

***Literature, Journalism and the Vocabularies of Liberalism: Politics and Letters, 1886-1916.***

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In recent years nineteenth-century liberalism has undergone a significant reappraisal. Once seen as an outdated creed, rooted in temperance and self-help, and with its heartlands in the remote nations of the Celtic fringe, its posthumous reputation has suffered badly at the hands of the socialists, Fabians, labourites, trade unionists and sundry progressives who followed in its wake, but rejected the free trade philosophies and Millite notions of individualism that characterised “Gladstonianism” at its height. For its critics, its incoherence was exemplified by the range of competing ideas and personalities that took root within the party, from representatives of the great eighteenth-century Whig dynasties to former Chartists, Irish Home Rulers, co-operators and a new generation of working-class radicals active in the franchise reform movements that led to the passage of the reform acts of 1867 and 1884. For many contemporaries the centre could not hold, and liberalism’s demise was inevitable. Ten years before the Liberal Party’s landslide victory of 1906, Keir Hardie, the leader of the Independent Labour Party, wrote of “absurd liberalism”; and branded the party “a bundle of contradictory tendencies” incapable of functioning as a coherent political force in the modern age. Others stressed its confusions both as a consistent philosophy and as a political platform.

Recent reassessments have sought to reclaim liberalism as a set of ideas and the nineteenth-century Liberal Party itself as a political force. Rather than occupying a position as an accumulation of pressure groups, locked in an uneasy alliance, liberalism has now been restored to the centre of nineteenth-century political life as an important force in local government, as a corrective to the jingoistic and imperialist excesses of Conservatism, as a vehicle for local and regional identities and as a unifying agent that inherited the mantle of early nineteenth-century plebeian reform movements and brought together different generations of radicals under the banner of a united moral crusade. As a number of historians have pointed out, the Liberal Party was made up of “networks,” whether of the aristocratic connections of the Cavendish and Spencer families, or groups of Nonconformist education and municipal reform organisations in regional centres, or even the working-man’s clubs that provided the bedrock of political liberalism in its constituency associations. Missing from these accounts has been a broader appreciation of the place of liberal ideas in the literary and journalistic cultures of later nineteenth-century Britain and an understanding of the methods whereby liberal ideas were expressed in the new lively print media of the middle years of the nineteenth-century.

It is timely, therefore, for Jock Macleod to identify a further network integral to the successes of nineteenth-century liberalism in the form of the journalistic clique that surrounded the new liberalism and found its mouthpieces in progressive organs like *The Star* *The Nation* and later wide-circulation newspapers like *The Daily News* and *The Daily Chronicle*. This is the first such study of the important group of “opinion formers” that clustered around the journalist Henry Massingham. As Macleod points out, the Massingham group comprised a concentric circle of individuals and organisations permeating not only the world of progressive journalism, but also establishing itself in publishing houses, philanthropic associations like Toynbee Hall,

and reaching into professional bodies including the Historical Association. With a broad constituency of intellectual support that allowed it to intersect with the Rainbow circle and the Fabian society, the Massingham network may be seen as a key component in liberalism's ability to communicate the messages of liberal ideas to a receptive audience in the metropolis. In their contributions Massingham and his colleagues explored the full range of late nineteenth-century reform programmes from women's suffrage, prison reform, social welfare, and into anti-slavery and imperialism. Moreover, the vigour and confidence of the group sheds new light on the accumulation of ideas that led to the foundation of the "New Liberalism" of the 1890s. Here Macleod's book provides an important corrective to those studies that have stressed the regional aspects and elements of nineteenth-century liberalism. As Macleod emphasises, despite the perception of London as an increasingly Tory-dominated city by the end of the nineteenth-century, liberal and radical journalists were still able to command a progressive audience and use their platform to shape new agendas for municipal reform and progressive legislative change. London, therefore, was the heartland of British literary liberalism. One strength of this book is the degree to which the Massingham circle is located in the ferment of ideas that led to Charles Booth's survey of poverty, the foundation of the Salvation Army Home colonies, and the broader agendas around metropolitan poverty and "outcast London". Macleod is at his strongest in his integration of the Massingham group into contemporary literary styles and associations. Constituting, not a throw-back to a traditional conventions of Nonconformist crusading zeal, but rather an element of the new literary culture of the early twentieth century, Macleod reclaims advanced liberalism as a mid-way point between traditional liberalism, and the confusions and contradictions of modernism.

As a study of a moment in cultural history at the *fin de siècle*, Macleod's book is unlikely to be bettered. Taking an interdisciplinary approach, it ranges across both literary and historical sources in novel and arresting ways that convey a strong sense of the dynamism of the "new journalism" of the period. Published in the "Palgrave Studies in Nineteenth-Century Writing and Culture" series this book demonstrates the tremendous potential still open to scholars willing to work on the disciplinary margins. In addition, the emphasis on journalistic networks opens up a hitherto neglected element in the later history of British liberalism conventionally seen as declining during this period. As a study in popular liberalism, this excellent book opens up new avenues for research into the neglected field of literary liberalism that should encourage further work in this area.

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