

Lancashire and the New Liberalism

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Lancashire and the New Liberalism: A half-century retrospective

Abstract

This essay discusses P.F. Clarke's seminal *Lancashire and the New Liberalism*. It considers the book's influence on the academic debate over the 'franchise factor' in Labour's displacement of the Liberal party, its influence on how we perceive Lancashire as a historical case study, and how it shaped subsequent interpretations of British political history. This short article is the first in a new subcategory of retrospective essays for *Transactions*. These will reflect on a significant text affecting the historical study of Lancashire and Cheshire. Authors will draw out the key themes of the work and discuss their significance on subsequent historiographical debate and methodological practice.¹

Introduction

Influential historical works make influential historians. Of the few significant contributions to modern British political history that place Lancashire front and centre, few have had the influence of Peter F. Clarke's *Lancashire and the New Liberalism*. With conclusions and approaches that still inspire historical debate in this, its fiftieth year, the text's influence should not be underestimated. Building on this success of this study, Clarke embarked on a still engaging and fruitful publishing career that has produced a dozen monographs and collections, many significant, that mostly focused in contemporary Britain's formative years between 1900 and 1950. For example, his *Hope and Glory* remains a key undergraduate textbook, while his work on John Maynard Keynes is rivalled only by the regarded works of Robert Skidelsky.² *Lancashire and the New Liberalism* was the debut publication of a noteworthy scholar, who used the county of Lancashire as a testbed for an innovative approach. The book brought a more democratic understanding of ideas in popular politics, appreciated the significance of politicians in mobilising their own supporters, and understood that voters supported candidates that reflected their interests, rather than assume the primacy of either economic 'structure' or limited high politics.

Clarke's sustained scholarship has certainly had an impact. As a writer his style and literary craftsmanship are as noteworthy as his original and sophisticated methods and conceptual approaches. Likewise, he supervised several future leading political historians, including E.H.H. Green and Duncan Tanner.³ Clarke both encouraged their work and accepted their conclusions over his own when they proved more plausible.⁴ However, this retrospective is not intended as mere hagiography, but is designed to evaluate *Lancashire and the New Liberalism's* originality and significance as an academic intervention. It also considers the

¹To discuss authoring a similar essay for *Transactions*, please contact the Reviews Editor.

²P. Clarke, *Hope and Glory: Britain, 1900-90* (London, 1996); P. Clarke, *The Keynesian Revolution in the Making, 1924-1936* (Oxford, 1988); P. Clarke, *The Keynesian Revolution and Its Economic Consequences: Selected Essays* (Cheltenham, 1998).

³P. Clarke, 'E.H.H. Green', *Guardian*, 29 September 2006; P. Clarke, 'Duncan Tanner', *Guardian*, 21 April 2010.

⁴P. Clarke, *Locomotive of War: Money, Empire, Power and Guilt* (London, 2017), 385; D. Tanner, 'The Parliamentary Electoral System, the 'Fourth' Reform Act, and the Rise of Labour in England and Wales', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 56:134 (1983), 210,218.

monograph's significance to the historiography of Lancashire and electoral reform, its place in debates over Liberal 'decline' and the 'rise' of Labour, and how historians conceptually approach political change. Finally, it considers the continuing influence of Clarke's interpretation and his wider thesis of the 'social purchase of ideas'.

Originality and argument

Historically, ideas were often ignored in a traditional historiographic predilection for administrative process and dramatic parliamentary manoeuvre, often linked to an ingrained focus on top-down authority, in political history.⁵ In many ways, some social and cultural history can underestimate their power, preferring to focus on the power of economic and social change to determine local community's political choices. During the late 1960s, Peter F. Clarke conceived the concept of the 'social purchase of ideas', which is concerned with 'illustrating the relationship between ideas, human agency, and politics'.⁶ This argues that not just the formal content of an idea that matters, but its acquisition or 'purchase' within a political institution or by the electorate, and how this happens is important.⁷ However, this approach does not neglect the important of social and cultural structures and changes. Context remains crucial, as political parties exist in the light of 'social and economic conditions, not as determinants, but as constraints which limit the available political strategies'.⁸ The aim of Clarke's *Lancashire and the New Liberalism* was to establish the coherence and determine the 'purchase' of a collection of ideas termed 'new' Liberalism.

Following a path already flagged up by Trevor Wilson in 1966, he questioned the centrality of class-consciousness to political choice.⁹ Both Henry Pelling before Clarke, and Ross McKibbin afterward, had argued in the inevitability of a working-class party's supplanting of the Liberals was primarily reliant upon socio-economic changes to the structure of British society.¹⁰ In arguing for the significance of New Liberalism's appeal, and the significance of its potential 'purchase' among Lancashire's voters, Clarke was questioning whether electoral choice was determined by a voter's 'class consciousness' or something deeper. Following this argument to its conclusion, therefore, it becomes the unintended, accidental catastrophe of the Great War and the effect of associated political trauma within the Liberal party that led to its supplanting by Labour after 1918.¹¹ This debate, sometimes delineated with the labels 'inevitalist' and 'accidentalist',

⁵ C.L. Mowat, 'Social legislation in Britain and the United States in the early twentieth century: a problem in the history of ideas', *Historical Studies* 7 (1969), pp. 81-96; P.F. Clarke, 'The Progressive Movement in England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 24 (1974), p. 159; M. Francis, *Ideas and Policies under Labour, 1945-51* (Manchester, 1997), pp. 1-3.

⁶ E.H.H. Green and D.M. Tanner, 'Introduction', in E.H.H. Green and D.M. Tanner (eds), *The Strange Survival of Liberal England* (Cambridge, 2007), p. 3.

⁷ P.F. Clarke, 'The making and remaking of 'common sense' about British economic policy', in C. Williams and A. Edwards (eds), *The Art of the Possible: Politics and Governance in Modern British History, 1885-1997: Essays in Memory of Duncan Tanner* (Manchester, 2015), p. 17.

⁸ P.F. Clarke, 'Ideas and Interests', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 12:1 (1981), p. 46.

⁹ T. Wilson, *The Downfall of the Liberal Party 1914-1935* (London, 1966).

¹⁰ J.A. Thompson, 'The Historians and the Decline of the Liberal Party', *Albion* 22:1 (1990), 66-67.

¹¹ P. Weiler, *The New Liberalism: Liberal Social Theory in Great Britain, 1889-1914* (London, 1982), 4-6.

went on to inform the parameters of the debate for a number of years. Advancing a thesis reflecting the latter school, Clarke highlighted the complexity of north-west Liberal party politics and organisation, argued for the significance of the local press - especially the *Manchester Guardian* – in county-level politics, and emphasised the significance of regional politicians in articulating Liberal appeals to varied groupings of voters. This provided a more plural understanding of Edwardian political change and gave a wider cast of political actors' greater significance within the complicated process of democratic politics.

In a 488-page analysis, *Lancashire and the New Liberalism* outlined the intellectual influence of alternative political approaches, opponents, and the cotton industry together and considered the political constraints of the expanded franchise and the nature of late Victorian electioneering. The significance of social, economic, and cultural affiliations and contexts as constraints that influenced how Lancashire politicians operated and fashioned their appeal to voters was methodically considered. Clarke then considers the importance of *Manchester Guardian* editor C.P. Scott as a journalist, progressive propagandist, and politician, before discussing the significance of Churchill, Lloyd George, and other MPs as national politicians (and successful proponents of progressivism) who operated successfully in the region. It then examined the impacts of a changing communal politics and electoral realignment on working-class Conservatism and wealthy Liberals, the altering appeal of Free Trade, and greater institutional Lib-Lab cooperation after 1903. Finally, activities during and the outcome of General Elections between 1900 and 1910 are evaluated and demonstrated how Liberalism remained consistently popular as a political creed in Lancashire.

Lancashire: exceptional or ordinary

The use of Lancashire as a case study area elevated the significance of the county in historical interpretations of political change and reinforced the importance of regional case study. It did 'for the North-West what K.O. Morgan did for Wales and Paul Thompson for London'.¹² Lancashire's significance lay, as Clarke noted, not in it being 'precocious or unrepresentative', but rather because it clearly demonstrated the way in which politicians had to interact with both a changing electorate and social, economic, cultural, and political contexts.¹³ While the varied conclusions of these studies cautioned those who sought to use these to inform national interpretations, they clearly provided useful interpretations on which other scholars later drew.¹⁴ Clarke had emphasised the importance of countywide, party-political peculiarities such as the political inclinations of the powerful cotton unions that avoided openly affiliating with either major party

¹² B. McGill, 'Review: P. F. Clarke. *Lancashire and the New Liberalism*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 1971. Pp. ix, 472. \$18.50 and David Ayerst. *The Manchester Guardian: Biography of a Newspaper*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. 1971. Pp. 702. \$15.00', *American Historical Review* 77:3 (1972), 793–794; A. Jones, 'Reviewed Work: *Lancashire and the New Liberalism* by P. F. Clarke', *Historical Journal* 15:2 (1972), 376-378.

¹³ Clarke, *Lancashire Liberalism*, 402-404.

¹⁴ D.J. Dutton, 'Lancashire and the new unionism: the Unionist party and the growth of popular politics, 1906-1914', *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire* 130 (1980), 132.

to maintain unity.¹⁵ This in turn shaped interpretations of politics in the cotton towns.¹⁶ If anything, together with interventions of John Vincent and Patrick Joyce, Clarke's analysis emphasised the significance of the cotton union's aloof stance in local politics.¹⁷ Compared to the combative and political unionism of coal miners, railwaymen, and dockers, the more limited engagement of textile unions in labour politics was noteworthy in an area whose wealth was founded on processing cotton. However, that industry was also important in other ways.

The international importance of the cotton industry helps explain the global mindedness of the Lancashire's electorate. Their links with the empire (and therefore support for both Free Trade and the imperial system) perhaps explain why voters had favoured the Tory's before that party's flirtation with protectionism from 1903.¹⁸ However, as is often the case with regional studies, even they are rarely specific enough not to rely on settlement-specific comments.¹⁹ For example, the Liverpool Liberals were notably less effective in working with issues like Home Rule despite that city's large catholic population due to the impact of local leadership proclivities and deep sectarianism.²⁰ Clearly, Liverpool's exceptionalism was notable.²¹ In recent articles building on this thesis, both Jonny Ball and James R. Evans both argue that Liverpool's unique demography and its isolationist political culture played significant roles in the city's political processes throughout the twentieth century.²² In spite of this, other communities and groups of industrial workers were more active, with the early regional affiliation of miners within the county to the Labour cause.²³ Perhaps the restrictions of traditional county boundaries have remained problematic for comparative interpretations of political communities.²⁴ Often, the peculiarities of a settlement can define their historic significance. Therefore, to understand regional political change in the north-west, it must be appreciated that Liverpool and other coastal towns had very different demographics, employment patterns, and political

¹⁵ J.K. Walton, *Lancashire: A Social History, 1558-1939* (Manchester, 1987), 264.

¹⁶ D. Howell, *British Workers and the Independent Labour Party, 1888-1906* (Manchester, 1984), 407,423.

¹⁷ J.K. Walton, 'The north-west', in F.M.L. Thompson (ed.), *The Cambridge Social History of Britain, 1750-1950, Volume 1: Regions and Communities* (Cambridge, 1990), 356.

¹⁸ G.J. Bryant, 'Bolton and the outbreak of the first world war', *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire* 138 (1988), 183-184.

¹⁹ D. Jackson, 'Friends of the Union': Liverpool, Ulster, and Home Rule 1910-1914', *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire* 152 (2003), 124-125.

²⁰ S. Davies, 'A stormy political career': P. J. Kelly and Irish Nationalist and Labour politics in Liverpool, 1891-1936', *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire* 148 (1998), 154-155.

²¹ For more on the 'Liverpool exceptionalism' thesis, see: P. J. Waller, *Democracy and Sectarianism: A Political and Social History of Liverpool 1868-1939* (Liverpool, 1981); S. Davies, *Liverpool Labour: Social and Political Influences on the Development of the Labour Party in Liverpool, 1900-1939* (Keele, 1996); J. Belchem, *Merseypride: Essays in Liverpool Exceptionalism* (Oxford, 2006).

²² J. Ball, 'Militant Liverpool' as Liverpool Exceptionalism: The Rise, Fall and Character of the City Council, 1983-1987', *Transactions of the Historical Society of Lancashire and Cheshire* 166 (2017), 146-147; J.R. Evans, 'The Interwar Politics of the Liverpool Irish: A Story of God, Class, and National Identity', *Transactions of the Historical Society of Lancashire and Cheshire* 167 (2018), 131-155.

²³ Clarke, *Lancashire Liberalism*, 404; J. Hill, 'The Lancashire miners, Thomas Greenall and the Labour party, 1900-1906', *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire* 130 (1980), 115-130.

²⁴ For more on this issue, see M. Collinson, 'A 'fertile ground for poisonous doctrines'? Understanding far-right electoral appeal in the south Pennine textile belt, c.1967-1979', *Contemporary British History* 34:2, 275, 288.

affiliations to Lancashire's industrial settlements, which in-turn differed from mining communities.²⁵ In many ways, Clarke's regional focus inspired similar region-driven interpretations.

A notable disagreement with Clarke's assertion that Lancashire exemplified wider changes underpinned Keith Laybourn and Jack Reynolds' analysis of the rise of Labour in West Yorkshire. They argued that in neighbouring West Riding, the process of Labour's supplanting of the Liberals was more reflective of national trends.²⁶ This criticism primarily reflected attempts to emphasise West Yorkshire over Lancashire as the 'birthplace' of Labourism, and if anything, emphasised the need for analytical subtlety and complexity. However, as Duncan Tanner argued, 'the process of political change was more fragmented' than Clarke, Laybourn and Reynolds, and Ross McKibbin had allowed in their earlier interpretations.²⁷ In this telling, the 'political system was an elaborate jigsaw'.²⁸ Greater disaggregation of accepted geographical and administrative monoliths can perhaps encourage more fruitful conclusions that accept the complexity and locality of Britain's electoral map. As Tanner's PhD supervisor, Clarke encouraged and accepted the effect these amendments had on his original interpretation. However, many subsequent interpretations were, to some degree, shaped by Clarke's 1971 monograph and associated articles.²⁹ These debates have, in turn, improved our understanding of political change and the nature of the British party system.

Historiographical influence and British political history

As Peter Clarke outlined in his conclusion, *Lancashire and the New Liberalism* was intended to demonstrate the particularity of a distinctly Edwardian election system.³⁰ This decade or so was a definitive period in British democratic development. Clarke's analysis encourages scholars to appreciate how quickly not only politics, but its contexts, underpinning ideas, and even its voting electorate can change and therefore ensure that no two electoral contests are the same. It is an early corrective to the oft-held assumption that Liberal 'decline' and a 'rise' of Labour were inevitable and intrinsically linked to some form of class-consciousness. The practice of politics by politicians, their communications with their voters, and how constituents then interpreted these and voted at the ballot box was vital. Political change was reliant on the changing choices of the electorate. At the nub of the view forwarded by Clarke and likeminded scholars, is the assumption that Liberalism was indeed viable, that it remained both the vibrant and senior partner on the political left in Britain, and that under no counter-factual scenario was Labour likely to challenge it.³¹ Most contemporary scholars accept a variant of this analysis, even if they question the underpinnings of its conceptual approach.

²⁵ D. Tanner, *Political Change and the Labour Party, 1900-1918* (Cambridge, 1990), 130-131.

²⁶ K. Laybourn and J. Reynolds, *Liberalism and the Rise of Labour 1890-1918* (Beckenham, 1984), 4.

²⁷ Tanner, *Political Change*, 419-420.

²⁸ Tanner, *Political Change*, 420.

²⁹ P.F. Clarke, "Electoral Sociology of Modern Britain," *History* 57:189 (1972), 31-55; P.F. Clarke, "The Progressive Movement in England," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 24 (1974), 159-181.

³⁰ Clarke, *Lancashire Liberalism*, 406-407.

³¹ K. Laybourn, "The Rise of Labour and the Decline of Liberalism: The State of the Debate," *History* 80:259 (1995), 210.

This being history, alternative interpretations abounded, but few charged Clarke with not asking the right questions.

Clarke's core thesis that Lancashire's Liberal organisation nimbly reshaped their appeal and adapted to the changing nature of the Lancashire electorate found supporters among contemporaneous scholars.³² This 'purchase' of Clarke's ideas ensured that *Lancashire and the New Liberalism* remained relevant and continues to inform historical and political interpretations. For example, in a 2015 article aiming to both define and explore the significance of 'progressivism', Emily Robinson highlights the significance of the Clarke's book in linking the purchase of progressivism synonymous with that of New Liberalism.³³ Together with Clarke's later work, his first attempts to extrapolate a new way of considering moderate British politics. As reviewers of EHH Green and Duncan Tanner's 2007 festschrift for Clarke noted, his work greatly influenced the 'new political history', particularly its focus on the significance of 'ideas, culture, institutions, identity, and context...to fully illuminate any political moment'.³⁴ *Lancashire and the New Liberalism* underpinned a new approach to understanding British politics. It was driven by the assumption that the individual ambitions, partisan loyalties or careerist leanings was always synonymous with a more European intellectual curiosity among a supposedly non-ideological political class.³⁵ In a sense, Clarke's approach joined those who questioned assumptions of a uniquely British approach to politics, detached from both Anglo-American and pan-European norms by English cultural exceptionalism reinforced by an English Channel-shaped redoubt.

Continued purchase

Lancashire and the New Liberalism was a significant academic intervention and played a major role in shaping the continuing historical debate over the political realignment of British politics during the Edwardian era and afterwards. While Clarke did not end the debate, he did push in new and fruitful directions. The existence and nature of a 'progressive' politics was discussed. How issues were conceptualised, interests were appealed to, and the role of ideas in this process altered how the debate was approached and therefore influenced some of the conclusions that later scholars reached. In many ways, the application of sophisticated academic analysis, and a full-length monograph, to this period of Lancashire's history did a great deal to elevate the county's significance in British political history and the study of the wider region's

³² D.J. Dutton, 'Lancashire and the new unionism: the Unionist party and the growth of popular politics, 1906-1914', *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire* 130 (1980), 146.

³³ E. Robinson, 'Defining Progressive Politics: Municipal Socialism and Anti-Socialism in Contestation, 1889-1939', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 76:4 (2015), 609-610.

³⁴ S.F. Moran, 'Review: The Strange Survival of Liberal England: Political Leaders, Moral Values and the Reception of Economic Debate. Edited by E. H. H. Green and D. M. Tanner', *The Historian* 73:3 (2011), 612-613; M. Hendley, 'Review of Green, E. H. H.; Tanner, D. M., eds., The Strange Survival of Liberal England: Political Leaders, Moral Values and the Reception of Economic Debate', *H-Albion H-Net Reviews* October, 2008: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=15548> (accessed 13/08/20).

³⁵ H. McCarthy, 'Review of The Strange Survival of Liberal England: Political Leaders, Moral Values and the Reception of Economic Debate', *Reviews in History* (no. 661) <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/661> (accessed 14/08/20).

history. Unpicking the significance of the local within an increasingly ‘nationalised’ politics in late Victorian and Edwardian Britain is still a stimulating area of historical research.³⁶ However, the books influence goes beyond the specific events, geographies, and time-period it chronicled.

Peter Clarke’s work continues to shape the approach of scholars in the fields of historic electoral behaviour, past politics, policymaking, leadership, and marketing, together with intellectual history. As Helen McCarthy observed, the historic actors who populate Clarke’s work were carefully placed with a methodical reconstruction of ‘densely-spun web of electoral imperatives, ideological impulses and economic realities’ that populated their world.³⁷ Complexity and plurality are never abandoned for simplified narrative. In this way, his works can never be simplistically located in the long-present schools of British political history. However, the significance of economy that determines Marxian interpretation, the influence of psychological and individual factors that shape a high-politics approach, and the focus on party apparatus that underpin traditional institutional histories are far from non-existent. Rather, they are more carefully weighed and integrated into an innovative, rigorous, and sophisticated historicist examination of political change in an appropriate context.

³⁶ For recent examples, see S. Wolstencroft, *The Progressive Alliance and the Rise of Labour, 1903-1922: Political Change in Industrial Britain* (Cham, 2018); M. Kidd, *The renewal of radicalism: Politics, identity and ideology in England, 1867-1924* (Manchester, 2020).

³⁷ H. McCarthy, review of *The Strange Survival of Liberal England: Political Leaders, Moral Values and the Reception of Economic Debate*, *Reviews in History* (no. 661) <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/661> (accessed 14/08/20).