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J. B. Conacher

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1852-1855

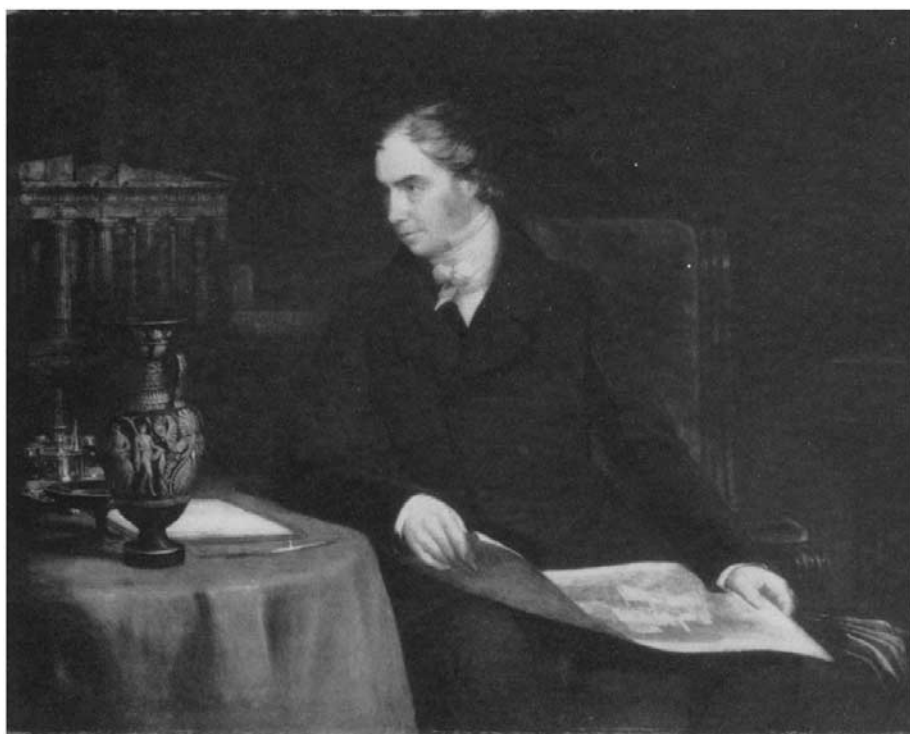
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THE ABERDEEN COALITION

1852-1855

A STUDY IN
MID-NINETEENTH-CENTURY
PARTY POLITICS

BY

J. B. CONACHER

*Professor of History
University of Toronto*



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W.M.C.

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PREFACE

Most political history, other than general surveys, is written in the form either of biography or of monographs dealing with particular themes or problems. I believe, however, that a case may be made for the study of an administration that is concerned with all its aspects and all its leading members. The purpose of this book is to examine the Aberdeen administration of 1852–55 in detail as an approach to mid-nineteenth-century British history.

I hope that the results will throw some light on the way the British parliamentary system worked in the high-Victorian period and also on the complicated subject of contemporary party relationships. To achieve this end I have deliberately explored all the major and many of the minor issues that faced the Aberdeen coalition during its relatively brief existence. The result is a long book, but I should like to think that the intrinsic interest of the story that emerges will succeed in carrying the reader with me.

Originally I had intended to write a history of the Peelites from 1846 to 1859 with much the same general purpose in mind, but in order to cope with the detail that seemed to be necessary to build up the picture, in the end I decided to limit the volume to its present scope. Thus the book begins abruptly with the fall of the Derby ministry in December 1852. I have sketched the developments leading up to the formation of the coalition in the barest detail, since I propose to deal with them in a separate study of the Peelites from 1846. Nevertheless, my interest still centres on the role of the Peelites in the coalition, because it points to the contribution that Peelism was to make in the development of a new Liberalism that was already challenging the Whiggism of an earlier day. Yet in the person of Lord John Russell Whiggism fought hard to maintain its old ascendancy and much of my attention is taken up with this struggle. Previous accounts of the coalition have been presented mainly through the medium of biography, which inevitably distorts the perspective of the whole picture. I have endeavoured to go beyond these individual biographies and in a sense to write a biography of the ministry as a whole.

Since my concern is primarily with political history in the broad sense, I have relied mainly on collections of private papers, supplemented

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by *Hansard* and some *Parliamentary Papers*, but I have not attempted to use the unpublished departmental papers of the various ministries. Thus, although the Eastern Question plays a big part in the history of the coalition and consequently in this book, I have approached it through the private correspondence of the ministers concerned, rather than the unpublished records of the Foreign Office. I am not concerned with the Eastern Question as a whole, but rather with the reaction of the British cabinet ministers to it. There is inevitably some overlapping with Temperley's *England and the Near East: the Crimea*; but that book is centred on Constantinople, mine on London. The story I tell is a complicated one, but the detail reveals much, not only about the individuals concerned, but also about the working of the British cabinet system of government in the mid nineteenth century, and more incidentally about British diplomacy.

My study ends as abruptly as it begins, with the sudden collapse of the coalition early in 1855. Some day I should like to deal with the sequel—the rise and fall of the first Palmerston administration, 1855–58, and its eventual re-organisation in 1859, which finally completed the work begun by Lord Aberdeen in 1852.

I have not attempted to develop the social, economic and intellectual background of the period, partly for lack of space, but mainly because this has been done so well in recent years by such historians as Asa Briggs, W. L. Burn, Kitson Clark and Norman Gash. Donald Southgate's *The Passing of the Whigs, 1832–1886* (London, 1962), which appeared when my earlier chapters on domestic politics were completed, covers some of the same ground, especially on the formation of the coalition, but necessarily more briefly.¹

I wish to acknowledge the gracious permission of Her Majesty the Queen to use the royal archives at Windsor. I wish also to thank the duke of Newcastle, Lord Aberdeen, Lord Clarendon, Lord Herbert, Lord Russell, Sir Fergus Graham and Mr C. Gladstone for allowing me to use the papers of their ancestors who were in the ministry. Thanks are also due to the British Museum, the Public Record Office, the Bodleian Library, the Cambridge University Library, the University of Nottingham Library, and the Newberry Library, Chicago, for giving me access to their collections (or, in the case of the Graham Papers, to the microfilm of them). I should also like to acknowledge with thanks the kind

¹ Olive Anderson's *A Liberal State at War* (London, 1967) appeared while the present work was in the press.

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I must also express my appreciation to the Nuffield Foundation, the Canada Council, and the Humanities Research fund of the University of Toronto for generous assistance in the form of grants and fellowships without which this work could never have been done. It would be rash to try to name all those friends whose advice and encouragement have helped me to complete the task, but I must thank in particular several colleagues, Professors J. C. Cairns, R. Helmstadter, D. J. McDougall and C. P. Stacey, who have read substantial parts of the manuscript, and my wife who has assisted me at all stages.

J. B. CONACHER

Garden Island, Ontario
1 September 1966

ABBREVIATIONS

<i>Ab. Cor.</i>	<i>Aberdeen Correspondence</i>
Add. MSS. 43039–43358	Aberdeen Papers
Add. MSS. 44086–44835	Gladstone Papers
<i>A.H.R.</i>	<i>American Historical Review</i>
<i>Camb. Hist. J.</i>	<i>Cambridge Historical Journal</i>
<i>E.H.R.</i>	<i>English Historical Review</i>
<i>E.P.</i>	<i>Eastern Papers</i> (in <i>P.P.</i>)
<i>Hansard</i>	<i>Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates</i> , 3rd series
<i>Hist. J.</i>	<i>Historical Journal</i>
<i>J.M.H.</i>	<i>Journal of Modern History</i>
MS. Clar.	Clarendon Papers
<i>P.P.</i>	<i>Parliamentary Papers</i>
PRO 30/22/10, 11, 12	Public Record Office (Russell Papers)
R.A.	Royal Archives, Windsor Castle
<i>T.R.H.S.</i>	<i>Transactions of the Royal Historical Society</i>

Full details of all manuscript sources will be found
in the Bibliography, p. 568