-fighters. When Nelson called to every Englishman to do his duty, where was the Prince of Wales? Enjoying himself at Brighton. He and his royal brother, who succeeded him on the throne,

had now found a new entertainment—shooting with an air gun in the Pavilion. They entertained the old, grey-haired Duke of Norfolk during his annual visit to Brighton, drank him under the table, and spent the rest of the night in a corner of the room indulging in a very animated discussion on the make and shape of the wig worn by their royal ancestor, George II. About this time, Prinny thought himself to be a very great politician, and undoubted leader of the Whigs. So far as we know, his notion of domestic policy was merely to choose waltzing partners for Lady Jersey, while his foreign policies went strangely awry during dinner one Sunday at Lady Salisbury's. George came "beastly drunk" and lustily abused the Emperor of Russia, then visiting England, with all manner of insults. When the Whigs grew tired of this silly behaviour and set their patron adrift, the Prince was so worn out with fuss, fatigue and rage that it appeared to everyone he must either die or go mad. There was a lull for a time in these strange adventures, until at last in 1820 came the gaudy coronation and the trial of Queen Caroline. Here it was that George lost the last of his friends among the people. His manners and morals were not at all improved, and disgust quickly changed to hate when it was found that he was an enemy of reform.

The first and perhaps the only service George did his countrymen was very characteristic of him—he invented a new shoe-buckle. "It was an inch long, five inches broad, and it covered almost the whole instep, reaching down to the ground on either side of the foot." His dying words also show the compass of his little mind. On his death-bed he was signing a state paper when all at once he exclaimed, "You have damned bad pens here." Surely he was the prince of triflers!

For a time the subject was quite content to be as coarse as his king. Among the nobility, in particular, we find very little disposition to mend these bad manners, and all through the period men appear gay, carefree, crude and indulgent. Those agencies which one usually expects to polish and refine were conspicuously quiet. The Church, the universities, the schools seldom uttered a word of reproof, indeed they often outdid the laity in their excesses. Some of the parsons preached politics and carried their spiritual mission amongst the Tories or Radicals instead of the poor and needy. It was more common, however, to find them hunting foxes or spending long holidays at Brighton as playmates of their Prince. In the universities the dons could, as a rule, out-drink or out-gamble any of the undergraduates. At least one professor at Cambridge "could pour out Greek like a drunken helot." If we find little of this indulgence in the public schools,

it is only because there were other more glaring faults. Lord Grey found the curriculum at Eton too narrow, said that he had been taught nothing, and preferred to have all his numerous sons tutored privately. No wonder, then, that Byron came home from Harrow and Trinity with idle habits. No wonder either that he preferred to breakfast at two or three o'clock in the afternoon, and spend long nights bibbing wine out of a polished skull. Gibbon had been a good fellow among the Georgians because he could sit gaming for twenty-two hours at a stretch, losing heavily all the time. Then there was a certain Bishop of Lincoln who, when moving from the deanery of St. Paul's, asked a learned friend of his, by the name of Will Hay, how he should move some exceptionally fine claret. "Pray, my Lord Bishop," says Hay, "how much of the wine have you?" The bishop said six dozen. "If that is all," replied Hay, "you have only to ask me six times to dinner, and I will carry it all away myself." We treasure these stories not as any compliment to Byron, Gibbon or the estimable Mr. Hay, but rather that we may rejoice that fashions change as completely as they apparently do.

People tire very easily of these amusements, especially those people who can afford only to enjoy them through the newspapers. Churchmen readily count wine-bibbing and gaming among the purely earthly joys, when once they get back to their Bibles. Politicians find in them only temporary relief from episodes like Peterloo, and no relief at all from tongues like Mr. Cobbett's. So the passing of this Georgian fashion was not at all a long process, since the common people were ready to forsake it whenever reputable leaders appeared. They had indeed become Victorian, or something very close to it, many months before George lay on his deathbed, and while the little Victoria was striving "to become a true Christian and to be obedient to *dear* Lehzen." Many forces were working to bring about this change; famine, unemployment, trade depression and rotten boroughs among them. The Combination Acts against Trade Unions and the Six Acts which came after Peterloo made many people fear that the Tory ministry intended to carry on a spirited war on behalf of the Haves against the Havenots. The cry went abroad for reform, political and social fashions speedily changed, and George soon became the last survivor of a tradition whose generous patron he so long had been.

II.

The two-party system, which many political writers laud up to the skies as an institution peculiarly English, has never appeared so mythical as it did during the general election of 1830. Three

parties, two of which were so beset with internal troubles that they appeared more like six or seven, appealed to the small electorate, leaving us to distinguish among the Tory, Whig and Radical candidates only by noticing whether they were hard, cool or hot-headed in the matter at issue—parliamentary reform. Even that is difficult because the Tories were preaching three gospels, the Whigs two, and the Radicals everything from manhood suffrage to open revolution.

Walpole, an accomplished tutor in the practice of politics, taught the politicians of his generation to depend for their majorities upon alliances between groups of members rather than upon any very rigid party discipline. He knew that underneath the standards of the two historic parties there was a good deal of bickering and jealousy, that townsmen and squires did not always see eye to eye, that factions were continually growing out of a new discontent or fad, and finally, that he must humour those peers who nominated members to the House of Commons; so he managed his supporters by tactful compromises and prudent bargains. Succeeding generations of politicians heeded this teaching. The Pelhams laid it on the very foundation of their "broad-bottomed" administration. It fortunately kept Lord North in power during the troublesome days of the American Revolution. Finally Pitt the Younger, one of the greatest political bargainers of all, found that it enabled him and his crew of Tories to outsail the Whig skippers for nearly fifty years. This half-century of office drew to a close in 1830, but to the last the Tory ministers followed the Walpolean tradition and, far from trying to arouse a party spirit among their followers, tried instead to fix new bargains between the warring factions.

During the process of Catholic Emancipation, one wing of the Tories became disaffected. To many of the High Churchmen and up-country squires reform of any sort was distasteful, but religious reform was nothing short of heresy, especially since farther along the road parliamentary reform came into sight. When the Duke of Wellington after much hesitation emancipated the Catholics and stopped short for a moment, to think deeply, the die-hard Tories grew very angry. They and the country at large quite misunderstood this brief hesitation, for the duke was really not thinking of further reforms at all, he was merely doing penance for his unintentional sin of emancipating the Catholics. He had done it in a weak moment, and was now heartily sorry. The band of the faithful that was gathered about him was not in so penitent a mood, however, and not a few of them were busy framing some

half measure which would take the place of thoroughgoing reform of parliament. At any rate the Canningites, the left wing of the party, saw that reform could not long be denied. These were the followers of by far the most liberal-minded Tory minister of that generation, whose death had been the occasion of the duke's coming into power. Huskisson now led the group, but his untimely death, in what was perhaps the first railroad accident in history, left the little group leaderless when the new parliament assembled and Melbourne, Palmerston and several of their followers became open allies of the Whigs.

But what of the Opposition? How did it fare during so long an exile from office? What was its opinion of manhood suffrage and rotten boroughs?

In the first place, it must be remembered that much of the strength of the Government lay in the weakness of the Opposition. If it was difficult to keep supporters at the back of a Government which had all manner of favours to bestow on its friends, it was much more difficult to keep the various factions on the left side of the House in good humour. Throughout the eighteenth century one of the most striking features in parliamentary history is the weakness and the confusion among the Opposition parties. Not Bolingbroke's pen, nor Burke's tongue, nor even Newcastle's pocket-book could keep the Opposition solid, steady or energetic. We must remember too that the Whigs, protesting against the persecution of Pitt, seceded completely from parliament without incurring the displeasure of their supporters in the country. What would we say these days about a party using such tactics? Evidently the business of the Opposition has greatly changed. Or think again of the condition after the death of Tierney, when for ten years until 1830 there was no official leader of the Opposition in the Commons. But after Althorp was appointed leader in that year, changes came very rapidly. The Whigs and their allies took new life, and came out solidly against the ministry. Hobhouse for the first time in history was able to speak of "His Majesty's Opposition." The ministry well might tremble, for their quarrelsome factions were now matched by a very solid, well captained array.

Although before the electors the Whigs were pretty unanimously in favour of reform, they had some difficulty in adopting any definite policy. Durham, at the head of the more Radical group, was not very generally trusted, because he had so lately flirted with the Tories and secured from them a peerage. Brougham was as brilliantly erratic as ever. He succeeded in making himself

popular among the Radical citizens of the towns, and then confounded everyone by getting himself elected by the landowners of Yorkshire where he owned not an acre of land. These two leaders had a good deal in common—their popularity in the country, their erratic habits and their willingness to support the very broadest sort of parliamentary reform. To some of their fellow Whigs, happily only a small group, their past conduct was impossible to forgive and their present enthusiasm led very much too far. This more conservative element was now forced to wonder where such rash doctrines were leading. What cared it for manhood suffrage, or ballot voting? How much better would it be to devise a scheme whereby the pocket boroughs would return Whigs in place of Tories and so end it.

Grey stood on the middle ground. He had long been the accepted leader of the parliamentary reformers, and was highly respected both within his own party and in the country. Lord John Russell seconded him. They had both very set notions of how far reform must go. They both realized there must be compromises. But they knew above all that the Whig party must be kept well in hand, so that it might be ready to fight the battle for reform when once the battle grounds had been chosen by the leaders. Grey's part throughout was to keep the party in good humour while his lieutenants framed the measure, and he played the part with admirable skill.

During the skirmishes with the Government in the Napoleonic period, the Whig advance guard became detached from the main army. Samuel Whitebread, an old friend of Grey's, gathered about him half-a-dozen of the most liberal-minded back-benchers and laid the foundations of the Radical Party. At once they were dubbed the "Mountain" by the straight-laced Tories, who remembered with some misgivings the activities of the Montagnards in France. It was a useless persecution, for there was nothing to fear. The new party was satisfied with very modest policies—poor law reform, free and compulsory education, Catholic Emancipation and parliamentary reform along the lines proposed by the London Hampden Club. But the Radicals found the opposition to these measures too strong for them. Whitebread committed suicide, and Althorp led most of the others back into the Whig camp. In the country, however, the movement did not die out so rapidly. Westminster, one of the few open boroughs, regularly returned the Radical, Sir Francis Burdett, thanks to the efficient management of agitators like Cobbett, Place, Cartwright and "Orator" Hunt. Finding Westminster too small for them, some of

these leaders toured the country, where they found the citizens very restless but badly in need of leadership. In such circumstances Cobbett was just the man to keep agitation alive, and in 1830 he was joined by Thomas Attwood, a Birmingham banker, who began to organize political unions in many parts of the country. Efforts so earnest and vigorous could not but bring results and, while in parliament the Radicals were still very weak in 1830, their strength in the country at large gave them considerable influence over the policies of the other two parties.

III.

When the first snows of that winter fell upon the housetops of Downing Street, there was a new tenant at Number Ten. He sat by the fireside rather uncomfortably, as he had every reason to do, for public duty had just chased him from the solid comfort of Howick, along the bumpy Great North Road, into the bleak misery of London. At the same time Fortune smiled very unexpectedly on his ambitions, made him Prime Minister, the idol of the middle-classes, and put in his hands the machinery with which he could reform the parliament. Surely Duty and Fortune never entered into a happier conspiracy.

Lord Grey, for it was he that was so queerly beset, was the outstanding veteran of the reform movement. In his twenties he had founded the "Friends of the People" and moved his first Reform Bill; in his thirties he had been tormented as a Radical; in his forties he had helped to abolish slavery; at forty-three he was leader of the Whigs, and now, at sixty-six, he was Prime Minister. This pilgrimage had been no less discouraging than Christian's, although the obstacles appeared in a somewhat different order. In the Valley of Humiliation, Pitt raged like a demon at reformers in general and Greys in particular. When Doubting Castle came in sight, Grey fell at once under the influence of the Giant Despair who persuaded him to lead the Whig "secession". When Pitt saw the Whig benches almost empty day after day during the last three years of the century (1797-1800), he immediately took advantage by imprisoning large numbers of reformers, gagging the press and passing the unfortunate Combination Acts against the Trade Unions. Of course, Grey's strategy was wrong, and his conduct shameful; so like the sensible fellow he was, he led the party back again to its post of duty. Next came a taste of office during the life of the Fox-Grenville Coalition in 1807, and in this ministry of "All Talents" Grey served first in the Admiralty and, after the death of Fox, in the Foreign Office. When the Tories came back

into power a few months later, the Whigs went again into opposition, while their leader was mired in the Slough of Despond. "I doubt very much whether there exists a very general disposition in favour of Reform," he wrote on one occasion, as he announced to the people of Great Britain that he would not revive his reform proposals until they were taken up "seriously and affectionately." The good man Help did not hurry to the rescue, and for twenty years (1810-30) the unhappy earl took his public duties all too lightly, while the Whig party decayed before his very eyes. But Help, although slow in coming, did not forsake the pilgrim, and announced his arrival in a series of accidents—a king's death, a minister's stubbornness, two Continental revolutions, the one in France, the other in Belgium, and finally a general election. Very suddenly Grey found that his feet stood on firm ground, and that the Whigs had recovered their spirit in spite of their despondent leader. The rest of the story any schoolboy knows—the Schedule "A", peer-making, and the mad days of May—for it is told in every history book of the period, and referred to regularly from pulpits and platforms the world over. Grey's mission can best be told in the words of Vergil which he himself used often to quote:

*Non adeo has manus Victoria fugit
Ut quidquam tanta pro spe tentare recusem.*

Cabinet making on this occasion was a difficult business. There was first of all a problem in political mathematics which, but for Grey, might still have been unanswered:—if there are forty seats in a ministry, of which thirteen are Cabinet posts, how may they be divided amongst three hundred members of parliament who sit in three groups so that everyone may be kept in good humour? The Canningites were such a large factor in the Whig success that they laid claim to favours out of all proportion to their number. The Whigs themselves were rather greedy for the offices they had so long been denied. By the very nature of things the Radicals must be given a considerable voice to keep the country quiet. Grey measured his angles nicely. Melbourne went to the Home Office, and his frank good-humour quite charmed the Whigs. It was not so easy to satisfy Goderich, whom everybody laughed at, but he finally became Colonial Secretary. Palmerston was another misfit, who by good luck was fitted into the Foreign Office. And so on. It was easier to settle the Radicals, for they were at the moment led by two runaway Whigs, Brougham and Durham. The former had spent the early months of that year promoting the "Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge", and by this

means endeared himself to the rustics who accepted him as their patron, though they could hardly appreciate *Animal Physiology* or the *Life of Galileo*. Durham's reputation was built more securely on correspondence with the Radicals out of parliament, and this he carried on through his agent, Colonel Leslie Grove Jones. However, if it was easy to choose the representatives of this group in the Cabinet, it was difficult to fit them in, as we shall presently see.

The laws of political psychology did not apply to Brougham or Durham, for their tempers were a contradiction of every rule of the science. When they appear in the diaries of the day, it is as Old Wickedshifts or Beelzebub, Radical Jack or King Jog. It was not that they were politically dishonest so much as they were ambitiously changeable. For a time it looked as if Brougham would not enter the Cabinet at all, and the news of his becoming Lord Chancellor set the wisecracks of Brooks's and the Reform Club all agog. It was Grey's business now to keep him there until the Reform Bill was drafted and passed, for his influence counted much in the country. Durham was easier, because he was a member of the Reform Committee, and on that account was kept busy persuading Russell to accept the vote by ballot. The difficulties of fitting two such erratic tempers into the Cabinet and of keeping them content were admirably met by Grey who could bully or cajole, persuade or demand, show good temper or bad as occasion demanded. In four days he had a ministry which with one exception remained with him until the Reform Bill received the royal assent. The problems of mathematics and psychology, which appeared so embarrassing at the first glance, were solved in masterly fashion by a wizard whose only magic was that he understood his fellow men.

To many it appeared that Britain was heading toward revolution and republic. The agitators, who were ready to take full advantage of any opportunity, were so encouraged at the results of the general election that they all became self-appointed advisers of the new Prime Minister. They poured out their advice from the platforms of the political unions or through the Radical section of the press, which now felt itself free of Tory persecution. When the duke, shortly after the election, cancelled one of the king's public engagements, it prompted one of the wags to scribble:

Charles the Tenth is at Holie-Rode,
 Louis Philippe will soon be going;
 Ferdinand wise and Miguel good
 Mourne o'er the deeds that their people are doing;
 And ye Kynge of Great Britain, whome Godde defende,
 Dare not go out to dine with a friend.

Nor did this unrest subside when Grey came into office. It only took another form. The critics merely changed their coats and became confidential advisers. It was not enough for a Prime Minister to keep peace within his Cabinet or to hear politely the claims of the multitude of office-seekers who, like Creevey, hoped to augment their slender income of "£200 a year or less"; he must also be very careful that the agitators in the country did not go too far. It was here that William played his part. He was not a very gallant figure as he waddled about the public functions half-blind and stupid; but when he strolled along the Strand unattended, or was bluff and familiar with the London mob, the people took him for a democrat. They had not often been on speaking terms with their king, perhaps that was just as well, and they enjoyed the thrill of this unexpected *bonhomie*. So while Grey soothed the troubled waters of Cabinet policy, William kept the voice of revolution quiet in the country.

IV.

The coming of the Whigs did more than bring the vote to the £10 copyholders. Before very long most of the Continental Governments were feeling the influence of a Liberal Government in Great Britain. Even during the last year or two in opposition, the Whigs had been able to force on the ministry a liberal policy toward the Greek revolutionaries, whose warfare attracted such Englishmen as Byron and Jeremy Bentham. Now the policy struck with the full force. Durham carried the doctrines of the Reform Bill to Belgium, while Grey warned Prussia and Russia that they must keep their hands off the new kingdom or risk the consequences. In the Iberian peninsula, where Liberals and reactionaries were constantly disturbing both Spain and Portugal, the Whigs stood beside France in support of the Liberals. Within the Empire the effects appeared more slowly, but they came nevertheless in the course of a decade or so. Durham journeyed to Canada, where he found much that astonished him, and his report is full of the same liberal spirit he displayed in Old World politics. Having beaten off the petitions of the pocket-borough owners in 1831, he grew very impatient with Haliburton and Beverley Robinson when they tried to defend their family compacts. The tide turned, and the Tories were on the wrong side of it. They stood like Mrs. Partington with her mop, in that humorous passage of Sydney Smith: "The Atlantic was roused. Mrs. Partington's spirit was up. But I need not tell you that the conquest was unequal. The Atlantic Ocean beat Mrs. Partington. She was excellent at a sloop or puddle, but she should not have meddled with a tempest."