

Disraeli – A Personal History by Christopher Hibbert. Harper Collins 2004.

No work about Benjamin Disraeli, the bicentenary of whose birth occurred during 2004, can fail to be written under the shadow of the monumental biography of him done by the late Lord Blake and first published in 1966. This is a debt which Christopher Hibbert, my favourite biographer, acknowledges, before he begins in his own way to tell a story that has been told before.

It is an eloquent statement of Hibbert's supreme proficiency in his craft that *Disraeli – A Personal History*, stands very favourable comparison with Blake's work, and in many ways bests its influential predecessor for readability, as well as being much more personal and much less reverential.

Having always been an admirer of Disraeli, particularly for his wit, and the way in which he sought constantly to turn situations to his own advantage – sometimes very successfully – it disappointed me to conclude on finishing the book that I viewed Disraeli far less favourably than I had before I started. This was not, I am sure the author's intention, for he always writes with admirable dispassion, but rather came from the unavoidable realisation of the extent to which Disraeli was, in every sense of the term, self-made. That notwithstanding his was an extraordinary life in the Victorian era, taking the child of Jewish parents to the height of British political and social affairs and bequeathing a legacy and a persona that is still talked about today.

In the church at Hughenden in Buckinghamshire, just below the house that was Disraeli's country retreat, stands a unique monument erected to Disraeli's memory by Queen Victoria, who visited the church after his death to lay flowers on his grave. Both gestures were unprecedented and as eloquent a proof as any of the importance of this unsurpassed Victorian life.

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