

Benjamin Disraeli, 1st Earl of Beaconsfield

21 December 1804 - 19 April 1881



Summary:

Politician, novelist and bon viveur, Benjamin Disraeli was a man with many interests, but it was as a Conservative politician that Disraeli achieved lasting fame.

Married Mary Anne Lewis in 1839 – she was 12 years his senior. Very happy marriage although he married her for her money.

Entered the House of Commons July 1837

Prime Minister for the first time: 27 February – 1st December 1868

Also Chancellor of the Exchequer 3 times under the Earl of Derby:

27 Feb 1852 – 17 Dec 1852,

26 Feb 1858 – 11 June 1859,

6 July 1866 – 29 Feb 1868.

Early Life

Disraeli was of Italian-Jewish descent, the eldest son and second child of Isaac D'Israeli and Maria Basevi. The most important event in Disraeli's boyhood was his father's quarrel in 1813 with the synagogue of Bevis Marks, which led to the decision in 1817 to have his children baptized as Christians. Until 1858, Jews by religion were excluded from Parliament; except for the father's decision, Disraeli's political career could never have taken the form it did.

Disraeli was educated at small private schools. At the age of 17 he was articled to a firm of solicitors, but he longed to become notable in a more sensational manner. His first efforts were disastrous. In 1824, at only 20, he borrowed recklessly to invest in South American mining shares, and, when he lost all (about £7k) a year later in 1825, he was left so badly in debt that he did not recover until 1849, when he was well past middle age.

Earlier in 1825 he had persuaded the publisher John Murray, his father's friend, to launch a daily newspaper, the *Representative*. It was a complete failure. Disraeli, unable to pay his promised share of the capital, quarrelled with Murray and others.

He turned to writing, motivated partly by his desperate need for money, and partly by a wish for revenge on Murray and others by whom he felt slighted. In his novel *Vivian Grey* (1826–27), published anonymously, he lampooned Murray while telling the story of the failure. Disraeli was unmasked as the author, and he was widely criticized.

Disraeli suffered what would later be called a nervous breakdown and did little during the next four years. He wrote another extravagant novel, *The Young Duke* (1831), and in 1830 began 16 months of travel in the Mediterranean countries and the Middle East. These travels not only furnished him with material for Oriental descriptions he used in later novels but also influenced his attitude in foreign relations with India, Egypt, and Turkey in the 1870s.

Back in England, he was active in London social and literary life, where his dandified dress, conceit and affectation, and exotic good looks made him a striking if not always popular figure. He was invited to fashionable parties and met most of the celebrities of the day. His novel *Contarini Fleming* (1832) has considerable autobiographical interest, like many of his novels, as well as echoes of his political thought.

Entry into Politics

By 1832 Disraeli had decided to enter politics and sought a seat near Wycombe, Bucks., where his family had settled. As an independent radical, he stood unsuccessfully for Hig Wycombe, twice in 1832 and once in 1835. Realizing that he must attach himself to one of the political parties, in 1835 he unsuccessfully stood for Taunton as the official Conservative candidate. His extravagant behaviour, great debts, and open Liaison with Henrietta, wife of Sir Francis Sykes (the prototype of the heroine in his novel *Henrietta Temple* [1837]), all gave him a dubious reputation.

In 1837, however, he successfully stood for Maidstone in Kent as the Conservative candidate. His maiden speech in the House was a failure. Elaborate metaphors, affected mannerisms, and foppish dress led to his being shouted down. But he was not silenced. He concluded, defiantly and prophetically, "I will sit down now, but the time will come when you will hear me."

He was a loyal supporter of Peel and his policies, with the exception of a personal sympathy for the Chartists that most Tories did not share.

Before long, Disraeli became a speaker who commanded attention, regarded as witty and able. He established his social position by marrying in 1839 Mary Ann Lewis, who had a life interest in a London house and £4,000 a year. She was deeply devoted to Disraeli, and, when he teased her in company that he had married for her worldly goods, she would say, "Dizzy married me for my money but if he had the chance again he would marry me for love." Her husband agreed.

Finding the financial demands of his Maidstone seat too much, Disraeli secured a Tory nomination for Shrewsbury, winning one of the constituency's two seats in 1841. He won widespread acclaim in March 1842 for worsting the formidable Lord Palmerston in debate, after which he and a small group of idealistic new Tory MPs, he formed the Young England group. They held that the landed interests should use their power to protect the poor from exploitation by middle-class businessmen. He expressed this view in his novels *Coningsby* (1844), *Sybil* (1845) and *Tancred* (1847).

From his disappointment at not being offered a Ministerial role, Disraeli gradually became a sharp critic of Peel's government, often deliberately taking positions contrary to those of his nominal chief. The best known of these stances was perhaps over the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846. But he also laid into the Whigs as freebooters, swindlers and conmen. The attack on Peel over his decision to repeal the Corn Laws eventually forced the government's resignation in June 1846.

Disraeli's election to Parliament as member for Buckinghamshire in 1847 and his purchase of Hughenden Manor in 1848 fortified his social and political power. His finances, however, remained shaky.

Chancellor of the Exchequer

At last in 1852 the Prime Minister, Lord Derby, offered Disraeli the posts of Leader of the Commons and Chancellor of the Exchequer. A combined salary of £5000pa may have attracted him as much as the posts themselves. The defeat of his December Budget, though, torn to pieces by Gladstone, caused the government's downfall.

Again, until 1858, the Tories were in opposition. Then Derby again formed a minority government, with Disraeli as Chancellor of the Exchequer. Disraeli for some time had felt there was no reason to allow parliamentary reform to be a Whig monopoly, and so he introduced a moderate reform bill in 1859. The bill, however, seemed too obviously designed to help his party, and so it was defeated; the Tories again were out of office and remained so for six years.

In 1865 when the Whig-Liberal leader Lord Russell brought forward a moderate reform bill, a combination of Tory opposition and a revolt against Russell toppled his government. Derby formed his third minority government with Disraeli as Chancellor once more. Although the initiative for reform was not his this time, Disraeli introduced it in the Commons and conducted the fight for it with unsurpassed enthusiasm and mastery of parliamentary tactics. The bill that passed doubled the existing electorate and was more democratic than most Conservatives had foreseen. Derby called it "a leap in the dark," but Disraeli could fairly claim that the bill had gone far toward "realizing the dream of my life and re-establishing Toryism as a national foundation."

Prime Minister 1868

Disraeli's eventual rise to the premiership in 1868 was to be the result of both port and policy. The Prime Minister Lord Derby was forced to resign on account of gout, and Disraeli, flushed with success after securing the reform bill to double the number of voters, was his natural successor. "Yes," he said in reply to a friend's congratulations, "I have climbed to the top of a greasy pole." The government was only a caretaker one, for the general election awaited only the completion of a new electoral register, and later in 1868 the Liberals won. Disraeli set a precedent by resigning before Parliament met.

As Prime Minister, however, Disraeli had struck up a remarkable rapport with Queen Victoria, thanks to his charm and skilful flattery. He was later to tell a colleague, who had asked for advice on how to handle the Queen, "first of all, remember she is woman".

Opposition

In the following 12-year period, politics changed from the chaotic collection of ill-defined, shifting groups that had been common from the beginning of Disraeli's career. Now the old politics defined by personalities shifted to an emergence of two parties with coherent policies. The party leaders, Disraeli and Gladstone, were implacable enemies, and they polarized the parties.

At first Disraeli played a comparatively peaceful role. He tried to create a new image for the Conservative Party that he hoped would persuade the new electorate. His seeming apathy disturbed his followers, and his novel *Lothair* (3 vol., 1870), a political comedy, seemed to some of them undignified.

From 1872 however, he ran his party with a firm hand, separating Conservative from Liberal policy on several issues: he defended the monarchy, the Lords and the Church against what he took to be the threat of radical Liberal policy; he put forth a policy to consolidate the empire, with special emphasis on India; he dwelt on social reform; he enunciated a strong Foreign Policy, especially against Russia. In 1872 Disraeli's wife died of cancer after many months of illness. Her death brought material losses: her house in London and her fortune passed to cousins. At age 68 his health was not good, but he turned implacably to political battle. He began a romantic friendship with two sisters, Lady Bradford and Lady Chesterfield, with whom he corresponded on politics and his personal feelings until his death.

His political fortunes turned when Gladstone's ministry was defeated in 1873. When Gladstone resigned, Disraeli refused to take office, pleading there was too much uncompleted business to dissolve Parliament, and that a minority government could only damage his party's prospects. Gladstone reluctantly returned to office, but within a year he dissolved the Parliament himself. Disraeli had been at work on party organization and electoral machinery, and the Conservatives won a resounding victory in 1874.

Second Premiership 1874 – 1880

Disraeli's cabinet of twelve, with six peers (five of whom had been in his 1st cabinet) and six commoners, was the smallest since Reform. In August 1876, Disraeli was elevated to the House of Lords as Earl of Beaconsfield and Viscount Hughenden.

Domestic policy

Disraeli's new government enacted many reforms, including the Public Health Act 1875, modernising sanitary codes through the nation, the Sale of Food and Drugs Act (1875), and the Education Act (1876). They also introduced a new Factory Act, meant to protect workers, the Conspiracy and Protection of Property Act 1875, which allowed peaceful picketing, and the Employers and Workmen Act (1875) to enable workers to sue employers in the civil courts if they broke legal contracts. The Liberal-Labour MP Alexander Macdonald said in 1879, "The Conservative party have done more for the working classes in five years than the Liberals have in fifty."

However, he was accused more than once of misusing his powers of patronage to appoint old friends into, particularly, clerical positions. He also made political appointments to positions previously given to career civil servants. Nevertheless, Disraeli made fewer peers (only 22, and one of those one of Victoria's sons) than had Gladstone—the Liberal leader had arranged for the bestowal of 37 peerages during his just over five years in office.

Foreign policy

Disraeli always considered foreign affairs to be the most critical and most interesting part of statesmanship, despite his not having travelled much. He had, however, criticised Gladstone for a "do-nothing" Foreign Policy. The following were key components of Government Policy and action during his second term.

Suez;

By 1875 80% of the traffic using the Suez Canal, which had opened in 1869, was British and was critical to the country's interests in India. It was jointly owned by French interests and by the Khedive of Egypt. Hearing that the latter was seeking to sell his 44%, Disraeli moved very quickly to purchase

these for Britain, using money he borrowed from Lionel de Rothschild. A risky manoeuvre, since the Government could easily have refused to ratify the purchase, leaving both men in the lurch. By the end of November, 1875, the deal had been done. It has been described as "the greatest romance of Mr. Disraeli's romantic career".

Gladstone's later act of taking control of Egypt in 1882 secured the Canal for British interests until after WWII.

Royal Titles Act;

Victoria had long wished to have an imperial title, reflecting Britain's expanding domain. She was irked when Tsar Alexander II held a higher rank than her as an emperor, and was appalled that her daughter, the Prussian Crown Princess, would outrank her when her husband came to the throne. She also saw an imperial title as proclaiming Britain's increased stature in the world. The title "Empress of India" had been used informally with respect to Victoria for some time and she wished to have that title formally bestowed on her. The Queen prevailed upon Disraeli to introduce a Royal Titles Bill. Disraeli was cautious about this, wary of negative reaction from MPs, and was fearful of losing any vote on the bill. However, when it was introduced it was passed with a majority of 75. Victoria formally became "Empress of India".

Balkans and Bulgaria;

Revolts in Bosnia and Herzegovina in July 1875, followed by further uprisings in Serbia and Bulgaria were very harshly put down by the Ottoman Empire. Gladstone, in retirement, was appalled by reports of atrocities and wrote a strong pamphlet urging that the Turks be deprived of Bulgaria. The Liberals then urged that the Ottoman Empire should no longer be a British ally. The Government was concerned with containing Russian territorial ambitions and saw the Ottomans as a useful partner to help in that. Disraeli's Cabinet sent Lord Salisbury to the December 1876 Constantinople Conference as Britain's lead representative but he failed to reach agreement with the Turks. The whole situation was rendered obsolete when Russia invaded Turkey on 21 April 1877, beginning the Russo-Turkish War.

The Russians pushed through Ottoman territory and by December 1877 had captured the strategic Bulgarian town of Plevna; their march on Constantinople seemed inevitable. The war divided the British, but the Russian success caused some to forget the atrocities and call for intervention on the Turkish side. Others hoped for further Russian successes. Disraeli's warnings that Russia was a threat to British interests in the eastern Mediterranean were deemed prophetic. At the end of January 1878, the Ottoman Sultan appealed to Britain to save Constantinople. Amid war fever in Britain, popular opinion was with Disraeli, though some thought him too soft for not immediately declaring war on Russia. With the Russians close to Constantinople, the Turks yielded and in March 1878, signed the Treaty of San Stefano, conceding a Bulgarian State which would cover a large part of the Balkans. It would be initially Russian-occupied and many feared that it would give them a client state close to Constantinople. Other Ottoman possessions in Europe would become independent; additional territory was to be ceded directly to Russia. This was unacceptable to the British, who protested, hoping to get the Russians to agree to attend an international conference which German Chancellor Bismarck proposed to hold at Berlin. Amid British preparations for war, the Russians and Turks agreed to this.

Congress of Berlin;

The Congress was held in June and July 1878, the central relationship in it that between Disraeli and Bismarck, although Disraeli left much of the detailed work to Salisbury. Principle to this was the cession by Britain of Cyprus (a viable base in the Eastern Mediterranean for the Empire) from the Ottomans. In turn, Russia gained territories and ports on the Black Sea. However, Disraeli and Salisbury gained agreement that Turkey should retain enough of its European possessions to safeguard the Dardanelles. Although Russia yielded, Czar Alexander later described the congress as

"a European coalition against Russia, under Bismarck". After the Treaty of Berlin was signed in July 1878, Disraeli and Salisbury returned home to heroes' receptions at Dover and in London. At the door of Number 10, Disraeli told the gathered crowd, "Lord Salisbury and I have brought you back peace—but a peace I hope with honour."

Afghanistan to Zululand;

As successful invasions of India generally came through Afghanistan, the British had observed and sometimes intervened there since the 1830s, hoping to keep the Russians out. But in 1878 the Russians sent a mission to Kabul that was not rejected by the Afghans, as the British had hoped. They proposed to send their own mission, insisting that the Russians be sent away. The Viceroy of India Lord Lytton concealed his plans to issue this ultimatum from Disraeli, and when the Prime Minister insisted he take no action, went ahead anyway. When the Afghans made no answer, the British Army under Lord Roberts started the 2nd Afghan War, easily defeating them. Roberts installed a new ruler, and left a mission and garrison in Kabul.

On 8 September 1879 Sir Louis Cavagnari, head of the mission in Kabul, was killed with his entire staff by rebelling Afghan soldiers. Roberts undertook a successful punitive expedition against the Afghans over the next six weeks.

British policy in South Africa was to encourage federation between the British-run Cape Colony and Natal, and the Boer Republics (Transvaal and Orange Free State). The governor of Cape Colony, Sir Bartle Frere, believing that the federation could not be accomplished until the native tribes acknowledged British rule, made such demands of the Zulu people that they were certain to reject. Frere did not send word to the cabinet of what he had done until the ultimatum was about to expire. Disraeli and the cabinet reluctantly backed him, and in early January 1879 resolved to send reinforcements. Before they could arrive, on 22 January, The Zulu king Cetawayo sent an army which trapped and destroyed an incompetently led British force at the Battle of Isandlwana, killing over a thousand British and colonial troops. Disraeli wrote the day after news reached London, "the terrible disaster has shaken me to the centre". He reprimanded Frere, but left him in charge, attracting fire from all sides. But he sent General Sir Garnet Wolseley as High Commissioner and Commander in Chief, and Cetawayo and the Zulus were crushed at the Battle of Ulundi on 4 July 1879.

1880 election

Gladstone accepted the offer in January 1879, from the Liberal Earl of Rosebery, and imported aspects of US electioneering techniques and later that year began his Midlothian Campaign, including attacking Disraeli, and drew huge crowds.

Conservative chances of re-election were damaged by the poor weather, and consequent effects on agriculture. Four consecutive wet summers through 1879 had led to poor harvests. In the past, the farmer had the consolation of higher prices at such times, but with bumper crops cheaply transported from the United States, grain prices remained low. Other European nations, faced with similar circumstances, opted for protection, and Disraeli was urged to reinstitute the Corn Laws. He declined, stating that he regarded the matter as settled. Protection would have been highly unpopular among the newly enfranchised urban working classes, as it would raise their cost of living. Amid an economic slump generally, the Conservatives lost support among farmers.

Disraeli's health continued to fail through 1879, and, despite showing confidence in public, Disraeli recognised that the Conservatives would probably lose the next election, and was already contemplating his resignation. Despite this pessimism, Conservative hopes were buoyed in early 1880 with successes in by-elections the Liberals had expected to win, and Parliament was dissolved on 24 March; the first borough constituencies began voting a week later. The election was thought likely to be close, but once returns began to be announced, it became clear that the Conservatives were being decisively beaten. The final result gave the Liberals an absolute majority of about 50.

Final months, death, and memorials

Disraeli refused to cast blame for the defeat, which he understood was likely to be final for him. Queen Victoria was bitter at his departure as Prime Minister.

Returning to Hughenden, Disraeli brooded over his electoral dismissal, but also resumed work on *Endymion*, which he had begun in 1872. The work was rapidly completed and published by November 1880. He carried on a correspondence with Victoria, with letters passed through intermediaries. When Parliament met in January 1881, he served as Conservative leader in the Lords, attempting to serve as a moderating influence on Gladstone's legislation.

Because of his asthma and gout, Disraeli went out as little as possible, fearing more serious episodes of illness. In March, he fell ill with bronchitis, and emerged from bed only for a meeting with Salisbury and other Conservative leaders on the 26th.

On the morning of Easter Monday, he became incoherent, then comatose. Disraeli's last confirmed words before dying at his London home in the early morning of 19 April were "I had rather live but I am not afraid to die". The anniversary of his death was for some years commemorated in the United Kingdom as Primrose Day. Despite having been offered a state funeral by the Queen, Disraeli's executors decided against it. The chief mourners at the service at Hughenden on 26 April were his brother Ralph and nephew Coningsby, to whom Hughenden would eventually pass. The Queen was prostrated with grief, but came to visit his grave four days later.

Disraeli is buried with his wife in a vault beneath the Church of St. Michael and All Angels, which stands in the grounds of his home, Hughenden Manor. There is also a memorial to him in the chancel in the church, erected in his honour by Queen Victoria and he has a memorial in Westminster Abbey.

Literary Works

In all, Disraeli wrote 14 novels before he first became Prime Minister, as well as a book of Poetry and a drama. The most famous is 'Sybil or The Two Nations' in 1845. He wrote *Lothair* in 1870 and *Endymion* in 1880. *Falconet*, his last book was unfinished in 1881.

Novels

- Vivian Grey (1826)
- Popanilla (1828)
- The Young Duke (1831)
- Contarini Fleming (1832)
- Ixion in Heaven (1832/3)
- The Wondrous Tale of Alroy (1833)
- The Rise of Iskander (1833)
- The Infernal Marriage (1834)
- A Year at Hartlebury, or The Election (with Sarah Disraeli, 1834)
- Henrietta Temple (1837)
- Venetia (1837)

- Coningsby, or the New Generation (1844)
- Sybil, or The Two Nations (1845)
- Tancred, or the New Crusade (1847)
- Lothair (1870)
- Endymion (1880)
- Falconet (unfinished 1881)

Poetry

- Poetry[edit]
- The Revolutionary Epick (1834)
- Drama[edit]
- The Tragedy of Count Alarcos (1839)