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Benjamin Disraeli: A Venetian lion in Lord Palmerston's zoo

by Stuart Rosenblatt

Disraeli

by Stanley Weintraub
Penguin Books, New York, 1993
717 pages, hardbound, \$30

Stanley Weintraub's new biography allows the perceptive reader to piece together the unfortunate but very important career of Benjamin Disraeli, one of Viscount Palmerston's key stooges and eventual successor as Britain's prime minister.

Disraeli was a "political animal" in the multicultural zoo of Lord Palmerston (Henry John Temple, British Prime Minister and Foreign Minister during much of the 1830-1865 period), as so trenchantly illustrated by a Schiller Institute conference panel on "Lord Palmerston's Multicultural Zoo," on Feb. 20 (see *EIR*, April 11, 1994). Disraeli's critical accomplishments were the founding of the Palmerstonian "Young England Movement," with its political and cultural ramifications, and his translation of Venetian imperial mandates into British foreign policy.

While Disraeli was born in 1804 into the emigré Jewish community in London, his family's roots were in Venice, Italy. His grandfather, Benjamin D'Israeli, was sent from Italy in the mid-18th century to find work in the Venetian community of London. His second marriage was to Sarah Shiprut de Gabai, daughter of a prominent business family and kin of the Chief Rabbi of Venice. Sarah was described as a virago—a turbulent, quarrelsome woman—and she became the model for a character in George Eliot's book *Daniel Deronda*. Benjamin D'Israeli became a prominent stockbroker in London and, upon retirement, joined the committee that erected the new Stock Exchange in London.

Disraeli's father, Isaac D'Israeli, not in need of money, became a well-known literary commentator, spending much of his time writing while squirreled away in the British Museum. He was an ardent devotee of Voltaire and travelled in

the literary circles of Lord Byron, which would later open the way for his son's rise to prominence.

After an abrupt conversion to Christianity at the age of 12, and an early exit from traditional education at the age of 15, Benjamin Disraeli (who dropped the apostrophe to anglicize his name) pursued a short career as a stock swindler (the Venetian tradition), which ended in failure. This was followed by a fit of depression, leading to a series of debauched, romantic tours of Europe and the Middle East. Lord Byron's personal valet, Tita, accompanied Disraeli as guide.

Disraeli was captivated by the Holy Land, and also became a self-proclaimed disciple of the Most Serene Republic of Venice, which had sought to dominate the world following the collapse of the Roman Empire. It bequeathed to the world Aristotelian empiricism, slavery, financial usury, and political divide-and-conquer stratagems. It had also transplanted many of its operatives into England from the 16th through 18th centuries for the purpose of spreading its ideas and designs.

Isaac D'Israeli's literary circles spilled over into the corrupt salons, and boudoirs, of decadent 19th-century England. After returning from his Byronesque tours of Europe and the Near East, the ambitious Benjamin clawed and slept his way into Parliament through these networks. He also launched his career as an author of political and cultural novels of the upper crust with a series of autobiographical works. Of an early work, *The Young Duke*, Disraeli said, "It is a series of scenes, every one of which would make the fortune of a fashionable novel: I am confident of its success, and that it will complete the corruption of public taste."

Two other books written in this period reflected his emerging political and cultural outlook. *Vivian Grey* (1826) marked Disraeli's entry in London's "high society" and would later serve as the inspiration for Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Grey*. In another novel, *Contarini Fleming* (1832), penned after Disraeli's tours of the continent, the protagonist's mother is Venetian, and names her son, the young hero seeking his roots in the "Serenissima Republic," Contarini, after the infamous Venetian noble family.

'Young England'

Following the passage of the 1832 Reform Bill, which expanded the number of seats in Parliament, Disraeli was sponsored by the Conservative power broker, Lord Lyndhurst, and elected to a seat in Parliament in 1837.

In 1842, the Conservative Disraeli founded "Young England," a parliamentary clique that agitated for a dramatic change in British politics. It resembled other radical, anti-establishment movements emerging throughout Europe, such as Young Italy, Young Poland, and Young Turkey. All of these movements were used by Lord Palmerston to destabilize the Holy Alliance, and to establish Britain as the world empire. Young England was used by Lord Palmerston, a Whig, as a battering ram against his political enemies at home. Disraeli's attacks, along with those of the Rothschilds and others, against Prime Minister Robert Peel, despite the fact that both were members in the Conservative Party, helped catapult Palmerston directly into power.

Young England was also used to reshape the cultural and political institutions of England, under a relatively small group, including John Manners, George Smythe, Alexander Cochrane, and, peripherally, Disraeli intimate Edward Bulwer-Lytton. Disraeli would later appoint Lytton's son, Lord Robert Lytton, Viceroy of India; Bulwer-Lytton himself dedicated one of his works, *England and the English*, to Disraeli's father.

In the 1840s, Disraeli wrote a trilogy of political novels which was central to the ideology of Young England: *Coningsby*, *Sybil*, and *Tancred*. All three had similar themes: Their starting point was the Chartist Movement of the 1830s, promoting the rise of the new industrial owners and laboring classes, and the need for a drastic reform of British politics. Disraeli was especially determined to transform the moribund Conservative Party. Disraeli acknowledged that the Whig Party, nominal opponent of the Conservatives, was in reality the Venetian Party, and he hoped to reshape the Tories in their image, thus forging the basis for a One Party/Two Party system.

As old as Venice

Disraeli's "Young" England ironically agitated for a return to old values, as Weintraub writes:

"Young England would proselytize for a nostalgic Old England that never was as 'Merrie' as its proponents described it, and revolved about attachment to the land through the institutions of Monarchy, Aristocracy, and Church, and their *noblesse oblige* toward a peasantry that now included the industrial labor force. It was a myth that gained power from the revival of a romanticized medievalism in art and architecture as well as in literature . . . and through the Oxford movement, an Anglicanism ritualized almost into Romanism. The Church of England—so Manners, Smythe, Cochrane, and their circle believed—had to lead the spiritual revival against materialism, which had degraded society."

Each of Disraeli's three books sounded a note of the new movement. *Sybil* romanticized the new working class forces that had to be tamed, lest they embrace the dreaded republicanism of America. *Tancred* spelled out the foreign policy agenda that Disraeli would implement as prime minister, i.e., the expansion into the Middle East and the consolidation of India as the jewel of the British Empire.

Barbara Tuchman, a kindred spirit of Disraeli's biographer Weintraub, wrote of *Tancred* in her book *Bible and Sword*:

"Speaking through the mouth of Fakredeen, the emir of Lebanon, a wily, ambitious Syrian whose only religion is one 'which gives me a sceptre,' he says: 'Let the Queen of the English collect a fleet . . . transfer the seat of her empire from London to Delhi. . . . In the meantime I will arrange with Mehemet Ali. He shall have Bagdad and Mesopotamia. . . . We will acknowledge the Empress of India as our sovereign and secure for her the Levantine coast. If she like she shall have Alexandria as she now has Malta. . . .' Thirty years later the author of *Tancred* officially added the title 'Empress of India' to the Queen's other titles.

"*Tancred* includes other startling glimpses into the future.

"Two comic characters are discussing world politics:

" 'Palmerston will never rest till he gets Jerusalem,' said Barizy of the Tower. 'The English must have markets,' said the Consul Pasqualigo. 'Very just,' said Barizy. Farther on a Jew of Jerusalem tells Tancred: 'The English will not do the business of the Turk again for nothing. They will take this city; they will keep it.' "

The political bible of Disraeli's trilogy was *Coningsby*, *The New Generation*, which transformed the Conservative Party. In *Coningsby*, Disraeli wrote: "The great object of Whig leaders in England from the first movement under Hampden to the last most successful one in 1688, was to establish in England a high aristocratic republic on the model of the Venetian. . . . William the Third told . . . Whig leaders, 'I will not be a doge' . . . they brought in a new family on their own terms. George I was a doge; George II was a doge. . . . George III tried not to be a doge. . . . He might try to get rid of the Whig Magnificoes, but he could not rid himself of the Venetian constitution."

Taper, one of the political hacks who abound in *Coningsby*, discussed the needed transformation of the Tory Party with his counterpart Tadpole:

" 'Ancient institutions and modern improvements, I suppose, Mr. Tadpole?'

" 'Ameliorations is the better word; ameliorations. Nobody knows exactly what it means.'

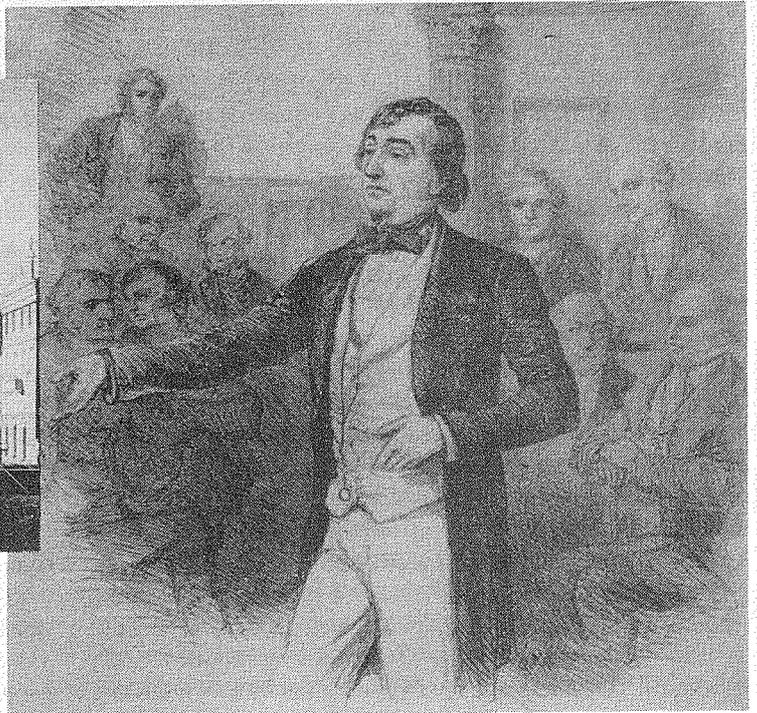
" ' . . . The time has gone by for Tory governments. What the country requires is a sound Conservative government.'

" 'A sound conservative government,' said Taper, musingly. 'I understand. Tory Men and Whig measures.'

In *Coningsby*, Disraeli repeatedly praised the administra-



An engraving of British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli in Parliament. Disraeli's novels romanticized even the most duplicitous practices of Venice, which he insinuated into both domestic and foreign policy in order to build the British Empire.



tions of Lord Shelburne and William Pitt, the exemplars of Venetian policies. He also expounded on a favorite Venetian practice: manipulate the masses into pseudo-democratic movements to let off steam, then co-opt them into government to be used for any sundry purpose. Disraeli called this "agitation": "We may, therefore, visit on the laches of this ministry the introduction of that new principle and power into our constitution which ultimately may absorb all, Agitation. This cabinet, then, with so much brilliancy on its surface, is the real parent of the Roman Catholic Association, the Political Unions, the Anti-Corn Law League." The phenomenon of popular agitation and manipulation, later perfected by Disraeli and his ally John Stuart Mill, would be termed "Tory Democracy."

In *Coningsby*, Disraeli also revealed his even more sinister outlooks through the shadowy figure of Sidonia, who would reappear in many of his books. Sidonia was a high-level intelligence operative thought to be a combination of Disraeli, Rothschild, and Spinoza. Sidonia was the Disraelian *éminence grise* and a mouthpiece for Disraeli's racialism and eugenicist ravings, which author Weintraub conveniently excludes.

Sidonia tells Coningsby:

"Yet the Jews, Coningsby, are essentially Tories. Toryism, indeed, is but copied from the mighty prototype which has fashioned Europe. And every generation they must become more powerful and more dangerous to the society which is hostile to them. Do you think that the quiet humdrum persecution of a decorous representative of an English university can crush those who have successively baffled the Pharaohs, Nebuchadnezzar, Rome, and the Feudal ages? . . . The fact

is, you cannot destroy a pure race of the Caucasian organization. It is a physiological fact; a simple law of nature, which has baffled Egyptian and Assyrian Kings, Roman Emperors, and Christian Inquisitors. . . . You must study physiology, my dear child. Pure races of Caucasus may be persecuted, but they cannot be despised, except by the brutal ignorance of some mongrel breed, that brandishes fagots and howls extermination, but is itself exterminated without persecution, by that irresistible law of Nature which is fatal to curs."

Coningsby created a cultural shock wave and was read across the globe; 50,000 copies were gobbled up in the United States alone. It was panned by some, but praised by the likes of Rothschild and Palmerston. In 1874 Disraeli would model his government on *Coningsby*.

Following the death of Victoria's consort Prince Albert, in December 1861, Disraeli accurately assessed the changed political situation, according to Weintraub: "Talking to Lord Stanley, Disraeli raised, when the Prince's name came up, a favorite image—he liked to find links to his mythical connections to Venice—about weak republics under a weak nominal ruler: 'A few years more [under Albert], and we should have had, in practice, an absolute monarchy: now all that is changed and we shall go back to the old thing—the Venetian constitution—a Doge.' "

Betraying his way to power

By the 1860s, Disraeli had become the leader of the Conservative opposition in Parliament, and in this capacity continued the tradition of Shelburne and Pitt and implanted Venetian imperial methods into shaping policy. Prior to Lou-

is Napoleon's taking power in France, it was Disraeli who served as British government liaison to Napoleon, himself a Palmerston stooge. Disraeli also backed the Confederate States insurrection against Abraham Lincoln (the Confederacy evolved out of the "Young America" movement). After the Civil War, Disraeli personally intervened on behalf of Confederate spymaster and Treasury Secretary Judah Benjamin to resettle him in England.

When Palmerston died in 1865, Disraeli emerged as the most important gamemaster in the government, becoming prime minister the first time after co-opting an enlarged electorate into the Conservative Party with his steering of the Reform Bill of 1867. As prime minister from 1874-80, Disraeli began the massive expansion of the British Empire, nearly bringing it to its apogee, fulfilling the promises of his early novels and charting the course for Britain's launching of World War I.

Disraeli launched his foreign expansion beneath the cloak of *noblesse oblige* and free trade, to which he had become a convert once his enemy Robert Peel was out of the way.

During his last tenure as prime minister, Disraeli conspired with the Rothschilds (outside the purview of the cabinet) to buy up the Khedive Ismail's shares in the Suez Canal in 1875 and begin the British occupation that would secure the "route to India."

The canal acquisition was one facet of the "Eastern Question" policy—the goal of turning the "Sick Man of Europe," as the Ottoman Empire was called, into a wholly owned British subsidiary. The pivot was India. Disraeli took India out of the hands of the East India Company and incorporated it into the government. He then moved to protect all routes to India by variously seizing parts of Afghanistan, Baluchistan, South Africa, Egypt, and Cyprus.

Disraeli also redefined British policy on the European continent, in concert with the aggressive, power-hungry Queen Victoria, to tear asunder the "alliance of three emperors," or *Dreikaiserbunde*, referring to the alliance of Germany, Russia, and Austria-Hungary that had consolidated in 1873.

Following the dictum of Palmerston's that no one power on the European continent be allowed to dominate, Disraeli and Victoria initiated the efforts to dismantle the alliance, and dismember each country individually. Victoria personally despised Prince Otto von Bismarck, and this animosity would eventually culminate in global war.

Disraeli and Victoria also launched a massive effort to prevent Russia from moving into the Ottoman Empire, seeking to prevent Russian access to the Mediterranean Sea, and avert a threat to India and the British Empire. As Disraeli remarked in a memo in 1876: "Many in England say, Why not? England might take Egypt, and so secure our highway to India. But answer is obvious. . . . If the Russians had Constantinople, they could at any time march their Army through Syria to the mouth of the Nile, and then what would be the use of our holding Egypt? Not even the command of the sea

could help us under such circumstances. . . . Constantinople is the key of India, and not Egypt and the Suez Canal."

To add to Britain's hatred for Russia, it had not forgotten the Russo-American alliance during the American Civil War that had just defeated the British-sponsored Confederacy, and Britain was determined to obliterate Russian power.

Disraeli's final performance on the world stage was his orchestration of the Conference of Berlin in 1878, called in the aftermath of the Russo-Ottoman conflict. Disraeli demanded that all Russian advances on Ottoman territory be rescinded, and threatened a new Crimean War if the demand were not met.

Victoria's concurrence in this matter was not hidden. "Oh if the Queen were a man, she would like to go and give those horrid Russians whose word one cannot trust such a beating." Disraeli succeeded in turning back the Russian advances and securing the island of Malta for England as a launching ground for the next round of imperial adventures.

The prime minister also understood the more subtle value of cultural manipulations. He knew the importance of monarchical pomp for holding down republican impulses, for which purpose he secured for Victoria the imperial designation "Empress of India," among other trappings.

Disraeli also forced the Queen out of her morbid fascination with her husband's death that had led to a long retreat from public life. Her "aura of power," whether in public events or religious ceremony, was central to his manipulations. Visibility was essential to calming the increasingly irritable public, incensed at paying for the prime minister's foreign adventures.

Appropriately, Victoria rewarded Disraeli for his efforts on her behalf with a leather-bound set of Goethe's *Faust*.

The legacy of Iago

In conclusion, one must locate Disraeli in the continuity of Venetian gamemasters—modern Iagos—preceded by Shelburne, Pitt, and Palmerston and succeeded by Robert Cecil (Lord Salisbury) and Cecil's nephew, Arthur Balfour, both of whom he handpicked. It was not accidental that Britain's *Daily Telegraph*, acknowledged by author Weintraub as Palmerston's official newspaper-mouthpiece, became the spokesman for Disraeli during his reign as prime minister.

In the realm of culture, the true domain of the Venetian policymaker, Disraeli also left his mark. He wrote well over a dozen books and hundreds of articles and communiqués. He introduced the "political novel" (the soap-opera of its day) into English literature, and those books brought Venetian principles into the awareness of the general public. As the leader of the Young England movement, he popularized the new medievalism, the new feudalism, and the "modern" return to Empire.

In politics, Disraeli was the precursor of Margaret Thatcher and Henry Kissinger; in culture, Oscar Wilde.