

# The Whig World

1760-1837

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# Contents

Illustrations	vii
Introduction	ix
1 The Whigs	1
2 Circles of Acquaintance	15
3 London	39
4 The Country	59
5 The French Connection	77
6 The March of Mind	99
7 Unbelievers	117
8 History and Politics	135
9 Enemies	157
10 Disappearance	175
Notes	181
Bibliography	199
Index	207



# Illustrations

*Between Pages 84 and 85*

- 1 Charles James Fox
- 2 The Right Honourable Catch-Singers
- 3 Holkham, the Hall
- 4 Spencer House, north-east view
- 5 A Hint to the Ladies to Take Care of their Heads
- 6 A Gaming Table at Devonshire House
- 7 The Westminster Election
- 8 Richard Brinsley Sheridan
- 9 William Lamb, second Viscount Melbourne
- 10 The In-Judicious Bottle-Holder

*For Herrattis*

# Introduction

One of the strangest facts in British history, and one which had the most lasting consequences, was that Parliament was six hundred years old before universal suffrage emerged in 1918. In most European states, parliamentary life only began at the same time, or shortly before, the arrival of full democracy. In Britain, it was possible to be parliamentary without being democratic, which in the rest of Europe was largely impossible. Whigs were parliamentarians but not democrats. They passionately defended all the liberties associated with regular debate, the rule of law and a respect for majorities, but thought that universal suffrage might well put all this in jeopardy. Europe had no Whiggery because Europe had no parliamentary life before democracy. It was an exclusively British experience.

Today, of course, the link between parliamentary life and universal suffrage is thought to be unbreakable. It is a formula that America seems intent on exporting around the whole world. It has come to be regarded, with a certain lack of imagination, as the only acceptable system. Even so, criticisms are made of it and appear to be growing louder. If Parliament is controlled by public opinion, and that public opinion is moulded by an international media, who then effectively governs? Should it be a matter of concern that the bulk of public opinion may be neither educated, interested or informed? Why, having achieved universal suffrage, are fewer and fewer people inclined to vote? Perhaps the linking of parliamentary life with democracy is unsafe. The Whigs would certainly have thought so.

Whigs could only operate in a system where parliamentary life was firmly separated from most democratic considerations. It was a world with parties and elections, but, before the 1832 Reform Bill, only 14 per cent of adult males voted; and only 18 per cent could do so even after the Bill had passed. Politicians in London were under few of the

pressures that complicate the careers of their modern counterparts. To be sure, some account had to be taken of the occasional mob, for otherwise windows would be broken and limbs endangered. Similarly, in the period 1780–1850, newspapers and reviews were founded, and their voices became more and more querulous. But for most of the time, for politicians living in the great west London squares, these were noises off. As a result, politics may have been more or less moral or more or less efficient. It was certainly different.

Far removed from democratic constraints, Whigs enjoyed a freedom of action and behaviour that modern politicians would find heady. Great aristocrats by wealth and birth, they did not so much despise public opinion as ignore it (unless a mob, like a bad winter, occasionally had to be noticed). Even if their morals and ideas were adversely dissected in cartoons and pamphlets, this had no consequences. Their position in politics was assured. Newspaper campaigns, which today routinely destroy political careers, had no purchase in their world. Whigs were free to think, speak and behave as they thought fit. It was a power which they often used reasonably and sometimes abused. In government, they had the option of leading opinion, along the path of religious toleration for example, being more knowing than their fellow men. In opposition, they had the privilege of being troublemakers, articulating views that governments did not wish to hear.

Whigs had another claim to status in this parliamentary, pre-democratic world. Quite simply, parliamentary life was Whig, in the sense that the Whigs had guaranteed its existence. In 1642, when Charles I had tried to destroy Parliament, Whig families had challenged him on the battlefield. In 1688, Parliament, for the first time, acquired an assured place in the country's political life, because Whigs had forced the despotic James II into exile in France. After 1688, Parliament had to be summoned every year. Whigs regarded these events as their victories. If Britain was odd because Parliament survived the dangers of the seventeenth century, the Whigs, as the patrons of Parliament, were for a time the national party.

It is therefore scarcely surprising that, from 1688 to 1760, the accession of George III, the Whigs were almost always in power. They were the party of government. The horrors of the seventeenth century gave way to a remarkable stability. Sir Robert Walpole was Prime Minister for

twenty-one years (1721–42). Englishmen enjoyed trial by jury, Habeas Corpus and an increasingly free press. Their European cousins had none of these things. In a way, the Whigs were owed a debt of gratitude. A grateful country should have absorbed sharp lessons.

To be out of office for most of the period 1760–1830 therefore came, in contrast, as something of a shock. It needed explanation. Perhaps it was owing to George III's ambition to achieve what his Stuart ancestors had failed to achieve. No sooner, however, was the problem of an overmighty executive dealt with by the 1832 Reform Act than people began to talk about the advantages of universal suffrage. With would-be autocrats defeated, democrats appeared. Neither offered any future for the Whigs. As very specialised animals, they needed a parliamentary environment free of democratic constraints. There was a moment in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries between autocracy and democracy that might be called the parliamentary period. It alone provided the oxygen which Whigs could breathe freely.

Living with the Whigs for the whole of a professional career has been very congenial. I count myself very fortunate. Expounding their way of life and habits of thinking has always been a great pleasure. Lecture audiences and pupils in tutorials have patiently listened to the stories, often laughed in the right places, and have exercised a sobering restraint on undue enthusiasm. I hope this book gives them the opportunity to reacquaint themselves with a tale to which they have indirectly contributed so much. I also hope that it will amuse many people to whom the mysteries of Whiggery are at present unknown. Special thanks must go to Alicia Black, Crofton Black, David Graham and Martin Sheppard for so professionally turning a manuscript into a book.

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