The American historian, Gertrude Himmelfarb, once put the question: ‘Who now reads Macaulay?’ Her own reply to the rhetorical question was:

Who, that is, except those who have a professional interest in him–and professional in a special sense: not historians who might be expected to take pride in one of their most illustrious ancestors, but only those who happen to be writing treatises about him. In fact, most professional historians have long since given up reading Macaulay, as they have given up writing the kind of history he wrote and thinking about it as he did.\(^1\)

The kind of history and thinking Himmelfarb was referring to is the ‘Whig interpretation of history’ which is one based on a grand narrative that demonstrated a path of inevitable political and economic progress, a view made famous by the Whig politician and historian Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-1859).\(^2\) In his *History of England: From the Accession of James II* (1848-1860), Macaulay maintained that the development of political institutions of the nation had brought increased liberties accompanied by the growth of economic prosperity. Macaulay’s study was begun when the educated classes of early Victorian Britain held a widespread fear of a French-style revolution during a time of extensive social, economic and political change. Many, in order to cope with such changes, looked to British history to yield role models as well as cautionary tales of what to avoid in creating a better society. One outcome was the early ‘Victorian History Wars’. These wars were fought over events of the seventeenth century, in particular over the English Civil War (1642-1649) and the significance of the Glorious Revolution of 1688. The Whigs (together with Radicals) celebrated Oliver Cromwell and the Parliamentary forces, seeing 1688 as their achievement, while Tories regarded Cromwell as a power hungry usurper, instead favouring Charles I and the Royalists and disputing Whig claims to the Glorious Revolution. The Middle Ages was another contested period. The Tories believed the Middle Ages was an era of relative peace and social harmony unlike their
own time of rapid social, economic and political developments. By contrast, most Whigs did not hold the Middle Ages in high esteem, seeing it, overall, as a backward period before the critical seventeenth century when absolutism was destroyed, opening the path towards progress. These differing interpretations of the British past triggered the lively early Victorian History Wars.

One major combatant who crossed swords with Macaulay and the Whig view was Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881). Regarding him, Himmelfarb might well have added a further question: ‘Who now reads Disraeli?’. Yet, like Macauley, he too represented, in his life and writings, a substantial and serious set of Victorian values. He shared with later conservatives a sense of moral decline in society. However, unlike them, Disraeli rejected economic liberalism instead seeing it as part of the problem. He looked back to the Middle Ages as a measuring stick for his own times. This can be seen in his membership of ‘Young England’, a Tory ginger group essentially made up of the young aristocrats George Smythe (1818-1857), iii Lord John Manners (1818-1906), iv and Alexander Baillie-Cochrane (1816-1890). v Their adherence to medievalism lay well within a Tory tradition of a paternalist territorial or residential aristocracy that was committed to both a code of Chivalry and the Constitution and the carrying out of a duty of care.

Here, in this idealised view, Benjamin Disraeli and others could see the Middle Ages involved a clear rejection of the liberal individualism of industrialisation that, in its unrestrained form, seemed to threaten social stability. He hoped that searching into the mediaeval period would provide answers for future political and social harmony. Disraeli understood the Middle Ages as having enjoyed the benefits of community-based values, as opposed to the perceived isolation of individuals in contemporary industrial cities. He and the Young Englanders advocated trying to replicate key features of the social order of a mediaeval past. In this past, they believed there was communal harmony, as the elites, both political and religious, provided basic needs of the population, with those beneath them in turn respecting and giving loyalty and service to their social superiors, who provided political stability along with economic
security and welfare where needed. Toryism of this kind had much in common with the motivation of industrial and social reforms of the paternalist Tory, Lord Ashley Cooper (1801-1885).\textsuperscript{vi}

Similar ideals or a sense of \textit{noblesse oblige} can be seen in the new Palace of Westminster (1837-1867) which was influenced by the neo-Gothic architect and passionate and vocal advocate of medievalism, A. W. N. Pugin (1812-1852). The Palace included three new chambers, one each for the Commons, the Lords and the Crown. Two of these were decorated from scenes of the Middle Ages consistent with the neo-Gothic architecture of the building’s exterior. The Queen’s Robing Room had frescoes painted by William Dyce (1811-1864) with scenes from the Arthurian tales dominating the inner sanctum of the room.\textsuperscript{vii} These were to remind the Queen, as she dressed for the opening of Parliament, that her role as the monarch was to rule wisely and make sure justice was done. In the Chamber of the House of Lords, mailed figures of signatories to the Magna Carta painted by C. W. Cope (1811-1890) stood between the windows. At one end of the chamber was Cope’s \textit{Edward III conferring the Order of the Garter on the Black Prince} and at the other Daniel Maclise’s (1806-1870) \textit{The Spirit of Chivalry}.\textsuperscript{viii} As the Arthurian tales were to the Queen, these images in the Lords were visual reminders to the nobility that, as part of their privileged position, they were to be chivalrous, self-sacrificing in a worthy cause and always to act with honour, including to their enemies, and in protection of women, children, and the weak and needy. To those predisposed to hold such values, the images served to bolster their conviction that the mediaeval period was an intrinsic part of a perceived national identity as well as emblematic of the historical progress of Britain beginning with King Arthur and continuing down to Queen Victoria.

The Palace satisfied both Tories and Whigs. For the former, the design recalled a time when they believed there was a social order symbolised by chivalrous virtues that maintained social harmony. As for the Whigs, the murals and art work show progress through past events that had protected fundamental liberties. However, when it came to the seventeenth century, real differences emerged between the Tory and Whig historical views. In the 1840s, a statue of Cromwell had been approved at the Palace but had to be abandoned as it proved too controversial because many Tories took
offence, one being Henry Phillpotts (1778-1869), the Bishop of Exeter, who condemned it ‘an insult’.\textsuperscript{ix} Whigs believed Cromwell had defended liberties of Parliament and the populace against Charles I who had been attempting to become an absolute monarch; thus the statue was perfectly suitable. On the other hand, Tories saw Cromwell as an earlier Napoleon, who had usurped the monarch’s powers, destroying the social order in a forerunner to the French Revolution. To many Tories, including the Young Englanders, the defeat and death of Charles was the end of the paternalism of the Middle Ages, which now needed to be revived.

These Tory paternalist feelings were summoned up by the writers of the Radical Tory Fraser’s Magazine. Confident they could revive such ideals, they actually gathered at a round table to write and discuss politics, comparing themselves to King Arthur’s knights, in their defence of Church and State and protecting the needy from exploitation.\textsuperscript{x} In their first years in the 1830s they established what they thought the Tories should do:

Toryism ought to be the Protective system … It ought to protect [emphasis added] the agricultural labourer from the farmer, the factory-child from the mill tyrant, the spital fields [sic] weaver from the competition of the men of Lyons; and [a] just electoral system in which all households, including working class ones would have the vote.\textsuperscript{xi}

While this level of commitment of Fraser’s was not shared by most Tories, these goals corresponded in some respects with those of ‘Young England’. The ideas are explored in Disraeli’s first two novels of the ‘Young England’ trilogy: Coningsby and Sybil (1844-1845). In each, the plot is secondary to the political message calling for a new generation of territorially-based aristocrats to take their place among the political elite to restore a paternalistic government. In addition, they attacked the liberal Toryism of Sir Robert Peel (1788-1850), Prime Minister from 1834-35 and again 1841-1846. As set out by the Tamworth Manifesto (1834), increasingly Peel moved the Tories towards a more laissez-faire position, as a way to increase economic growth and ultimately improve living standards that would, in the long-term, protect traditional institutions.\textsuperscript{xii}

Peel’s stance was not too far removed from Macaulay’s economic outlook. In Macaulay’s review of the Tory poet Robert Southey’s (1774-1843) Sir Thomas More;
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or Colloquies on the Progress and Prospects of Society (1829), he criticised Southey’s lament about aspects of the new industrial age compared to pre-Reformation society and the poet’s call for the State together with the aristocracy to intervene economically for the poor to create a fairer society. Macaulay argued that, in fact, industrialisation had led to the common people being better fed and housed and, with improved medicine, living longer than they had three centuries earlier. Forecasting, that ‘If we were to prophesy that in the year 1930, a population of fifty millions, better fed, clad, and lodged than the English of our time, will cover these islands … machines, constructed on principles yet undiscovered will be in every house,—that there will be no highways but the rail-roads, no travelling but by steam … many people would think us insane.’

Peel may not have had Macaulay’s imagination, nevertheless his policy exposed him to direct criticism in the narrative of Coningsby: ‘The Tamworth Manifesto of 1834 was an attempt to construct a party without principles … [the] consequence has been political infidelity.’ Disraeli, though, as a paid Tory propagandist in the mid-1830s had attempted to defended Tamworth by claiming the Whigs were an aristocratic oligarchy that had usurped the powers of the monarch for their own self-interest by bringing the Hanoverians to the throne. Like more traditional Tories he was embittered by Peel’s increasing move towards economic liberalism that seemed to embrace the economic policy of Whig and Radical liberals. One of the novel’s Tory numbers-men, Mr. Taper, sums up this view of Peel’s government as ‘Tory men and Whig measures’. This is a reference to the Whigs’ introduction of the first Reform Act and the increasingly laissez-faire policies such as the ‘new’ Poor Laws. The Law as it was constructed fitted the definition by the ruling elite of the ‘deserving poor’ and ‘undeserving poor’. The former were working people who earned enough to avoid the poorhouse and the latter were deemed ‘undeserving’ because they were out of work or did not earn enough to survive. Many early Victorian Tories like Disraeli opposed the Laws seeing them as a prime example of the wretched divide between the classes as well as symptomatic of the elites forgetting their social responsibility. To these Tories, those who sat on the centralised boards did not meet the people with whom they were dealing. Instead, in a bureaucratic manner, they decided, solely on the basis of economic efficiency, what was to happen to paupers without regard to their individual situation. By contrast, it should ideally be local agents in the regions
affected, such as local landowners and clergy, who should deal directly with the poor with whom they would have a close association. Such a view was misleading as many of these local figures did have direct dealings with the poor houses. Nevertheless the image of the heartless poor house was powerful and reinforced by descriptions given in *Oliver Twist* (1837-39) or the campaign by the ‘Young England’ supporter, John Walter II (1776-1847), an MP and the proprietor and virtual editor of *The Times*. As a Berkshire magistrate, he had acted sympathetically towards paupers in opposition to the laws.xvii

Disraeli made the link between the ‘new’ Poor Laws and Chartism. Chartism was a symptom of the ways the ‘new’ Poor Laws worked; the protesters were in part voicing their opinions on the pernicious effects of the Law. For this reason he made a sympathetic speech about the first ‘People’s Charter’ in 1839:

> He [Disraeli] was not of those who ascribed the people’s charter, as it was called, to the New Poor law; but at the same time he believed there was an intimate connection between the two … the old [pre-1832] constitution had an intelligible principle, which the present had not. The former invested a small portion of the nation with political rights. Those rights were intrusted [sic] to that small class on certain conditions – that they should guard the civil rights of the great multitude. Great duties could alone confer great station, and the new class which had been invested with political station had not been bound up with the great mass of the people by the exercise of social duties… xviii

To Disraeli, the need for a charter arose from a lack of leadership because those in places of responsibility had failed in their duty of care, instead abdicating it to the unprepared and unfit middle classes. In line with his speech, Disraeli voted in a minority of five Tories, with four Radicals, in opposing an advance to the Birmingham Corporation to establish a police force to suppress riots in the city.xix In addition, in 1840, he condemned the cruelty of the treatment given to Chartist prisoners.

The first novel, *Coningsby; or the New Generation* (1844), is very loosely based on Disraeli’s early experiences in politics. It is the story of a young aristocrat, Henry Coningsby, and his life in politics in the 1830s and 1840s, especially his effort to find new Tory principles. The second novel, *Sybil; or The Two Nations* (1845), closely
tied thematically to *Coningsby*, is about the social relationship of the upper and middle classes to the working classes, with each (famously) comprising ‘a nation’ of the subtitle. The story is based around the growing disillusionment of the young aristocrat Charles Egremont (brother of the irresponsible Earl of Marney) with the way the aristocracy (including his brother) treat the poor. Another element is his relationship with the other ‘nation’, established through Sybil, a young novice nun, and her father, Walter Gerard, a Chartist leader and, secretly, a disinherited Anglo-Saxon aristocrat.

*Sybil* was based on parliamentary Blue Books and letters by the Chartist leader and journalist Feargus O’Connor (1796-1855).\textsuperscript{xx} It was also influenced by Disraeli’s visits with Manners and Smythe to Manchester in 1843 and 1844. The purpose of the 1844 visit had been to speak at the Manchester Athenæum on the importance of education for the working classes and the loss of the ‘principle of duty’ that had led to the virtual division of Britain.\textsuperscript{xxi} These opinions angered many on the Tory side including the future Liberal Prime William Gladstone (1809-1898), at that stage a liberal Tory, who was a supporter of Peel’s economics.

Among other politicians there were both Tory and Radical supporters. After the Manchester visit, Disraeli saw another supporter, the paternalist squire and radical Tory, W. B. Ferrand (1809-1889) at Bingley, a rapidly expanding industrial town. In line with ‘Young England’ ideals, Ferrand had granted allotments on his land for the Bingley factory workers. Disraeli was there to celebrate these allotments and gave a speech in front of a flag inscribed with the words ‘The Throne and the Cottages’, a slogan conveying the idea of a mutually supportive integral relationship. The ‘aristocracy’, both landed and industrial, as though they were mediaeval feudal lords would provide security to their workers by supplying housing and care, which, in turn, would create loyalty among the workers.\textsuperscript{xxii}

The common themes of the first two novels are the rightful role and responsibility of the Church and of the territorial ‘aristocracy’, both landed and industrial. This aristocracy is the ‘real’ one, which is both territorial and ‘Saxon’ or English. The idea of a ‘Saxon aristocracy’ is explained in *Coningsby* in a conversation between Coningsby and Mr. Millbank, a northern industrialist.\textsuperscript{xxiii} The exchange takes place at
Millbank’s home. After Coningsby accuses Millbank of being ‘opposed to an aristocracy’, Millbank replies: ‘No, I am not. I am for an aristocracy; but a real one, a natural one.’ Millbank argues, as Disraeli had done his earlier propaganda work *Vindication of the Constitution*, that most of the Norman peerage was decimated during the Wars of the Roses, with only five out of twenty-nine families surviving. But to Millbank, as with Disraeli, those of Norman lineage are not the real or ‘ancient’ aristocracy; the real (Saxon) aristocracy ‘are to be found among the peasantry; the gentry, too, may lay some claim…’ The bulk of the aristocracy have their power based on false claims as it is built on confiscated church land or founded on political alliances that resulted in titles being granted, with names taken from places where they neither reside nor work. Millbank is calling for what Thomas Carlyle termed the ‘real aristocracy’, a group who are made up of the best and brightest. Carlyle (1795-1881), a reactionary man-of-letters, claimed in his *Past and Present* (1843) that the Middle Ages was a time of paternalism which had been encouraged by both aristocracy and clergy but had disappeared with the rise of industrialisation. Carlyle called for industrialists or ‘Captains of Industry’ who have shown their talents to establish the same authority over the people as the mediaeval aristocracy had done, to bring stability and prosperity. Disraeli was making the same point.

The ideal of a territorial aristocrat is Eustace Lyle, a wealthy Roman Catholic of an old ‘Cavalier’ family. He is promoted as the model of the connection between the people and the Church. He reintroduced festival days (that had been abolished under Cromwell) so that people could relax from work and rediscover their religiousness in a way believed similar to that enjoyed in mediaeval times. This point is further made in *Sybil* when Egremont meets Gerard and Sybil (both Catholics) in the ruins of the Abbey near Egremont’s family manor, which has been built on that Abbey’s land. The decaying Abbey is a metaphor of the decline and fall of the aristocracy and particularly of the failure of the Church that had formerly underpinned the social order to maintain communal stability and harmony. As Egremont asks himself: ‘Were there any rick-burners in the times of the lord abbot? And if not, why not? And why should the stacks of the Earls Marney be destroyed, and those of the Abbots of Marney spared?’ The Tractarian priest in the novel, Mr St Lys, who regularly visits the industrial and rural poor, sets the blame squarely on the Church in an exchange with Egremont:
I blame only the Church. The Church deserted the people; and from that moment the Church has been in danger, and the people degraded. Formerly, religion undertook to satisfy the noble wants of human nature, and by its festivals relieved the painful weariness of toil. The day of rest was consecrated, if not always to elevated thought, at least to sweet and noble sentiments … all were brethren…

The link here to Anglo-Catholic worker-priests in urban slums in the 1880s and 1890s is self-evident. Ashley’s Factory Bill in May 1844 gave the ‘Young England’ group an ideal opportunity to express such sentiments when they openly supported and voted in its favour. The Bill was designed to limit children and women to a ten hour working day. The Commons, including the majority of Tories, passed the Bill by nine votes. Ashley believed, as did Disraeli and his group, that the working people needed time for recreation to recover from the heavy labour, as well as to be educated. Disraeli’s colleague, Manners, even believed in the restoration of the maypole, as expressed in his collection of poems, England’s Trust (1841). The idea behind it was the need for recreational activities, regarding mediaeval pastimes as having provided the basis for a community for they brought people of different groups together in a shared activity. Supporting the Ten Hour Bill was unusual for the ‘Young Englanders’, believing as they did such measures were the responsibility of the landed classes, the clergy and industrialists rather than of Parliament. As Disraeli claimed in 1849 there should be ‘no interposition between capital and labour.’ But in this case, the Bill was needed because the employers were failing their workers.

Disraeli held that it was up to the ‘true’ aristocracy as the rightful leaders, to adopt a genuine and active leadership role or else destructive forces would usurp their role. Coningsby himself understands his duty to be a leader partly by appreciating the significance of the tombs of mediaeval knights. He realises he must become a crusader like King Arthur’s knights, who fought for those not able to defend themselves. In one way, the marriage between Coningsby and Edith Millbank, the daughter of Mr. Millbank, is a symbolic union of the old aristocracy with the industrial aristocracy, whose combined paternalism will provide for the betterment of society, for the marriage involved a shared understanding of landed labourers and the industrial poor. Disraeli used the marriage of Egremont and Sybil as emblematic of a forging of a new aristocracy from both ‘nations’ of the rich and poor symbolising
greater understanding between the ‘Two Nations’ that would, in turn create one nation that would not only be stronger but also peaceful.

That the novels evoked debate by their interpretation of Britain’s history and their implied commentary on the politics of the day is demonstrated in a sample of the responses. *The Times*, with its already established support for ‘Young England’ was lavish in praise of the novels, calling *Sybil* ‘another of Mr. Disraeli’s brilliant political novels.’

It agreed with Disraeli’s historical interpretation and criticism of the ruling classes; however it did warn against using history as a lesson as ‘it is so easy to decide upon past occurrences by the light which has since shone upon the world, and so difficult to exclude its influence, even by the greatest efforts of the imagination, in endeavouring to arrive at an impartial conclusion.’

Not all were so cautious about being impartial in their comments. Traditional Tories openly celebrated *Coningsby*’s messages in the Tory *The Christian Remembrancer* (an organ of the High Church party): ‘All honour to the great statesman whose unslumbering eye saw each opportunity of fighting the battle of *conservatism* against a hungrier and more rabid revolutionary foe than England had seen since the dark days of 1642.’

More so it agreed with Disraeli’s criticism of Peel for being indistinguishable from the Whig leader Lord John Russell (1792-1878) and hoped the monarchy would become a dominant symbol of national identity and patriotism.

On the other hand, W. R. Greg (1809-1881), a Free Trade mill owner, complained in the Utilitarian *Westminster Review*, as he later did with Elizabeth Gaskell’s (1810-1865) *Mary Barton* (1848), that Disraeli had stereotyped the factories as having no ‘genuine regard for the poor.’

Similarly but more forcibly, the evangelical *Eclectic Review*, which had liberal Radical sympathies, subscribed to the view that the nineteenth century was one of progress, both political and economic. It saw the past as less free than Disraeli presumed, exposing a lack of understanding on his part. Over time, the *Eclectic* argued, progress had brought freedoms that could not have existed in an autocracy. It charged Disraeli and the ‘Young Englanders’ with wanting to ‘roll back the wheels of civilization, and prostrate the liberties of mankind under the sceptre of autocracy ... in other words, to re-erect the throne of despotism, so that the irresponsible will of one man may control millions....’
But there was strong although not unqualified radical support for *Coningsby*. A *Westminster* article written by W. E. Hickson (1803-1870), the owner and editor from 1840-1852, expressed the belief that the old political divisions were coming to an end and change was on its way: “‘Coningsby’ is the yeast that will help in the general fermentation of ideas; and the result, although it may not advance the views of ‘Young England’ or what Mr. D’Israeli [sic] calls the ‘new generation,’ must be favourable to progress.” However some of Disraeli’s ideals were actually rejected by Hickson as absurd because ‘The monarch and all priest[s] have alike fallen, from their high estate.’ Nevertheless despite Disraeli’s denying he was not a Utilitarian, Hickson read into the novels his own utilitarian thinking, because *Coningsby* attacked both Tory and Whig, he claimed “‘Coningsby’ is a Benthamite novel that is a novel written solely with a view to utilitarian or political objects…”

*Fraser’s Magazine* was at the time a radical Tory journal. Although overall it agreed with Disraeli’s historical interpretation and believed the Tory party, with the aristocracy and church, did not do enough for the poor, it was nevertheless suspicious of Disraeli’s motives. *Fraser’s* commented ‘[Disraeli] originally a Radical, then a Whig, by and by a Conservative’ so therefore he cannot find a solution because he ‘has no well-grounded principle to fall back upon.’ As well, it could not accept with his criticism of the Reform Act. While agreeing with the charge in *Sybil* ‘that [the] Whigs [had] abused their position’ the *Fraser’s* reviewer, contended that, without the Act, there would not be the ‘true noble house of the people’s right’. The reviewer argued further that expanding the franchise had given more people a direct stake in the constitution creating a safeguard for the traditional institutions of Church and Crown.

Whatever the degrees of acclaim or condemnation ‘Young England’ received through their work and the novels in the years 1842 to 1845, the group were already breaking up as *Sybil* was published. ‘Young England’, never a strongly united group, had a major split over the increase of the government grant to the Catholic Maynooth College in Ireland in 1845. Manners and Smythe, in accordance with their Tractarianism, voted for it, but Disraeli did not. He wanted to prove his anti-Catholic
credentials, thus appealing to that strong sentiment among traditional Tories. The action was also part of his still growing resentment towards Peel.\textsuperscript{xlii} It was easier for Disraeli to vote against Maynooth, as he was no Tractarian. As Smythe wrote to Manners: ‘Dizzy’s attachment to moderate Oxfordism [Tractarianism] is something akin to Bonaparte’s moderate Mohamedanism.’\textsuperscript{xliii} This was similar to Manners’ feeling, when he wrote in his journal: ‘Could I only satisfy myself that d’Israeli [sic] believed all that he said, I should be more happy, his historical views are quite mine, but does he believe them?’\textsuperscript{xlv}

Disraeli had sympathy for the pre-Reformation church, for the social order he believed it provided, but had little interest in doctrinal or ecclesiastical matters. When it came to Disraeli’s defence of the Catholic James II in \textit{Sybil}, it was on the basis of the hereditary principle, not because of religion. Apart from religious differences, there had already been tension as Disraeli felt his colleagues were not ambitious enough, particularly Smythe, who was acknowledged, even by adversaries, like the writer G. H. Lewes (1817-1878), to be talented, but also lazy and often drunk.\textsuperscript{xlvii} Furthermore, Disraeli felt betrayed by Smythe’s acceptance of office in the dying days of Peel’s Prime Ministership.\textsuperscript{xlviii} Increasingly Disraeli aligned himself on the side of the Tory Protectionists in the Anti-Corn Laws debate of 1846. These differences assisted the break-up.

Disraeli’s move was partly opportunistic, to bring Peel’s Prime Ministership to an end, and partly self-promotion, to raise his status among the Protectionists who made up two-thirds of the party. However he also genuinely felt, consistently with his aristocratic principles (despite never saying he supported protectionism), that the new laws would threaten the aristocracy’s position by reducing their income.\textsuperscript{xlix} Though the law was passed with Whig and Radical support, it led to a bitter split among Tories, with only a third remaining loyal to Peel, resulting in the handover of government to the Whigs. Disraeli’s actions against Peel gave him an increased political profile, so much so that soon he would become the Protectionist leader in the Commons and eventually Chancellor of the Exchequer in the 1850s and 1860s.

Meanwhile, the Tory split led him to continue to question Britain’s political and social condition. The third novel of the trilogy, \textit{Tancred; or the New Crusade} (1847),
reflected his persisting concerns. It was meant originally to be about the Church of England. Instead, it is a story of a young aristocrat, Tancred (a name taken from a Norman crusader), who is disillusioned with Britain. His answer is to go on a pilgrimage to the Holy Sepulchre to find meaning in the world. Disraeli’s disillusionment with post-1846 politics is made clear by what has happened to Coningsby and Egremont (now Lord Marney). Both have become typical politicians, forgetting their mission to serve the people. Tancred meets them and other characters from the earlier novels at a dinner where they sit at a round table — like King Arthur’s knights. However it is not a celebration of their achievements. As with Arthur’s knights, they (like Britain’s elites) have become morally corrupt and failed in their duty as guardians of the people. What is needed is a crusade to find the Holy Grail and redeem Britain from its sins and restore lost goodness and glory. In the Arthurian tales, it is the purest knight who is able to find the Grail. Tancred attempts this by going on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land that will restore Britain’s glory, by finding a message from God. Apart from some small criticism of the Church’s role already mentioned the novel sidetracks into the issue of Jewish superiority and into claims that Christianity is Judaism fully realised.

The radical and satirical Punch celebrated the end of ‘Young England’ by carrying an article under the title ‘Casting off old notions’. It depicts Disraeli as a merchant speaking in Middle English, trying to sell off mediaeval armour, sixteenth century ruffs and cavalier dress to a sceptical ‘John Bull’. Yet mediaevalism was part of a long-term trend that continued to look positively, if idealistically, on the Middle Ages. Neo-Gothic architecture continued for some years as the single most prominent style of design, with the later landmark examples of the Prince Albert Memorial (1863-1872) in Hyde Park, the Manchester Town Hall (1868-1877) and London’s St. Pancras Station (1868-1874). These combined a looking back to a mediaeval past perceived as enviably harmonious, while acknowledging the present by using the modern techniques of iron reinforcement and mass-produced bricks and glass. The ideals of chivalry were also found in areas other than architecture, for instance, in the much read Alfred Tennyson’s Idylls of the King (1872) (again, about Arthur and his Court) and the works of the widely popular Pre-Raphaelite artists, as well as in other Victorian paintings and the impressionist photography of Julia Margaret Cameron (1815-1879).
The anxieties and fear of revolution, clearly evident at the beginning of the early Victorian period, did not readily dissipate, especially among older Victorians. It was no coincidence that the philosopher Bertrand Russell (1872-1970), writing about his dying paternal grandfather, the former Prime Minister Lord John Russell (1792-1878), reported that old man, lying on his deathbed in 1878, ‘heard a loud noise in the street and thought it was the revolution breaking out.’

Nevertheless, after the early Victorian period, the predominant response was one of confidence. By the mid-Victorian years, a firm and widespread conviction had developed to override earlier anxieties and confirm that British history was one of inevitable progress, a progress which the rest of the world could learn from constitutionally as well as in other ways.

Moreover, the acceptance of medievalism became more pronounced during the Victorian period, and the division between the Whig and Tory historical interpretations gradually lost its political impact. This was evident in 1899 with the erection of a statue of Oliver Cromwell outside the Houses of Parliament. Recalling the hostility such a proposal had attracted in the 1840s and concerned over traditional conservative feelings (as well as a number of Irish MPs protests), the former Liberal Prime Minister, the 5th Earl of Rosebery (1847-1929), paid for the statue out of his own money. It was unveiled by a mason at 7:30am in front of five people including a policeman on duty. Still, these qualifications do not detract from the significance of the actual erection of the statue. It was now tolerated by the Conservative government of the day suggesting that the early Victorian History Wars had, by the end of the Victorian period, lost much of their force and political significance.

Notes

2 He was created as 1st Baron Macaulay in 1857.
3 Later the 7th Viscount Strangford.
4 Later the 5th Duke of Rutland.
5 Later the 1st Baron Lamington.
6 Later the 7th Earl of Shaftesbury.


xvi Disraeli, Coningsby, p. 85.


xviii Hansard, vol. 49 (July 8 - Aug. 6 1839), Third series, col. 247-249.


xxi Bradford, Disraeli, p. 140. See also Feuchtwanger, Disraeli, pp. 54-55.


xxiii The father of Coningsby’s friend, Oswald.

xxiv Disraeli, Coningsby, p. 140.

xxv Disraeli, Coningsby, p. 141.


xxviii Disraeli, Sybil, 113.


xxi The Times (London), 1 May 1845, 5.

xxxii The Times, 19 May 1845, 7.


xxxiv Later 1st Earl Russell

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[xxxi] [Hickson], ‘Coningsby’, Westminster, p. 88.
[xxx] Disraeli, Benjamin, Tancred; or the New Crusade [1847], Peter Davies: London, 1927, pp. 140-141.