

**JAMES BRYCE  
VISCOUNT BRYCE**



**STUDIES IN CONTEMPORARY  
BIOGRAPHY**

**James Bryce Viscount Bryce**

# **Studies in Contemporary Biography**

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# Table of Contents

PREFACE

DEAN STANLEY [16]

THOMAS HILL GREEN

ARCHBISHOP TAIT [19]

ANTHONY TROLLOPE [21]

JOHN RICHARD GREEN [22]

SIR GEORGE JESSEL, MASTER OF THE ROLLS

LORD CHANCELLOR CAIRNS

BISHOP FRASER

SIR STAFFORD HENRY NORTHCOTE, EARL OF IDDESLEIGH  
[34]

CHARLES STEWART PARNELL

CARDINAL MANNING

EDWARD AUGUSTUS FREEMAN [37]

ROBERT LOWE VISCOUNT SHERBROOKE [41]

WILLIAM ROBERTSON SMITH

HENRY SIDGWICK

EDWARD ERNEST BOWEN [53]

EDWIN LAWRENCE GODKIN

LORD ACTON

WILLIAM EWART GLADSTONE

INDEX



# PREFACE

## [Table of Contents](#)

The first and the last of these Studies relate to persons whose fame has gone out into all lands, and about whom so much remains to be said that one who has reflected on their careers need not offer an apology for saying something. Of the other eighteen sketches, some deal with eminent men whose names are still familiar, but whose personalities have begun to fade from the minds of the present generation. The rest treat of persons who came less before the public, but whose brilliant gifts and solid services to the world make them equally deserve to be remembered with honour. Having been privileged to enjoy their friendship, I have felt it a duty to do what a friend can to present a faithful record of their excellence which may help to keep their memory fresh and green.

These Studies are, however, not to be regarded as biographies, even in miniature. My aim has rather been to analyse the character and powers of each of the persons described, and, as far as possible, to convey the impression which each made in the daily converse of life. All of them, except Lord Beaconsfield, were personally, and most of them intimately, known to me.

In the six Studies which treat of politicians I have sought to set aside political predilections, and have refrained from expressing political opinions, though it has now and then been necessary to point out instances in which the subsequent course of events has shown the action of Lord Beaconsfield, Mr. Lowe, and Mr. Gladstone to have been right or wrong (as the case may be) in the action they respectively took.

The sketches of T. H. Green, E. A. Freeman, and J. R. Green were originally written for English magazines, and most of the other Studies have been published in the United States. All of those that had already appeared in print have been enlarged and revised, some indeed virtually rewritten. I have to thank the proprietors of the *English Historical Review*, the *Contemporary Review*, and the *New York Nation*, as also the Century Company of New York, for their permission to use so much of the matter of the volume as had appeared (in its original form) in the organs belonging to them respectively.

*March 6, 1903.*

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xi

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1

BENJAMIN DISRAELI, EARL OF BEACONSFIELD <sup>[1]</sup>

When Lord Beaconsfield died in 1881 we all wondered what people would think of him fifty years thereafter. Divided as our own judgments were, we asked whether he would still seem a problem. Would opposite views regarding his aims, his ideas, the sources of his power, still divide the learned, and perplex the ordinary reader? Would men complain that history cannot be good for much when, with the abundant materials at her disposal, she had not framed a consistent

theory of one who played so great a part in so ample a theatre? People called him a riddle; and he certainly affected a sphinx-like attitude. Would the riddle be easier then than it was for us, from among whom the man had even now departed?

When he died, there were many in England who revered him as a profound thinker and a lofty character, animated by sincere patriotism. Others, probably as numerous, held him for no better than a cynical charlatan, bent through life on his own advancement, who permitted no sense of public duty, and very little human compassion, to stand in the way of his insatiate ambition. The rest did not know what to think. They felt in him the presence of power; they felt also something repellent. They could not understand how a man who seemed hard and unscrupulous could win so much attachment and command so much obedience.

Since Disraeli departed nearly one-half of those fifty years has passed away. Few are living who can claim to have been his personal friends, none who were personal enemies. No living statesman professes to be his political disciple. The time has come when one may discuss his character and estimate his career without being suspected of doing so with a party bias or from a party motive. Doubtless those who condemn and those who defend or excuse some momentous parts of his conduct, such as, for instance, his policy in the East and in Afghanistan from 1876 to 1879, will differ in their judgment of his wisdom and foresight. If this be a difficulty, it is an unavoidable one, and may never quite disappear. There were in the days of Augustus some who blamed that sagacious ruler for seeking to check the expansion of the Roman Empire. There were in the days of King Henry the Second some who censured and others who praised him for issuing the Constitutions of Clarendon. Both questions still remain open to argument; and the conclusion any one forms must affect in some measure his judgment of



each monarch's statesmanship. So differences of opinion about particular parts of Disraeli's long career need not prevent us from dispassionately inquiring what were the causes that enabled him to attain so striking a success, and what is the place which posterity is likely to assign to him among the rulers of England.

First, a few words about the salient events of his life, not by way of writing a biography, but to explain what follows.

He was born in London, in 1804. His father, Isaac Disraeli, was a literary man of cultivated taste and independent means, who wrote a good many books, the best known of which is his *Curiosities of Literature*, a rambling work, full of entertaining matter. He belonged to that division of the Jewish race which is called the Sephardim, and traces itself to Spain and Portugal;<sup>[2]</sup> but he had ceased to frequent the synagogue—had, in fact, broken with his co-religionists. Isaac had access to good society, so that the boy saw eminent and polished men from his early years, and, before he had reached manhood, began to make his way in drawing-rooms where he met the wittiest and best-known people of the day. He was articled to a firm of attorneys in London in 1821, but after two or three years quitted a sphere for which his peculiar gifts were ill suited.<sup>[3]</sup> Samuel Rogers, the poet, took a fancy to him, and had him baptized at the age of thirteen. As he grew up, he was often to be seen with Count d'Orsay and Lady Blessington, well-known figures who fluttered on the confines of fashion and Bohemia. It is worth remarking that he never went either to a public school or to a university. In England it has become the fashion to assume that nearly all the persons who have shone in public life have been educated in one of the great public schools, and that they owe to its training their power of dealing with men and assemblies. Such a superstition is sufficiently refuted by the examples of men like Pitt, Macaulay, Bishop Wilberforce, Disraeli, Cobden, Bright, and



Cecil Rhodes, not to add instances drawn from Ireland and Scotland, where till very recently there have been no public schools in the current English sense.

Disraeli first appeared before the public in 1826, when he published *Vivian Grey*, an amazing book to be the production of a youth of twenty-two. Other novels—*The Young Duke*, *Venetia*, *Contarini Fleming*, *Henrietta Temple*—maintained without greatly increasing his reputation between 1831 and 1837. Then came two political stories, *Coningsby* and *Sybil*, in 1844 and 1845, followed by *Tancred* in 1847, and the *Life of Lord George Bentinck* in 1852; with a long interval of silence, till, in 1870, he produced *Lothair*, in 1880 *Endymion*. Besides these he published in 1839 the tragedy of *Alarcos*, and in 1835 the more ambitious *Revolutionary Epick*, neither of which had much success. In 1828-31 he took a journey through the East, visiting Constantinople, Syria, and Egypt, and it was then, no doubt, in lands peculiarly interesting to a man of his race, that he conceived those ideas about the East and its mysterious influences which figure largely in some of his stories, notably in *Tancred*, and which in 1878 had no small share in shaping his policy and that of England. Meanwhile, he had not forgotten the political aspirations which we see in *Vivian Grey*. In 1832, just before the passing of the Reform Bill, he appeared as candidate for the petty borough of High Wycombe in Buckinghamshire, and was defeated by a majority of twenty-three to twelve, so few were the voters in many boroughs of those days. After the Bill had enlarged the constituency, he tried his luck twice again, in 1833 and 1835, both times unsuccessfully, and came before two other boroughs also, Taunton and Marylebone, though in the latter case no contest took place. Such activity in a youth with little backing from friends and comparatively slender means marked him already as a man of spirit and ambition. His

next attempt was more lucky. At the general election of 1837 he was returned for Maidstone.

His political professions during this period have been keenly canvassed; nor is it easy to form a fair judgment on them. In 1832 he had sought and obtained recommendations from Joseph Hume and Daniel O'Connell, and people had therefore set him down as a Radical. Although, however, his professions of political faith included dogmas which, like triennial parliaments, the ballot, and the imposition of a new land-tax, were part of the so-called "Radical" platform, still there was a vague and fanciful note in his utterances, and an aversion to the conventional Whig way of putting things, which showed that he was not a thorough-going adherent of any of the then existing political parties, but was trying to strike out a new line and attract men by the promise of something fresher and bolder than the recognised schools offered. In 1834 his hostility to Whiggism was becoming more pronounced, and a tenderness for some Tory doctrines more discernible. Finally, in 1835, he appeared as an avowed Tory, accepting the regular creed of the party, and declaring himself a follower of Sir Robert Peel, but still putting forward a number of views peculiar to himself, which he thereafter developed not only in his speeches but in his novels. *Coningsby* and *Sybil* were meant to be a kind of manifesto of the "Young England" party—a party which can hardly be said to have existed outside his own mind, though a small knot of aristocratic youths who caught up and repeated his phrases seemed to form a nucleus for it.

The fair conclusion from his deliverances during these early years is that he was at first much more of a Liberal than a Tory, yet with ideas distinctively his own which made him appear in a manner independent of both parties. The old party lines might seem to have been almost effaced by the struggle over the Reform Bill; and it was natural for a bold and inventive mind to imagine a new departure, and put

forward a programme in which a sort of Radicalism was mingled with doctrines of a different type. But when it became clear after a time that the old political divisions still subsisted, and that such a distinctive position as he had conceived could not be maintained, he then, having to choose between one or other of the two recognised parties, chose the Tories, dropping some tenets he had previously advocated which were inconsistent with their creed, but retaining much of his peculiar way of looking at political questions. How far the change which passed over him was a natural development, how far due to mere calculations of interest, there is little use discussing: perhaps he did not quite know himself. Looking back, we of to-day might be inclined to think that he received more blame for it than he deserved, but contemporary observers generally set it down to a want of principle. In one thing, however, he was consistent then, and remained consistent ever after—his hearty hatred of the Whigs. There was something in the dryness and coldness of the great Whig families, their stiff constitutionalism, their belief in political economy, perhaps also their occasional toyings with the Nonconformists (always an object of dislike to Disraeli), which roused all the antagonisms of his nature, personal and Oriental.

When he entered the House of Commons he was already well known to fashionable London, partly by his striking face and his powers of conversation, partly by the eccentricities of his dress—he loved bright-coloured waistcoats, and decked himself with rings—partly by his novels, whose satirical pungency had made a noise in society. He had also become, owing to his apparent change of front, the object of angry criticism. A quarrel with Daniel O'Connell, in the course of which he challenged the great Irishman to fight a duel, each party having described the other with a freedom of language bordering on scurrility, made him, for a time, the talk of the political world. Thus there was more curiosity

evoked by his first speech than usually awaits a new member. It was unsuccessful, not from want of ability, but because its tone did not suit the temper of the House of Commons, and because a hostile section of the audience sought to disconcert him by their laughter. Undeterred by this ridicule, he continued to speak, though in a less ambitious and less artificial vein, till after a few years he had become one of the most conspicuous unofficial members. At first no one had eulogised Peel more warmly, but after a time he edged away from the minister, whether repelled by his coldness, which showed that in that quarter no promotion was to be expected, or shrewdly perceiving that Peel was taking a line which would ultimately separate him from the bulk of the Conservative party. This happened in 1846, when Peel, convinced that the import duties on corn were economically unsound, proposed their abolition. Disraeli, who, since 1843, had taken repeated opportunities of firing stray shots at the powerful Prime Minister, now bore a foremost part not only in attacking him, but in organising the Protectionist party, and prompting its leader, Lord George Bentinck. In embracing free trade, Peel carried with him his own personal friends and disciples, men like Gladstone, Sidney Herbert, Lord Lincoln, Sir James Graham, Cardwell, and a good many others, the intellectual *élite* of the Tory party. The more numerous section who clung to Protection had numbers, wealth, respectability, cohesion, but brains and tongues were scarce. An adroit tactician and incisive speaker was of priceless value to them. Such a man they found in Disraeli, while he gained, sooner than he had expected, an opportunity of playing a leading part in the eyes of Parliament and the country. In the end of 1848, Lord George Bentinck, who, though a man of natural force and capable of industry when he pleased, had been to some extent Disraeli's mouthpiece, died, leaving his prompter indisputably the keenest intellect in the Tory-Protectionist party. In 1850, Peel, who might possibly have in time

brought the bulk of that party back to its allegiance to him, was killed by a fall from his horse. The Peelites drifted more and more towards Liberalism, so that when Lord Derby, who, in 1851, had been commissioned as head of the Tory party to form a ministry, invited them to join him, they refused to do so, imagining him to be still in favour of the corn duties, and resenting the behaviour of the Protectionist section to their own master. Being thus unable to find one of them to lead his followers in the House of Commons, Lord Derby turned in 1852 to Disraeli, giving him, with the leadership, the office of Chancellor of the Exchequer. The appointment was thought a strange one, because Disraeli brought to it absolutely no knowledge of finance and no official experience. He had never been so much as an Under-Secretary. The Tories themselves murmured that one whom they regarded as an adventurer should be raised to so high a place. After a few months Lord Derby's ministry fell, defeated on the Chancellor of the Exchequer's Budget, which had been vehemently attacked by Mr. Gladstone. This was the beginning of that protracted duel between him and Mr. Disraeli which lasted down till the end of the latter's life.

For the following fourteen years Disraeli's occupation was that of a leader of Opposition, varied by one brief interval of office in 1858-59. His party was in a permanent minority, so that nothing was left for its chief but to fight with skill, courage, and resolution a series of losing battles. This he did with admirable tenacity of purpose. Once or twice in every session he used to rally his forces for a general engagement, and though always defeated, he never suffered himself to be dispirited by defeat. During the rest of the time he was keenly watchful, exposing all the mistakes in domestic affairs of the successive Liberal Governments, and when complications arose in foreign politics, always professing, and generally manifesting, a patriotic desire not to embarrass the Executive, lest national interests should

suffer. Through all these years he had to struggle, not only with a hostile majority in office, but also with disaffection among his own followers. Many of the landed aristocracy could not bring themselves to acquiesce in the leadership of a new man, of foreign origin, whose career had been erratic, and whose ideas they found it hard to assimilate. Ascribing their long exclusion from power to his presence, they more than once conspired to dethrone him. In 1861 these plots were thickest, and Disraeli was for a time left almost alone. But as it happened, there never arose in the House of Commons any one on the Conservative side possessing gifts of speech and of strategy comparable to those which in him had been matured and polished by long experience, while he had the address to acquire an ascendancy over the mind of Lord Derby, still the titular head of the party, who, being a man of straightforward character, high social position, and brilliant oratorical talent, was therewithal somewhat lazy and superficial, and therefore disposed to lean on his lieutenant in the Lower House, and to borrow from him those astute schemes of policy which Disraeli was fertile in devising. Thus, through Lord Derby's support, and by his own imperturbable confidence, he frustrated all the plots of the malcontent Tories. New men came up who had not witnessed his earlier escapades, but knew him only as the bold and skilful leader of their party in the House of Commons. He made himself personally agreeable to them, encouraged them in their first efforts, diffused his ideas among them, stimulated the local organisation of the party, and held out hopes of great things to be done when fortune should at last revisit the Tory banner.

While Lord Palmerston lived, these exertions seemed to bear little fruit. That minister had, in his later years, settled down into a sort of practical Toryism, and both parties acquiesced in his rule. But, on his death, the scene changed. Lord Russell and Mr. Gladstone brought forward a Reform Bill

strong enough to evoke the latent Conservative feeling of a House of Commons which, though showing a nominally Liberal majority, had been chosen under Palmerstonian auspices. The defeat of the Bill, due to the defection of the more timorous Whigs, was followed by the resignation of Lord Russell's Ministry. Lord Derby and Mr. Disraeli came into power, and, next year, carried a Reform Bill which, as it was finally shaped in its passage through the House, really went further than Lord Russell's had done, enfranchising a much larger number of the working classes in boroughs. To have carried this Bill remains the greatest of Disraeli's triumphs. He had to push it gently through a hostile House of Commons by wheedling a section of the Liberal majority, against the appeals of their legitimate leader. He had also to persuade his own followers to support a measure which they had all their lives been condemning, and which was, or in their view ought to have been, more dangerous to the Constitution than the one which they and the recalcitrant Whigs had thrown out in the preceding year. He had, as he happily and audaciously expressed it, to educate his party into doing the very thing which they (though certainly not he himself) had cordially and consistently denounced.

The process was scarcely complete when the retirement of Lord Derby, whose health had given way, opened Disraeli's path to the post of first Minister of the Crown. He dissolved Parliament, expecting to receive a majority from the gratitude of the working class whom his Act had admitted to the suffrage. To his own surprise, and to the boundless disgust of the Tories, a Liberal House of Commons was again returned, which drove him and his friends once more into the cold shade of Opposition. He was now sixty-four years of age, had suffered an unexpected and mortifying discomfiture, and had no longer the great name of Lord Derby to cover him. Disaffected voices were again heard among his own party, while the Liberals, reinstalled in



power, were led by the rival whose unequalled popularity in the country made him for the time omnipotent. Still Mr. Disraeli was not disheartened. He fought the battle of apparently hopeless resistance with his old tact, wariness, and tenacity, losing no occasion for any criticism that could damage the measures—strong and large measures—which Mr. Gladstone's Government brought forward.

Before long the tide turned. The Dissenters resented the Education Act of 1870. A reaction in favour of Conservatism set in, which grew so fast that, in 1874, the general election gave, for the first time since 1846, a decided Conservative majority. Mr. Disraeli became again Prime Minister, and now a Prime Minister no longer on sufferance, but with the absolute command of a dominant party, rising so much above the rest of the Cabinet as to appear the sole author of its policy. In 1876, feeling the weight of age, he transferred himself to the House of Lords as Earl of Beaconsfield. The policy he followed (from 1876 till 1880) in the troubles which arose in the Turkish East out of the insurrection in Herzegovina and the massacres in Bulgaria, as well as that subsequently pursued in Afghanistan and in South Africa, while it received the enthusiastic approval of the soldiers, the stockbrokers, and the richer classes generally, raised no less vehement opposition in other sections of the nation, and especially in those two which, when heartily united and excited, have usually been masters of England—the Protestant Nonconformists and the upper part of the working class. An election fought with unusual heat left him in so decided a minority that he resigned office in April 1880, without waiting for an adverse vote in Parliament. When the result had become clear he observed, "They," meaning his friends, "will come in again, but I shall not." A year later he died.

Here is a wonderful career, not less wonderful to those who live in the midst of English politics and society than it

appears to observers in other countries. A man with few external advantages, not even that of education at a university, where useful friendships are formed, with grave positive disadvantages in his Jewish extraction and the vagaries of his first years of public life, presses forward, step by step, through slights and disappointments which retard but never dishearten him, assumes as of right the leadership of a party—the aristocratic party, the party in those days peculiarly suspicious of new men and poor men—wins a reputation for sagacity which makes his early errors forgotten, becomes in old age the favourite of a court, the master of a great country, one of the three or four arbiters of Europe. There is here more than one problem to solve, or, at least, a problem with more than one aspect. What was the true character of the man who had sustained such a part? Did he hold any principles, or was he merely playing with them as counters? By what gifts or arts did he win such a success? Was there really a mystery beneath the wizard's robe which he delighted to wrap around him? And how, being so unlike the Englishmen among whom his lot was cast, did he so fascinate and rule them?

Imagine a man of strong will and brilliant intellectual powers, belonging to an ancient and persecuted race, who finds himself born in a foreign country, amid a people for whose ideas and habits he has no sympathy and scant respect. Suppose him proud, ambitious, self-confident—too ambitious to rest content in a private station, so self-confident as to believe that he can win whatever he aspires to. To achieve success, he must bend his pride, must use the language and humour the prejudices of those he has to deal with; while his pride avenges itself by silent scorn or thinly disguised irony. Accustomed to observe things from without, he discerns the weak points of all political parties, the hollowness of institutions and watchwords, the instability of popular passion. If his imagination be more susceptible than

his emotions, his intellect more active than his conscience, the isolation in which he stands and the superior insight it affords him may render him cold, calculating, self-centred. The sentiment of personal honour may remain, because his pride will support it; and he will be tenacious of the ideas which he has struck out, because they are his own. But for ordinary principles of conduct he may have small regard, because he has not grown up under the conventional morality of the time and nation, but has looked on it merely as a phenomenon to be recognised and reckoned with, because he has noted how much there is in it of unreality or pharisaism—how far it sometimes is from representing or expressing either the higher judgments of philosophy or the higher precepts of religion. Realising and perhaps exaggerating the power of his own intelligence, he will secretly revolve schemes of ambition wherein genius, uncontrolled by fears or by conscience, makes all things bend to its purposes, till the scruples and hesitations of common humanity seem to him only parts of men's cowardice or stupidity. What success he will win when he comes to carry out such schemes in practice will largely depend on the circumstances in which he finds himself, as well as on his gift for judging of them. He may become a Napoleon. He may fall in a premature collision with forces which want of sympathy has prevented him from estimating.

In some of his novels, and most fully in the first of them, Mr. Disraeli sketched a character and foreshadowed a career not altogether unlike that which has just been indicated. It would be unfair to treat as autobiographical, though some of his critics have done so, the picture of Vivian Grey. What that singular book shows is that, at an age when his contemporaries were lads at college, absorbed in cricket matches or Latin verse-making, Disraeli had already meditated profoundly on the conditions and methods of

worldly success, had rejected the allurements of pleasure and the attractions of literature, as well as the ideal life of philosophy, had conceived of a character isolated, ambitious, intense, resolute, untrammelled by scruples, who moulds men to his purposes by the sheer force of his intellect, humouring their foibles, using their weaknesses, and luring them into his chosen path by the bait of self-interest.

To lay stress on the fact that Mr. Disraeli was of Hebrew birth is not, though some of his political antagonists stooped so to use it, to cast any reproach upon him: it is only to note a fact of the utmost importance for a proper comprehension of his position. The Jews were at the beginning of the nineteenth century still foreigners in England, not only on account of their religion, with its mass of ancient rites and usages, but also because they were filled with the memory of centuries of persecution, and perceived that in some parts of Europe the old spirit of hatred had not died out. The antiquity of their race, their sense of its long-suffering and isolation, their pride in the intellectual achievements of those ancestors whose blood, not largely mixed with that of any other race, flows in their veins, lead the stronger or more reflective spirits to revenge themselves by a kind of scorn upon the upstart Western peoples among whom their lot is cast. The mockery one finds in Heinrich Heine could not have come from a Teuton. Even while imitating, as the wealthier of them have latterly begun to imitate, the manners and luxury of those nominal Christians among whom they live, they retain their feeling of detachment, and are apt to regard with a coldly observant curiosity the beliefs, prejudices, enthusiasms of the nations of Europe. The same passionate intensity which makes the grandeur of the ancient Hebrew literature still lives among them, though often narrowed by ages of oppression, and gives them the peculiar effectiveness that comes from turning all the

powers of the mind, imaginative as well as reasoning, into a single channel, be that channel what it may. They produce, in proportion to their numbers, an unusually large number of able and successful men, as any one may prove by recounting the eminent Jews of the last seventy years. This success has most often been won in practical life, in commerce, or at the bar, or in the press (which over the European continent they so largely control); yet often also in the higher walks of literature or science, less frequently in art, most frequently in music.

Mr. Disraeli had three of these characteristics of his race<sup>21</sup> in full measure—detachment, intensity, the passion for material success. Nature gave him a resolute will, a keen and precociously active intellect, a vehement individuality; that is to say, a consciousness of his own powers, and a determination to make them recognised by his fellows. In some men, the passion to succeed is clogged by the fear of failure; in others, the sense of their greatness is self-sufficing and indisposes them to effort. But with him ambition spurred self-confidence, and self-confidence justified ambition. He grew up in a cultivated home, familiar not only with books but with the brightest and most polished men and women of the day, whose conversation sharpened his wits almost from childhood. No religious influences worked upon him, for his father had ceased to be a Jew in faith without becoming even nominally a Christian, and there is little in his writings to show that he had ever felt anything more than an imaginative, or what may be called an historical, interest in religion.<sup>[4]</sup> Thus his development was purely intellectual. The society he moved in was a society of men and women of the world—witty, superficial in its interests, without seriousness or reverence. He felt himself no Englishman, and watched English life and politics as a student of natural history might watch the habits of bees or ants. English society was then, and perhaps is still,

more complex, more full of inconsistencies, of contrasts between theory and practice, between appearances and realities, than that of any other country. Nowhere so much limitation of view among the fashionable, so much pharisaism among the respectable, so much vulgarity among the rich, mixed with so much real earnestness, benevolence, and good sense; nowhere, therefore, so much to seem merely ridiculous to one who looked at it from without, wanting the sympathy which comes from the love of mankind, or even from the love of one's country. It was natural for a young man with Disraeli's gifts to mock at what he saw. But he would not sit still in mere contempt. The thirst for power and fame gave him no rest. He must gain what he saw every one around him struggling for. He must triumph over these people whose follies amused him; and the sense that he perceived and could use their follies would add zest to his triumph. He might have been a great satirist; he resolved to become a great statesman. For such a career, his Hebrew detachment gave him some eminent advantages. It enabled him to take a cooler and more scientific view of the social and political phenomena he had to deal with. He was not led astray by party cries. He did not share vulgar prejudices. He calculated the forces at work as an engineer calculates the strength of his materials, the strain they have to bear from the wind, and the weights they must support. And what he had to plan was not the success of a cause, which might depend on a thousand things out of his ken, but his own success, a simpler matter.

A still greater source of strength lay in his Hebrew intensity. It would have pleased him, so full of pride in the pure blood of his race,<sup>[5]</sup> to attribute to that purity the singular power of concentration which the Jews undoubtedly possess. They have the faculty of throwing the whole stress of their natures into the pursuit of one object, fixing their eyes on it alone, sacrificing to it other desires, clinging to it even when

it seems unattainable. Disraeli was only twenty-eight when he made his first attempt to enter the House of Commons. Four repulses did not discourage him, though his means were but scanty to support such contests; and the fifth time he succeeded. When his first speech in Parliament had been received with laughter, and politicians were congratulating themselves that this adventurer had found his level, he calmly told them that he had always ended by succeeding in whatever he attempted, and that he would succeed in this too. He received no help from his own side, who regarded him with suspicion, but forced himself into prominence, and at last to leadership, by his complete superiority to rebuffs. Through the long years in which he had to make head against a majority in the House of Commons, he never seemed disheartened by his repeated defeats, never relaxed the vigilance with which he watched his adversaries, never indulged himself (though he was physically indolent and often in poor health) by staying away from Parliament, even when business was slack; never missed an opportunity for exposing a blunder of his adversaries, or commending the good service of one of his own followers. The same curious tenacity was apparent in his ideas. Before he was twenty-two years of age he had, under the inspiration of Bolingbroke, excogitated a theory of the Constitution of England, of the way England should be governed at home and her policy directed abroad, from which he hardly swerved through all his later life. Often as he was accused of inconsistency, he probably believed himself to be, and in a sense he was, substantially faithful, I will not say to the same doctrines, but to the same notions or tendencies; and one could discover from the phrases he employed how he fancied himself to be really following out these old notions, even when his conduct seemed opposed to the traditions of his party.<sup>[6]</sup> The weakness of intense minds is their tendency to narrowness, and this weakness was in so far his that, while always ready for new expedients, he was not



accessible to new ideas. Indeed, the old ideas were too much a part of himself, stamped with his own individuality, to be forsaken or even varied. He did not love knowledge, nor enjoy speculation for its own sake; he valued views as they pleased his imagination or as they carried practical results with them; and having framed his theory once for all and worked steadily upon its lines, he was not the man to admit that it had been defective, and to set himself in later life to repair it. His pride was involved in proving it correct by applying it.

With this resolute concentration of purpose there went an undaunted courage—a quality less rare among English statesmen, but eminently laudable in him, because for great part of his career he had no family or party connections to back him up, but was obliged to face the world with nothing but his own self-confidence. So far from seeking to conceal his Jewish origin, he displayed his pride in it, and refused all support to the efforts which the Tory party made to maintain the exclusion of Jews from Parliament. Nobody showed more self-possession and (except on two or three occasions) more perfect self-command in the hot strife of Parliament than this suspected stranger. His opponents learnt to fear one who never feared for himself; his followers knew that their chief would not fail them in the hour of danger. His very face and bearing had in them an impassive calmness which magnetised those who watched him. He liked to surround himself with mystery, to pose as remote, majestic, self-centred, to appear above the need of a confidant. He would sit for hours on his bench in the House of Commons, listening with eyes half-shut to furious assaults on himself and his policy, not showing by the movement of a muscle that he had felt a wound; and when he rose to reply would discharge his sarcasms with an air of easy coolness. That this indifference was sometimes simulated appeared by the resentment he showed afterwards.

Ambition such as his could not afford to be scrupulous, nor have his admirers ever claimed conscientiousness as one of his merits. One who sets power and fame before him as the main ends to be pursued may no doubt be restrained by pride from the use of such means as are obviously low and dishonourable. Other questionable means he may reject because he knows that the opinion of those whose good-will and good word he must secure would condemn them. But he will not be likely to allow kindness or compassion to stand in his way; nor will he be very regardful of truth. To a statesman, who must necessarily have many facts in his knowledge, or many plans in his mind, which the interests of his colleagues, or of his party, or of the nation, forbid him to reveal, the temptation to put questioners on a false scent, and to seem to agree where he really dissents, is at all times a strong one. An honest man may sometimes be betrayed into yielding to it; and those who know how difficult are the cases of conscience that arise will not deal harshly with a possibly misleading silence, or even with the evasion of an embarrassing inquiry, where a real public interest can be pleaded, for the existence of such a public interest, if it does not justify, may palliate omissions to make a full disclosure of the facts. All things considered, the standard of truthfulness among English public men has (of course with some conspicuous exceptions) been a high one. Of that standard Disraeli fell short. People did not take his word for a thing as they would have taken the word of the Duke of Wellington, or Lord Althorp, or Lord Derby, or Lord Russell, or even of that not very rigid moralist, Lord Palmerston. Instances of his lapses were not wanting as late as 1877. His behaviour toward Sir Robert Peel, whom he plied with every dart of sarcasm, after having shortly before lavished praises on him, and sought office under him, has often been commented on.<sup>[7]</sup> Disraeli was himself (as those who knew him have often stated) accustomed to justify it by observing that he was then an insignificant personage, to

whom it was supremely important to attract public notice and make a political position; that the opportunity of attacking the powerful Prime Minister, at a moment when their altered attitude towards the Corn Laws had exposed the Ministry to the suspicions of their own party, was too good to be lost; and that he was therefore obliged to assail Peel, though he had himself no particular attachment to the Corn Laws, and believed Peel to have been a *bona-fide* convert. It was therefore no personal resentment against one who had slighted him, but merely the exigencies of his own career, that drove him to this course, whose fortunate result proved the soundness of his calculations.

This defence will not surprise any one who is familiar with Disraeli's earlier novels. These stories are as far as possible from being immoral; that is to say, there is nothing in them unbecoming or corrupting. Friendship, patriotism, love, are all recognised as powerful and worthy motives of conduct. That which is wanting is the sense of right and wrong. His personages have for certain purposes the conventional sense of honour, though seldom a fine sense, but they do not ask whether such and such a course is conformable to principle. They move in a world which is polished, agreeable, dignified, averse to baseness and vulgarity, but in which conscience and religion scarcely seem to exist. The men live for pleasure or fame, the women for pleasure or love.

Some allowance must, of course, be made for the circumstances of Disraeli's position and early training. He was brought up neither a Jew nor a Christian. The elder people who took him by the hand when he entered life, people like Samuel Rogers and Lady Blessington, were not the people to give lessons in morality. Lord Lyndhurst, the first of his powerful political friends, and the man whose example most affected him, was, with all his splendid gifts, conspicuously wanting in political principle. Add to this the isolation in which the young man found himself, standing outside the common stream of English life, not sharing its sentiments, perceiving the hollowness of much that passed for virtue and patriotism, and it is easy to understand how he should have been as perfect a cynic at twenty-five as their experience of the world makes many at sixty. If he had loved truth or mankind, he might have quickly worked through his youthful cynicism. But pride and ambition, the pride of race and the pride of genius, left no room for these sentiments. Nor was his cynicism the fruit merely of a keen and sceptical intelligence. It came from a cold heart.

The pursuit of fame and power, to which he gave all his efforts, is presented in his writings as the only alternative ideal to a life of pleasure; and he probably regarded those who pursued some other as either fools or weaklings. Early in his political life he said one night to Mr. Bright (from whom I heard the anecdote), as they took their umbrellas in the cloak-room of the House of Commons: "After all, what is it that brings you and me here? Fame! This is the true arena. I might have occupied a literary throne; but I have renounced it for this career." The external pomps and trappings of life, titles, stately houses and far-spreading parks, all those gauds and vanities with which sumptuous wealth surrounds itself, had throughout his life a singular fascination for him. He liked to mock at them in his novels, but they fascinated him none the less. One can understand how they might fire the imagination of an ambitious youth who saw them from a distance—might even retain their charm for one who was just struggling into the society which possessed them, and who desired to feel himself the equal of the possessors. It is stranger that, when he had harnessed the English aristocracy to his chariot, and was driving them where he pleased, he should have continued to admire such things. So, however, it was. There was even in him a vein of inordinate deference to rank and wealth which would in a less eminent person have been called snobbishness. In his will he directs that his estate of Hughenden Manor, in Buckinghamshire, shall pass under an entail as strict as he could devise, that the person who succeeds to it shall always bear the name of Disraeli. His ambition is the common, not to say vulgar, ambition of the English *parvenu*, to found a "county family." In his story of *Endymion*, published a few months before his death, the hero, starting from small beginnings, ends by becoming prime minister: this is the crown of his career, the noblest triumph an Englishman can achieve. It might have been thought that one who had been through it all, who had

realised the dreams of his boyhood, who had every opportunity of learning what power and fame come to, would have liked to set forth some other conception of the end of human life, or would not have told the world so naively of his self-content at having attained the aim he had worked for. With most men the flower they have plucked withers. It might have been expected that one who was in other things an ironical cynic would at least have sought to seem disillusionised.

To say that Disraeli's heart was somewhat cold is by no means to say that he was heartless. He was one of those strong natures who permit neither persons nor principles to stand in their way. His doctrine was that politics had nothing to do with sentiment; so those who appealed to him on grounds of humanity appealed in vain. No act of his life ever so much offended English opinion as the airy fashion in which he tossed aside the news of the Bulgarian massacre of 1876. It incensed sections who were strong enough, when thoroughly roused, to bring about his fall. But he was far from being unkindly. He knew how to attach men to him by friendly deeds as well as friendly words. He seldom missed an opportunity of saying something pleasant and cheering to a *débutant* in Parliament, whether of his own party or the opposite. He was not selfish in little things; was always ready to consider the comfort and convenience of those who surrounded him. Age and success, so far from making him morose or supercilious, softened the asperities of his character and developed the affectionate side of it. His last novel, published a few months before his death, contains more human kindness, a fuller recognition of the worth of friendship and the beauty of sisterly and conjugal love, than do the writings of his earlier manhood. What it wants in intellectual power it makes up for in a mellower and more tender tone. Of loyalty to his political friends he was a model, and nothing did more to secure his command of the

party than its sense that his professional honour, so to speak, could be implicitly relied upon. To his wife, a warm-hearted woman older than himself, and inferior to him in education, he was uniformly affectionate and indeed devoted. The first use he made of his power as Prime Minister was to procure for her the title of viscountess. Being once asked point blank by a lady what he thought of his life-long opponent, Mr. Gladstone answered that two things had always struck him as very admirable in Lord Beaconsfield's character—his perfect loyalty to his wife, and his perfect loyalty to his own race. A story used to be told how, in Disraeli's earlier days, when his political position was still far from assured, he and his wife happened to be the guests of the chief of the party, and that chief so far forgot good manners as to quiz Mrs. Disraeli at the dinner-table. Next morning Disraeli, whose visit was to have lasted for some days longer, announced that he must leave immediately. The host besought him to stay, and made all possible apologies. But Disraeli was inexorable, and carried off his wife forthwith. To literary men, whatever their opinions, he was ready to give a helping hand, representing himself as one of their profession. In paying compliments he was singularly expert, and few used the art so well to win friends and disarm enemies. He knew how to please Englishmen, and especially the young, by showing interest in their tastes and pleasures, and, without being what would be called genial, was never wanting in *bonhomie*. In society he was a perfect man of the world—told his anecdote apropos, wound up a discussion by some epigrammatic phrase, talked to the guest next him, if he thought that guest's position made him worth talking to, as he would to an old acquaintance. But he had few intimates; nor did his apparent frankness unveil his real thoughts.

He was not of those who complicate political opposition with private hatreds. Looking on politics as a game, he liked,



when he took off his armour, to feel himself on friendly terms with his antagonists, and often seemed surprised to find that they remembered as personal affronts the blows which he had dealt in the tournament. Two or three years before his death, a friend asked him whether there was in London any one with whom he would not shake hands. Reflecting for a moment, he answered, "Only one," and named Robert Lowe, who had said hard things of him, and to whom, when Lowe was on one occasion in his power, he had behaved with cruelty. Yet his resentments could smoulder long. In *Lothair* he attacked, under a thin disguise, a distinguished man of letters who had criticised his conduct years before. In *Endymion* he gratified what was evidently an ancient grudge by a spiteful presentation of Thackeray, as he had indulged his more bitter dislike of John Wilson Croker by portraying that politician in *Coningsby* under the name of Nicholas Rigby. For the greatest of his adversaries he felt, there is reason to believe, genuine admiration, mingled with inability to comprehend a nature so unlike his own. No passage in the striking speech which that adversary pronounced, one might almost say, over Lord Beaconsfield's grave—a speech which may possibly go down to posterity with its subject—was more impressive than the sentence in which he declared that he had the best reason to believe that, in their constant warfare, Lord Beaconsfield had not been actuated by any personal hostility. Brave men, if they can respect, seldom dislike, a formidable antagonist.

His mental powers were singularly well suited to the rest of his character—were, so to speak, all of a piece with it. One sometimes sees intellects which are out of keeping with the active or emotional parts of the man. One sees persons whose thought is vigorous, clear, comprehensive, while their conduct is timid; or a comparatively narrow intelligence joined to an enterprising spirit; or a sober, reflective,