

The Rise and Fall of Radical Westminster, 1780-1890 (Studies in Modern History). By Marc Baer. Palgrave Macmillan. 2012. 384pp. £65.00. ISBN 9780230349315.

In the eleven pages which constitute his 'Commencement', Marc Baer reveals the ambitious task facing any biographer of Westminster. In order to understand why what was to late-Georgians 'Radical Westminster' became by the 1880s a bellwether of conservatism, why the 'glue which held together the culture of elections' (p. 10) changed so strikingly, a biographer of Westminster needs not only a command of chronological scope – 1780-1890 in this case – but also thematic breadth. Language, ritual, association, place, personality, violence, democracy, gender, class, and the visual are all encountered, and – Baer suggests – *need to be* encountered in order to give any such biography sufficient gravitas.

Across eight chapters whose stories both compliment one another and function as standalone arguments, the cultural history of politics demonstrates a remarkable and refreshing command of the micro and the macro. Both of these perspectives are enriched by a commitment to observing phenomena over time. Published in a year which saw both the death of Eric Hobsbawm and preparations gathering pace for the fiftieth anniversary of Edward Thompson *Making of the English Working Class*, Baer's approach is fitting. Here then alongside details such as the last appearance of a butcher at the head of a Westminster election procession in George Lamb's 1820 campaign with read grander syntheses. 'Elections in the late Georgian era', Baer writes, 'were about far more than politics, and that by the mid-Victorian era a democratic identity resulted from the social use of political space in the borough of Westminster' (p. 155).

Thus Baer's is a story of how elections changed from being about more than politics to something we might more readily identify as politics. As this excerpt reveals, space plays a significant dynamic in this story. Indeed three chapters located at the heart of this monograph – on 'Crowds', 'Spaces', and 'Rituals' – concern themselves with space. These chapters contain some of *Radical Westminster*'s most enjoyable passages, including those on violence (pp. 116-127) and political dinners (pp. 181-186), sections which also serve to exemplify the text's commitment to seeing politics as a public affair rather than a high-political, parliamentary game (indeed the Houses of Parliament themselves play little more than a supporting role in the text).

Reviewers can only judge the content of a book on what they knew. Few, I expect, know as much about Westminster as Baer. Nonetheless this reader does have a few concerns; some general, others specific. Starting with Baer's strength – his foregrounding of space – the insistence of reading locale into the politics of Westminster does, somewhat curiously, isolate Westminster from the spaces around it. Elsewhere, admirable attempts to read across the period result in awkward compromises – the butcher who attacked Sheridan in 1806 may have been inspired by the print *The Butcher's of Freedom* (p. 103), but given that this Gillray print was published in 1788 was it not more likely that Sheridan's assailant was aping the eighteenth-century cult of the London butcher? (discussed on p. 116); and the proximity between Baer's discussions of upper-class customers of satirical print shops and prints 'appear[ing] in working-class reading rooms and plebeian dwellings' gives the reader a false sense that these processes happened simultaneously. Indeed Baer's deployment of satirical prints – a medium afforded a whole chapter – demands close scrutiny. Whilst acknowledging their complexity (p. 237) and problematising 'mono-causal explanations' of the change from Georgian caricature to Victorian cartoons (p. 24), Baer does not consider, for example, whether Georgian loyalist caricature could be hyper-loyalist to the point of subversion (an argument made by Steve Poole in 'Gillray, Cruikshank & Thelwall: Visual Satire, Physiognomy and the Jacobin Body', *John Thelwall: Critical Reassessments, Praxis* (2011)). Neither does Baer incorporate Todd Porterfield's recent challenge to readings of caricature which assume the medium communicated effectively. Indeed Baer's overlooking of Porterfield's work, reflects a historiography which feels dated and narrow – discussions of female political space omit vibrant scholarship on Chartist women; the analysis of crowds ignores a vast swath of British social history published since the 1990s; and his analysis of space would be enriched by engagement with both urban and cultural geographers. Moreover, Amanda Foreman's *Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire* is not a recent text on the Georgian socialite – it was published in 1998.

All of which should not diminish the skill and bravery with which Baer explains the rise and fall of radical Westminster – few texts would dare to dedicate little more than four pages to a biography of the Whig leader Charles James Fox (p. 43-48), to argue that 'locale has been a neglected variable in life-writing' (p. 67), to lead the reader through its argument with explanatory tables and diagrams more common in the seminar room, or to claim that a generation of Edmund Burke enthusiasts had potentially missed his personal experience of brutality during the 1788 Westminster election (p. 231). As a text crammed full of provocations alone, *Radical Westminster* comes highly recommended.