

# Preface: Angus Hawkins and the Victorians

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Angus Hawkins's *Modernity and the Victorians* diagnoses a disorder in the scholarship on Victorian Britain, and proposes an interpretative remedy. It explores how twentieth-century social scientists invented a condition labelled 'modernity'; examines how this scheme came to infect the study of Victorian political and social history; and discusses its influence within successive rounds of historiographical debate about the nature of the period. The book insists that the 'modernization theory' beloved of twentieth-century sociologists cannot be made to fit the facts of nineteenth-century British history, and that a satisfactory grasp of the dynamics of the period must rely on alternative conceptual frameworks.<sup>1</sup> Angus intended the volume to be bracing, realised his approach was partial, anticipated that it might attract criticism, and hoped that it would motivate debate.

In producing this short study, Angus was targeting an audience beyond the modern British historians towards whom his previous scholarship had mainly been addressed. He aspired to reach students of historiography, historically minded social scientists, and perhaps even a wider popular constituency interested in how present preoccupations can distort readings of the past. All these groups will have their own responses to the arguments presented in the book, and it is easy to imagine them disagreeing about it. But making sense of the text requires us to set it in context with Angus's

<sup>1</sup> For a very different take on 'modernization' in English historiography before the 1970s, see Michael Bentley, *Modernizing England's Past: English Historiography in the Age of Modernism, 1870–1970* (2005).

wider agenda as an interpreter of Victorian political and intellectual life, and with his broader contributions to the history of modern Britain over a long career. *Modernity and the Victorians* is in some ways a departure from his earlier work, not least in adopting the extended essay form, and it certainly reveals new dimensions to his historical interests and thinking. But it also engages with, and expands on, many of the same fundamental questions with which he had been concerned for decades.

Angus was dedicated to the Victorians. Virtually all of his published work, over forty years of scholarly activity, dealt with events during Queen Victoria's reign of 1837–1901. He maintained this firm focus even as various contemporaries who had also started out writing about the nineteenth century drifted towards the twentieth. More recently, as a growing number of historians started to express doubts about the analytic value of the category 'Victorian', and about the chronologies associated with the label, Angus redoubled his commitment, producing a large volume on *Victorian Political Culture* in 2015, now followed by this smaller one on *Modernity and the Victorians*.<sup>2</sup> Looking back, it seems particularly appropriate that his first major publication should have been in the journal *Victorian Studies*.<sup>3</sup>

Read together, Angus's body of scholarship on Victorian Britain is strikingly unified, in both thematic and interpretive terms. His priorities and perspectives shifted over time, but it is often possible to find the seeds of later arguments in his earliest writings. A long-term fascination with the 14th earl of Derby, combined with other publications on Disraeli and aspects of Tory politics, has tempted some commentators to pigeonhole Angus as a historian of Conservatism.<sup>4</sup> That is to miss the real core of his interests. At the

<sup>2</sup> Angus Hawkins, *Victorian Political Culture: 'Habits of Heart and Mind'* (2015). He did not, however, see the Victorian era as an uncomplicated unity, and at times criticised 'the comforting lure of periodization': "Parliamentary Government" and Victorian Political Parties, c. 1830–c. 1880, *English Historical Review* 104 (1989), pp. 638–69, at p. 666.

<sup>3</sup> Angus B. Hawkins, 'A Forgotten Crisis: Gladstone and the Politics of Finance during the 1850s', *Victorian Studies* 26 (1983), pp. 287–320.

<sup>4</sup> For Angus's work on Derby, see below, nn. 17–19; for Disraeli and Conservatism, see 'The Disraelian Achievement: 1868–1874', in Stuart Ball and Anthony Seldon (eds), *Recovering Power: the Conservatives in Opposition since 1867* (2005), pp. 28–46; 'A Calm, Temperate, Deliberate, and Conciliatory Course of Conduct': Mid-Victorian Conservative Foreign

broadest level, his work centres on problems about the structures (as he called them) of nineteenth-century politics; about the nature and art of political leadership; and about the attitudes and values which upheld political systems. More specifically, however, his oeuvre is best understood as offering a sustained, developing, and pioneering anatomy of what he called ‘parliamentary government’. This, he argued, was both a practice and an ideal. Angus used the phrase to describe the constitutional dispensation which pertained between the Reform Acts of 1832 and 1867: the handful of decades during which the power of the Crown over the making and breaking of governments was largely curtailed, but before tightly organised national parties asserted a firm grip on the levers of power. In this period, Angus argued, the British parliament fleetingly enjoyed a kind of autonomous sovereignty, and it was primarily in parliament that administrations were formed, contested, and dissolved. This state of affairs was accompanied and underpinned, he suggested, by an imposing mass of political theory and elaborated rationalisation, which helped to inform politicians’ behaviour. Nearly all of Angus’s published scholarship can be seen as attempting to make sense of this political conjuncture, and of its demise in the period between 1867 and the Home Rule crisis.

*Parliament, Party, and the Art of Politics in Britain, 1855–59* (1987), which grew out of Angus’s doctoral thesis, was his first major essay on the problem of ‘parliamentary government’. A finely textured study of parliamentary politics in the late 1850s, it set out to correct entrenched misapprehensions about that decade, and to make wider suggestions about the practice of political history. Based primarily on a Stakhanovite interrogation of 81 collections of (mainly) parliamentary politicians’ private papers, and professing particular intellectual debts to Andrew Jones, John Vincent, J. B. Conacher, and the early Derek Beales, the work was unambiguously a study in the then-controversial ‘high political’ mode, though it should be noted that Angus largely avoided using that vexed

label.<sup>5</sup> By the 1980s, however, ‘high political’ historiography was beginning to deal with questions quite distinct from those posed by the scholars—most famously Maurice Cowling—who are generally seen to have founded the approach in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>6</sup> One group of historians had turned towards the problem of how elite politicians’ behaviour was informed by their ‘intellectual’ contexts—an issue which would become more prominent in Angus’s later work.<sup>7</sup> *Parliament, Party, and the Art of Politics*, however, signalled its central innovation in its title. The book was concerned primarily with the roles played in parliamentary politics by political parties, and especially by the languages and labels of party, which Angus showed to have been strikingly fluid. These themes had not featured prominently in the original ‘high politics’ studies, in part because most work by the members of the (so-called) ‘Peterhouse School’ had dealt with slightly later periods, when party organisation was more formalised. The propositions found in *Parliament, Party, and the Art of Politics* about the operation of party allegiances, and the nature of party identities, would underpin much of Angus’s later work. So would the formidably robust empirical foundations laid down in researching the book.

The book’s subtle discussions of parliamentary language, labels, and rhetoric represented an unmistakeable advance on previous work in the area. *Parliament, Party and the Art of Politics* criticised historians’ willingness to accept politicians’ self-avowed party designations as authoritative; cast light on how political vocabulary helped to project clarity where opinion was in reality ambiguous or divided; and emphasised the extent to which ‘[c]ollective identity sprang from shared perceptions of opponents.’<sup>8</sup> Party alignments in the mid-nineteenth century, Angus insisted, were mutable, fissile things, as much rhetorical as ‘real’. They depended not just on the ever-shifting practical issues and principled stands which shaped

<sup>5</sup> Angus Hawkins, *Parliament, Party and the Art of Politics in Britain, 1855–59* (1987), pp. ix–x.

<sup>6</sup> *Parliament, Party and the Art of Politics* makes only a single, passing footnote reference to Cowling.

<sup>7</sup> Alex Middleton, ‘“High Politics” and its Intellectual Contexts’, *Parliamentary History* 40 (2021), pp. 168–91.

<sup>8</sup> Hawkins, *Parliament, Party and the Art of Politics*, esp. pp. 5–14, quotation at p. 13.

'high politics', but also on the loaded (and often contradictory) ways in which alignments were captured in contemporary political debate. As the book explained, party labels were 'more a means of inner rationale than a tool of ideological analysis', often having less to do with coherent ideological frameworks (or spectrums) than with 'tone, style, personal reputation and past positions'.<sup>9</sup> *Parliament, Party and the Art of Politics* sought also to draw out more precisely the modes of thinking on politics which affected parliamentary action, and argued that thought and practice were 'fused through the medium of rhetoric'.<sup>10</sup> In this vein, it explored how particular political issues could work in unexpected ways when filtered through the ambitions and priorities of parliamentary politicians, interrogated the relationship between parliament and the national political community, and insisted that there existed 'no simple relation between events occurring outside Westminster and the response within'.<sup>11</sup> The view Angus presented in the book of the worlds of Westminster, St James's, and the country house, as 'half-closed' rather than entirely exclusive, offered scope for tracing wider connections between levels of politics.<sup>12</sup> Recent commentary on the historiography of modern British politics has uncovered a number of striking conceptual overlaps between the early, 1960s and 1970s 'high political' studies, and the varieties of 'new political history' centred on 'political culture' which have become so influential since the 1990s.<sup>13</sup> In hindsight, *Parliament, Party and the Art of Politics* can be seen to represent an important bridge between these interpretative modes. Angus's central insight in the book was that political institutions—and 'parties' in particular—had to be studied in

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 12–13.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 18–19. Cf. Michael Bentley, 'Party, Doctrine, and Thought', in Michael Bentley and John Stevenson (eds), *High and Low Politics in Modern Britain* (1983), pp. 123–53.

<sup>11</sup> Hawkins, *Parliament, Party and the Art of Politics*, p. 78. On these themes see also Angus Hawkins, 'British Parliamentary Party Alignment and the Indian Issue, 1857–1858', *Journal of British Studies* 23 (1984), pp. 79–105.

<sup>12</sup> Hawkins, *Parliament, Party and the Art of Politics*, p. 271. Cf. David Craig, '“High Politics” and the “New Political History”', *Historical Journal* 53 (2010), pp. 453–75, at p. 475.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.; David Craig, 'Political Ideas and Languages', in David Brown, Robert Crowcroft, and Gordon Pentland (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Modern British Political History, 1800–2000* (2018), pp. 13–31; Steven Fielding, 'High Politics', in David Brown, Robert Crowcroft, and Gordon Pentland (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Modern British Political History, 1800–2000* (2018), pp. 32–47.

terms of their *perceived* functions within a fast-changing political system, rather than being approached as ideal types.

Although *Parliament, Party, and the Art of Politics* prioritised the perceptions and strategies of parliamentary politicians, the book betrayed a much wider hinterland. This was clear not least in some of its epigraphs, which were drawn from mid-nineteenth-century literature, journalism, and political theory. In 1989, two years after the book, Angus published what has become his most widely cited article, an *English Historical Review* piece on ‘“Parliamentary Government” and Victorian Political Parties, c. 1830–c. 1880’.<sup>14</sup> Here he offered an incisive discussion of contemporary theories of ‘parliamentary government’, and of the place of parties within that system—dealing with obscure pamphleteers as well as intellectual titans like Walter Bagehot, and intellectuals-in-politics like the 3rd Earl Grey—all of which analysis was fused with a bold, overarching characterisation of the shifting constitutional structures of nineteenth-century British politics. The article, with which Angus always remained satisfied, set the tone for much of his later scholarship. Subsequent work would reach ever further beyond the limits of parliament, while paying ever more attention to the problem of how to draw meaningful connections between spheres of political activity.

Angus’s second book, *British Party Politics, 1852–1886* (1998), can be seen as a staging post on this path.<sup>15</sup> It is more ambitious, not to mention rather longer, than its textbook format might lead readers to expect. The volume’s stated purposes are to explain how ‘parliamentary government’ gave way to a more ‘modern’ party system, and in the process to reassert ‘the importance of understanding the constitutional context of Victorian politics’.<sup>16</sup> The text is bookended by two particularly valuable chapters on the structure of British politics at the start and end of the period covered, which lay out a notably expansive conception of what belonged to the political world, touching on journalism, electoral politics, and the various social and cultural environments of parliamentary activity,

<sup>14</sup> Hawkins, ‘“Parliamentary Government”’.

<sup>15</sup> Angus Hawkins, *British Party Politics, 1852–1886* (1998).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 1, 7.

including clubs, country houses, and public meetings. Angus argued here that it was vital to take account of changes in the nature of British society as a 'backdrop' to the explanation of political change, and that understanding the politics of the mid-Victorian period was in large part about understanding the shifting relations between parliament and an increasingly complex 'political nation'.<sup>17</sup> Sandwiched between these essays in structural analysis, there is a high-level narrative of the parliamentary politics of the period, which further developed Angus's arguments about the 'elusive relation between conviction, vision, and the tactical', and which had particularly interesting things to say about the roles played and tactics employed by Derby and Disraeli.<sup>18</sup>

Angus's landmark two-volume biography of Lord Derby, *The Forgotten Prime Minister* (2007–8), obviously represented a culmination of a long-standing interest in the politician himself.<sup>19</sup> Rehabilitating Derby's maligned leadership had been one of the priorities of *Parliament, Party, and the Art of Politics*, and of a companion article in *Parliamentary History* Angus published in the same year, 1987—which was itself based on a paper first presented in 1978.<sup>20</sup> The intervening years had seen a series of further Derby-centric publications.<sup>21</sup> *The Forgotten Prime Minister* filled out Angus's arguments about Derby's strategies, activities, ideas, and wider significance on the basis of the first comprehensive consultation of his private papers. The volumes will surely remain authoritative for

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 3–5.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 262. On Disraeli, see esp. p. 216, where Angus argued that Disraeli's great legacy to British Conservatism lay in language, and reflected that 'if governing men was a matter of words, such a legacy was the most valuable gift of all'.

<sup>19</sup> Angus Hawkins, *The Forgotten Prime Minister: The 14th Earl of Derby*, vol. 1: *Ascent: 1799–1851* (2007); *The Forgotten Prime Minister: The 14th Earl of Derby*, vol. 2: *Achievement: 1851–1869* (2008).

<sup>20</sup> Angus Hawkins, 'Lord Derby and Victorian Conservatism: A Reappraisal', *Parliamentary History* 6 (1987), pp. 280–301, at p. 280.

<sup>21</sup> Angus Hawkins, 'Lord Derby', in R. W. Davis (ed.), *Lords of Parliament: Studies, 1714–1914* (1995), pp. 134–62; 'A host in himself': Lord Derby and Aristocratic Leadership', *Parliamentary History* 22 (2003), pp. 75–90; Angus Hawkins, 'The 14th Earl of Derby, 1799–1869', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004). Later work on Derby includes 'Derby Redivivus: Reflections on the Political Achievement of the Fourteenth Earl of Derby', in Geoffrey Hicks (ed.), *Conservatism and British Foreign Policy, 1820–1920: The Derbys and their World* (2011), pp. 19–40; 'Lord Derby', in Charles Clarke, Toby S. James, Tim Bale, and Patrick Diamond (eds), *British Conservative Leaders* (2015), pp. 75–92; 'The 14th Earl of Derby', in Stephen Lloyd (ed.), *Art, Animals and Politics: Knowsley and the Earls of Derby* (2015), pp. 200–21.



many years to come. Read as part of a developing oeuvre, however, it is striking to see how Angus continued to expand his sense of what mattered in explaining the mindsets and manoeuvres of aristocratic politicians. *The Forgotten Prime Minister* focused on the parliamentary and ministerial crucible, to be sure, but it also dealt with Derby's estate management, his religion, his shooting, his preoccupation with horse racing, his Homeric translation, his organisation of a volunteer corps, his interventions in local politics, and not least his 'famous jokes'.<sup>22</sup> The other point which stands out, in this context, is how perfectly Derby's life traces the boundaries of Angus's era of 'parliamentary government'. There at its foundation in 1832, Derby passed away shortly after the Second Reform Act ushered in its obsolescence. The final paragraph of the biography, indeed, reflects that Derby was 'the last British prime minister to uphold the axioms of Victorian "parliamentary government"', and that it was precisely the rise of class politics, the electoral platform, and new notions of popular sovereignty in the years after his death which accounted for his fall into relative obscurity.<sup>23</sup>

Looked at in this light, Angus's final full-length book, *Victorian Political Culture: 'Habits of Heart and Mind'*, appears as the culmination of a series of attempts to discern the dynamics of 'parliamentary government' by considering it from different and ever-wider perspectives. The book is essentially a study of constitutional structures and attitudes, spanning the different levels of, and cultural influences on, nineteenth-century politics. It set out to trace 'the links between the intellectual currents, the religious convictions, the public values, the political intentions, and the electoral dynamics of the age'.<sup>24</sup> It sought to show that political identities and public attitudes were subjective creations, forged in encounters between politicians' self-regarding and self-interested use of language and 'the language and values shaping the multiple coexisting identities of locality, region, nation, religion, profession, or leisure'.<sup>25</sup> The volume's leitmotif, the argument that Victorian politics was shaped by distinctive, evolving sets of attitudes towards the past, morality, and

<sup>22</sup> Hawkins, *The Forgotten Prime Minister*, vol. 1, p. 417.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. vol. 2, pp. 422–3.

<sup>24</sup> Hawkins, *Victorian Political Culture*, p. 16.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 16.



community—also a cornerstone of the present volume—can be traced, in its elements, back to the early Hawkins.<sup>26</sup> But the more sustained attention given to intellectuals and patterns of ideas, and particularly to the world of constituency politics—making extensive use of new research by the History of Parliament Trust—constituted new departures.<sup>27</sup> Despite the implicitly encompassing ‘Victorian’ title, the chronological centre of gravity remained the same as in earlier work. Three-quarters of the book is devoted to the period up to 1867, while the next chapter along (taking the story to 1886) is entitled ‘The Demise of “Parliamentary Government”’. Picking up once again on the questions about party labels and identities which had always been central to his scholarship, and building on the work of Joseph Coohill, the book also saw Angus engage for the first time in a sustained programme of counting, mapping MPs’ partisan self-identification as recorded in the regularly published parliamentary manual *Dod’s Parliamentary Companion* between 1833 and 1869.<sup>28</sup> Angus had hoped to pursue this operation further, into the closing decades of the nineteenth century.

Angus was rarely forthcoming about questions of methodology, and sometimes appeared hostile to ‘discourses on method.’<sup>29</sup> Nonetheless, firm precepts about the practice of political history emerge from his writing. He once remarked, revealingly, that the ‘fascination of political history partly lies in unravelling the circumstantial and inadvertent from the thoughtful and deliberate.’<sup>30</sup>

<sup>26</sup> For the significance of the past in mid-Victorian politics, see e.g. Hawkins, *Parliament, Party and the Art of Politics*, p. 3; and for moral sentiment, Hawkins, *British Party Politics*, p. 135.

<sup>27</sup> See also Angus Hawkins, ‘Government Appointment By-Elections: 1832–86’, in T.G. Otte and Paul Readman (eds), *By-Elections in British Politics, 1832–1914* (2013), pp. 51–76.

<sup>28</sup> The results are summarised in the graph in Angus Hawkins, *Victorian Political Culture: ‘Habits of Heart and Mind’* (2015), p. 103. The foundational work can be found in Joseph Coohill, *Ideas of the Liberal Party: Perceptions, Agendas and Liberal Politics in the House of Commons, 1832–52* (Chichester, 2011), which covered the period up to 1852. See also Joseph Coohill, ‘Parliamentary Guides, Political Identity and the Presentation of Modern Politics, 1832–1846’, *Parliamentary History* 22 (2003), pp. 263–84; Seth Alexander Thévoz, *Club Government: How the Early Victorian World Was Ruled from Clubs* (2018). Angus had always been more interested in quantitative approaches to Victorian political history than the majority of his peers, with *Parliament, Party and the Art of Politics* making great play of the findings of pioneering quantifiers like W. O. Aydelotte. Figures from *Dod’s* also featured in a less developed way in some of Angus’s earlier work: see e.g. Hawkins, *British Party Politics*, p. 29, and n. 33.

<sup>29</sup> Angus Hawkins, ‘Popular Politics and Post-Structuralism: 1815–1867’, *Archives* 22 (1995), pp. 89–92, at p. 92.

<sup>30</sup> Hawkins, *British Party Politics*, p. 312.

Informed by his early work on the sphere of 'high politics', and surely owing something to the influence of John Vincent—to whom *The Forgotten Prime Minister* was dedicated—his writing always emphasised the role of contingency, and the importance of considering the paths not taken as well as those which were. Angus was fascinated by 'that sense of contingent uncertainty, lost with hindsight, that shrouded perceptions of the future', and sought to demonstrate that 'in politics, as in chess, the manoeuvres of an opponent anticipated, forestalled, and never played can be as important as those moves actually made'.<sup>31</sup> Indeed it was because 'the actions of individual politicians and parties cannot be isolated from the perceived intentions of others and the contingent shift of events' that Angus remained so committed to the narrative mode.<sup>32</sup> We can also see a preoccupation with the fluidity and power of political language, and especially of party labels, running through all his writing. The register of debts on this front in *Victorian Political Culture* does not do justice to his own role as a pioneer on these questions in his 1980s work, which historians studying these now relatively fashionable themes would benefit from looking at again.<sup>33</sup> But increasingly, as time went on, the central theme of Angus's work was integration: of politicians' varied interests and priorities, of the arenas in which they operated, of parliamentary action and intellectual culture, of domestic politics and politics overseas, and of the various different spheres of 'political' activity. All this was supported by a close interest in the contingent interrelations between the diverse issues which rose and fell as subjects of political discussion. Angus argued that 'familiarity with the *structure* of politics and the *function* of elements within it is necessary to understanding the significance of events', but insisted in the same breath that those structures were never rigid, and that the rules of the political game were constantly being rewritten.<sup>34</sup> Calls to think harder about the connections between different types of 'political' activity have become increasingly familiar in twenty-first-century commentary on the

<sup>31</sup> Hawkins, *The Forgotten Prime Minister*, vol. 1, pp. vii–viii.

<sup>32</sup> Hawkins, *Parliament, Party and the Art of Politics*, p. 21.

<sup>33</sup> Hawkins, *Victorian Political Culture*, Introduction.

<sup>34</sup> Hawkins, *British Party Politics*, p. 312.

state of modern British political history.<sup>35</sup> Angus, again, along with other so-called ‘high political’ historians of his generation, proposed meaningful solutions to this problem, which deserve to be engaged with more widely.

On these grounds and others, there is no doubting the lasting significance of Angus’s writing for our understanding of modern British politics. For historians of Victorian Conservatism, most obviously, his scholarship will remain a permanent landmark. But he was, it might be suggested, equally interested in the dynamics of nineteenth-century Whiggism and Liberalism. His major piece of editing work was the diary of a Liberal statesman, and one of his central claims about Lord Derby was that the Tory leader remained steeped in Whig values.<sup>36</sup> He argued, moreover, that the constitutional order which underpinned the era of ‘parliamentary government’ was a Whig achievement, supported by Whig theories, and that—taking direct issue here with other leading twentieth-century historians of nineteenth-century politics—the Whigs (as he understood the grouping) remained a powerful political force deep into the later nineteenth century.<sup>37</sup> So his writings will continue to speak also to historians of ‘progressive’ politics in the Victorian era. Angus always remained convinced that nineteenth-century political life only made sense when the battles between different parties, traditions, and agendas were set at the centre of the analysis.

How, then, does *Modernity and the Victorians* fit with this body of work? Angus describes the book in his Introduction as a ‘methodological complement’ to his *Victorian Political Culture*, and the two

<sup>35</sup> See e.g. Jon Lawrence, ‘Political History’, in Stefan Berger, Heiko Feldner and Kevin Passmore (eds), *Writing History: Theory and Practice* (2003), pp. 183–202; Luke Blaxill, *The War of Words: The Language of British Elections, 1880–1914* (2019), p. 9.

<sup>36</sup> Angus Hawkins and John Powell (eds), *The Journal of John Wodehouse, First Earl of Kimberley, for 1862–1902* (1997); Hawkins, *The Forgotten Prime Minister*, vol. 2, pp. 402–3. See also Angus Hawkins, ‘Coalition before 1886: Whigs, Peelites and Liberals’, *Journal of Liberal History* 72 (2011), pp. 10–13; Angus Hawkins, ‘Celebrating 1859: Party, Patriotism and Liberal Values’, *Journal of Liberal History* 65 (2009), pp. 8–16.

<sup>37</sup> See e.g. Hawkins, “‘Parliamentary Government’”; *Victorian Political Culture*, p. 98; *British Party Politics*, ch. 1 and pp. 309–11. Angus’s main dissent here was with the influential analysis of the composition of the Liberal Party in the 1860s and 1870s developed by Jonathan Parry: he noted in *British Party Politics* that ‘where Parry sees Liberals, the present study more often prefers to see Whigs’: p. 311. Cf. J. P. Parry, *Democracy and Religion: Gladstone and the Liberal Party, 1867–1875* (1986); and later Jonathan Parry, *The Rise and Fall of Liberal Government in Victorian Britain* (New Haven, 1993).

volumes are indeed closely related.<sup>38</sup> To reiterate, the present study is an argument that historians ought to look at the Victorians on their own terms, without using theory as a crutch, and without testing nineteenth-century British society against dubious sociological models (or ideals). It suggests that, as soon as historians start to pick at these distortive frameworks, the continued influence of the past, morality, and overlapping notions of community on Victorian life stand out much more starkly than do the shibboleths of ‘modernisation’ theory, industrialisation, urbanisation, democratisation, and secularisation. The book is not, however, intended to provide a comprehensive answer to a particular question. It is, instead, a mature and humane essay, lightly referenced, which prioritises conceptualisation, and the forging of new connections across a career’s worth of reading. It is at once a piece of twentieth-century intellectual history, a contribution to the history of scholarship, a commentary on more recent historiography, and an attempt to intervene in current debates around the practice of political history. It is, in short, difficult to pigeonhole.

Prior to 2015’s *Victorian Political Culture*, Angus handled historiography with a light touch, and evidently did not see the concept of ‘modernity’ as needing particular interrogation. Indeed, the term barely features in his earlier writings. But *Victorian Political Culture* is situated much more robustly within theoretically and ideologically informed scholarly literatures, discussing Perry Anderson, E. P. Thompson, Martin Wiener, and James Vernon, among others.<sup>39</sup> Angus argued in that book that too many historians had seen it as their job to ‘judge the “deviancy” of Victorian political culture from “class consciousness” or “modernity”’; and he suggested that they ought preferably to seek ‘to understand nineteenth-century public values and political aspirations in their own terms.’<sup>40</sup> *Modernity and the Victorians* makes a much more expansive and fully supported version of the same historiographical argument. It is in this sense

<sup>38</sup> See p. 2 of the present book.

<sup>39</sup> Hawkins, *Victorian Political Culture*, pp. 18–21. For his earlier thoughts on Vernon, see ‘Popular Politics and Post-Structuralism’.

<sup>40</sup> Hawkins, *Victorian Political Culture*, p. 21.

that it stands as a 'methodological complement' to *Victorian Political Culture*.

So *Modernity and the Victorians* belongs, in some senses, to a later set of developments in Angus's scholarship. Yet in other, more fundamental ways, the agenda behind it can be traced back to his earliest writings. In common with other historians of Victorian Britain writing in the 1980s, and indeed the 'high political' pioneers of the previous generation, Angus began his career reacting very consciously against the present-minded priorities which seemed to have taken hold of modern British political history. As we have seen, part of the purpose of his first salvo of publications was to wrest the concept of the political 'party' out of the hands of teleologically minded social scientists, and more particularly of the historians who had adopted their precise, Procrustean definitions of what characteristics a 'party' *ought* to have. Angus, as we have heard, always insisted that a meaningful understanding of Victorian politics required looking at the roles which 'parties' actually played in the (sometimes rapidly shifting) political system, and at the functions which contemporaries ascribed to them.<sup>41</sup> He understood from the outset, as he would later put it, that terms like 'party' were 'the currency of a continuing and dynamic polemical debate, their meanings fluid, contested, and partisan', and that attempts to pin them down into stable analytic categories missed the essence of what political argument and behaviour was about.<sup>42</sup>

*Modernity and the Victorians* can therefore be seen, in some degree, as an attempt to reconstruct the origins of the intellectual backdrop against which Angus initially believed himself to be writing, and to assert the continued influence of an interpretative framework which he had always deemed fundamentally unsatisfactory. There will be different views on precisely how far 'modernization theory' has remained a significant factor in Victorian historiography since the 1980s. But it is salutary to be reminded that analyses of the Victorians based around concepts of 'improvement' and

<sup>41</sup> For his mature thoughts on this problem, see Angus Hawkins, 'Political Parties', in D. Brown, R. Crowcroft and G. Pentland (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Modern British Political History 1800–2000* (2018), pp. 247–65.

<sup>42</sup> Hawkins, *Victorian Political Culture*, p. 21.

‘progress’—of which there have been such an industrial quantity—owed as much as they did to such a particular, and in some respects quite peculiar, scholarly tradition. In making this case, the book aims to clear the ground for alternative interpretative paradigms. The second half of the volume, accordingly, offers a pithy crystallisation and clarification of Angus’s own vision of nineteenth-century British politics, society, and intellectual culture, neatly conceptualised in the title of the fourth chapter, ‘The Victorians without Modernity’. Here, tradition, reaction, and contingency matter just as much as ‘progressive’ change. Angus argues that the impact of urbanisation and industrialisation was strictly limited, that there was no such thing as a rigid ‘two-party’ binary, that parliamentary reform did not point in one direction, that ‘class consciousness’ was of restricted significance, and that the political and cultural power of religious conviction and of visions of the (English) past remained largely unchallenged. Readers may reflect that Angus’s preoccupation with the mid-nineteenth-century era of ‘parliamentary government’ perhaps encouraged him to prioritise the more established and slowly-changing aspects of Victorian culture, at the expense of some of the more spectacular transformations of the *fin de siècle*.

The text which follows is not substantively different from that which Angus had submitted to Oxford University Press, and had partially revised, before his death. Editorial intervention has been limited to necessary stylistic revision, the correction of errors, and the addition of missing references and dates. Angus would, of course, have refined his prose differently, but the goal has been to preserve his distinctive tone. The original sources for statistics and examples cited in the work, where not footnoted, can usually be found in the pages of *Victorian Political Culture*. The structure of the text is as Angus left it, though he had hoped to find a way of integrating the first and second chapters. He had also planned to expand *Modernity and the Victorians* in several directions, in response to the Press’s readers’ reports. He would have said more about the monarchy; he would have added a more sizeable section on the historiography of the British empire; and he would have included substantive discussions of the seminal mid-twentieth-century

scholarship of Norman Gash and Arthur Aspinall, as well as taking full account of more recent work by Donald Bloxham, Matthew Hilton and James McKay, Paul Readman, and Frank Trentmann.<sup>43</sup> It may be hoped that other scholars will fill out these dimensions, in other contexts, in due course. In doing so, they might also reflect that there are further problems which deserve to be addressed about the relations between ‘modernization theory’ and Victorian historiography. Can we do more with the Victorians’ own concepts of the ‘modern’, ‘progress’, and ‘improvement’? How dominant have ‘modernity’-centric interpretations of the nineteenth century ever really been in English historiography? How far were foreign historians of Britain taken in by the same narratives? And, more broadly, how distinctive do ‘modernization’-inflected approaches to the British nineteenth century look by comparison with scholarship on other countries, and indeed on other periods? Readers of *Modernity and the Victorians* are likely to find themselves struck by more such questions. If so, the work will have fulfilled its intended purpose of provoking reflection and debate.

Alex Middleton

<sup>43</sup> Specifically, of Donald Bloxham, *History and Morality* (2020); Matthew Hilton and James McKay (eds), *The Ages of Voluntarism: How We Got to the Big Society* (2011); Angela Bartie, Linda Fleming, Mark Freeman, Alexander Hutton, and Paul Readman (eds), *Restaging the Past: Historical Pageants, Culture and Society in Modern Britain* (2020); Frank Trentmann (ed.) *Paradoxes of Civil Society: New Perspectives on Modern German and British History* (2000).



