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BREXIT AND ALL THAT

The English and Their History, by Robert Tombs.
Alfred A. Knopf, 1,024 pages, \$45



ROBERT TOMBS HAS WRITTEN A comprehensive history of England: it begins with the Neanderthals and ends with New Labour. So vast a topic, so large a book (more than a thousand closely printed pages), inevitably contains many strands, but perhaps the most notable is the Whiggish, or classically liberal, one. To be sure, Tombs, a fellow of St. John's College, Cambridge, is keenly aware of those Whig foibles which another Cambridge don, Sir Herbert Butterfield of Peterhouse, deplored in his 1931 book, *The Whig Interpretation of History*. But unlike Butterfield, Tombs wants his readers to understand how much the Whigs got right, and although he seems to have conceived his book almost as an elegy for Englishness, it can be read, in the light of the Brexit vote, as a blueprint for revival.

The pivot on which *The English and Their History* turns is what Tombs calls the "great divide," the period between 1500 and 1700 when the medieval molds were shattered and the rudiments of modern England emerged.

With their vision of freer commercial, intellectual, and spiritual markets, their commitment to the rule of law, and their invention of constitutional government, the Whigs created what Friedrich Hayek called the "only set of ideals that has consistently opposed all arbitrary power," a philosophy that has at the same time brought about unprecedented material prosperity wherever it has been applied.

BUt WHAT ABOUT THE DARK SATANIC mills? The slag heaps of the Industrial Revolution were surely as hideous as John Ruskin and Charles Dickens made them out to be, but as a result of all that smoke, Tombs maintains, there "were fewer poor people in England" in the 19th century "than elsewhere in Europe." Friedrich Engels got it wrong when he

denounced as the "degradation" of the new industrial "proletariat" what was in fact the plight of a non-industrial, unskilled underclass, many of them newly

arrived Irish immigrants, who had no connection with factory work. Such slums in London, Liverpool and Manchester illustrated not industrialization but the problems of rapid urbanization without manufacturing industry—what England's booming population might have suffered had it *not* been for the Industrial Revolution, and which was being suffered in the ancient teeming cities of eastern and southern Europe, from Palermo to Moscow.

Factory work might not have been pleasant, but in Tombs's telling things would have been a good deal worse without it. The triumph of Whiggism, in his view, meant not only more cakes and ale but also a more stable, less violent political order. "There were at least twenty-two incidents in Europe between 1844 and 1914," he writes, "in which more than twenty-five people were killed by government forces; none was in Britain. This is not bad testimony to an absence of intense hatred and fear."



Tombs challenges contemporary narratives that would make the English story into one of continuous class- or gender-inspired oppression, but he is not a complacent—what in the 18th century would have been called a “vulgar”—Whig. He knows very well what Whigery is not good at. It is too “mechanistic” a creed to create communities like the ancient city-state or the medieval town, in which art cooperated with faith to create agreeable, at times beautiful, forms of common life. Tombs writes sympathetically of the old English “cultural and religious centres” before the Great Divide that severed England from the Catholic Church. With their “origin myths and legends” and their highly developed spiritual life, the old centers nourished, he argues, a culture that relied as much on the soft compulsion of art and mysticism to promote social cohesion as on the cruder whip of the statutory law. The medieval English towns “were not chaotic places.” Their “confraternities and guilds,” their “festivals, processions and plays (such as the York and Wakefield mystery plays),” promoted social cohesiveness through the easy, Orpheus-lyre compulsion of art and music, and knitted up the disparate threads of daily life in ways that put to shame the barren culture of the modern community center or welfare bureau.

THIS IS THE TRICKY PART OF TOMBS’s neo-Whig argument. The English Reformation that installed Henry VIII as head of a new church gave the liberating kick that prepared the way for the Whig revolution, with all its blessings. But there is a degree of truth in the old Tory notion of an acquisitive, solipsistic Puritanism stifling what Tombs calls an ancient “festive, communal” culture. “Merrie England,” with its public poetry (May games, Whitsun ales, Morris dances, the art of the cathedrals and parish churches), was not, he thinks, entirely a myth.

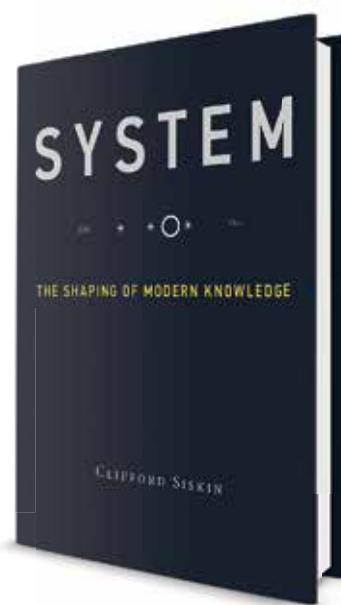
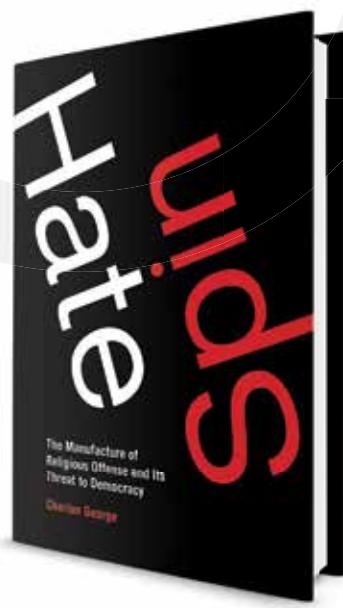
“Whoever was born a poet” in the Middle Ages, Victor Hugo said, “became an architect,” a creator of three-dimensional forms that brought the community together, a master of what Friedrich Nietzsche called “that higher art, the art of festivals.” Johannes Gutenberg and the Protestant Reformation changed the equation: one could now take one’s poetry as well as a good deal of one’s spiritual refreshment privately, through printed books. This was liberating—and also isolating. The Puritan’s introspective preoccupation with his soul, unmediated by tradition and sacramental guidance, was morbid, or so mystical conservatives from Samuel Taylor Coleridge to Evelyn Waugh have argued. At the same time, the Calvinist theory of grace was all too

easily confounded with divinely sanctioned secular riches and bred what Coleridge called a Christian Mammonism—a drab and soulless England of “looms and coal mines and counting houses...the power and the weakness of great possessions,” as Waugh wrote in his biography of the English Jesuit martyr Edmund Campion.

Although he is more measured, Tombs too deplores the “incalculable” cultural losses of the English Reformation. But the old order, in yielding place to new, did not entirely disappear, and Tombs suggests that it was the very persistence, in Reformed, Whig England, of the older cultural strain—it might be called the Tory strain—that kept the country from becoming Dickens’s Coketown writ large. He notes, by way of example, that although the Reformation did away with the old liturgies, much that was humane in their culture survived, and he points to artists like William Byrd and Thomas Tallis who perpetuated an “ancient Catholic tradition” of cultural artistry, one that has continued to soften the rough places of post-Catholic English life.

This older culture, growing as it did out of a communal faith that insists on the dignity of all human life, may have contributed to the comparative gentleness of English manners in another way. “There are doubtless several

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reasons,” Tombs writes, “why English politics has long been unusually peaceful, at least to the extent that it is very rare for people to kill or even hurt each other; but it seems plausible that the shared Christianity of rival parties was one of the causes.” Other nations with a Christian heritage, among them Germany and France, did of course fall into mass political violence. The peculiar combination, in England, of Christian aspirations and Whig institutions may have helped set the English apart.

WHIG ENGLAND, ITS IDEA OF individual liberty leavened with an older Tory aspiration toward community, has for some time been falling into obsolescence. Tombs endorses historian José Harris’s contention that since the Second World War Britain, once “one of the most localized and voluntaristic countries in Europe,” has become “one of the most centralized and bureaucratic.” “European integration,” Tombs writes, “pushed English and British law and institutions—now often presented as embarrassingly archaic and ripe for ‘modernization’—towards alignment with Continental norms.” Less emphasis was placed on the soft compulsion of culture and manners in the promotion of civil order; England joined the rest of the world in becoming ever more reliant on the harder coercion of a rapidly metastasizing statute book and a pervasive administrative bureaucracy—that “giant power,” as Honoré de Balzac called it, “wielded by pygmies.”

There was a ray of light. Margaret Thatcher brought the free market back into favor, and under Tony Blair the Labour Party broke with socialism. Capitalism, Tombs writes, “laid New Labour’s golden eggs.” But if Blair made peace with city grandes, he did little to loosen the stranglehold of the overregulated state, and the recent banking booms in London, like those in New York, suggest rot rather than vitality, the cronyism of Court Whiggery (financial and political elites in bed together). Country Party or Patriot Whiggery developed in the 18th century precisely to check the corruption of Court Whigs, but in another sign of the demise of the Whig tradition, defenders of the status quo have succeeded in portraying the Country Whiggism

of both England’s UKIP and America’s Tea Party as a dodgy, paranoid philosophy out of touch with the times.

THE LAST PAGES OF TOMBS’S BOOK ARE as much a mortuary as a history, embalming as they do a distinctive Englishness that, before the Brexit vote at any rate, seemed rapidly to be becoming a thing of the past. The British electorate’s decision to leave the European Union will certainly disrupt and perhaps forestall England’s transition from island kingdom to European province in “alignment with Continental norms.” But it is too soon to tell whether this revival of the cranky English stubbornness that long defied the orthodoxies of the Continent will lead to a Whig renaissance; it may yet be that England’s Whig experiment, with its antipathy to arbitrary power, will come to be seen as an historical anomaly, a rare exception to the compulsion in which the annals of human experience are largely written.

The Whigs’ geographic and cultural range has, after all, been exceedingly narrow. That Whig liberty thrived in Britain was partly a fluke: in the dawn of the modern era England, with its “moat defensive,” had no need of a large standing army, and English monarchs were therefore unable to impose on the kingdom an absolutist regime like those their brother kings were busy building in France, Prussia, Austria, and Russia. Nineteenth-century Continental nations that attempted to emulate the English model met with only limited success. Where free states did emerge in Europe, they were all too often at the mercy of the reigning dynasties—Romanov, Habsburg, and Hohenzollern—with their authoritarian traditions. (Otto von Bismarck’s Reichstag was constitutional window-dressing; the Prussian officer corps and General Staff were effectively independent of legislative control.) Gerhard Ritter, in his 1940 book *Machtstaat und Utopie*, went so far as to argue that nations like Germany, militarily vulnerable on account of their position at the crossroads of Europe, could never develop the sort of secure free institutions the insular English have long enjoyed. Whether or not Ritter was right in this, the fact remains that only since 1945, when Western Europe came under the pro-

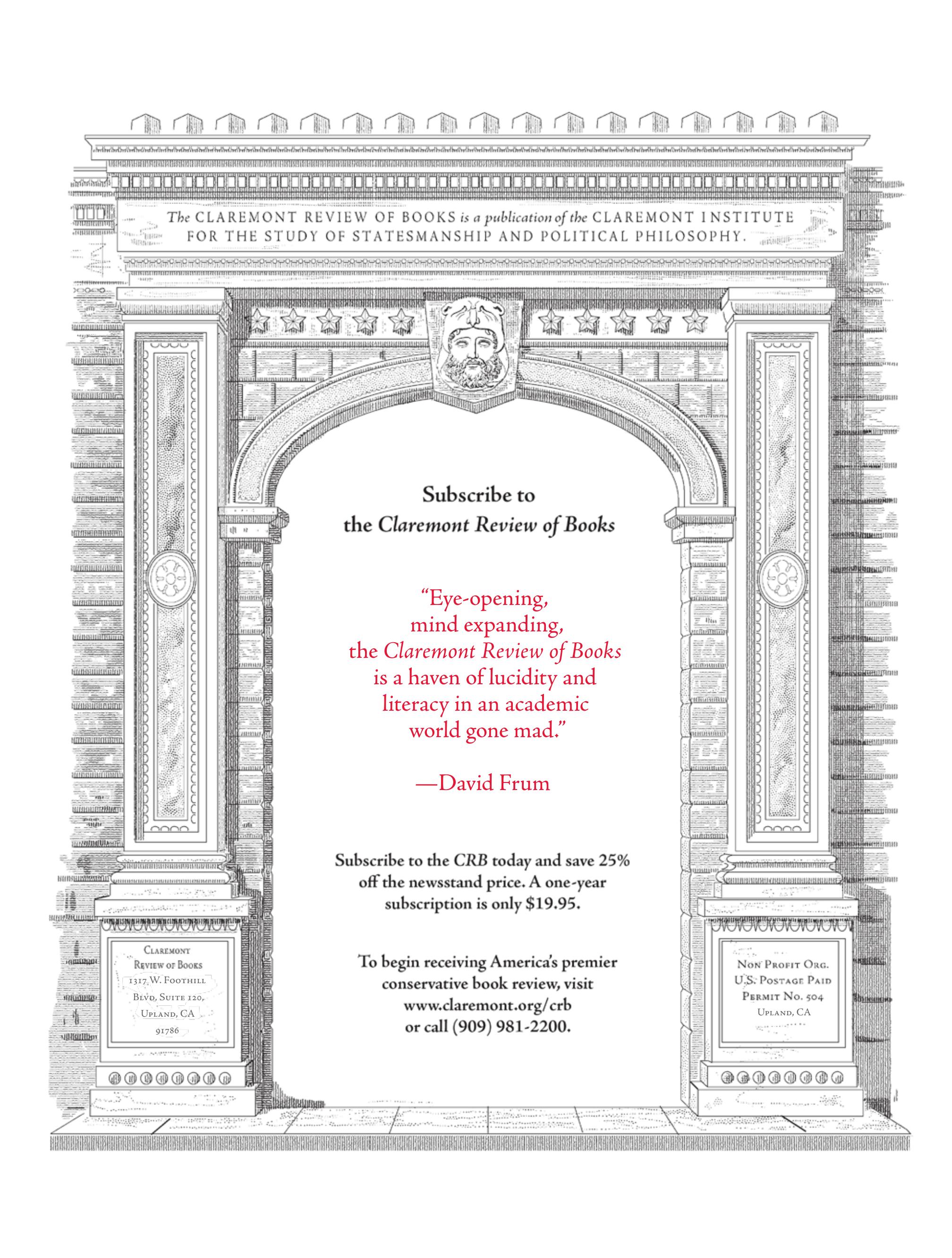
tection of American arms, has the free state broadly and continuously flourished there; the cases of Japan and South Korea are similar.

IN MUCH OF THE REST OF THE WORLD, Whiggery doesn’t thrive. Among the Islamic nations, stable constitutional government is the exception not the rule. The Latin American republics have a checkered history of caudillos, military juntas, corruption, and poverty. Of the Asian powers, India has in recent years become reliably Whiggish; China, Russia, and Iran have not.

In the United States itself, the child of Whig revolution, classical liberal principles are losing their hold on the popular imagination. The traditional Whig jealousy of executive power has so far faded that government by presidential fiat—in effect, lawless government—inspires little concern and is often hailed for its bold expediency. In the courts lawyers for the executive are re-litigating the dispensing power—the royal prerogative to suspend the law at the executive’s pleasure—one of the causes of the Revolution of 1688. Individual liberty continues to be a cherished ideal in the United States, but as a result of changes in school and college curricula there seems to be little understanding of how vulnerable freedom is without the legal and constitutional infrastructure to sustain it.

Hayek said that he wrote his 1960 book, *The Constitution of Liberty*, in order to reassemble the “broken fragments” of the Whig tradition before they were swept away in the “collectivist tide,” and in his concluding chapter he cited Lord Acton’s belief that Whiggism “is the supreme achievement of Englishmen.” What may be most valuable in Robert Tombs’s account of the decline of Englishness is the warning it sounds. If the outcome of the Brexit vote gives ground for cautious optimism, the fact remains that the Whig ideals which inspired Hayek and Acton—ideals rooted in repugnance to the coercion of human beings by arbitrary power—are fragile, more fragile, perhaps, than we know.

Michael Knox Beran, a lawyer and writer, is the author of *Forge of Empires: Three Revolutionary Statesmen and the World They Made, 1861–1871* (Free Press) and *Jefferson’s Demons: Portrait of a Restless Mind* (Free Press).



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