

I. Introduction

If you look at him – especially the unflattering Hayter¹ portrait of 1823, rather than the kinder Lawrence² portraits of 1796, 1808, 1820, 1821 and 1826 – with his double chin and his watery eyes Robert Banks Jenkinson, second Earl of Liverpool does not look like the greatest anything. Benjamin Disraeli³ famously termed him ‘the Arch-Mediocrity’. He had only one full-scale biography, written in 1868. Yet look at his achievements in economics, foreign policy and financial management, his record in some of Britain’s most dangerous, difficult years and at the calibre of his colleagues, and the picture looks different. Ruling at the apogee of British power, winning a major global war, managing a historically unprecedented economic transformation, in office longer than any of his successors, he stands revealed as Britain’s Greatest Prime Minister. Liverpool was prime minister for fifteen years, with an unequalled record:

- i. he organised victory in the Napoleonic Wars;
- ii. he managed (with Castlereagh)⁴ the peace settlement that followed;

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1. George Hayter (1792-1871), knighted 1841. Portrait of Lord Liverpool, 1823. Hayter was a second-rate artist and an ardent Whig but this unflattering portrait, a sketch prepared for a group picture of the Queen Caroline trial, is the Liverpool image generally used by Whig historians.
 2. Thomas Lawrence (1769-1830), knighted 1815. FRS 1822. President of the Royal Academy, 1820-30. Portraits of Lord Liverpool, 1796, 1808, 1820, 1821, 1826. A solid Tory as well as a top-notch artist, albeit one who tended to flatter his sitters; his 1826 portrait of Liverpool a year before his retirement is magnificent and suggests Liverpool’s real stature much better than the Hayter one.
 3. Benjamin Disraeli (1804-81). 1st Earl of Beaconsfield from 1876. Small-time swindler and unsuccessful novelist, who went on after Liverpool’s death to become MP for Maidstone, Shrewsbury and Buckinghamshire, 1837-76. Conservative Leader in the Commons, 1849-76. Chancellor of the Exchequer, 1852, 1858-59, 1866-68. Prime Minister, 1868, 1874-80.
 4. Robert Stewart, Viscount Castlereagh, 2nd Marquess of Londonderry (1769-1822).

- iii. he directed Britain's economy through the most difficult years of the industrial revolution;
- iv. he managed (with Sidmouth)⁵ the social unrest of the difficult years 1816-20 without a major uprising;
- v. he brought down (with Vansittart)⁶ without default or inflation the highest debt level ever incurred by the British government;
- vi. he designed two versions of the Corn Laws that determined British trade policy for the next generation;
- vii. he took Britain back onto the gold standard against strong opposition and reformed the coinage;
- viii. he ended his term in office with a vigorous period of social reform and trade liberalisation (with Peel,⁷ Robinson⁸ and Huskisson⁹);
- ix. he reformed the English banking system, making it sound, stable and flexible; and
- x. he led an outstandingly able government containing six past and future prime ministers.

I elaborate on these achievements in the Conclusion, where Liverpool is compared briefly with other prime ministers.

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- Chief Secretary for Ireland, 1798-1801. President of the Board of Control, 1802-6. Secretary for War and the Colonies, 1805-06, 1807-09. Foreign Secretary, 1812-22.
- 5. Henry Addington (1757-1844). MP for Devizes, 1784-1805. 1st Viscount Sidmouth from 1805. Speaker, 1789-1801. Prime Minister, 1801-04. Lord President of the Council, 1805, 1806-7, 1812. Lord Privy Seal, 1806. Home Secretary, 1812-22.
 - 6. Nicholas Vansittart (1767-1851). 1st Baron Bexley from 1823. MP for Hastings, Old Sarum, East Grinstead and Harwich, 1796-1823. Chancellor of the Exchequer, 1812-23. Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, 1823-28.
 - 7. Robert Peel (1788-1850). 2nd Baronet from 1830. MP for Cashel, Chippenham, Oxford University, Westbury and Tamworth, 1809-50. Chief Secretary for Ireland, 1812-18. Home Secretary, 1822-27, 1828-30. Prime Minister, 1834-35, 1841-46.
 - 8. Frederick John Robinson (1782-1859). 1st Viscount Goderich from 1827. 1st Earl of Ripon from 1833. MP for Carlou and Ripon, 1806-27. Vice-President of the Board of Trade, 1812-18. Joint Paymaster of the Forces, 1813-17. President of the Board of Trade, 1818-23. Treasurer of the Navy, 1818-23. Chancellor of the Exchequer, 1823-27. Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, 1827. Prime Minister, 1827-28. Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, 1830-33. Lord Privy Seal, 1833-34. President of the Board of Trade, 1841-43. President of the Board of Control, 1843-46.
 - 9. William Huskisson (1770-1830). Son of a Staffordshire country gentleman. Tory MP for Morpeth, Liskeard, Harwich, Chichester and Liverpool, 1796-1802, 1804-30. Privy Councillor, 1814. Senior Secretary to the Treasury, 1804-06, 1807-09. First Commissioner of Woods and Forests, 1814-23. President of the Board of Trade, 1823-27. Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, 1827-28. Killed by Stephenson's 'Rocket' at the opening of the Liverpool and Manchester Railway, 15 September 1830.

Despite his long tenure and many achievements, Liverpool has an odd lack of prominence in the memoirs, cartoons, mob house trashings and Radical jeremiads of the period. A self-effacing man, Liverpool preferred it that way – for one thing, his wife Louisa was of a nervous disposition and in delicate health – she died in 1821, just as the government became more popular. Liverpool had no need to seek popular acclaim on the hustings, which he left to his able Commons lieutenants.

House of Commons debates were better reported than those in the Lords. However, Liverpool, himself an excellent speaker, faced Grenville, Grey¹⁰ and Lansdowne¹¹ in the Lords and so had much tougher opposition than the feeble Ponsonby¹² and Tierney,¹³ Whig Commons leaders from 1808-21, or the Whig Commons leadership in 1821-27, when no leader was selected.

Thus, with his speeches under-reported and the government's limited publicity machine concentrated on his Commons colleagues, Liverpool was much less in the public eye than others who have led the government for comparable periods. Nevertheless, Liverpool's dominance of an outstandingly able group of ministers was unquestioned. Partly this was due to his excellent grasp of economic matters, a subject on which both Canning and Castlereagh were uncertain and his followers were self-effacing men like Vansittart, distrusted by the bulk of the government's followers, like Huskisson, or younger, feebler and more junior like Robinson. Furthermore, even on foreign policy, military strategy and home affairs, he was deferred to by prominent colleagues like Castlereagh, Wellington, Sidmouth and Peel. (Canning after 1822 is an exception, although he deferred to Liverpool on policy outside foreign affairs.)

Finally, on one measure Liverpool's stature is unchallengeable. One of the most important tasks of a Prime Minister is to win general elections and Liverpool, with four outright victories (1812, 1818, 1820 and 1826) and

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10. Charles Grey (1764-1845). 2nd Earl Grey from 1807. Whig MP for Northumberland 1786-1807. First Lord of the Admiralty, 1806. Foreign Secretary and Leader of the House of Commons, 1806-07. Reform Bill Prime Minister, 1830-34. Inspired a teabag!
 11. Henry Petty-Fitzmaurice (1780-1863). 3rd Marquess of Lansdowne from 1809. Whig MP for Calne, Cambridge University and Camelford, 1802-09. Chancellor of the Exchequer, 1806-07. Home Secretary, 1827-28. Lord President of the Council, 1830-34, 1835-41, 1846-52. Leader of the House of Lords, 1846-52. Minister without Portfolio, 1852-58.
 12. George Ponsonby (1755-1817). Whig MP (Ireland) for Wicklow Borough, Inistioge and Galway, 1778-1801. MP for Wicklow, Tavistock and Peterborough, 1801-17. Lord Chancellor of Ireland, 1806-07. Leader of the Opposition, 1808-17.
 13. George Tierney (1761-1830). Whig MP for Colchester, Southwark, Athlone, Banden, Appleby, Knaresborough, 1796-1830. Treasurer of the Navy, 1803-04. President of the Board of Control, 1806-07. Master of the Mint, 1827-28. Leader of the Whigs in the House of Commons, 1818-21.

no general elections lost, leads all contenders in this area. His three closest competitors were Sir Robert Walpole,¹⁴ William Gladstone¹⁵ and Harold Wilson¹⁶ but none of their records quite matches Liverpool's.

It may be objected that in the eighteenth century elections were won largely by patronage rather than through popular opinion. Nevertheless, by Liverpool's time that had already changed, with the power of patronage sharply restricted by various Acts of Parliament from 1780 onwards up to Curwen's¹⁷ Act of 1809. The first truly popularly decided election was the landslide victory of the Duke of Portland¹⁸ in 1807 on the issue of Catholic Emancipation (which the Duke and his followers opposed, in line with majority public opinion). Thus, in terms of winning elections, politically a Prime Minister's most important objective, Liverpool was unparalleled.

Liverpool's historical stature appears undistinguished – he was after all ranked only nineteenth among 50 prime ministers by *The Times* in 2010,¹⁹ and other rankings have been similarly mediocre. Yet this book will show he was much better than that, and I believe Liverpool should rank ahead of the field.

The philosophy by which Liverpool governed was in the January 1830 *Quarterly Review*²⁰ first defined as 'Conservatism' (a 'Conservative' being defined as a follower of that philosophy, by then mostly embodied in Wellington's administration) and thus should be honoured as the original definition of that much-used term.

14. Sir Robert Walpole (1676-1745). 1st Earl of Orford from 1742. MP for Castle Rising and King's Lynn, 1701-12, 1713-42. Secretary at War, 1708-10. Treasurer of the Navy, 1710-11. Paymaster of the Forces, 1714-15 and 1720-21. First Lord of the Treasury and Chancellor of the Exchequer, 1715-17, 1721-42. Prime Minister, 1721-42.
15. William Ewart Gladstone (1809-98). MP for Newark, Oxford University, South Lancashire, Greenwich and Midlothian, 1832-95. President of the Board of Trade, 1843-45. Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, 1845-46. Chancellor of the Exchequer, 1852-55, 1859-66, 1873-74, 1880-82. Prime Minister, 1868-74, 1880-85, 1886, 1892-94.
16. Harold Wilson (1916-95). Lord Wilson of Rievaulx (life peer) from 1976. MP for Ormskirk and Huyton, 1945-83. President of the Board of Trade, 1947-51. Prime Minister, 1964-66, 1974-76.
17. John Curwen (1756-1828). MP for Carlisle, 1786-1812. MP for Carlisle and Cumberland, 1816-28.
18. William Henry Cavendish-Bentinck (1738-1809). 3rd Duke of Portland from 1762. MP for Weobley, 1761-62. Lord Chamberlain, 1765-66. Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, 1782. Prime Minister, 1783, 1807-09. Home Secretary, 1794-1801. Lord President of the Council, 1801-05. Minister without Portfolio, 1805-06.
19. *The Times*' Top 50 Prime Ministers, 5 May 2010. Of the 55 prime ministers since Sir Robert Walpole, *The Times* rating pre-dated David Cameron, Theresa May and Boris Johnson and left out Wilmington and Goderich.
20. 'Article IX – Internal Policy', *The Quarterly Review*, Vol. XLII, no. LXXXIII (January 1830) p. 276. At first attributed to John Wilson Croker, now thought to be by John Miller of Lincoln's Inn (?-1841).

Despite his philosophical importance, his long period in power and his manifold successes, Liverpool's low biographical profile is strange. There have been only five biographies in 192 years, only one of them a full-length study. Compare that to the numerous studies of Wellington,²¹ Castlereagh and Canning,²² all of whom were Liverpool's subordinates, and the omission is extraordinary. Even Sidmouth, another unfashionable figure, has enjoyed several rehabilitating biographies in the last half-century. The omission extends to Liverpool's papers; those of Wellington, Castlereagh and Canning were published in multiple-volume editions in the nineteenth century while Liverpool's papers remain in handwritten obscurity in the British Library's archives.

The first biography of Liverpool had some advantages over its successors. Written anonymously, *Memoirs of the Public Life and Administration of the Rt Hon. The Earl of Liverpool* was published in 1827, after Liverpool's retirement but while he was still alive. It had access to no correspondence and so was based on Liverpool's public speeches only but, being written before Catholic Emancipation and the Reform Act, was usefully respectful of Liverpool's position on those issues and his political views in general. Overall, like Aurelian Cook's 1685 biography of Charles II,²³ it has special value in being written before scepticism took hold, thus showing the way to a more balanced and generous appraisal than biographies that followed the change of regime.

Before the second full biography of Liverpool, Disraeli had his say. Disraeli started life as a Radical and by 1844, despite his wealthy older wife, was still paying off the debts he had incurred in the 1825 South American bonds bubble. Disgruntled at the Conservative Party establishment (Peel denied him a job in 1841), he tried to build his political position on the back of a 'Young England' Tory/Radical ginger group. The theory of history Disraeli came up with in his novel *Coningsby* thus relied on denigrating Liverpool's administration as a

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21. Arthur Wellesley (1769-1852). 1st Viscount Wellington from 1809. 1st Earl of Wellington from 1810. 1st Marquess of Wellington from 1812. 1st Duke of Wellington from 1813. MP (Ireland) for Trim, 1790-97. MP for Rye, Tralee, Mitchell, and Newport, 1806-09. Chief Secretary for Ireland, 1807-09, Master-General of the Ordnance, 1818-27. Prime Minister, 1828-30, 1834 (briefly). Foreign Secretary, 1834-35. Ensign, British army, 1787. Lieutenant-Colonel, 1793. Served in Flanders, 1793-95, then served in India 1798-1805 becoming Major General in 1802 and winning Battle of Assaye in 1803. Served in Copenhagen expedition 1807. Lieutenant-General, 1808. General, 1812. Field Marshal, 1813. Portugal and Spain, 1808, 1809-14. Battle of Waterloo, 1815.
 22. George Canning, 1770-1827. MP for Newtown, Wendover, Tralee, Petersfield, Liverpool, Harwich and Seaford, 1793-1827. Paymaster of the Forces, 1800-01. Foreign Secretary, 1807-09, 1822-27. Prime Minister, 1827.
 23. Aurelian Cook, *Titus Britannicus: an essay of history royal, in the life & reign of His late Sacred Majesty, Charles II, of ever blessed and immortal memory* (James Partridge, 1685).

period of 'mediocrity' and Liverpool as 'the Arch-Mediocrity' – being a Tory MP he did not dare do this to Pitt.²⁴ This would not have mattered much to Liverpool's reputation – *Coningsby* is not a very good novel – except that Disraeli improbably became leader of the Conservative Party and a much-admired prime minister.

Disraeli's success combined with Peel's attempt to re-brand the 'Conservatives' in the 1830s and his flashy 1846 repeal of Liverpool's Corn Laws to make Liverpool deeply unfashionable. Not only were most historians Whigs, but even the Tory ones, such as fifth Earl Stanhope (biographer of Pitt), sought to meld with the prevailing zeitgeist and not attempt the resurrection of other pre-Peel Tories. Wellington never went out of fashion, Castlereagh's reputation was rehabilitated by the future Lord Salisbury in 1862 and Canning, in any case a quasi-Whig, was helped by the prominence of his son (Governor General of India, 1856-62). Liverpool had no such assistance.

The first major biography, and so far the only full-length one, is the three-volume *Life and Administration of Robert Banks Jenkinson, Second Earl of Liverpool* published in 1868 by Charles Duke Yonge, a second-tier academic historian (then Professor of History at Queens College, Belfast) and prolific writer. Yonge's biography was workmanlike but viewed Liverpool from a Canningite perspective, perhaps inevitable by the time it was written. Canning's abilities are overrated, his character even more so (Mrs Arbuthnot's diaries being then unavailable). This warps Yonge's view of Liverpool's activities. Inevitably, the Canningite period after 1822 is treated with more sympathy than the period of greatest achievement in Liverpool's earlier years. An equally serious problem is that Yonge devotes little space or analysis to economic, monetary and fiscal policy.

Yonge's is a perfectly competent biography but damns Liverpool with faint praise and, with its dull prose, makes him seem uninteresting. With Yonge as a 'standard biography' and Disraeli having suggested there was nothing much there, it is unsurprising that no further biography appeared for 80 years.

After a 70-year gap, W.R. Brock's *Lord Liverpool and Liberal Toryism, 1820-27*, published in 1941 and not a full biography of Liverpool, took the Canningite error to new lengths by claiming that the post-1822 Liverpool ministry was in essence a new government, with new policies of 'Liberal Toryism'. While the Liverpool government's policies indeed changed after 1820, the primary drivers of that change were the economic upturn, the reduction in unrest to which it led and the easing of fiscal and budgetary constraints. Even after he became Foreign Secretary, Canning had little influence on policy outside foreign affairs; he remained passive, for example, at the crucial December 1825 Cabinet meeting which discussed the financial crisis and possible reactions to it.

24. William Pitt the Younger (1759-1806). MP for Appleby and Cambridge University, 1781-1806. Chancellor of the Exchequer, 1782-83, 1783-1801, 1804-06. Prime Minister, 1783-1801, 1804-06.

Sir Charles Petrie's *Lord Liverpool*, published in 1954 and the first biography since Yonge, is short but generally favourable. However, its influence was lessened by Petrie's own eccentricities; he was a keen Jacobite supporter, writing an alternative history in which the 1745 rebellion succeeded, and had connections with the British far-right. Like previous biographers of Liverpool, Petrie lacked a grasp of economic and financial matters.

The biographers' inattention to economic policy was finally reversed in the 1970s with two books, J.E. Cookson's *Lord Liverpool's Administration, 1815-22*, published in 1975 and Boyd Hilton's *Corn, Cash, Commerce: The Economic Policies of the Tory Governments, 1815-1830* in 1977. Both books dealt primarily with economic policy, Hilton's entirely, and recognised the importance of the early post-war years to the fiscal, monetary and economic stabilisation that laid the foundation for the century's later prosperity. Even Hilton, however, missed the importance and quality of Liverpool's 1826 banking reform. In the same decade (1974) Asa Briggs, in his survey of prime ministers, recognised Liverpool's 'sheer professionalism',²⁵ a quality that was to cause an upward reappraisal in Liverpool's standing in decades to come.

Norman Gash, whose *Lord Liverpool* appeared in 1984, was the most distinguished historian of Liverpool's biographers, and brought additional know-how from his life's work on Peel. Alas, he too did not focus on economic questions. However, for the first time he provided some details of Liverpool's private life, humanising him. He also took an appropriately sceptical view of Canning's activities and relationship with Liverpool. Gash's final verdict was significantly more positive than the prevailing consensus among historians: 'In any analysis of his premiership three features are outstanding: his competence in every important branch of public business, his successful handling of an extraordinary variety of problems, and his gift for getting the best out of his colleagues.'²⁶

Most recently, William Anthony Hay's *Lord Liverpool: A Political Life*, published in 2018, is a high-quality addition to Liverpool's biographies, with particularly helpful information on his early life, drawn from his still-unpublished correspondence. Hay focusses on Charles Jenkinson as well as Liverpool, tracing the career of Liverpool's formidable and formative father. Like other biographers, he underemphasises the economic area, though his title indicates this will be the case. Hay, like Gash shares the generally higher opinion of Liverpool that has prevailed in recent decades.

This book takes further the last forty years' rehabilitation of Liverpool's reputation and suggests that, by a modest margin, he was the greatest of all Britain's prime ministers.

25. Asa Briggs, *Sir Robert Peel* in Herbert van Thal (ed.), *The Prime Ministers, Volume 1: Sir Robert Walpole to Sir Robert Peel* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1974) pp. 287-96.

26. Norman Gash, *Lord Liverpool* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1984) p. 254