



## John Bright: A 19th Century Freedom Fighter

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John Bright's fame was so high in the middle of the 19th century that early settlers in the village of Morse's Creek in north eastern Victoria decided to rename the place, Bright.

One imagines that few of the town's current population of 2,200 could tell you how it got its name.

They would not be alone. According to his new biographer, Bill Cash, Bright is 'almost forgotten' in England as well. Cash implies that this forgetfulness is particular to Bright, but, with the possible exceptions of Gladstone and Disraeli, all 19th century British political figures have largely been forgotten by the general populace, as the teaching of political history has become less fashionable in recent decades.

In works of political history, however, Bright is still accorded a rightfully prominent role. And so he

should be. Bright was a key figure in all the great debates of his time, many of which still resonate today. Along with his great friend Richard Cobden, he was one of the leaders of the Anti-Corn Law League, whose ultimate success in 1846 delivered cheaper food for generations of the British working class. It remains the iconic political triumph for free trade.

Bright's other great campaign was for parliamentary reform. His campaign began in the late 1850s and ultimately led to the Second Reform Act of 1867, which extended the franchise to include much of the working class. He was also a vigorous opponent of British participation in the Crimean War; an advocate of more humane policies towards India; and a key international supporter of the North in the American Civil War. To emphasise Bright's prominent standing in the United States, Cash relates how, when Abraham Lincoln was assassinated, the items in his pockets included a letter from Bright.

There is no doubt that Bright is worthy of a new biography and Cash released his work to coincide with the bicentenary of Bright's birth last November. Cash brings to the task both a personal connection to his subject (Bright was his great-grandfather's cousin) and an understanding of politics, gleaned from being a Tory MP for 27 years.

Politicians often make very good political biographers and in England excellent examples include Roy Jenkins and William Hague. Cash's work does not quite have the polish of some others and also suffers a little from his decision to write issuebased, rather than chronological, chapters, necessitating some repetition and making the narrative occasionally feel disjointed. And, while Cash's assessment of Bright is generally sound, it is impossible to disagree with one British newspaper reviewer, who commented that the book 'starts from the wrong place' in repeated attempts to claim Bright for 'the Tory camp'. Bright was rightly known as a radical in his time, yet Cash constantly seeks to bring out what he terms Bright's 'innate conservatism'. Other than Bright's opposition to Home Rule for Ireland late in his career, there was very little about Bright which was conservative. Uncompromising support for freetrade was a radical position in the 1840s and it still is today.

However, the book has more strengths than weaknesses. Cash neatly categorises politicians, using Bright and Disraeli as examples, between those interested in achieving 'objectives and principles' (and rarely holding ministerial office), and those focused on 'personal ambition'. Cash clearly sees his own career, which includes being one of the leaders of a rebellion over the Maastricht treaty that almost brought down John Major's government, as an attempt to emulate Bright's approach.

The book also lets readers appreciate how views of what entails good policy have changed. While in modern times reform has often meant a shift to indirect taxes, in the 19th century it meant the opposite, as Cash makes clear in relation to Robert Peel's 1842 Budget:

'It was one of the most significant budgets of the nineteenth century, representing a huge tilting of the economy towards free trade and, consequently from indirect taxes on trade to direct taxes on income.'



Another important issue Cash raises is what happens when two policy principles come into conflict. The example he gives is when, on obtaining self-government, the Canadians used their new found democratic control to shift from a policy of free trade to protection. The question arose of whether the Imperial government should intervene. Bright plumped for democracy.

Cash sensibly does not attempt to boost Bright at the expense of Cobden, pointing out that historians have often tried to manufacture differences between the two men. They had complementary talents. Bright was a magnificent orator. He put his talent to great use, gaining support for such great causes as free trade, democracy and opposition to slavery.

Hopefully, Cash's work will go some way towards ensuring that the achievements of this great freedom fighter are brought to the attention of a new audience.