

Book Review

**Andro Linklater's *Why Spencer Perceval had to die:
The Assassination of a British Prime Minister***

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Edward is in the first year of his DPhil in history at St Anne's College, Oxford. His DPhil focuses on the life of Spencer Perceval, Britain's only assassinated Prime Minister, an often overlooked politician yet leader during the war against Napoleon and whose religious beliefs profoundly shaped his politics and policies. This review of the most recent publication dealing with Perceval, written by the prolific and well-respected author, the late Andro Linklater, considers the controversial notion that there was more to Perceval's death than just an insane bankrupt merchant.

On the 11th May 1812 the British Prime Minister Spencer Perceval walked into the lobby of the House of Commons. His path was blocked; a shot rang out, Perceval staggered and fell. Hurried into an adjoining room, he was pronounced dead. He passed into history as Britain's only assassinated Prime Minister. Two American presidents, slain in Ford's Theatre and in Dallas, have passed into immortality. Two others, Garfield and McKinley, descended into obscurity. Perceval served roughly the same length of time as Premier as Kennedy was President, and oversaw a war equal or greater in scope and importance than the American Civil War, against Napoleonic France. Yet he too has receded into the historical shadows, the preserve of pub quiz specialists and niche British historians. His assassin, John Bellingham, commands in Britain no notoriety equivalent to Lee Harvey Oswald. A merchant imprisoned in Russia for debt, Bellingham had unsuccessfully tried to claim compensation from the British Government for its inadequate support of his cause. He decided to assassinate Perceval

as the only way to secure ‘justice’. So he did, and was hanged a week later for the murder.

Originally published in the bicentenary year of Perceval’s assassination, this new book by Andro Linklater re-examines the circumstances surrounding the murder. As my dissertation topic is on Spencer Perceval and books about him are rare I was intrigued. What new insights would Linklater offer about the assassination? What new light would be shone on Perceval’s life? I will begin by looking at Linklater’s treatment of Perceval’s assassination, before turning to how Linklater interprets Perceval himself.

Linklater comes to a startlingly conclusion about the assassination. His conspiracy theory is the justification for the book. He argues that Bellingham was the unwitting instrument of Liverpool merchants, exasperated at how Perceval’s tough action against the slave trade (through commercially restrictive measures called Orders-in-Council) had both ruined their illegal profits and destroyed trade with America, thereby bringing Britain and America to the brink of war. They provided Bellingham with the money necessary to support him while living in London in the months building up to the assassination.

This conclusion seems based around first adopting a ‘follow the money’ approach and then asking *quo bono?* As with all conspiracy theories it picks out inconsistencies: the different temperament of Bellingham in 1812 from 1810 (when he first tried to secure compensation); the contradiction between his high spending in London and his impoverished state in Liverpool; that Bellingham was half-an-hour late in going to Parliament to assassinate Perceval; Liverpool MP Isaac Gascoyne’s (a pro-slave trade MP) contradictory statements about his actions during and after Perceval’s murder, among others. Then Linklater relies on supposition as to who this mystery backer might be: American

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metal merchant Elisha Peck. Peck wished to avoid economically ruinous war between Britain and America (Linklater: 207, 209-10), so he allegedly gave Bellingham the necessary financial support and cajoled him into going ahead with the assassination.

Linklater raises interesting questions about the anomalies that any shocking event generates due to the sheer complexity of life and the fallibility of recollection. He offers a useful insight into life in Liverpool in the early nineteenth century. However I am unconvinced. He relies more on conjectures rather than evidence for his main thesis of a conspiracy. Probability may be fine in mathematics, less so in history.

Let us now turn from the murder to the victim. Perceval was forty-nine years old in 1812. The second son of the second wife of the Earl of Egmont he had had to make his own way in the world. His rise initially came through his legal career where he toiled away after leaving Trinity College Cambridge in 1783 (Thorne: 764). His financial prospects were so poor that Perceval's father-in-law had refused his suit, and his wife Jane had to elope in order to tie the knot. Their first home was above a carpet shop, not the abode normally associated with the son of a peer of the realm. Thereafter Perceval's family and career prospered together – by 1812 he had twelve children (six of each). After serving in the two main legal offices of Solicitor-General and Attorney-General, in 1807 Perceval became Chancellor of the Exchequer under the figurehead premiership of the Duke of Portland. Two years later, in October 1809, he ascended to be Prime Minister, praised by George III as “the most straightforward man he had almost ever known” (Thorne: 769).

His premiership was eventful. The previous government had collapsed with a duel on Putney Heath between two cabinet ministers. An inquiry into the disastrous expedition to Walcheren

threatened to immediately bring down Perceval's ministry. Thereafter a series of political storms battered his administration: the war against Napoleon, particularly that being fought in the Iberian Peninsula; the connected need to provide bullion to pay for Wellington's troops; an attempt to return Britain to the gold standard which Perceval had to defeat, and above all, the madness of George III and his replacement by the seemingly hostile Prince Regent. Yet Perceval survived all of these challenges. The current British Foreign Secretary William Hague has opined that "Had he lived, Spencer Perceval, would probably have become one of the longest serving Prime Ministers in British history" (Hague: 396).

Linklater's depicts Perceval as a pious, obstinately determined and ruthless politician whose single-mindedness, in the best classical tradition, is destroyed by the similar single-mindedness of his nemesis Bellingham. There are commendable aspects to Linklater's portrayal. He is right to stress the importance of Perceval's religious beliefs on his politics and policies, a point previous historiography has rarely addressed – for example the last biography of Perceval, in 1963, devoted one standalone chapter to the subject (Gray: 15-27.). Linklater is right to emphasise Perceval's role in tackling the slave trade and contributing to causing the Anglo-American war of 1812. However he tends to assert rather than provide solid evidence for such claims, rendering them interesting suggestions for investigation but not historically watertight interpretation. This is exacerbated by Linklater's inadequate referencing and mild predilection for relying on the accounts of radicals, opponents of the conservative Perceval, such as Henry Hunt and William Cobbett. I also disagree with the description of Perceval as ruthless. During the collapse of the Portland ministry that preceded Perceval's own ministry, Perceval had offered to serve under a third man as a compromise between

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his claims to pre-eminence and those of the Foreign Secretary George Canning. Indeed Perceval's success in obtaining the premiership lay in avoiding the blatant ambition and unedifying arrogance that harmed his rival Canning (Throne: 769). Linklater skips over this incident without exploring this apparent counterpoint to his assertion.

It would be churlish to pass too harsh a judgement on this work. The conspiracy theory is interesting if unpersuasive. The assertions about Perceval are suggestible if occasionally unsubstantiated, exaggerated or erroneous. It is heartening that Mr. Linklater's book will spread knowledge of Perceval and his tragic end to a wider audience. Greater thoroughness and less sensationalism would however have made this a better work of history.

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