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The Reform Act of 1867 was, as Lowe had foreseen, essentially self-destructive. The very completeness of the borough franchise accentuated neglect of the counties; the very removal of anomalies between borough and borough, county and county, brought into full focus the partiality shown there to boroughs at the expense of counties. All this might have remained far longer a subject of academic banter, fit for the Commons only on a Friday afternoon, had not the Disraelian redistribution of seats been so puny, and had not population growth and movement rendered what was puny both a nuisance and a matter of fruitful political concern.

The necessary assimilation of the franchises to household level may be seen, not without reason, as but a marginal constitutional amendment, the correction or completion of Disraeli’s handiwork – neither a large step nor one into the unknown. Several constituencies with borough qualifications and the occupation franchise were of greater territorial extent than small counties, and possessed a wholly agricultural character. And if the peasantry had behaved well in East Retford, Cricklade, New Shoreham and Aylesbury, then why deny the vote to those no poorer, no less educated, no more susceptible to the bribes of demagogues – why use an arbitrary line? South Lancashire, the West Riding, North Lanark and Essex provided the obverse of that coin;¹ and here denial of electoral rights was made more acute by industrial migration. The Secretary of the Shipwrights’ Association on the Clyde made plain the case:²

In the districts of Govan and Partick there were 94,000 inhabitants, the majority of whom were skilled mechanics. Of this population, 19,442 persons exercised the municipal franchise; but only 3,426 persons had a voice in the political affairs of the country. That was through no fault of their own, but was due to the shifting character of their employment, occasioned by the removal of large firms to cheaper land.

² Letter to Broadhurst, read by the latter to the Commons, 3 Apr. 1884. 3 Hantsd celxxxvi. 1352.
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The subject of the county franchise brought forth much talk about ‘Hodge the country clod’, his political nature and the use he might make of his vote. There recurs in press and pamphlets a balancing of various pressures and instincts – the squire’s ‘screw’ and the ‘solid weight of county Tory organization’ against a ‘just sense of grievances endured’, ‘pure spite’ towards the farmer, and ‘mere contrariety’.¹ But we have already touched on this most crucial point: there was no polarity between county (i.e. landed) interest, and borough (i.e. smoke-stack) interest; and though many publicists chose to play the equalization of franchise between boroughs and counties as granting the whole agricultural community a voice,² any accompanying redistribution of seats must work against the agricultural counties and small non-industrial boroughs, against southern England, and in favour of the mining and manufacturing districts. Publication of the 1881 Census report early in 1884 opportunely provided Reform combatants with statistics of the pursuits of the people, the continued drift to the towns and the encroachment of urban upon rural. Population in English and Welsh urban sanitary districts had risen in the decade since 1871 by more than 4 million to a total of over 17 million; rural districts betrayed in that same period a net loss of 1 million to 8½ million. Responsible, far from extreme radical, opinion suggested that exclusively rural areas in England and Wales could no longer expect more than 160 Members.³ And Disraeli, it will be remembered, had actually granted additional representation to the agricultural counties.

Raikes, a Conservative who preferred the title of ‘Constitutional reformer’, was unseated at Chester in the great overthrow of 1880. Accepting defeat, he looked immediately to a future ‘altogether in the hands of the democracy’, when ‘the views of town artisans & country bumpkins though both oscillating as violently as has been the case in these last three elections may possibly by oscillating in

¹ Pall Mall Gazette, 28 Dec. 1883, p. 4. Compare Lord Dercamore to Akers-Douglas, 7 Dec. 1885: ‘The present Parl. cannot fail to be a very short one and during the interval, our county magnates must cultivate the agricultural voter & bring him to a sense of his responsibilities.’ Chilston Mss., C167/1.
² Elliot, though impressed by Kimberley’s speech in the Lords, thought he treated the bill ‘far too much as if it was confined to enfranchising the agricultural labourers, whereas this class will be surpassed in numbers by the new urban voters.’ Diary, 7 July 1884. Elliot Diaries, Vol. 10.
³ Shaw-Lefevre, 7 Apr. 1884. 3 Hansard cxlxxxvi. 1878.
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different directions to a certain extent neutralize one another.¹ He may be excused his easy identification of county householder and country bumpkin; more revealing is his sense that the great battle was over, and the cynicism which registered no party or political despair.

Raikes shared a widespread belief that the grant to counties of household suffrage would follow upon Liberal success at the polls. From the early 1870s, Trevelyan had annually moved such a Commons resolution. Hartington, as party leader in opposition, openly signified approval in 1877. And in 1880, after 153 of the returned Liberals,² including the candidate for Midlothian, had made favourable and specific mention of the measure in their election addresses, Disraeli saw fit to sketch out Conservative tactics upon a bill whose introduction he expected forthwith,³ while Chamberlain, newly admitted to the Cabinet, ‘urged the importance of dealing immediately with the question’. These fears and hopes were premature: ‘Mr. Gladstone considered that this subject, entailing as it would a new dissolution, ought to be deferred till towards the close of the Parliament just elected.’⁴ And so it was. There intervened three and a half years of Irish torment; and Disraeli died.

In October 1883, the National Liberal Federation, to which Gladstone was reportedly looking to ‘swell the sails’⁵ for the coming Session, held a conference at Leeds. It undertook – a solecism this – to formulate the course of Westminster business, with Parliamentary Reform taking precedence over any Local or Metropolitan Government bills, and Franchise being brought forward independently of Redistribution proposals.⁶ 2,500 Radical delegates behaved as Radical delegates, not particularly sure of

¹ Raikes to Elliot, 9 Apr. 1880. Elliot Mss., Bundle 21.
² Weymouth, 8 July 1884. 3 Hansard ccxv. 438. Weymouth had obtained his figure from a ‘most valuable institution, called the Universal Knowledge and Information Office, in Bloomsbury, which had been instituted by Lord Truro.’ Since he was concerned to dispute that the issue had been prominently before the constituencies at the general election, this total will not be generous.
³ Balfour to Salisbury, 8 Apr. 1880. Balfour Mss., 49688 fol. 18.
⁶ If the Conference’s function or the organizers’ design was more limited – to ‘settle’ the priority of County Franchise over London Government – none entertained doubt as to that issue; the metropolis was sorely under-represented at the gathering. John Morley, Viscount Morley of Blackburn, Recollections (2 vols., 1917), Vol. 1, p. 198; Standard, 18 Oct. 1883, p. 4.
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themselves, would. There was more than an element of that classroom desire to gratify the teacher with unison chants to his angled question. Mistakes were few, if predictable. Contentious detail inevitably baffled even the most willing, as Morley found to his dismay: ‘Were they to have a single residential franchise, or to accept the great principle of one man one vote? (Hear, hear.) Were the clergy to retain the four seats for the two Universities of Oxford and Cambridge? (No, yes.)’¹ There were also moments of misdirected exuberance which threatened to cast discredit upon all the other resolutions that were passed, and indirectly to cast discredit upon the seriousness of the whole affair. Thus at Leeds, women’s suffrage was carried – an emotional genuflection before the altar of Bright and Cobden, whose daughters were its advocates there. In the Commons, the cause had lately sunk to the lowest form of existence, a motion on going into Committee of Supply. But the guidance was, in general, good, and most delegates knew what they were about. Cheers were more readily accorded to an appeal that legislation proceed along the lines set by the Reform Acts of 1832 and 1867 than they were to the Jacobin alderman who would have had the question of Redistribution taken out of Parliamentary hands on the grounds of Parliamentary self-interest.²

The autumn Cabinet at which Gladstone first broached the possibility of a Franchise bill for the next Session followed hard on the heels of this Conference. The Government moreover, passing over the Conference’s extravagances, followed the ‘dictated’ programme as regards essentials in allowing Parliamentary Reform pride of place for 1884 and in holding back Redistribution. In one crucial respect, though, the Cabinet went a good deal further in the direction of uniformity. A single measure encompassed the United Kingdom; the union of the kingdoms was, indeed, the very foundation of the bill. What had been passed over in silence at Leeds, what was passed over in silence during subsequent jamborees at Bristol, Glasgow, London and Reading, and what had hitherto been passed over in almost total silence, was the inclusion of Ireland in the measure. This question, said one discomfited Liberal, would have been felt to be a ‘staggerer’.³

What may have been a ‘staggerer’ in October 1883 could not be so described four months later. Gladstone rightly allowed a limpness of predetermination to hang about his introduction of the

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Franchise bill. The major provisions were utterly simple and, by then, widely predicted – extension to the counties of the £10 occupation, the household and £10 lodger qualifications established in the boroughs in 1867, and as corollary to that uniformity, unity between the kingdoms. Henceforward in England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland, four-fifths and more of all voters, both in boroughs and in counties, would exercise their vote as occupiers. That Gladstone should have spent as long as he did on 28 February 1884 in straight exposition of the remaining details bears witness to the complexity of electoral privileges. There was no attack on property qualifications in the counties – the 40/– freehold, £5 copyhold and £50 and £5 leasehold qualifications. Conversely, except for the introduction of a service franchise which recognized the responsibility of those whose rent was deducted per contra from their salary, there was nothing new. Maitland found the Act ‘a very clumsy document’.¹ To the extent that, where they did not lead directly to the creation of fictitious votes, existing rights and oddities were spared, he was justified in the charge; but even the constitutional and legal historian might welcome the establishment of an occupation franchise at £10 clear annual value in place of a £12 rateable value in English counties, a Scottish £14 occupation and an Irish £4 rating qualification which had been given in respect of land alone.

Complete as to area, the measure was so in no other respect. Incompleteness in regard to the apportionment of electoral power gave rise to a forceful Conservative charge – that the landed interest would be most surely swamped in county after county by the town ‘overflow’ vote if an election under household suffrage preceded redistribution. After 1867, variety in the Commons had been secured by a Redistribution Act which rested on quite different franchise qualifications in borough and county. With the two franchises assimilated to one another, so much more would depend on the character of Redistribution in the new bill. Gladstone immediately appealed to ‘deck-loaders’ ‘that any friend of the Franchise Bill, who approves of it as it stands while thinking it might be made still better, & who waives attempts at improvement for fear of endangering its life, renders in my opinion a real service to the interests of the nation’.² The appeal to Liberal restraint enjoyed huge success. From February to July, Conservative

amendments, designed to draw from the Prime Minister the Government’s Redistribution scheme, and varying only between the demand that Franchise should not proceed without certain additions and the concession that it might proceed with those additions, were negatived in the Commons with monotonous regularity. On the Second Reading, Manners’ amendment was lost by 340 votes to 210, only Goschen and Ennis of the Liberal party going against, and the Parnellites giving a solid vote for the Government. Though on Raikes’ instruction to the Committee, the Liberals were caught unawares and struggled home by only 27, in Committee itself they reasserted their authority to defeat Colonel Stanley’s motion by 276 to 182. A threat to Liberal unity from within was posed by Albert Grey’s proposal to postpone operation of the Franchise bill until 1 January 1887. This amendment was withdrawn, in its stead the Government accepting H. H. Fowler’s embodiment of Gladstone’s own suggestion, 1 January 1885. On a different tack, Claud Hamilton’s attempt to substitute ‘Great Britain’ for ‘United Kingdom’ not only failed to detach any of the anti-Irish elements in the Liberal ranks but secured no more than 137 Conservative supporters. Women – if they presented a Conservative threat to Liberal enfranchisement – fared no better, their cause (Woodall’s amendment) being voted down by 273 to 137. Those who favoured the perfection of proportional representation were told that this was a matter pertaining to Redistribution. Others, of course, entered their protests in the order book: the gesticulations – anything from ‘one man, one vote’ to extension of the property qualification – had no political importance. The bill was read a third time, nem. con., on 26 June, in effect unaltered since introduction.

There had for a month been too many reminders in Conservative speeches of the right of the Second Chamber to act as guardian of the popular will for doubt to remain as to the advice which the Conservative majority in the Lords would offer. The essential decision to reject the bill was taken in early May. Notice of the exact form, which is the Manners, Raikes and Stanley tack yet again, came under Cairns’ signature on 1 July:

That this House, while prepared to concur in a well-considered and complete scheme for the extension of the franchise, does not think it right to assent to the Second Reading of a Bill having for its object a fundamental change in the constitution of the electoral body of the United Kingdom, but which is not accompanied by provisions for so
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apportioning the right to return Members as to insure a true and fair representation of the people, or by any adequate security in the proposals of the Government that the present Bill shall not come into operation except as part of an entire scheme.

Activity in the soliciting of votes was immediate and intense, for and by both Government and Opposition. Between them, Wemyss was no less active, urging his Peers first to pass the Second Reading and then to support an Instruction in Committee which might secure Redistribution before dissolution. Wemyss made no mark. Cairns’ amendment (by design) divided the House on almost straight party lines, and the Government in the circumstances did well to muster 146 votes against 205 on 8 July. In the days following, Wemyss and other political adventurers or philanthropists vainly sought after an accommodation. Gladstone and Salisbury each determined in every way to emphasize the enormity of the other’s action, Salisbury charging Gladstone with having steered a collision course, Gladstone announcing an Autumn Session in which Franchise would be brought forward alone once more. This total intransigence was reflected in the division on Wemyss’ new resolution, the majority against being within a handful of that secured by Cairns.

To a contemporary chronicler with a sublime faith in the political worth of noise and an eye for symmetry, subsequent events were too good to be true. Just as a mandate to the Government from an orderly assemblage of Liberal delegates at Leeds in the autumn of 1883 marked for him the origin of this Reform, so now in the early autumn of 1884 did an orderly demonstration for the enlightenment of the Lords presage its successful conclusion.¹ Too good, in truth, to be true. In coarsening the flavour of a delicacy proper to politicians for the common palates, the Government found itself in a position no less delicate than that of its opponents. Conservatives, having trusted to the Lords, were now urging on an appeal to the people which might bring to the forefront of practical politics the very existence of that House; Liberals, caught somewhere between earnestness on the tired theme of Franchise first and an onslaught on the Peers, still needed to prise thirty of their number from allegiance to Salisbury.

Parliament reassembled. The Franchise bill, in its July form,

¹ James Murdoch, A History of Constitutional Reform in Great Britain and Ireland: a Full Account of the Three Great Measures of 1832, 1867 and 1884 (Glasgow, 1883), p. 263.
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was introduced to the Commons without discussion on 24 October, and reappeared for the Second Reading on 6 November. Colonel Stanley moved his former amendment, which was lost by 372 to 232 – and again, for good measure but to no further avail, in Committee. The Lords took up the measure without delay, 18 November being appointed for their Second Reading. The day before, however, Gladstone in the Commons and Granville in the Lords stated their willingness, if the Franchise bill was allowed to pass at an early date, to make the provisions of Redistribution the subject of friendly communication with the leaders of the Opposition. That evening, Hartington gave Balfour his private gloss upon timing: the Conservative pledge to pass the Franchise bill through the Lords that Session was not to precede agreement with regard to Redistribution.¹ Heneage, ‘one of the Whig “bonnets”’, added (only later troubling to check his answers with Gladstone) ‘that in the event of the Government bringing in a Bill mutually agreed upon…they will stake their existence on the Bill, the same as in the alternative case of bringing in a Bill of their own.’² On this basis, Salisbury and Northcote entered Gladstone’s drawing-room. They did not enter into or upon total darkness, since Cabinet Committee proposals had conveniently found their way to the Standard more than a month before, and the wide range of negotiable matter had meanwhile been revealed in ‘irresponsible’ conversations. Men of both parties intent on a business settlement now settled Redistribution business and, that they might not be disturbed, adjourned Parliament for the week.

The Commons was presented with a fait accompli on 1 December. Ninety-one boroughs with less than 15,000 population, the 6 agricultural boroughs, and Sandwich and Macclesfield (corrupt beyond all redemption) were merged into their respective counties. Thirty-five boroughs and 2 counties, with a population between 15,000 and 50,000, were docked of one Member. The City of London lost 2 of its 4. Haverfordwest and Pembroke were to be treated as one. Seats liberated by want of population went where population demanded, by application of a uniform rule – to the metropolis and to the great or new industrial and manufacturing areas, whether borough or county, English, Welsh, Scottish or Irish. Though, curiously and suspiciously, the net result was that no country

¹ Hartington to Gladstone, 17 Nov. 1884, Iddesleigh Mss., 59020 fol. 103.
² Smith to Salisbury, 17 Nov. 1884, enclosing copy by Smith of Heneage’s note to Ritchie of same date. Salisbury Mss., Series E.
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Filched from another – Ireland maintained its Union total, and an increase of 12 in the numbers of the House met Scotland’s need – this was a large-scale redistribution. Perhaps, however, greater novelty lay in adoption of the system of single-member districts, save only for Universities, the City and those 23 boroughs which were to retain their two members. Such safeguard as was afforded to the variety of separate interests present within large counties and boroughs by dividing them was reinforced by the direction given to the Boundary Commissioners – that in dividing, they should take note of variety, and in a rough manner keep like with like. Before the Commissioners even began their labours, the Commons was hustled to a Second Reading ratification of the leaders’ performance. This they agreed to without division, while the Franchise bill moved from the Lords to receive the Royal Assent.

The Redistribution agreement bound both front benches to support of its terms. As to the manner in which these provisions had been arrived at – what was Liberal give, what Conservative take – secrecy reigned. Thus opposition, were it to be meaningful, demanded either a wholesale rejection by either party of its leadership on grounds of suspected treachery, or else a union of backbenchers. This was to ask much of Redistribution which affected each Member and each constituency differently; or it was to expect nothing from discipline and traditional ties. The penalty paid was, in fact, small. Courtney, Financial Secretary to the Treasury, resigned upon the failure to incorporate the principle of proportional representation; and Conservative Members’ unwillingness to support each and every proposal by following Northcote into the Government lobby served to highlight the latter’s thankless task, and fatally undermined his already precarious authority as party leader in the Commons. In Committee, Redistribution was never in any danger. Proportional representation found only 31 supporters. Bryce, a Fellow of Oriel urging abolition of university seats, secured 79. Arnold proposed to raise the disfranchisement level for boroughs to a 20,000 line, and was swamped by over 200 votes. The House then passed to consideration of the Schedules, and gave itself over to antiquarianism and lamentation; it was without effect, no condemned borough being granted a reprieve. On 11 May 1885, Courtney entered his last protest against single seats, and the bill passed the Commons – no amendment of importance or alteration of principle having been allowable or, in the event, allowed. Within four days and without demur, it had been read
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twice in the Lords. Later stages there were remarkable only for an amendment proposed by the Marquess of Lothian to lift Jedburgh from the county of Roxburghshire and add it to the Hawick Burghs. There was nothing remarkable in the suggestion, little more so in its being carried by 13 votes. But before the Liberal Commons could decline to accept the amendment or reasons for disagreeing be shunted between one Chamber and the other, the Government, defeated on a Budget resolution, had resigned. The last scene of the Third Reform Act was thus under Salisbury’s direction. He played it in the appropriately low key, despatching a message that the Lords did ‘not insist on their Amendments to the Bill to which this House has disagreed.’

The Third Reform bill has never been thought a dramatic episode in itself, nor is it now seen as dramatic in the development of representative government;¹ and this is explanation enough why the measure – a ‘logical extension’ of 1867, without any Disraelian thrills – should have attracted no historian. One would hesitate to suggest that others have positively funked the task of unearthing what it was that politicians were attempting in 1884; yet acknowledgment has often been of that variety where fame accrues and importance is ascribed in inverse proportion to informed understanding. The historian of the ‘age of Disraeli and Gladstone’ quite rightly takes his leave before 1884. His ‘late Victorian’ colleagues take their cue at the first election under the new rules. Both pay their respects, but the event itself is passed by. There is then some excuse for the present work.

Nevertheless, this book will be judged on a wrong basis unless it is accepted that it could not have appeared with any approach to honesty under the title, The Third Reform Bill. It is not exhaustive nor is any such claim made for it. The weight of evidence cited may initially give rise to erroneous expectation. A moment’s attention to the nature of this evidence ought to dispel any such expectation. The historian who comes to late nineteenth century politics knows perfectly well that so much and such varied material is available that he can feel free to write whatever sort of history he chooses to write. He uncovers an abundance of correspondence. He explains the abundance: Parliamentary recesses were still lengthy, and

¹ How much remained of the old after 1885 and how far in practice removed from universal male suffrage was the vote has been demonstrated by N. Blewett, ‘The Franchise in the United Kingdom, 1885–1918’, Past & Present No. 32 (1965), pp. 27–56.