

SELECTED SPEECHES

OF THE LATE RIGHT HON. THE

EARL OF BEACONSFIELD

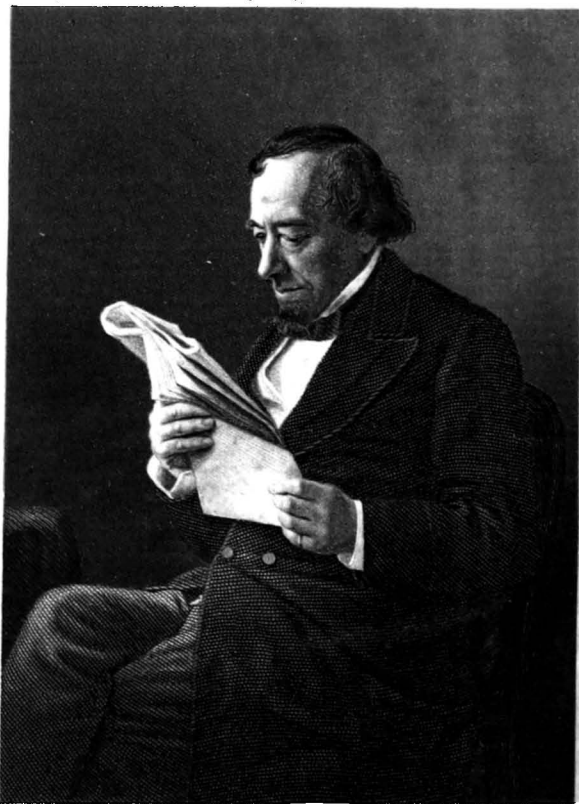
VOL. I.

‘There is one great drawback inherent in Parliamentary oratory, that it is always criticised in a partisan spirit. The object which the speaker has in view is almost invariably foreknown and prejudged, and it is hopeless to expect an impartial hearing from either of the political parties whose sympathies, interests, or prejudices have predetermined their opinions for or against the cause he represents. The most convincing logic, the most unanswerable facts, are listened to with a scepticism which no powers of persuasion can remove. On the other hand, the most transparent fallacies are accepted and applauded with a liberal and accommodating faith for which no imposture is too extravagant. An energetic “whip” baffles the highest oratorical effect; empty benches paralyse the most brilliant powers; crushing majorities annihilate reason, facts, and figures. But the orator who looks beyond an ephemeral political triumph has this consolation—the record of his speeches is preserved. The time comes sooner or later when his judgment is tested by an impartial audience, and his claim to statesmanship decided—not on a parliamentary vote, but on the strength of fulfilled predictions, of realised calculations, and of proved foresight.’

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Beaconsfield,

SELECTED SPEECHES
OF THE LATE
RIGHT HONOURABLE THE
EARL OF BEACONSFIELD

ARRANGED AND EDITED

WITH INTRODUCTION AND EXPLANATORY NOTES

BY

T. E. KEBBEL, M.A.

With a Portrait

IN TWO VOLUMES—VOLUME I.

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PREFACE.

ON giving these volumes to the public, it is my first duty, as it is also my greatest pleasure, to acknowledge the aid which I have received from the friends and colleagues of Lord Beaconsfield. To the MARQUIS of SALISBURY, SIR STAFFORD NORTHCOTE, LORD ROWTON, Mr. E. STANHOPE, SIR PHILIP ROSE (one of Lord Beaconsfield's executors), and last, but not least, to BARON DIMSDALE, late Member for Hertford, I am indebted in various degrees for assistance in the process of selection, for the revision of the proof sheets, for the communication of many interesting details, and for the key to Lord Beaconsfield's tactics in more than one Parliamentary campaign. Without these powerful auxiliaries, I could scarcely have presumed to venture on a task of so much difficulty; even with them I am only too conscious how very imperfectly I have discharged it.

T. E. KEBBEL.

January 17, 1882.

CONTENTS

OF

THE FIRST VOLUME.

PART I.

EARLY SPEECHES.

	PAGE
HIGH WYCOMBE, JUNE 9, 1832	3
HIGH WYCOMBE, NOV. 27, 1832	5
HIGH WYCOMBE, DEC. 16, 1834	10
TAUNTON, APRIL 29, 1835	25

PART II.

SPEECHES ON AGRICULTURAL INTEREST, FREE TRADE, AND CONDUCT OF SIR ROBERT PEELE'S GOVERNMENT.

THE NEW TARIFF, MAY 10, 1842	35
IMPORT DUTIES, APRIL 25, 1843	38
SPEECH AT SHREWSBURY, MAY 9, 1843	46
SUGAR DUTIES, JUNE 17, 1844	58
OPENING OF LETTERS BY THE GOVERNMENT, FEB. 28, 1845	63
AGRICULTURAL DISTRESS, MARCH 17, 1845	74
MAYNOOTH, APRIL 11, 1845	82
SPEECH ON ADDRESS, JAN. 22, 1846	98
AMENDMENT TO MOTION FOR GOING INTO COMMITTEE OF WHOLE HOUSE, FEB. 20, 1846	111

	PAGE
CORN IMPORTATION BILL, THIRD READING, MAY 15, 1848	144
AYLESBURY, JUNE 26, 1847	173
INCOME-TAX, MARCH 10, 1848	182
LOCAL TAXATION, MARCH 8, 1849	208
STATE OF THE NATION, JULY 2, 1849	240
AGRICULTURAL DISTRESS, FEB. 19, 1850	258
" " FEB. 11, 1851	279
" " MARCH 28, 1879	324
" " APRIL 29, 1879	334

PART III.

LATER FINANCIAL SPEECHES.

BUDGET, DEC. 3, 1852	345
REPLY, DEC. 16, 1852	396
SPEECH ON MR. GLADSTONE'S BUDGET, MAY 2, 1853	436
WAYS AND MEANS. BUDGET, APRIL 19, 1858	444
MR. GLADSTONE'S BUDGET, FEB. 24, 1860	475
WAYS AND MEANS, APRIL 7, 1862	493
MR. WALPOLE'S RESOLUTION, JUNE 3, 1862	505
COMMERCIAL TREATY WITH ITALY, FEB. 17, 1863	519

PART IV.

PARLIAMENTARY REFORM.

BOROUGH FRANCHISE, MAY 8, 1865	529
ON INTRODUCING BILL OF 1867, MARCH 18, 1867	544
SECOND READING, MARCH 26, 1867	567
MR. GLADSTONE'S AMENDMENT (COMPOUND HOUSEHOLDERS), APRIL 12, 1867	592
THIRD READING REFORM BILL, JULY 15, 1867	607
COUNTY FRANCHISE, MAY 18, 1874	624

INTRODUCTION.

THE Speeches of Lord Beaconsfield possess a value peculiar to themselves. Not only do they present us with the opinions of a great statesman in the language of a great orator; they are also the product of a singularly original and penetrating mind, surveying English history and politics from a perfectly independent position, outside of all the hereditary influences and prejudices of our party life, and unattainable perhaps by one whose mind has been steeped in them from childhood. In this respect they are unique. No other English statesman who has risen to the same eminence has ever contemplated the English constitution from the same external height, or brought to the consideration of political theories an understanding so absolutely unhampered by the shackles of political tradition. That this circumstance was not an unmixed advantage to Lord Beaconsfield himself in his public career may readily be granted. Veteran politicians did not like being told by a young man of five-and-twenty that the whole conception of our party history which had been implicitly accepted by them for the last forty years was wrong from the beginning; and much of the peculiar animosity which Mr. Disraeli inspired on his first entry into life may be ascribed to this cause. But it was an unqualified advantage to the world at large that our history and our constitution should be subjected to this inde-

INTRODUCTION.

pendent criticism, which has, certainly, had the effect of exploding more than one vulgar error on the subject of political parties.

I have accordingly been guided in this work by three principles of selection. It has been my object to select (1) those speeches which exhibit in the strongest light the character of the speaker, and the views of history and politics which were peculiar to himself; (2) those which form an essential part of the history of great public questions, and which are indispensable to the full comprehension of them; and (3) those which are of general and permanent interest, containing maxims and arguments which, in the opinion at least of Lord Beaconsfield's admirers, all future generations may consult with profit.

The difficulty of forming a selection from the speeches of any leading statesman of our own times, whose public career has extended over half a century, must obviously be considerable, if only on account of the number which are now required of him, compared with what would have sufficed some five-and-twenty years ago. But, in the case of Lord Beaconsfield's speeches, the difficulty is at least doubled by the exceptional extent to which the English people are familiar with them. His graver eloquence was often of a very high order; but here he has his equals, and, as many perhaps may think, his superiors. He might have had both perhaps even in the domain in which he now shines without a rival had we the speeches in full of either Charles Townsend or the elder Pitt. In default of such competitors, however, it is no disparagement of any English orator, either living or dead, but a simple fact, to say that no one has ever equalled Lord Beaconsfield in that special combination of humour and sarcasm by which he originally gained the ear of the House of Commons, and which served him more effectually than the most impas-

INTRODUCTION.

sioned declamation, in the particular kind of warfare in which he found himself engaged—a warfare which reminds us at one time of the quarrel between Pope and the dunces, at another of the more dignified hostilities between Pope and Addison.

These were the oratorical triumphs which won him the sympathetic admiration of the English people, and it was the consummate and truly racy rhetoric displayed in these encounters which made the deepest impression on their minds. A brilliant repartee, a happy illustration, a choice metaphor, remain embedded in the popular memory, when longer and even higher flights of oratory are forgotten; and Lord Beaconsfield hardly ever made a speech of first-class importance which did not contain some gem of this description. Each of them will probably have its own circle of admirers, who will naturally find fault with a selection in which they look for it in vain. This is a difficulty, the difficulty, namely, of pleasing everybody, which I could not expect to overcome; and I can only therefore throw myself on the indulgence of the public—should I be charged, as I almost certainly shall be, with the omission of speeches which ought to have been included, and the inclusion of others which might just as well have been omitted.

But, if such has been my own principal difficulty, I must warn the reader of two others which he will encounter for himself in perusing the speeches of Lord Beaconsfield. One is the corruptness of the text, in many, if not all his earlier ones; the other is the variety of meanings which the orator was accustomed to attach to the same words. For instance, he as often uses the word democracy to signify a class in society as to signify a form of government. He occasionally uses the word aristocracy when he means oligarchy, and oligarchy when he means aristocracy. And other instances might be given. Finally, perhaps, this may be the place to acknowledge that his style is some-

times obscure, and his constructions harsh, though this is more apparent of course in reading his speeches than it was in listening to them; and I have been assured by veterans of the gallery, that there were no speeches in the House of Commons easier to report than Mr. Disraeli's. To use their own language, he never 'rushed' at a topic or an argument, but was always deliberate, and consequently always intelligible; even when in the disposition of his sentences he was not a little Thucydidean.

His early speeches are in some respects the most interesting of all, because in these the most original side of his mind is turned towards us. After he became one of the recognised chiefs of the Conservative party, and was enrolled among the dozen leading men on whom the country relies in turn for the administration of affairs, the difference between him and others was one less of kind than of degree. His policy on public questions was the policy of a great party moulded to a large extent by its political traditions and based on accumulated experience. His financial policy, his foreign policy, his reform policy might be better or worse than the views espoused by other statesmen; but they were not views of which it could be said that nobody else could possibly have entertained them. They were founded on considerations familiar to all politicians; and though Mr. Disraeli would have impressed his own idiosyncrasy upon everything he undertook, it cannot be said that he imported any absolutely new ideas into the practical questions of the day. But in his conceptions of our political history, and in the creed which he endeavoured to found upon them, he stands entirely alone; nor do I think it improbable that posterity will attach at least as much importance to these as to those more solid achievements in the domain of practical statesmanship, which,

INTRODUCTION.

during the latter part of his life, threw them completely into the shade. I have accordingly been careful to give as many speeches as I could in which these opinions find expression ; and that the reader may be in a position to do justice to them, I would press upon him the following considerations.

Mr. Disraeli, like Mr. Gladstone, entered public life with a theory ; not one which he had inherited, but one which he had constructed for himself. The period immediately succeeding the Reform Bill of 1832 was favourable to the growth of original opinions, and the tendency of the Romanticist revival which marked the first half of the nineteenth century was to turn men's thoughts upon the past. Mr. Disraeli was stirred by the wave as well as others ; and as to others it came in a feudal or an ecclesiastical shape, to him it came in a political. As earlier forms of society and earlier conditions of religion attracted some minds ; so the earlier struggles of our two great political parties attracted his, who fancied that he saw them reproduced before his own eyes. As Scott loved to brood over the idea of reviving in his own person the feudalism of the Middle Ages : as Newman and Keble, and even Mr. Gladstone, recurred to the Church of the Stuarts as the only remedy for the religious distractions of the day : so did Mr. Disraeli's imagination carry him back to the Toryism of the first Georges as our only protection against the dangers threatened by the Reform Bill. At one period of our history the Whigs had changed the dynasty in order to acquire power ; they had now changed the constitution. Eighteen hundred and thirty-two was sixteen hundred and eighty-eight ; William IV. was another George II., a puppet in the hands of a party, yet chafing under a thralldom from which he was unable to extricate himself. Mr. Disraeli was the champion of a popular Toryism exposing the pseudo-popular pretensions of a Whig oligarchy. What

Wyndham had advocated in 1733 he would advocate in 1833. That he overlooked certain very awkward differences between the two periods may be granted. But a similar class of differences was overlooked by the feudal and the ecclesiastical revivalist. All three aspirations had their origin in the same source. 'It was the stirring of the blood' when the present century was young. But neither Mr. Gladstone's theory nor Mr. Disraeli's was found to stand the test of experience, and each silently allowed it to drop into the background. Not, indeed, that either of them ceased to look back on it with fondness. Mr. Disraeli, indeed, perhaps as late even as 1867, may have felt that he was to some extent acting up to the letter of his earliest professions. But we find in both constant traces of the early love—indications of an intellectual craving for a creed which was found to be impracticable.

We are next led to ask what there was in the actual world of politics when Mr. Disraeli entered it to lend any colour to such opinions as he expresses in his earlier speeches. We must remember, then, that, strange as his declamations against the Whig Party may sound to ourselves, they represent what was by no means an uncommon feeling at the time, and that among men of long political experience and of what is called sober common-sense. That the Constitution and the empire would be destroyed by the success of the Reform Bill and the continuance of the Whigs in power, is a sentiment which meets us constantly in the correspondence of the Duke of Wellington. Mr. Disraeli had, probably, excellent reasons for saying what he says in 'Coningsby': 'Nevertheless, there existed at this period a prevalent conviction that the Whig party, by a great stroke of State, similar in magnitude and effect to that which, in the preceding century had changed the dynasty, had secured to themselves the government of this country for at least the

INTRODUCTION.

lives of the present generation.' Cobbett, whose early Toryism was just what Mr. Disraeli aspired to reproduce, though he had become a violent Revolutionist by the time of the Reform Bill, could say nothing too severe of the Whigs. So that, take it all in all, there was material enough to lend to the world of imagination in which Mr. Disraeli at that time loved to move, the appearance of reality which was necessary to sustain the illusion. But practical experience very soon revealed to him the superficial nature of the analogy which had once misled him; and, though he retained to the last his faith in popular Toryism, he saw clearly enough that the enemies of the constitution and the empire were not to be sought among the Whigs.

There was, however, one tradition of the eighteenth century to which he always clung, and in the first twenty years of his public life, from 1832 to 1852, its influence is conspicuous. Lord Shelburne says of the Tories in the reign of George II. 'that justice has not been done to their character and principles, owing to the never-ceasing outcry of Ministers in confounding them with Jacobites; but in fact they were the landed interest of England, who desired to see an honourable, dignified government conducted with order and due subordination, in opposition to the Whigs, who courted the mob in the first instance, and in the next the commercial interest.'

Almost every word of this might have been written of Lord Beaconsfield. 'The landed interest of England' was, to the day of his death, the object of his devotion; and on it he constantly maintained that the greatness of England had been reared. Hence his opinions on Free Trade and Protection, which were not founded on any disbelief in the economic soundness of the former. But he was irritated by the sophism which represented the Corn Laws as a tax on the food of the people for the benefit of a single class. The territorial system

INTRODUCTION.

of England did not exist for its own sake. It conferred enormous benefits on the nation. If you disputed this assertion, and said that you did not want a territorial aristocracy, that was a different question, to be argued at another time. But till you did say so you had no right to describe Protection as a tax on the food of the people for the benefit of a single class. It was a tax on the food of the people for their own benefit; for the sake of a great public object; for the maintenance of a national institution of which long experience had taught them the inestimable value. Granted that protective duties on agricultural produce were required for the maintenance of the territorial system, we must set against these the whole results which flow from the existence of an aristocratic order; from its sagacity and fortitude in the conduct of public affairs; from its moral and intellectual influence on the national life; from its discharge of great local duties, and its close hereditary sympathies with the labouring population; from its patronage of art, science, and literature; from its pride and its chivalry; and it was by no means so certain that the balance would come out in favour of unlimited Free Trade. There were those who questioned both these assumptions; who would deny either that the landed interest was necessary to the welfare of the people, or that Protection was necessary to the support of the landed interest. We have seen his answer to the former proposition. With the latter he would have agreed in the abstract. The landed interest had flourished before the Corn Laws were imposed, and might flourish after they were repealed. But then with the removal of Protection must come the removal of those special burdens on the land for which Protection was the only excuse.

He seems to have thought that Free Trade, salutary free trade, ought to be based on the principle of reciprocity

INTRODUCTION.

established by commercial treaties. But as our own financial policy had left us nothing to give in exchange, it was useless, he thought, to rely on reciprocity as an economical principle. Commercial treaties might be useful to England on political grounds, but on no other. The conclusion was that the landed interest must be relieved of those exceptional charges for which when Protection was abolished it received no equivalent whatever. Hence arose the demand for the readjustment of Local Taxation, which in our own time has become a question of the first magnitude, of which for a quarter of a century the Tory party has never lost sight, and which on their accession to office in 1874 they immediately took into consideration.

Of Mr. Disraeli's financial speeches, beyond what I have written in the paragraphs prefixed to each, I am able to say little. He never commanded a majority of the House of Commons while he was Chancellor of the Exchequer; and it would have been impossible for him, as Sir Stafford Northcote has pointed out, to achieve any of those dazzling financial exploits which distinguished the career of Mr. Gladstone, even had he been so minded. Such achievements require for success the support of an unflinching majority and the control of the public revenue for a considerable series of years. Mr. Gladstone brought in eight Budgets in succession; but towards the middle of the series his policy looked very like a failure; and no minister in a minority, certainly not one with Mr. Gladstone in Opposition, could have survived the ordeal of 1862. Nor should it ever be forgotten that Mr. Gladstone, while he was Chancellor of the Exchequer, occupied a position very different from that of Mr. Disraeli when he was Finance Minister. Mr. Gladstone had his hands free; Mr. Disraeli had not. The latter, in addition to the labours of his own department, was leader of the House of Commons. Mr. Gladstone was not. Mr. Disraeli, while

INTRODUCTION.

framing his Budget, was at the same time immersed in labours from which Mr. Gladstone during all those years in which his financial reputation was built up was comparatively exempt. Reform Bills, Foreign Policy, the very struggle for existence pressing heavily on the Conservative minister, absorbed a great deal of the time which Mr. Gladstone was able to devote exclusively to finance. But that his genius was well qualified for the mastery of economic science is shown as well by his own financial statements, as by the admitted value of the criticism which he bestowed on others.

The speeches here given on Parliamentary Reform, though not as specimens of oratory among Mr. Disraeli's best, possess considerable value. They vindicate the right of the Tory party to deal with the question as soon as the Whigs had reopened it; and show that Tories had been the earliest Reformers, as they had also been the earliest Free Traders. His own objects in legislation were mainly two: first, the extension of the franchise among the working classes, to compensate them for what they had lost in 1832, coupled with securities for the due representation in the House of Commons of the variety of interests and classes of which the community is composed; and secondly, the increase of the county representation. He always considered it to be of the deepest importance to prevent any single class in the country from obtaining a decisive preponderance in Parliament, and he denied to the last that his own Bill of 1867 was calculated to have that effect.

On Foreign Affairs in general his own Government was accused of very much the same propensity as he himself had constantly condemned in the policy of Lord Russell and Lord Palmerston. But I think all candid and impartial critics will allow that there was a vast difference in the circumstances of the two governments. The Italian question, the Polish ques-

INTRODUCTION.

tion, the Danish question, were not in the first place questions which touched the British Empire, while the charge brought against Lord Russell in connection with them was that he irritated and estranged foreign Powers by perpetual and injudicious interference, without diverting them from their objects by the legitimate use of British influence. No reader of these speeches can bring the same charge against Lord Beaconsfield. The questions on which he interfered were those in which our Empire was at stake, and his remonstrances, so far from being futile, produced important and valuable results. He would probably have said himself that his foreign policy steered a middle course between a policy of isolation and a policy of intrusion; that it was strictly a defensive policy, vigilant and energetic, but neither vexatious nor ambitious. It is, however, no part of my present task to reconcile all the discrepancies, either real or apparent, which show themselves between the earlier and the later speeches of this illustrious man. Some of them are due to real changes of opinion, caused by corresponding changes in the condition of the world, in the relations of party to party and of country to country; some to the different degrees of knowledge with which at different times he spoke upon the same subject; others, and not a few, are merely nominal, due to the habit which I have already mentioned of using the same words in various different significations. But whatever may be thought of his policy during the last six years of his life, no one can rise from the dignified and impressive eloquence in which it is embalmed without doing homage to the character of a true patriot.

*Ut cunq; ferent ea facta minores,
Vincet amor patriæ, laudumq; immensa cupido.*

I will only add that if changes of opinion on the gravest questions which can occupy the attention of public men be

INTRODUCTION.

indeed a crime, then statesmen of eminence, and living statesmen among the number, who are still considered worthy of our reverence, must stand at the bar alongside of him.

The reperusal of these memorable speeches seems to wrap one in a dream. One finds it difficult to believe that the speaker will be heard no more, and that we shall never again see him in that English House of Commons whose fame and honour were so dear to him. Insensibly one's mind wanders back to the days when every eye in that great assembly was fastened on the Tory leader as he sat silent through a hurricane of invective, or rose to retort or to expound. Once more one seems to see that motionless figure, that pale impenetrable countenance, which had betrayed hardly a sign of animation during the speech of his antagonist, suddenly kindle into life and flame as he sprang up in answer to the challenge, confident in his own resources against even the most tremendous odds. Again one hears the ringing rounds of applause or the loud peals of merriment as he successfully demolished what had seemed to be a resistless argument, or turned the tables on an adversary who had rashly tried to be sarcastic. It is hard to persuade one's self that this is all the work of the imagination, and that he will never again, in either House of Parliament, cheer his followers to the fight, sustain the drooping spirits of a party, or vindicate the name and fame of a nation and an Empire.