

Correspondence

To the Editor of *The Journal of British Studies*:

I am writing to make certain that someone, at least, enters a protest against Professor Gertrude Himmelfarb's extraordinary article in the November, 1966, issue of the *J.B.S.* on the Reform Act of 1867. As a teacher of intellectual history, I have long used with admiration her excellent books in the field of "pure" ideas – on Mill, Darwin, and Acton. It is painfully clear that the Reform Act article sees her quite out of her element. Perhaps without realizing it, she has entered another precinct in intellectual history, that of "ideas in politics," which is not susceptible to the use of the same techniques she has so skillfully applied in her other works. One must learn party history intimately, so that one sees a particular crisis against a deep background. As those of us who have worked in this field know, from painful experience, it is alluring but fundamentally disastrous to extrapolate from a few utterances made in a particular political crisis outward to large statements about what constitutes "Conservatism" or "Liberalism." It is certainly dangerous to assume that intellectuals like John Stuart Mill and Walter Bagehot may be taken as speaking for the politicians of their era.

Her article is founded not upon new evidence, but upon what is fundamentally a new guess as to what was going on in people's minds. To be able to make an *informed* guess requires the kind of research in depth which Professor Himmelfarb has obviously not undertaken. To make the guess with such sweeping disdain for everyone else who has ever worked on the problem calls for a much sounder foundation than she has provided.

I can only here suggest, for example, that she totally misunderstands the mind of William Gladstone. Her contempt for him is obvious, and, I might add, somewhat disfiguring in an article which makes large claims upon the open-mindedness of its readers. To make him out a Utilitarian is – there is no other word – nonsense. Even a rudimentary knowledge of Gladstone would reveal not only his distaste for Utilitarianism as a dehumanizing political vision, but the far more compelling influence upon his mind of Edmund Burke, St. Augustine, and Dante, to take just the most prominent of his intellectual sources. Not understanding Gladstone, she is therefore completely disqualified from making the guess that his amendments to Disraeli's bill were insincere

challenges, for such a guess can only be made about anyone when one's knowledge of him is as complete and thoroughly informed as the evidence allows.

We are being asked to ignore, too, half a century of Tory history. They were the enemies par excellence of suffrage reform. It was quite understandable for Gladstone to be astonished at Disraeli's sudden conversion to real household suffrage. Only the year before he had been bitterly attacking Gladstone's reform bill of 1866, which would have added perhaps 400,000 to the electorate, as a degrading "Americanizing" of the constitution. (3 *Hansard* 183: 113, April 27, 1866, gives Gladstone's reply to this charge.) One cannot escape asking, after reading her whole article, if Disraeli and the Conservatives were so supremely confident of the common people, why did they wait forty years before acting upon this benign conviction? Why had they so attacked Gladstone in the preceding years of the 1860s when he had been going about the country trying to convert the nation to a wider suffrage?

I for one am delighted that Professor Himmelfarb is beginning to write about ideas in politics, for this means we shall all be benefitting in the future from her manifest talents at work in a new field. But I am personally convinced that her work will have infinitely more value if she comes to look upon liberalism and conservatism in politics as *political* movements, as distinct from intellectual movements, which must be understood within a historical framework rather than a philosophical one provided by the views of given intellectuals. John Stuart Mill does not speak for William Gladstone, nor do Walter Bagehot or Jeremy Bentham. And if they do not, what happens to her article? I think it is helpful in giving us a better understanding of Disraeli, which is a real service. But as an assessment of the Liberal role in the framing and enactment of the Reform Act of 1867, my own view is that it is founded upon such serious misconceptions — aided, one might suggest, by a certain hostility of attitude — that I cannot take it seriously.

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To the Editor of *The Journal of British Studies*:

I am grateful to Professor Kelley for pointing out to me what I would not otherwise have suspected: that "ideas in politics" are different from "pure ideas," and that "political movements" are

distinct from “intellectual movements.” May I, in turn, remind him of what I am certain he knows: that it is customary to conduct intellectual discourse on an intellectual plane, and that his personal remarks, whether in flattery or abuse, are as irrelevant as they are disagreeable.

Let me address myself to the few points of substance in his letter.

1) Gladstone as a utilitarian: Even I have the “rudimentary knowledge” to realize that in religious matters, for example, Gladstone was not a utilitarian. I was, however, dealing with his political and social views, and I tried to specify in exactly what sense these were utilitarian. Robert Lowe, who prided himself on being a staunch utilitarian, wrote to Gladstone in 1877: “In almost all subjects except the franchise I agree with you more than, I think, with anyone else.” (BM, Add. MSS, 44302, quoted by James Winter in the article cited below.) It may well be that I am unqualified to make an “informed guess” about Gladstone’s mind; but surely Lowe was qualified to do so. As for the “compelling influence” of Burke, Augustine, and Dante: Is Professor Kelley seriously suggesting these as the sources of Gladstone’s liberalism? To this “teacher of intellectual history,” they seem a very odd trinity to have inspired the democratic faith that Professor Kelley seems to attribute to Gladstone. Or is he suggesting that these influences were purely “intellectual” and therefore had nothing to do with Gladstone’s politics — in which case what does he mean by speaking of their “compelling” influence?

2) My “guess” that Gladstone’s amendments were “insincere”: But my guess only echoed Gladstone’s own confessions. (See the quotations on pages 107, 109, and 110 of my article.) Is Gladstone’s testimony also to be disallowed as an ill-informed guess?

3) “Half a century of Tory history”: But it was just this simplistic view of history that my essay was designed to test. Does Professor Kelley mean that because the Tories opposed reform in 1830, they must be assumed to have opposed it in 1867? But the fact is that they did not oppose it in 1867 — which suggests that history, even Tory history, did not stand still.

4) Gladstone vs. Disraeli: If Disraeli favored reform in 1867, I am asked, why did he oppose Gladstone’s bill in 1866? I cannot here repeat the entire argument of my essay. But one good question deserves another: If Gladstone was so ardent a reformer in 1866, why did he resist Disraeli’s reform in 1867? Moreover, if he was so ardent in 1866, why did he then limit himself to only

400,000 new electors (less than half of whom would be of the working class), and why was he later so appalled at the idea of household suffrage? And on the "Americanizing" argument: Does Professor Kelley really wish to inquire into the two protagonists' views of America – not half a century earlier but only a few years earlier, during the Civil War, when Gladstone favored the South and Disraeli the North? Moreover, to say that Gladstone had been "going about the country" during the sixties campaigning for reform gives a highly exaggerated picture of his activities. His most famous speech, of 1864, was, as I explained in my essay, almost immediately nullified by his subsequent remarks. And during the fall and winter of 1866-67, when there were those who were "going about the country" on this issue, he was quietly vacationing in Rome.

5) Mill, Bagehot, and Bentham do not speak for Gladstone: One might think that the whole of my essay dealt with the first three and that Gladstone was never given a hearing at all. In fact, Mill and Bagehot occupy less than 5 pages of a 42-page essay, and Bentham appears not at all. Benthamism does, to be sure, but only in the specific context of the contemporary political literature – *Essays on Reform*, for example. And even Mill and Bagehot are cited only in conjunction with Gladstone, Lowe, and the other party leaders. It is interesting that Professor Kelley should be so distressed by my invocations of these "intellectuals" (yet Mill, after all, was a Member of Parliament at the time, and Bagehot was editor of the *Economist* and a person of considerable political influence) as to ignore the 37 pages devoted to Gladstone, Bright, Lowe, and other unimpeachably political figures.

6) I regret that Professor Kelley cannot take "seriously" my view of Gladstone's politics. Perhaps he can take more seriously the recent findings of reputable scholars who have done the kind of "research in depth" that we both value. I refer to John Vincent, *The Formation of the Liberal Party* (1966); Maurice Cowling, "Disraeli, Derby and Fusion," *Historical Journal*, 1965; and James Winter, "The Cave of Adullam and Parliamentary Reform," *English Historical Review*, 1966. Without implicating these scholars in my own views, I think it fair to say that they effectively demolish the view of Gladstone that Professor Kelley finds so self-evident.

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