

Book Review: Portrait of a Party: The Conservative Party in Britain, 1918-1945

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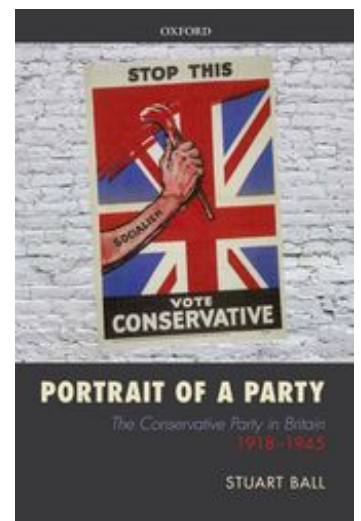
*The Conservative Party is the least investigated and understood of British political parties, despite its long record of success. Using an original approach and a wide range of sources, **Stuart Ball** analyses the nature and working of the Conservative Party during one of the most significant and successful periods in its history. Academic historians will likely find Ball's study a fruitful endeavour, especially if they are working on related or tangential historical themes, concludes **Jason Brock**.*



Portrait of a Party: The Conservative Party in Britain, 1918-1945. Stuart Ball. Oxford University Press. April 2013.

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There is certainly no dearth of recent historical scholarship on aspects of inter-war Britain. Much of this has been prompted, I strongly suspect, by the current economic malaise in Britain and as such it has tended to focus upon economic considerations. That is not to say that there have been no recent histories of other inter-war concerns, as Richard Overy's popular book *The Morbid Age* is a testament to. What is worth noting, however, is that although there is no shortage of historical attention on the rise of the Labour Party and the decline of the Liberals, there is somewhat less scholarship on the Conservative Party in the period. The reasons for this are more than a little puzzling; although I could speculate that it is because many historians simply think of the Conservatives as less ideologically interesting (or, perhaps, less politically palatable to themselves personally). Whatever the case may be I am pleased that [Stuart Ball's](#) new book goes some way to redressing the balance.





Ball is one of Britain's leading historians of Conservatism as a political movement and we should not be surprised to find this "portrait" of the Conservative Party to be a thorough and developed one. Nevertheless, the extent of the research is really very impressive and Ball has explored a large amount of unpublished material ranging from private papers to Constituency Association records and those of ancillary Party organisations. This, then, is no simple study of the great and the good of the Parliamentary Conservative Party but rather a much broader examination of the Conservatives as a whole, from the grassroots activists and their engagement with the public right through to the leadership. As Ball makes clear in his introduction, this book is a blending of the "old" and the "new" approaches to political history. Although I fully understand why the title is *Portrait of a Party*, I feel that the scale and scope of the study reflects something closer to a landscape painting (although this would provide for a somewhat less elegant title).

The best embodiment of the merits of Ball's methodical and totalising approach is to be found in the chapter on the public appeal of the Party, which is also full of usefully tabulated data on the Party's electoral support. Ball points out that the Conservatives were not content to simply be a party of negative cohesion, even though the rise of socialism provided ample scope for such an electoral tactic, but instead pursued a definite and positive appeal to the nation. There remained, however, a certain duality in this regard; especially since "the wise Conservative travels light" in ideological terms, as Ian Gilmour put it. Yet, and in spite of the policy focus on the particular issues of the day, there was certainly a rather more philosophical or doctrinal undercurrent to Conservatism in the period and the Party benefitted from being seen as the "bulwark against unsettling or threatening change" (p. 82), as it also did from its identification with the existing predominant value order in society. One of the more commented upon aspects of the Conservative appeal during the inter-war years pertains to its popularity with the newly-enfranchised female voters of Britain who, after all, would seem like a more natural constituency for either the Liberals or Labour. In tackling this issue Ball explores the Conservative notion of being "the party of the home" as opposed to the one of the (male-dominated) workplace. The Conservatives were therefore unencumbered by the masculine politics of Trade Unionism and found themselves freer to present an appeal the cut across class lines and targeted women as individuals rather than as a collective.

In other chapters, it must be said, Ball's approach yields results that are less likely to be of interest to the non-academic reader. They do not seem to be the intended audience in any case though, and the detailed examination of many other aspects of the Conservative Party are likely to be of some use to a number of historians tackling inter-war Britain. The chapter on the Constituency Associations, for example, is impressively detailed and tells us not only of some of the key grassroots debates of the period – such as tariffs, the future of India, and the continuation of the National Government – but also the procedures followed within the local Associations, something that is valuable if we want to understand the Party machine in its entirety. I reserve the same praise for the chapter on Ministers, and especially the section of it dealing with Junior Ministers since they are under-discussed in the historiography.

There are a few areas of Ball's book that do not really add much to our existing understanding beyond some additional detail and colour. This is especially true of the chapter "Leaders" and also, to a slightly lesser extent, that on "The Parliamentary Party", which are coincidentally likely to be the sections with a broad public appeal. Yet I feel that this work is better assessed on its merits than its failings (the former certainly outweighing the latter) and I cannot deny my admiration for the scope of the study. The level of detail makes it likely, I think, that many readers will be dipping in so as to mine the seam of scholarship rather than consuming the work as a whole. *Portrait of a Party* has been picked up by a few popular periodicals and has received somewhat mixed reviews that often ask the book to be something that it is not. Those expecting a succinct popular history of the Conservative Party between 1918 and 1945 will be disappointed, but the intended audience of academic historians will likely find Ball's study a fruitful endeavour, especially if they are working on related or tangential historical themes (a group in which I would include myself, incidentally).

Jason Brock is a PhD candidate and Visiting Tutor in the Department of History at Royal Holloway, University of London. His thesis is a study of J.A. Hobson's economic and political thought and he is more broadly interested in the history of economic ideas and political economy. Jason currently teaches undergraduate and postgraduate classes in modern British and European history as well as the history of political thought and the philosophy of history. [Read more reviews by Jason.](#)