***The Politics of Empire at the Accession of George III: The East India Company and the Crisis and Transformation of Britain’s Imperial State.* By James M. Vaughn. New Haven: Yale University Press. 2019. 320 pp. $50. ISBN: 9780300208269.**

Max Skjönsberg, University of St Andrews

‘Why did the most politically liberal and commercially dynamic early modern European power establish an autocratic and tributary garrison state in South Asia?’, James M. Vaughn asks at the start of *The Politics of Empire at the Accession of George III.* The author claims that imperial historiography has not managed to escape from the shadow of J. R. Seeley, who argued in the nineteenth century that Britain’s acquisition of India had been unplanned and largely accidental. Framing his book in opposition to economic arguments about the logic of industrial expansion and, more importantly, Namierite assumptions about the unimportance of ideology and principles in eighteenth-century British politics, Vaughn attempts to put political ideas back into imperial historiography. The foundation of the Second British Empire was rooted in nothing short of ‘the political defeat of radical liberalism’, he contends (p. 12). Vaughn’s central idea is that Britain took an illiberal turn in the third quarter of the eighteenth century when ‘a conservative-reactionary political project’ defeated ‘radical Whiggery’. This ‘conditioned the shift from an empire centred around free association and exchange to one largely based on conquest and dominion.’ (Ibid.) The title of Vaughn’s book is a nod to Namier’s magnum opus, *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* (1929). This book has been countered before, notably by John Brewer’s *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III* (1976). As Vaughn rightly stresses, however, Namierite assumptions have not been entirely eviscerated from historiography. Namier was after all one of the most influential British historians of the twentieth century, and everyone who has read him understands why.

Vaughn’s attempt to put ideology – with focus on the metropolitan ‘public sphere’ – at the heart of eighteenth-century British politics should be applauded. More specifically, he demonstrates convincingly that Eastern trade and the East India Company (EIC) occupied a central role in metropolitan debate as well as in high politics. This means that we need to move beyond Seeley’s influential argument that the Second British Empire was founded in ‘in a fit of absence of mind’. In this respect, the book is an important achievement. However, in this review I will criticise Vaughn’s usage of anachronistic terms, especially ‘liberal’ and ‘conservative’ which gained political meaning and currency in the nineteenth century. In Vaughn’s framework, the third quarter of the eighteenth century presented a clash between radicalism, liberalism and progressivism (translated into the eighteenth-century term Whig and especially ‘radical Whig’), on the one hand, and reactionary conservatism, or Tory, on the other. At one point in the book, Vaughn even associates Whig with the ‘Left’ and Tory (and Jacobites) with the ‘Right’ (p. 44), which is something most political historians have wisely ceased doing. Since he equates Toryism with conservatism he has no qualms about labelling self-described Whigs as ‘new Tories’, not because they had much to do with Toryism in the way it was understood at the time but simply because they wanted ‘to preserve the aristocratic-oligarchic character of the British political system’ (p. 114). Historically speaking, this does not make much sense, even though, as it happens, it may be possible to identify a new emerging High Church Toryism in the 1760s, concentrated in Oxford rather than high politics.[[1]](#footnote-1)

I think that the book’s framework, and especially Vaughn’s anachronistic labels and explanatory categories become problematic if one considers Edmund Burke’s party connection, the Rockingham Whigs, who were the successor to the Pelham-Newcastle Whigs (the Old Corps). The Newcastle and Rockingham cadre were ‘establishment Whigs’ who lost their grip on power in the wake of the accession of George III, and to an extent already in the preceding years on the back of the ascendency of the Elder Pitt. These Whigs play an almost negligible part in this book, even though the Rockingham administration of 1765-6 is very briefly discussed (pp. 196-7). Vaughn writes that the general trend of ‘New Toryism’ was only ‘briefly interrupted in July 1766 with the formation of the Chatham administration’ (p. 201), in other words, the government succeeding Rockingham’s. In an endnote, he says that the Rockinghamites sought to steer a ‘middle way’ between ‘new Toryism’ and ‘Whig radicalism’ (p. 287 n93). I think this party connection pose a bigger problem for his explanatory framework, however. The Newcastle and Rockingham Whigs certainly wanted to *preserve* (or, after 1760, restore) the parliamentary settlement of 1688-9. In Vaughn’s terminology, this would classify them as among the ‘conservative-reactionary forces [which] sought to autocratically centralize and militarize Britain’s Atlantic empire and to consolidate the East India Company’s political dominion in Bengal’ (p. 16). Indeed, they may even be ‘new Tories’ in Vaughn’s vocabulary (p. 114). But the Rockingham administration of 1765-6 repealed the Stamp Act and despite the Declaratory Act, which affirmed parliamentary sovereignty over the colonies, the Rockingham Whigs became known as the friends of America in the 1770s. They were not anti-imperial, but they were certainly committed to what they viewed as an ‘empire of liberty’. The Rockinghamites’ position on the EIC evolved from a hands-off approach (based on the imperative to respect its charter) to realising the necessity for regulation. Fox’s India Bill (drafted by Burke) brought down the third administration of this group of Whigs at the end of 1783, and Burke’s major occupation in the last decade of his life was the prosecution of Warren Hastings, Governor-General of India, for misdeeds and corruption. Moreover, Newcastle’s Whigs had earlier opposed Bute’s and Grenville’s cider tax as vociferously as the ‘radical Whigs’ and the ‘bourgeoise’, and Vaughn’s exclusive focus on the latter (pp. 69-70, 134-5) gives the appearance of a clear-cut division between ‘conservative-reactionary forces’ and ‘radicals’. The Rockingham administration of 1765-6 – in which Newcastle served, and which was aristocratic even by eighteenth-century standards, although this did not prevent it from being unusually attuned to merchant and City opinion – repealed the cider tax.

Vaughn writers: ‘Contra Whig historiography, the central political conflict of the late 1750s and 1760s was not a contest between the influence of the Crown and the liberties of Parliament but rather a struggle over the character of the parliamentary settlement achieved in 1688.’ (p. 15; see also p. 230). Since the two were undoubtedly closely related, readers would be forgiven to wonder about the degree to which this is a meaningful distinction at all. Crucial episodes such as ‘Wilkes and Liberty’ and key opposition Whig statements, from Burke’s *Thought on the Cause of the Present Discontents* (1770) to the *Letters of Junius* (1769-70)*,* were explicitly about the influence of the crown and the power of parliament, *as well as* the character of the parliamentary settlement of 1688-9. Vaughn is of course correct that a new political discourse emerged in these decades, a more reformist Whiggism which is usually called ‘radical’ even though this is also an anachronism. Important contributors to this new discourse include the likes of Catharine Macaulay, Richard Price, James Burgh, and Joseph Priestley (n.b. not Richard Priestly as he is called at p. 229).[[2]](#footnote-2) Vaughn focuses on an earlier phase of this tradition and especially the career of the ‘West-Indian’ William Beckford. This group should be distinguished from Burke’s Whiggism – indeed, Burke referred to ‘the Bill of Rights people’ as a ‘a rotten subdivision of a Faction amongst ourselves’.[[3]](#footnote-3) But it would be misleading or at least imprecise to suggest that this new ‘radicalism’ was uninterested in the influence of the Crown and the liberties of Parliament. They agreed with George III about the need to break the Whig aristocracy’s control of politics. At the same time, the ‘radical Whigs’ (if such a coherent group can indeed be identified) and the Rockingham Whigs saw eye to eye on issues such as the cider tax and the Stamp Act, as we have seen, as well as John Wilkes’s right to be elected to the Commons in 1768-70. Finally, if the Rockingham Whigs are included in the traditional ‘ruling class’ in Britain, it would be deeply misleading to suggest that this group as a whole ‘shifted its focus from the threat posed by the Crown to the thread posed from below.’ (p. 114). Many in this aristocratic Whig grouping continued to regard what they saw as the increasing power of the Crown as the main danger well into the 1790s, which is why it took so long for its then-leader Duke of Portland to follow Burke and split with Charles James Fox over the French Revolution. These Whigs were also periodically concerned with the threat from below, but my point is simply to question whether a decisive shift happened within the ‘ruling class’, and to point out that this may not be a meaningful monolithic category at all because of the diversity of opinion.

Vaughn’s impressive study demonstrates that principles and ideas were much more important in British politics in the third quarter of the eighteenth century than neo-Namierite readings would grant. However, the battle lines were messier, much more complex and frankly more interesting than his framework and stringent categories allow for. Eighteenth-century politics rarely fits easily with our political categories, and the usage of terms such as ‘conservative-reactionary’, ‘liberal’, ‘progressive’ and even ‘radical’ in eighteenth-century contexts often raises more questions than it answers.

1. Niall O’Flaherty, *Utilitarianism in the Age of Enlightenment: The Moral and Political Thought of William Paley* (Cambridge, 2019), pp. 182-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In another rare slip in the book, John Trenchard’s co-author of *Cato’s Letters* is referred to as Robert Gordon instead of Thomas Gordon. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Burke to Richard Shackleton, 15 August 1770, *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke,* ed. Thomas W.

   Copeland et al. (10 vols., Chicago, 1958–1978),II, p. 150. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)