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Disappointing Democracy

The 1918 Representation of the People Act tripled the electorate to just over twenty-one million but was, nonetheless, a cautious document, one befitting Britain's protracted and uneven democratization. Women would have to wait until the 1929 general election before they could vote on the same basis as men, while plural voting was not abolished until 1949. Moreover, although MPs flirted with proportional representation, the Act confirmed Britain's adherence to the first-past-the-post system as the way to elect members of the House of Commons.¹ As a result, if 1918 saw all working-class men and most women enter the game of politics, the nature of the contest had changed less than some hoped and others feared. The centrality of Parliament, described in one 1917 primer as 'the most ancient and authoritative legislature in this or any other known age', remained.² Representative politics also continued to be dominated by men: only thirty-eight women were elected to the Commons between 1918 and 1939.

While the structure of politics remained familiar, in the two decades following the First World War Britain experienced a unique series of upheavals. During the 1920s Labour replaced the Liberals as the party of opposition, while the country endured four general elections in quick succession as first-past-the-post struggled to accommodate three parties with similar levels of support. In 1926 the General Strike, according to some, even threatened the legitimacy of Parliament.³ The international slump that followed the 1929 Wall Street Crash also threw politics further asunder and in 1931 the minority Labour government, unable to deal with the consequences of mass unemployment, resigned. It was replaced by a Conservative-dominated National coalition led by former Labour Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald, whose 'betrayal' his old party would never forgive.⁴ As a result, politics was in almost as much flux as the world economy, with politicians apparently helpless to master events. Indeed, at the apex of the 1931 crisis MacDonald told his new Cabinet colleagues that 'the ordinary person ... has no great faith in political leaders of any kind'.⁵

The National government restored financiers' confidence in ministers' ability to balance the books, but unemployment reached three million in 1932 and remained at over two million for all but one of the remaining years of peace.⁶ Despite fears, this did not lead to a huge surge in support for fascism or communism: the National coalition easily won the 1931 and 1935 general elections. The domestic challenge to democracy was nonetheless still on an unprecedented scale, while internationally the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany threatened Britain and its Empire. As a result, by the end of the decade some predicted that representative democracy was on the way out.⁷ Others, however, continued to fervently believe in a politics that revolved around Westminster, including the Conservative schoolmistress who in 1935 looked upon Stanley Baldwin, by then Prime Minister, as 'our earthly "Rock of Ages"'.⁸ Perhaps with less passion, no less than seventy per cent of qualified voters participated in general elections held during 1922–35 while in 1939 the three main parties claimed to have two million members.⁹

Yet, as Hitler prepared to invade Poland, during the summer of 1939 it was hard not to see the interwar period as defined by political frustration. Liberals bemoaned the demise of their party; Labour adherents had little positive to show for MacDonald's two brief periods in power; while even the electorally successful Conservatives were disturbed by their inability to restore the country to its pre-1914 state. As Baldwin claimed in 1934, Britain's

political advance has gone ahead of our cultural ... [T]here are a vast number of people who were enfranchised after the War who cannot yet have had the opportunity of so studying the extremely difficult and complicated questions we have to face to-day with the certainty that they can detect fallacies.¹⁰

In the same year, the former Liberal MP E. D. Simon established the Association for Education in Citizenship in the hope of 'saving [democracy] in the future by better education if', he added ominously, 'it can survive the next five or ten years'.¹¹ While many members of Britain's political class were disappointed in the electorate, a considerable number of new voters were in turn disillusioned with them. The social research organization Mass-Observation argued that a large number looked on representative politics as 'just another of the forces which exploit them and of which they know little or nothing'.¹² If, by the interwar years, most of the formalities of democracy were present, it seems that not everybody felt their voices were being taken seriously.

Certainly, Trollope's belief in the possibilities of parliamentary politics was shared by an ever-diminishing number of novelists. Stephen McKenna, whose

Sonia (1917) claimed Parliament had been subverted by the press, wrote in 1921: 'It is not through the House of Commons that England will be made a home fit for heroes.' This Liberal, distressed at his party's collapse, believed that 'politics are losing their soul; and material self-interest is being made the touchstone of government'.¹³ Others also considered Parliament no longer performed a useful function. When Howard Spring penned *Fame is the Spur* (1940) – a novelized critique of the career of the 'traitor' MacDonald – he considered the National government had left Britons like 'sheep without a shepherd'.¹⁴ Spring's was a study of leadership gone wrong and formed part of a wider literature of disappointment produced by writers on the left and centre-left. Even ostensibly apolitical novelists such as Agatha Christie, who appealed to fans of the massively popular detective genre, mostly expressed their irritation with democracy.

Compared to the novel, the theatre had always been subject to some kind of political censorship. In 1935 the Lord Chamberlain even prevented chorus girls in a West End revue singing a number which claimed newspaper headlines 'make fools think they've found fame' while wearing facemasks of leading politicians.¹⁵ Yet, as a largely middle-class distraction, censors were rarely exercised about what was said on the stage about politics. That was, however, not the case with the increasingly influential cinema, which appealed to those who benefitted most from enfranchisement after 1918: the working class, women and the young.¹⁶ For this reason the country's newest and by 1939 most popular dramatic form was subject to stringent controls, which meant that if politicians were depicted on the big screen they were mostly presented in heroic and historical terms, as 'statesmen' able to transcend the silly people's own fallibilities.

Parliament: Irrelevant and wrong

Those who hoped a Parliament elected by all the people would promote radical reform were frustrated by its reality and some expressed their disappointment through novels. Trollope would have recognized many of the reasons for what such left-inclined figures saw as the failure of parliamentary politics to address the compelling issues of the day. Yet, while many novels pointed to leaders' character flaws as well as the debilitating role of partisanship, they also highlighted other factors, like Commons procedure, bureaucracy and, most disturbingly, Britain's economic decline.

Ellen Wilkinson advanced the latter explanation in her detective novel *The Division Bell Mystery* (1932).¹⁷ A left-wing MP defeated in Labour's 1931 rout,

Wilkinson had already written one novel and was a well-established media figure. After the collapse of MacDonald's government – one many Labour members blamed on New York bankers – in public Wilkinson praised Parliament for 'its opportunity for public service, and its instrumentality for the installing of a lasting democracy'.¹⁸ Her novel, however, struck a contrasting note. It has a venerable Conservative MP declare of ministers' need to secure a loan from an American banker: 'Imagine what Palmerston or Disraeli would have said at the idea of Britain going cap in hand to such a creature for money ... ?' Robert West, his young colleague, is also concerned. As Wilkinson writes of him:

He looked up for comfort to Big Ben, standing a gigantic Guardsman against a clear blue sky. The clock-face looked so benevolently familiar that West tried to shake off the thought that so often came into his mind in these days – this was all a façade, that the reality of Parliament was something quite different, that the real seat of Government had gone elsewhere, to Lombard Street or perhaps even across the Atlantic Ocean.

West's feelings intensify when a demonstration of the unemployed delays his entry into the Commons.

The House with its lighted windows seemed the quiet centre of the whirlpool that was London. A harassed Cabinet Minister negotiated with an American financier inside, and outside the raw material of their transactions, the people who elected the Minister and would have to pay interest on the loan, surged and demonstrated. They wanted bread. It wasn't like England ... The division bell rang for the last vote of the day. West ran up the stairs to vote. He hadn't the least idea what about. But that is the comfort of the House of Commons. It gives everybody such a comforting feeling that 'something has been done about it'. But what, and how, and why even the men who were doing the 'something' had very little idea beyond the immediate details of the day.

Even before the 1931 crisis, John Galsworthy's additions to his *Forsyte Saga*, *The Silver Spoon* (1926) and *Swan Song* (1928), suggested Parliament's irrelevance.¹⁹ Like his contemporary H. G. Wells, Galsworthy believed the parties' pursuit of votes meant politicians were unwilling to do what was necessary. He used Michael Mont, an idealistic Conservative MP who selflessly wants to improve society, to expound his own remedies for Britain's ills.²⁰ Mont embraces 'Foggartism', a creed which if applied would mean that the people would 'endure a worse Present for the sake of a better Future'. Despite recognizing its merits, all the parties reject 'Foggartism', fearing the consequences of advancing unpopular policies that would hit voters' pockets. In disgust, Mont describes Parliament as

‘the best drag on Progress ever invented’. Noting the Commons’ impotence in the face of the great events of the day, Mont, like Wilkinson’s elderly MP, looks backwards:

What things had been done here! The abolitions of Slavery, and of Child Labour, the Married Woman’s Property Act, Repeal of the Corn Laws; but could they be done nowadays? And if not – was it a life?

Gripped by a sense of futility, Mont abandons Parliament to establish a pressure group intent on improving working-class housing.

If party undermined the effectiveness of Parliament, others believed the much-venerated Commons procedure was itself at fault. The protagonist in Labour MP James Welsh’s novel *Norman Dale MP* (1928) was exasperated to discover that as soon as the post-election preliminaries were concluded, and despite the country’s pressing problems, MPs immediately adjourned for a prolonged break. Like Welsh, the progressive author A. J. Cronin’s *The Stars Look Down* (1935) told the story of a young collier MP, Davey Fenwick, one also frustrated with the ‘inertia of parliamentary routine’. While Davey is taught to ‘cultivate patience’ by a more experienced Member, Cronin shows that patience is not its own reward. The miners are betrayed when the 1929 Labour government’s Mines Bill excludes nationalization, despite the leadership’s promises. Cronin makes sure readers appreciate that Davey’s contempt for the MacDonaldite argument justifying this omission – ‘We’ve got to be careful. We’ve got to be constitutional’ – is a righteous one, for it is only advanced by Labour MPs corrupted by public life.²¹

In speaking against the Bill, Davey highlighted the disconnection between Westminster ceremonial and the nation’s real concerns. ‘Recently, at the opening of this parliament,’ he tells the House,

we had again the opportunity of witnessing all the splendour, pomp and pageantry which, my hon. Friends will assure me, bespeaks the greatness of this nation. Did any of my hon. Friends contrast it, for one second, with the beggary, poverty, misery and penury which exists within the greatness of this nation?

The speech’s impact is, however, fatally undermined when a Conservative backbencher imitates a dog, leading MPs to roar with laughter.²² While Davey’s attack on ‘gradualism’ is a specific comment on MacDonald’s shortcomings, Cronin sets his criticisms within a wider framework. ‘Gradualism’ is but one symptom of an intractable and a wider problem: parliamentary politics.

Similarly, towards the end of his life Hamer Shawcross – Spring’s MacDonald

surrogate in *Fame is the Spur* – is possessed of a rare honesty about his motives.²³ Despite being born in the Manchester backstreets, Shawcross reached the Cabinet and the Lords, but his rise did nothing to help his poor supporters. A successful politician, he claims, means ‘appearing to have nothing but his country’s interest at heart, [so] he must be an expert at appealing to panic, passion and prejudice. When these do not exist, he must know how to create them at the right moment’, as it was, ‘our business to throw the patient into a panic, to persuade him that he’s going to die unless he takes our medicine’. Spring even has Shawcross speculate:

whether statesmen might not be the true pests and cancers of human society. They had controlled the affairs of the world for centuries, and the affairs of the world seemed to him now beyond any control at all. He could not think of any matter of statecraft that was not conducted with more complications, less honour and simplicity, than would go to such a matter between a few private human beings.

This lack of faith in public authority’s ability to address pressing problems was most completely expressed in Cronin’s *The Citadel* (1937).²⁴ Needing to eradicate the source of an outbreak of typhoid by replacing a foul sewer, Dr. Andrew Manson has to blow up the offending drain to force the otherwise inert local council to build a new one. So he can pursue research into the causes of silicosis, Manson then works in Whitehall’s Coal and Metalliferous Mines Fatigue Board (MFB). However, the inefficiencies and indolence of a bureaucracy subject to the whims of its political masters prevents Manson from conducting his vital work. Instead, at the pedantic behest of Dr. Bigsby of the Board of Trade, Manson investigates the correct size of bandages. Leaving in disgust, he acquires a private general practice in a poor district of the capital, where paying patients prove hard to come by. Reflecting on his experiences, Manson declaims: ‘There ought to be a better scheme. A chance for everybody – say, oh, say State control!’ Appearing to embrace the essence of what would become the National Health Service, Manson, then, ‘groaned, remembering Doctor Bigsby and the MFB. No, damn it, that’s hopeless – bureaucracy chokes individual effort – it would suffocate me.’

If structural reasons underpinned some novelists’ despair, individual moral failings also played their part. Described as a ‘kindly social satire’, Winnie-the-Pooh author A. A. Milne’s 1923 play *Success* underlined the extent to which party competition harmed the national interest.²⁵ The sole object of Conservative Cabinet Minister R. Selby Mannock is to best Labour, while he is so preoccupied with his career he pushes his daughter into a politically useful

but romantically dubious marriage. But Mannoek was once an idealist and on being reunited with his childhood sweetheart confesses:

I've been looking back at my career. After all, he's in a position of trust, a Cabinet Minister. He is responsible for all the happiness of the people, his fellow countrymen and women. How often have I thought of their happiness? How often of my personal triumph – my success? What are our intrigues for, our strategy, our tactics? To improve the condition of England? Or to improve our personal position? I look back on my career, and never once can I say, 'He did that for others.'

This brief moment of introspection is nevertheless quickly dispelled when the Prime Minister offers Manson promotion.²⁶

Milne was a Liberal, but works depicting Labour's rise also presented Westminster as a moral hazard. In Welsh's *Norman Dale MP* his hero is even warned by a sympathetic veteran member of the Commons:

you'll get more men on the make here than you'll get anywhere else on earth. You'll find, too, that the more they are on the make, the more violently they proclaim their altruism ... You'll get more cynical hypocrites in here to the square yard than anywhere in the world; they're no' a' in the Tory and Liberal parties either.²⁷

Welsh anticipated the warning Cronin has Davey Fenwick receive from another old hand in *The Stars Look Down*:

There's nothing like public life for searching out a man's private weaknesses. Personal ambition and social ambition and damned selfishness and self-interest, that's the curse of it.²⁸

The pathetic people

Such left-inclined authors also expressed distress at voters' indifference to the kind of reforms they favoured; indeed, many traced the inadequacies of parliamentary democracy back to the people themselves. Galsworthy's Mont asserts: 'we politicians don't think ahead, simply because we know it's no earthly. Every elector thinks his own immediate good is the good of the country.'²⁹ If Wells had outlined a similar case in *The New Machiavelli*, he elaborated it in *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933). Voters, he declared,

that poor invertebrate mass deity ... easily roused to panic and frantic action against novel, bold or radical measures, very amenable to patriotic claptrap, very easily scared and maddened into war, and just as easily baffled to distrust

and impotence by delays, side issues, and attacks on the personalities of decisive people he might otherwise have trusted

were politically incapable. Anticipating Spring's critique of 'statesmen', Wells declared that only politicians able to rouse 'the apathetic majority of submissive mankind' provided what passed for leadership. Such figures, he claimed, were, however, imprisoned by having to appeal to the majority. This meant that progress, as Wells saw it, was impossible until government had passed into the hands of scientists free to follow their own reason.³⁰ Wells looked on parliamentary democracy as a primitive stage in humankind's development. Like the playwright George Bernard Shaw, the reforms Wells believed were necessary could not be delivered by pitiable devices such as people casting their votes for party representatives charged with debating policy in the Commons.³¹

Conservatives were in contrast thankful that so many supported the *status quo*. Warwick Deeping's *Sorrell and Son* (1925) told the story of a man of breeding fallen on hard times and therefore forced into contact with 'the poor, envious industrial crowd'. Yet while Deeping believed many workers wanted to sweep away civilization, he was confident they lacked the necessary skills. Moreover, his novel highlighted more amenable proletarians who help Sorrell rise back up the ladder, notably the aptly named Albert Hulks, a physically intimidating but deferential porter. 'He hadn't much head, and he said so', Sorrell writes, but Hulks possesses 'the vigour of a steam engine' with which he undertakes Sorrell's manual work, declaring: 'O, yes – I've got a back, but he's got a head, some head.'³²

Some have contrasted Deeping's hostility to the working class with the apparently more benign attitudes evident in Cronin's *The Citadel*.³³ Yet Cronin shared Deeping's low assessment of proletarian capacities. His hero, the idealistic Manson, is for a time employed by a medical aid society financed and run by Welsh miners. When he exposes pitmen for feigning illness so they can draw compensation, however, most of Manson's patients take their business elsewhere in protest. The miners are also depicted as fearing science and a mob destroys Manson's laboratory, even though he is trying to find a cure for silicosis. Cronin's *The Stars Look Down* had already shown miners' susceptibility to irrationality when they go looting during a strike. That earlier novel also had them reject the noble Davey in the 1931 election in favour of the false promises, slurs and free beer of his unscrupulous Conservative rival. As Manson concludes when leaving South Wales:

It was a wonderful ideal, this group of working men controlling the medical services of the community for the benefit of their fellow workers. But it was an

ideal. They were too biased, too unintelligent ever to administer such a scheme progressively.³⁴

If critical of the *status quo*, Cronin was no socialist, but even fictions written from that perspective betrayed the sense that the proletariat left to its own devices was helpless. Indeed, pessimism about popular potential was a common theme among works categorized as 'proletarian revolutionary literature'.³⁵ Thus during the early 1920s, when talk of a workers' insurrection was at its height, J. D. Beresford's *Revolution: A Novel* (1921), one of the few fictions to depict such a revolt sympathetically, still has the uprising fail. This view was also evident among moderate reformists in the Labour party. Mary Agnes Hamilton would be elected Labour MP for Blackburn in 1929; in *Follow My Leader* (1922) she has her young upper-middle-class heroine attend a workers' meeting for the first time. Confronted by proletarians in the mass, she feels there is 'something at once fascinating and horrible' about the crowd, 'frightening' even, looking upon the people there 'as an undifferentiated mass, cruel and ugly beyond anything she had ever seen.' While feeling sorry for 'their dreary helplessness', the working class remains in her eyes 'dumb, ugly, unappealing to the sense, patiently and helplessly unhappy'.³⁶ Similarly, Walter Greenwood, a Labour councillor by the time *Love on the Dole* was published in 1933, has workers in his Hanky Park district of Salford be so susceptible to capitalist propaganda that the activist Larry Meath declares: 'it's driving me barmy to have to live among such idiotic folk. There's no limit to their daftness: won't think for themselves, won't do anything to help themselves'.³⁷ In *The Professor* (1938) the Communist-inclined Rex Warner also emphasized the fickleness of 'the mob' while his only leading working-class character is a 'stupid but amiable' trade union Cabinet member who, like Deeping's Hulks, is strong of body but weak of mind.³⁸

Wanted: Leaders

Some reformers remained optimistic that the people would eventually support their diverse causes. Liberal intellectual Ramsay Muir and the left-wing Labour figure G. R. Mitchison even wrote future histories to convince readers of the practicability of their respective projects. Significantly, however, in both cases the achievement of their aims only occurred *after* the people had been properly 'educated'.³⁹

Other left-inclined writers emphasized the importance of leaders able to

inspire in the right way. Sandy Colquoun in Hamilton's *Follow My Leader* skilfully arouses the people's better nature at a mass meeting:

To this great concourse of people, he had a freedom of communication that enabled him to unlock the secret places of his soul and enter into the secret places of their souls ... For what was it, in the last analysis, but a belief in the divine thing in the heart and soul of every one of those who heard him, their faces lifted up to his? That was the root of the whole matter. It was in them; he could bring it out. He believed, not in himself, but in them; in himself only as expressing that thing in them which they could know and hold on to, believe and therefore realize, when some one showed them it was there: not in any one for himself, but, for each, in every one of the others.⁴⁰

The robust Colquoun (possibly modeled on an idealized, pre-'betrayal' MacDonald) was, however, an exceptional figure. While such writers often gave life to characters wanting to disinterestedly represent the people's interests, they were usually frail and mostly failed to evoke a response. Colquoun was more typical – given the general pessimism about proletarian capacities – in that 'despite his overalls [he] did not look like a workman', possessed as he was of an 'intellectual' head.⁴¹ The future miners' MP Norman Dale is also 'different from the other laddies, up with a passion for books and education, instead of going out to dances or "walking out with a girl"'.⁴² Larry Meath is similarly 'a cut above' his fellow workmen, possessing a 'quality of studiousness [which] elevated him to a plane beyond that of ordinary folk; he seemed out of place'.⁴³ Meath is, though, brought down by the conditions he so passionately criticized. Joe Astell, the lone socialist on South Riding Council in Winifred Holtby's *South Riding* (1936), is also a 'doomed man' living in the shadow of pneumonia and tuberculosis, the consequence of a lifetime working for a New Jerusalem.⁴⁴ The novel ends with Astell, having been duped by a corrupt cabal on the council, leaving for industrial Scotland, where he will redouble his work for socialism despite the certain knowledge that death will quickly follow as a result.

While the idealistic Davey in *The Stars Look Down* is healthy, he is defeated at the polls and returns to mining, while those corrupted by ambition and greed follow MacDonald into the National government.⁴⁵ This lesson, that good leaders fail while the bad prosper, was writ large in *Fame is the Spur*. Hamer Shawcross always wanted to be 'someone' and to that end uses his impressive physique and 'mountebank tricks' to move audiences. His rise leaves in its wake a childhood friend from the Manchester slums, the 'painstaking and uninspired' Arnold Ryerson. Unlike the glamorous Shawcross with his aristocratic bearing,

Spring describes Ryerson as actually looking like an artisan. He is also a boring speaker, but possesses a 'native integrity' and an 'utter honesty and a straightness of purpose', qualities that naturally prevent his political advance.⁴⁶

Ellen Wilkinson's first novel, *Clash* (1929), was one of the few to highlight ordinary people's untutored abilities. As one of her characters claims, the efficient running of local committees during the General Strike 'just shows what a lot of organizing ability is running to waste among the workers in this one-eyed country, where a man is called a "hand" and not allowed to think.'⁴⁷ That Wilkinson was a woman might just have been coincidental, but her optimism in what could be done beyond conventional politics is something few of her male counterparts shared.

Women: Still the saviours of democracy

Despite their enfranchisement, most novelists continued to present women as playing no part whatsoever within politics. In the year the Representation of the People Act extended the franchise to all women over the age of twenty-one, however, Hilaire Belloc created fiction's first female Prime Minister. *But Soft: We Are Observed* (1928) was a comedy set in 1979 – coincidentally the year Britain finally sent a woman to Number 10 – a time when Belloc claimed most men had given up on what he described as the 'dying system' of politics. More typically, in *The Stars Look Down* Cronin presented Davey's wife and mother as respectively misunderstanding and opposing his desire for a political career. Similarly, Dorothy, heroine of George Orwell's *The Clergyman's Daughter* (1935), is so preoccupied with her daily round that parliamentary contests make little impact: she hardly knows the difference between a communist and Conservative. The heroine in Hamilton's *Follow My Leader* is more significant politically, but the story nonetheless revolves around whether she will remain under the thumb of a forceful Conservative father or follow the dynamic socialist Colquoun.

If not presented as antipathetic to politics, or as the prize between two contending men, women retained their traditional role of 'moral police'. Most notably, in *Fame is the Spur*, Ann, wife of Hamer Shawcross, becomes a suffragette, is incarcerated for her beliefs and dies due to the authorities' rough treatment. She is, as Spring notes, one of many:

Up and down the country the women were roused, hundreds of thousands of them, gentlewomen and harridans, peeresses, sempstresses, laundry girls,

professional women: it was a great unifying wave of feeling, productive of a willingness to suffer which no uprising of men had seen in the long course of English history. There was no party allegiance about it. In all the parties the women were deserters ... Senseless, heroic, unheeding of consequences, the movement rolled on, sullied by violence, by arson, by every kind of destruction, advertised by anguish, by suicide, but redeemed by the quality which is rare and precious: the willingness to hand over, for a faith, body and soul to the torturer.

Had Shawcross supported votes for women, Spring continues, it

would have been the one cause of the many he advocated to which, in his old age, he might have looked back and said: That, at all events came off. Though so much else was wind and water, that endured, that came through.⁴⁸

If Ann Shawcross is politically active, she is just one of a number of principled second rank characters in Spring's novel. It was unusual for women to hold centre stage as politicians in their own right, even in stories written by women. When Wilkinson wrote the detective novel *The Division Bell Mystery* (1932) she chose as her protagonist a male MP, although one of his helpers was a fiery female Member, one modelled closely on the author and who embodied some of the dilemmas faced by women in politics, being 'very young and lovable, but determined to live up to her chosen role as a grim and sexless legislator'.⁴⁹ Written in the same genre and in the same year, the leading female figure in Mary Agnes Hamilton's *Murder in the House of Commons* is the 'Lady from Lima', the glamorous blackmailing prostitute whose death at the hands of an MP is covered up by colleagues to save their party embarrassment. In Wilkinson's *Clash* the protagonist is female, although much of the novel is preoccupied with whether she will marry a man who regards her career as inferior to homemaking. More exceptionally, the key figure in Harold Nicolson's *Public Faces* (1932) is a junior Foreign Office minister who, in striking contrast to the men depicted, is efficient and upright. It is moreover her extraordinary willingness to sacrifice her career by telling the truth that prevents a disaster.

Vera Brittain's *Honourable Estate* (1936) was the most complete depiction of how women might improve a flawed, man-made politics, the focus of her novel being the struggle of two generations of women to achieve the vote.⁵⁰ Echoing the optimism of Edwardian suffragettes about the impact women will make on politics, Brittain's account is – for a writer on the left in the context in which it was written – amazingly sanguine, emphasizing as it does the possibilities of politics rather than its shortcomings. As Brittain has her heroine Ruth Harding predict, 'if only women could do something to shape the course of politics', the world

would be a better place. On that theme she addresses a meeting of working-class women, telling them that their newly acquired vote was ‘the greatest of political weapons’. Unlike the rejection experienced by Larry Meath and countless other male activists, Ruth evokes a positive response from her audience. Brittain’s novel consequently ends on an extraordinarily upbeat note, with Ruth a Labour MP and her government about to pass the Widows’ Pensions Bill.

Comedies and detectives

Works written in supposedly apolitical genres generally presented politics as inherently ridiculous and politicians as pompous, bullying bores. The narrative in Angela Thirkell’s *August Folly* (1936), a comedy of upper-middle-class manners, for example, is punctuated with references to the Root Vegetables Bill, something of interest only to her most obnoxious characters. If it is unsurprising that politicians in P. G. Wodehouse novels were ridiculed – all his characters were – they were presented in a highly stereotyped way. In *Jeeves and the Impending Doom*, published in the same year as the General Strike, appears the Right Hon. A. B. Filmer, Cabinet minister and – indicating he is a killjoy – president of the Anti-Tobacco League. Described by Bertie Wooster’s aunt as ‘a serious-minded man of high character and purpose’, Filmer is in reality ‘a tubby little chap’ who talks of topics Wooster finds incomprehensible, leading him to conclude, rightly, that he is ‘a superfatted bore’.⁵¹ Roderick Spode, a recurring character in Wodehouse stories, was established as a bully well before *The Code of the Woosters* (1938), in which he has become leader of the Black Shorts, a thinly veiled rendition of Oswald Mosley’s Blackshirts. While this might be seen as Wodehouse finally taking politics seriously and satirizing fascism, it is, however, best regarded as one more instance in which he ridicules any and every politician, without discrimination.

Politics was depicted in a greater variety of ways within detective fiction, the period’s most popular genre, which by the end of the 1930s accounted for one in four of all published novels. Even the politically committed contributed to the genre, including the Oxford socialist theorist G. D. H. Cole, who with his wife Margaret wrote over twenty-five thrillers, although they avoided political subjects. As we have seen, ex-Labour MPs Hamilton and Wilkinson also turned their hands to murder mysteries set in Parliament, during which they commented on the nature of politics. Nicholas Blake (*nom de plume* of poet and communist Cecil Day-Lewis) wrote the most obviously political detective novel

of the period. His *The Smiler with a Knife* (1939) depicted a fascist attempt to overthrow democracy. Wanting to illustrate the power of the Popular Front, a strategy then advocated by Moscow, Day-Lewis has ordinary men and women drawn from across society thwart the plot. His novel ends with a left-wing coalition in power and intent on challenging rather than appeasing Hitler and Mussolini. Eric Ambler was not a communist, but as a self-confessed 'pinko' his late 1930s thrillers – notably *Cause for Alarm* (1938) – were set on a continent in which bankers, industrialists and fascists threatened the lives of his confused English protagonists who are sometimes helped by friendly Soviet agents.⁵²

A series of ten detective tales written during 1927–35 even featured the gentleman detective – and Liberal MP – Scott Egerton. Lucy Beatrice Malleeson, who wrote the stories, had, however, no apparent agenda other than selling novels. A prolific novelist, she worked under numerous pen names, in this case Anthony Gilbert.⁵³ The stories in her series were formulaic: Egerton always intervenes on behalf of someone falsely accused of murder and proves the wronged party's innocence by finding the real villain, often at personal risk. Egerton is heroic, young, clever and physically adept, at one point using jiu jitsu against an armed murderer. He additionally possesses an indomitable will; according to Malleeson, 'No rocks were impossible to him, no deserts utterly pathless.' She also describes him as 'debonair, assured', 'cool, collected, detached', 'flawlessly tailored, exquisitely groomed'; as a friend tells him, 'One of these days, Scotty, they'll put you in the British Museum as a flawless specimen of the upper middle classes.'⁵⁴

If Egerton followed the model of the amateur upper-class detective, best exemplified by Dorothy L. Sayers' Lord Peter Wimsey, his political background makes him unusual. Moreover, while Egerton's career rarely intrudes into Malleeson's plots, by making him so sympathetic she sketches out what qualities an ideal politician should possess. Thus, Egerton is a bi-partisan figure, initially a reforming Conservative but by the end of *The Tragedy at Freyne*, his first outing, a Liberal. Scrupulously conscientious – Egerton's parliamentary work sometimes involves him rising at 4 a.m. – his political views remain vague, although when articulated they would have been endorsed by most Conservative and Liberal readers. For example, Egerton backs a scheme to help struggling farmers, 'not by Government subsidy which is infernally dangerous, but by the goodwill of other industries.'⁵⁵ Yet, however important is his Commons career, Egerton consistently prioritizes his relationship with wife Rosemary, the pursuit of whom at one time put his political future in jeopardy: private happiness is much more important to him than public success.

While she has an MP as her hero, Malleon nonetheless makes it clear that the exemplary Egerton did not typify Britain's political class. Indeed, he is introduced by one character as 'a member of the least democratic body on this earth, the British House of Commons'.⁵⁶ On the rare occasions she places Egerton in the Chamber, Malleon highlights his exceptionalism, describing him sitting through an 'interminable discussion' in which 'One member after another rose and drifted into an incredibly dull monologue'.⁵⁷ Finally, indicating her commercial motives, when Malleon created Arthur G. Crook – 'a rather unattractive Cockney character' – who proved much more popular, Scott Egerton MP was never heard of again, despite the series being well liked.

Agatha Christie: The politics of the apolitical

Malleon was a prominent exponent of the detective genre, but in terms of sales she was not in the same league as Agatha Christie: nobody was. Christie's phenomenal success was based on her plots, not her politics; indeed, one critic claimed she completely lacked 'political knowledge and intent'.⁵⁸ For a novelist supposed to have no interest in the political world, during the course of thirty-seven novels and short story collections published during 1920–40, Christie tackled it on a surprising number of occasions. Indeed, the 'politician' was one of Christie's army of stock types, depicted in a way that would have been recognized by those who read Wodehouse and other novels produced by supposedly apolitical middlebrow writers. In her work some have also perceived a new kind of conservatism, one that especially resonated with young, suburban and female readers, which mocked tradition while celebrating modernity. According to the literary historian Alison Light this was a conservatism which helped 'shape that idea of a nation of benign crossword puzzlers and home owners, enjoying privacy and moderation and domestic consumption, and indifferent to Politics at large'.⁵⁹ As such, Christie's novels articulated some of the 'conventional wisdoms' which ultimately benefitted the interwar Conservative party ones implacably opposed to the intervention of public authority in private life.⁶⁰

Christie's mysteries are littered with occasional remarks about politics, which indicated her scepticism about a world presented as inefficient, old-fashioned, intrusive, silly and *male*. In one of her first novels, *The Secret Adversary* (1922), the young heroine Tuppence complains that dealing with government always involves filling in lots of forms and suffering delays.⁶¹ It is said in *The Seven Dials Mystery* (1929) that the only qualifications for becoming an MP are deep

pockets and the fortitude to 'stand up on a platform and talk a lot of junk, or kiss dirty babies in Bermondsey'.⁶² This gentle cynicism is confirmed when, in 'Murder in the Mews' (1937), on 5th November Hercule Poirot asks his friend Chief Inspector Japp: 'To blow up the English Parliament, was it a sin or a noble deed?' Japp chuckles and replies: 'Some people would say undoubtedly the latter!'⁶³ To be interested in politics is, moreover, bad form: one reason for disliking Mr. Reilly in *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe* (1940) was that he 'liked arguing about politics'.⁶⁴

When depicting MPs, Christie usually presents them in ways that could only have alienated her many young female readers. In *The Seven Dials Mystery*, junior minister George Lomax is described as 'a disgusting wind-bag, an unscrupulous hypocritical old hot-air merchant, a foul, poisonous self-advertiser'. A die-hard Conservative, Lomax also bemoans the decline of family life and collapsing moral standards.⁶⁵ One of the suspects in *Hercule Poirot's Christmas* (1938) is the MP George Lee, described as 'somewhat corpulent' with a 'heavy jowl and a slow pedantic utterance'. Lee is also guilty of marrying a blank-faced drone, far too young for him.⁶⁶ Charles Laverton-West MP, whose fiancée is dispatched in 'Murder in the Mews' is – unusually – young, good-looking, only 'slightly pompous' and if possessed of 'commonplace' ideas is at least not stupid. He is, however, completely unmoved by his loss, being only interested in avoiding scandal, which causes Japp to describe him as a "Bit of a stuffed fish ... *And* a boiled owl!" Perhaps most damningly, for many Christie readers, during his interview with the Chief Inspector, Laverton-West also revealed his dislike for women of the 'independent type'.⁶⁷

Two of Christie's MPs are women, although they are even less sympathetically drawn than their male equivalents.⁶⁸ Mrs. Macatta is a minor character in two stories.⁶⁹ Described as 'always going off the deep end about Welfare and Pure Milk and Save the Children', Macatta's conversation consists entirely of public policy. When talking, she 'barked out short sentences rather than spoke them' and sometimes emitted a 'loud and virtuous snort' and was 'generally of somewhat alarming prospect'. A woman of 'great earnestness of purpose', she was widely considered a huge bore, one moreover obsessed with the 'the purification of England's morals'. Macatta was also a severe critic of men, of whom she spoke with contempt, predicting women were 'going to be the great force in government in ten years time'.

These characteristics are developed further in the forbidding shape of Lady Westholme, who appears in *Appointment with Death* (1938).⁷⁰ Westholme is

barely feminine, a 'big masterful woman' who 'lived entirely in tweeds and stout brogues', has a 'weather-beaten countenance', 'large red rocking-horse nostrils' and a 'booming voice'. She is widely disliked for being a bully, while 'being a true politician, she had no sense of humour'. As disparaging of men as is Macatta, Westholme similarly and equally paradoxically stands for 'old-fashioned values of family life'. She also has no small talk and speaks only of public affairs. In fact, such is her all-consuming ambition, Westholme murders a blackmailer threatening to expose a dark secret that would end her career. Significantly, Westholme is often contrasted to the young medical student Sarah King, whom she patronizes manfully. Sarah is, for Christie, the right kind of professional woman, one who seeks to complement not supplant men. The de-sexed Westholme, like Macatta, is a woman gone wrong who, like their male counterparts, threatens the socially liberal but politically conservative world of many of Christie's female readers.

Christie imbued a few of her politicians with a contrasting set of characteristics. 'The Kidnapped Prime Minister' (1924) is set during the First World War and features the fearless premier David MacAdam, nicknamed 'Fighting Mac'.⁷¹ MacAdam successfully stands between Britain and a disastrous peace treaty: without his strong leadership, Christie states, the country would have succumbed to German-inspired pacifism. As Britain faced the prospect of another war, she gave readers one more heroic politician. Lord Mayfield of 'The Incredible Theft' (1937) was a 'big man, square-shouldered' and 'always charming to women'.⁷² A self-made engineering employer before becoming Minister of Armaments, Mayfield has designed a revolutionary new bomber and – like MacAdam – is wholly preoccupied with ensuring Britain's security.

One, Two, Buckle My Shoe was published in the first year of the Second World War. In it, Christie suggested – as had Wilkinson in *The Division Bell Mystery* – that power had shifted from politicians to financiers.⁷³ However, in this unusually politically sophisticated novel, Christie did not think that a bad thing. The banker Alistair Blunt was a man whose face – unlike that of the Prime Minister – was unknown to the public, although he was 'A man who said Yes and No to Governments ... a man in whose hands lay supreme power.' Blunt's was, though, an apparently benign authority, representing as he did 'Good sound Conservative finance'. Without his support, the government would fall, which was why extremists of left and right wanted him dead. Blunt, unlike most of the politicians depicted in Christie's earlier stories, was also an unassuming man, preferring to discuss private matters and, like her readers, a fan of detective stories.

Poirot regards Blunt as a national saviour but also considers him ‘virtually a dictator and to a dictator his own life becomes unduly important and those of others unimportant’. Thus, to protect himself from blackmail, Blunt becomes a murderer, accidentally killing an innocent man. Discovering this, Poirot turns him over to the police, while still agreeing the banker stands for ‘sanity and balance and stability and honest dealing’. Explaining why he nonetheless exposed Blunt’s crime, Poirot declares: ‘I am not concerned with nations, Monsieur, I am concerned with the lives of private individuals who have the right not to have their lives taken from them.’ Despite everything, Blunt had been consumed by ‘the love of power’, as had one of Christie’s earliest political characters. Sir James Peel Edgerton MP of *The Secret Adversary* is widely regarded as a future Prime Minister, but his obsession with unlimited power has him become the mastermind behind a Bolshevik plot. Even being Prime Minister would not have been enough. As he asks: ‘What then? Was that power? Hampered at every turn by my colleagues, fettered by the democratic system of which I would be the mere figurehead!’⁷⁴

Christie’s novels suggested that politics was an unpleasant necessity and that the desire for public power was inherently corrupting. Focusing on the individual flaws of particular politicians, they nonetheless never questioned the ultimate merit of the Westminster model. Indeed, when the *status quo* is placed in peril, her politicians become heroic statesmen. As Mr. Barnes, the retired secret agent in *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe* says:

We’re very tiresome people in this country. We’re conservative, you know, conservative to the backbone. We grumble a lot, but we don’t really want to smash our democratic government and try new fangled experiments.⁷⁵

Moreover, as Blunt says, ‘We are democratic in England – truly democratic. We can grumble and say what we think and laugh at our politicians.’⁷⁶ When national security is at stake, though, the joking has to stop.

If most politicians were ridiculous, politics was ultimately a grave business, one Christie suggests is too serious for the participation of her readers. Politics is also a world of necessary secrets, which is why the discreet Poirot is so often consulted. As Japp says to his friend: ‘Who’s got half the Cabinet in his pocket? You have. Hushing up their scandals for them.’⁷⁷ Sometimes, Christie makes it clear, politicians have to lie to the people for their own good. As Poirot says:

the men who control the destiny of a country ... are particularly vulnerable to displays of popular feeling ... A statesman these days has a difficult task.

He has to pursue a policy he deems advantageous to his country, but he has at the same time to recognize the force of popular feeling. Popular feeling is very often sentimental, muddle-headed, and eminently unsound, but it cannot be disregarded for all that.⁷⁸

That is why, in 'The Incredible Theft', Poirot covers up the indiscretions of a great man, for his skills will be needed to guide Britain safely through the gathering storm.

Screening the past

Christie was not alone in distinguishing between the majority of politicians and those few exceptional 'statesmen'. Generally unwilling as well as unable to depict contemporary politics, cinema's popular historical dramas sometimes tackled the biographies of these latter figures.⁷⁹ *Disraeli* (1929) and *The Iron Duke* (1935) had a Prime Minister as protagonist, while *The House of Rothschild* (1934), *Clive of India* (1935), *Victoria the Great* (1937), *Parnell* (1937), *Sixty Glorious Years* (1938) and *Suez* (1938) depicted an array of leading political figures.⁸⁰ In these movies filmmakers told stories of selfless leaders and benevolent monarchs advancing a national interest defined in imperial terms, presenting their protagonists as wise, paternalistic and humane.

Through these dramas the big screen gave audiences the leaders many appeared to wish for during a troubled period while also outlining a view of democracy convenient to defenders of the *status quo*. Some on the left claimed that because film production was controlled by the 'money bags' historical dramas were 'resolutely anti-liberal: Dizzy is always a hero, Gladstone a skunk'.⁸¹ There were certainly distortions, but these owed little to the undoubted Conservative bias of the British film industry.⁸² *Disraeli*, *The House of Rothschild*, *Clive of India*, *Parnell* and *Suez* were made in Hollywood. Undeniably inaccurate, most errors were, however, British in origin. *Disraeli*, for example, was faithfully adapted from a play penned in London, while *Clive of India* was written by W. J. Lipscomb and R. J. Minney, whose script was almost indistinguishable from their 1934 West End play, which aimed to show theatre-goers what, 'a great and very likeable person' Clive had been.⁸³

American anglophilia meant that an interest in British history was a defining aspect of US national identity, something those who ran Hollywood were only too keen to satisfy, especially as Britain accounted for half their foreign earnings.⁸⁴

There were other calculations: such films gave the studios 'class'. In 1928 Warner Brothers contracted the British actor George Arliss to reproduce on the screen some of his North American stage successes, including *Disraeli*. As related by Arliss, Harry Warner said of *Disraeli* that 'he did not expect it to pay, but he was using me as an expensive bait to hook people into the cinema who had never been there before.'⁸⁵ *Disraeli* nevertheless surprised everybody: it was a commercial and critical triumph, with Arliss winning the Oscar for Best Actor. *Disraeli* had a special appeal for the Warner brothers – the sons of Jewish immigrants – as his story echoed theirs. A Jewish protagonist who overcomes Gentile opposition to promote universal – in this case imperialist – values from which all, Gentile as much as Jew, gain, he was a model for their assimilation into American society.⁸⁶

Disraeli appeared in another Hollywood movie, *Suez*, a biopic of Ferdinand de Lesseps, the Frenchman responsible for building the canal. By the time *Suez* went into production, Hollywood's Jewish bosses like Louis B. Mayer were openly calling on the US to join forces with Britain against Hitler.⁸⁷ The resulting pro-British bias in *Suez* was certainly hard to miss. According to the movie, de Lesseps' vision was of a canal open to the world, something he hoped would promote greater international cooperation. Gladstone is presented as ideologically against the scheme through a small-minded, nationalist dislike of what he calls 'fly-by-night foreign schemes'. He is a surrogate for the bull-headed American isolationism of Charles Lindburgh and his supporters. *Disraeli*, in contrast, is described by de Lesseps as one of the 'men of vision who can see beyond national boundaries' and passionately supports the project. The two make common cause and the film concocts a meeting during which *Disraeli* tells de Lesseps that in building the canal he was doing England's work. *Disraeli*'s Jewishness is ignored in the movie because it is irrelevant to the story; his imperialism, however, remains important, but that has been transfigured into a disinterested Anglo-American internationalism.

Arliss was the actor most associated with the historical genre on both sides of the Atlantic. Hardly handsome, slightly built, possessed of bad teeth and in his early sixties when he signed for Warners, *Disraeli* made Arliss a star. He subsequently played Voltaire, Nathan and Meyer Rothschild, Richelieu, Alexander Hamilton and the Duke of Wellington. When not playing historical roles, Arliss assumed the parts of fictional millionaires, prime ministers, monarchs and aristocrats. The *Daily Mirror* called him the 'incomparable Arliss', as *Disraeli* was one of Britain's most successful films of 1930, while a 1934 survey of cinemagoers had him as the country's most popular male film star, relegating Clark Gable to second place.⁸⁸ Yet the roles Arliss played were all bent to his same benevolent interpretation of those great men who wielded

authority in general and political power in particular. He played statesmen as kindly, approachable and even whimsical figures, although they were also wise and possessed the necessary skills to achieve their disinterested ends.⁸⁹ Not a man to challenge preconceptions, Arliss gave the transatlantic cinema-going public a version of leadership for which many of them appeared to hanker in a time of crisis.

The Conservatives were only party that could hope to exploit Disraeli's cinematic prominence. Baldwin was wont to cite Disraeli as evidence his party had always been concerned to improve working-class lives.⁹⁰ If Baldwin used the real Disraeli to win votes, Conservative Central Office was alert to the electoral possibilities of his dramatized version, and Arliss was happy to help. The party had a fleet of cinema vans that exhibited short propaganda movies, and which during the 1935 election campaign reached an estimated 1.5 million people. One of these films had Arliss play Disraeli, delivering a stirring message to present-day Britons.⁹¹

Victoria the Great and *Sixty Glorious Years* were British made and could not have been produced had Edward VIII not lifted George V's ban on depictions of the late Queen.⁹² Produced by Herbert Wilcox and starring his wife Anna Neagle, they cast Victoria as many seemed to want to think of her: preoccupied with her subjects' prosperity and, the *Manchester Guardian* believed, 'an actively beneficent constitutional force'.⁹³ The films were extremely popular, especially with working-class audiences: Bolton cinemagoers declared *Victoria the Great* their favourite movie.⁹⁴ In these dramas, the *New Statesman* critic claimed, the Queen's Prime Ministers 'succeed one another like patient dogs', complaining of their 'ludicrous inadequacy' as portraits. As a consequence Gladstone was reduced to 'the man who left Gordon to his fate' and Disraeli boiled down to 'the man who bought the Suez Canal'.⁹⁵ Such brevity, however, meant they outlined the role expected of Victoria's premiers: to do the monarch's work, which is to say ignore partisanship and serve the national – that is imperial – interest.

Such historical dramas depicted the people as, at best, capricious and open to manipulation. Wellington in *The Iron Duke* is 'the idol of the people' but still subject to malign newspaper speculation about his relationship with a married woman. If this press-invented scandal turns the people against him, Lord Castlereagh assures Wellington that 'Nobody thinks anything about it except the crowd. They have to be answered.' Wellington responds: 'Ah, the crowd. Dangerous cattle – eat out of your hand one day and bite your fingers off the next!' Similarly, *Clive of India* illustrated how the press could turn the people even against a man of honour. When he first returns from India, Clive is greeted

by cheering crowds, but on coming home for the last time he is stoned after journalists claim he is corrupt.

Sixty Glorious Years also shows how malign politicians might turn the people against their own interests. Lord Palmerston mobilizes the Queen's subjects against Albert for opposing his policy of war with Russia. The people are consequently induced to see the Prince as a traitor after the Foreign Secretary makes them 'wild with rage and fear', turning Britain into, as Albert complains, a 'mad house'. Yet the war turns out to be a terrible and pointless waste of life. Thus, while both *Victoria* films end with the Queen cheered by crowds celebrating her 1897 Jubilee, she has also been shown enduring their less peaceable side: when rioting against the Corn Laws they even break the windows of her beloved Buckingham Palace.

Conclusion

It was ironic that cinema, the newest and technically most radical form of entertainment, promoted a pre-democratic form of leadership, one that diminished the political role of those who sat in the dark to enjoy it. That many of the big screen's historical dramas had a Hollywood provenance made the nature of the picture they painted even more paradoxical. Yet such films were hardly out of step with many of the novels written during the difficult interwar decades. While mocking everyday politicians, Christie echoed conventional wisdoms about the nation's dependence on a small number of exceptional men who the people should allow to get on with the job of ensuring their security.

Even works written by writers on the left expressed severe doubts about the newly enfranchised people's capacities. Many also despaired of, or simply dismissed, the possibilities of representative politics in general. One of the few novels to suggest that desirable reforms could be achieved through democracy was Holtby's *South Riding*, but her novel showed that it took the corrupt intentions of a group of councillors to improve poor people's housing: this was progress by accident.

Whatever the origins and purpose of fictions produced during the interwar period, they mostly agreed that little could be expected of the people, the ones who ensured that representative institutions were largely operated by pandering and self-interested politicians unable to take the longer view. If this fictional perspective was a reaction to the betrayals and disappointments some writers endured in the 1920s and 1930s, it was also an exaggerated and uneven

reflection of real events. Despite everything, Britain remained free of continental upheavals, while the vast majority of Britons enjoyed rising standards of living.⁹⁶ This would also be a standpoint that would soon be tested in the coming war with Germany, which inaugurated a new kind of conflict – a ‘people’s war’, albeit one in which Britain was led by a Prime Minister more at home in the eighteenth as opposed to the twentieth century.

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