

# The books that inspired Lewis Baston: “In David Butler’s British General Election series, one can see the moments where the tide of history turned”

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*Lewis Baston is a UK political analyst and commentator writing on topics ranging from elections, history and corruption. He tells us how his interest in political science was influenced early by his father’s academic career and their proximity to the University of Southampton library with its endless amount of books in politics and history. He deeply admires David Butler’s election studies for giving narrative excitement to the UK’s most defining elections and explains how these studies continue to inform his approach to politics.*



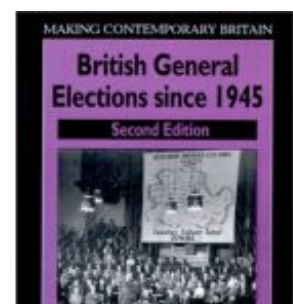
I became interested in political science at the age of about fourteen. My father was (indeed, still is despite retirement) an academic and we lived close to the University of Southampton. I was, as a shy and bookish teenager, intrigued by the University library and its contents that were far more sophisticated than the local reference library, and I sometimes read there and prevailed upon my father to borrow interesting books.

The politics and history section was particularly fertile territory for me, with books on such an array of subjects clustered around Dewey decimal 320 – socialist theory, representative institutions, electoral systems, the far right and so on. But I kept coming back to the little row of books with nearly the same title, and one consistent author: *The British General Election of...* by David Butler and his colleagues.

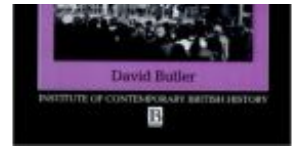
David Butler modestly says that the Nuffield election studies are at best “immortality in the footnotes of others”, but they are more than that. While they are not exactly works of suspense, because we know the ending each time, there is narrative excitement in *why* and *how* we got to the result we did. In close elections like 1964, 1970, February 1974 and 1992, one can see the moments where the tide of history turned. The Nuffield studies give one a strange sort of cultural literacy in the electoral conflicts of the past – some now utterly obscure like the ‘noose trial’ of 1966, some still echoing like the interventions of Enoch Powell in the elections of 1970 and 1974.



The original study in 1945 by McCallum and Readman was inspired, as so many things at that time were, by the desire not to repeat the mistakes of the period after 1918. They felt that the 1918 election had become shrouded in mythology and did not want the same thing to happen in 1945. The Nuffield studies put down on record some of the contemporary flavour, and the facts as they happen, and do a first quantitative study of the aggregate results. Over time, they have become more sophisticated as election campaigning, polling and the

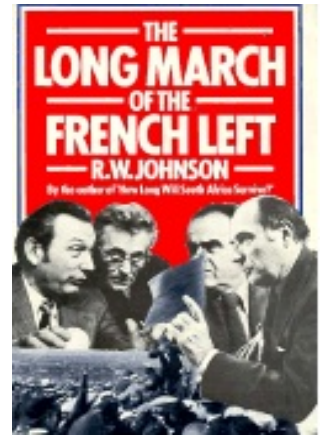


discipline of political science have become more sophisticated, and as the authors have become privy to more and more information from the key players. But they are still fulfilling the purpose of the 1945 study – to be the second draft of electoral history, close enough to see it as contemporaries saw it but removed from the heat and partiality of day to day journalism.



The Nuffield studies have not killed off the phenomenon of people talking nonsense about the events, results and meaning of elections, but they have drastically reduced the amount of nonsense uttered, and that is a considerable achievement for any programme of academic work. The series remains in good hands, with Dennis Kavanagh and Phil Cowley producing a splendid work about the 2010 election.

My choices of where to study were influenced by my reading, and I had the great good fortune to meet and study under two people whose writing I had admired. I applied to Magdalen College Oxford because I admired the work of R.W. Johnson: particularly *The Long March of the French Left*, a Butlerite work in many ways, but also his journalism – I remember a *New Statesman* piece about Stroud in the 1980s which was probably the first serious work on the British Green Party. Then I went to Nuffield College Oxford and had the privilege of studying under David Butler during an election campaign in 1992 and helping him and Martin Westlake with their book on the 1994 European election.



I also spent some happy times in the mid-1990s organising the archive of David's papers, with the help of my then wife Karen Baston. David and his co-authors and occasional helpers had conducted a large number of off the record background interviews for the books since 1964, and the notes to these are a fascinating insight into history as it unfolded. It was a further peek behind the curtain, which I had first raised by reading the Nuffield election studies, at what Britain was like at these crucial lock gates of history. I admired David and his colleagues' ability to command the confidence of people from different sides of politics, to synthesise the information that came to them in ever increasing quantity and quality, and to be fair without abandoning their own judgement. The example still inspires me.

I remain a proud and unrepentant Butlerite in my own writing. I have great respect for the rigour that quantitative and statistical methods have introduced into political science, but I have taken from Butler the feeling that quite basic aggregate numbers (polls and election results) and simple measures (swing, vote share, correlation) can still say interesting things to specialist and general audiences alike. I like writing for newspapers and appearing on television, and feel that these are valid and useful things to do, in part because David showed that this is true. Blogging is a modern-day extension of that mission.

Paradoxically, my current semi-detached academic status is

also a Butler legacy: in 1994 he encouraged me to follow up the opportunity that Anthony Seldon presented, to work on his biography of John Major, to the eventual detriment (I am sure this was not David's intention) of my D.Phil.

What else do I read? I have a promiscuous liking for contemporary history in whatever country I have visited lately, be that Mexico, Argentina, Moldova, Vietnam or wherever. But I have to confess that I am a devotee of crime literature. I like to think that I require a certain amount of quality in the crime novels I read, be that the sheer craft of Lawrence Sanders, John Sandford or Peter Robinson, the psychological depth and sense of place of Frank Tallis, or the all-out satirical attack of Christopher Brookmyre. I aim eventually to write a crime novel myself, and if I can be worthy of these influences I would be happy. And if the style and content of my writing on political and historical subjects identifies me as a member of the school of David Butler, then I am proud.



David Butler (left) BBC studios, during the 1950 UK general election (Photo from BBC Archive <http://bbc.in/btKTCV>)

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**Lewis Baston** is Senior Research Fellow at [Democratic Audit](#), and author of several books including [Don't Take No For An Answer](#) (on the 2011 electoral reform referendum), *Reggie: The Life of Reginald Maudling*, and several books on elections including *The Political Map of Britain* (with Simon Henig). From 2003 to 2010 he was Director of Research for the Electoral Reform Society.

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