D. J. Taylor tells the story of Thackeray's spirited performance on the Oxford hustings in 1857.

The Newcomer

The most famous Oxford by-election of all took place in 1938 when the Master of Balliol, A. D. Lindsay, standing on a Popular Front, anti-Munich ticket, managed to halve the majority of his Tory opponent, Quintin Hogg. Running it a close second, perhaps, was a contest fought out more than eighty years before, featuring a celebrated novelist and a campaign whose excesses confirmed a reputation for corruption and electoral sharp practice that dogged the city for most of the Victorian era.

Modern critics have tended to belittle Thackeray's attempt on the constituency of Oxford in July 1857. Catherine Peters, for example, calls it 'a faintly ludicrous episode, even for the middle of the nineteenth century'. This kind of mild disparagement is understandable – twenty-five years after the Great Reform Act the amateur politician was fast becoming an endangered species – but it ignores Thackeray's abiding interest in current affairs, rekindled by recent mismanagement of the Crimean War, and the range of contacts he had built up in the decade since *Vanity Fair* (1847–48) had made him famous. This, after all, was a man who knew leading Liberal magnates such as Palmerston and Lord John Russell, and dined at the Whig salon of Holland House – not bad attributes for anyone who fancied setting up as parliamentary candidate in the 1850s.

At the same time, it is sometimes easy to forget the enthusiasm with which Victorian literary men embroiled themselves in practical politics. Dickens had been a parliamentary reporter; Trollope stood at Beverley in 1868 (a jaundiced account of this experience turns up in his novel *Ralph The Heir*). John Morley ended up – in another century, admittedly – as Secretary for India. Certainly the Whig faction that began the episode by inviting Thackeray to stand at Edinburgh in 1856 would have seen nothing ridiculous in the idea of having a novelist as their candidate.

As it turned out, Thackeray declined this offer. It was never repeated – largely because the sarcasm of his recent lecture series on *The Four Georges* had offended some of the senior aristocratic Liberals in whose gift many parliamentary seats still lay – but he was undeterred. He thought that the success of his recent lecture tour around the provinces had made him better known, to the point where he would have a better chance of entering parliament as an independent than as a Whig nominee. In any case, his annoyance with the current Liberal administration, and what he saw as Palmerston's cynicism in repopulating his cabinet from the same small group of grandees favoured by his failed predecessor, Lord Aberdeen, was one of his main reasons for standing. The general election of March 1857, at which Palmerston's premiership was confirmed, went by without anything suitable offering itself, but by midsummer there was news of a vacancy at Oxford. Thackeray decided to stand.

For an aspiring parliamentarian from London, the Oxford constituency mixed advantages and drawbacks in about equal parts. It returned two members (James Langston, the senior MP, had sat since 1841) and was broadly Liberal in sympathy, although a Tory, Donald Maclean, had retained one of the seats from 1835 to 1847. The electorate was small, barely extended by the Reform Act of 1832, and by the mid-1850s standing at fewer than 3,000 voters. It was also horribly corrupt: Langston alone was thought to spend £200–£300 per election in procuring support.

Corruption, in fact, had created the vacancy which Thackeray now proposed to occupy. In the March general election – a fight between four Liberals – Langston had romped home, but suspicions of latent Conservatism had led to the defeat of Edward Cardwell, the other sitting member, by Thackeray's friend Charles Neate, fellow of Oriel. Shortly afterwards, however, Neate was removed on a charge of 'Colourable Employment' – providing temporary and mostly spurious jobs for one's supporters during an election – and a contest to fill the single vacant seat was set for 21 July. No Conservative presented himself, and it looked as though Thackeray would have a clear run against the Whig nominee, a somewhat languid Irish peer named Viscount Monck.

Arriving in Oxford early in the month, Thackeray established himself at the Mitre Inn and renewed his longstanding connection with St John's, where his old Charterhouse friend W. R. Stoddart had been a fellow

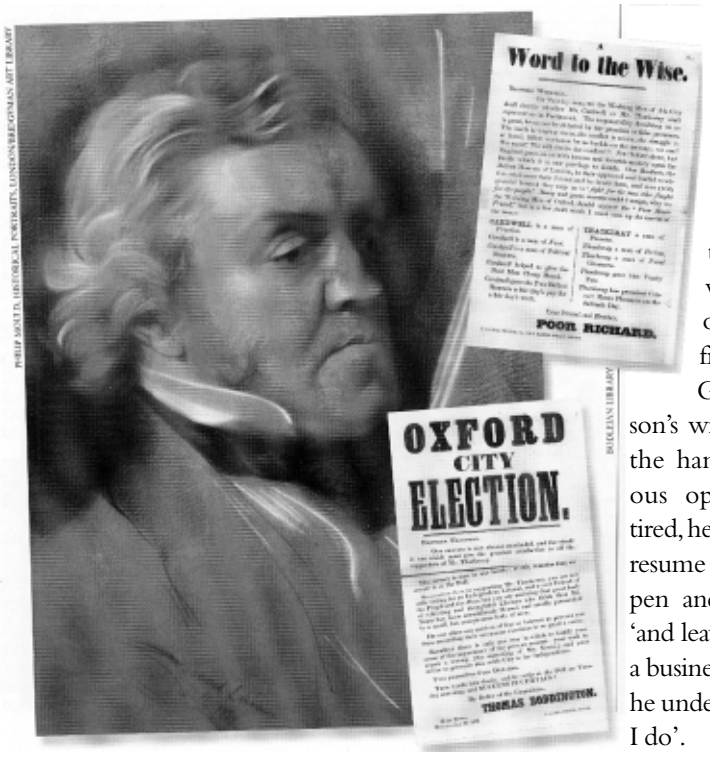
until his death the year before. The first statement of his political beliefs, issued to an electorate that would have had considerable trouble in decoding them from his published works, stressed his radical credentials. In a 'Broadside' to the voters of 9 July he promised, if elected, to use his best endeavours to widen the constitution and 'popularise' the government of the country. 'With no feeling but that of good will towards those leading aristocratic families who are administering the chief offices of the state, I believe that it could be benefited by the skills and talents of persons less aristocratic …'

All this sat comfortably with the moderate radicalism that had distinguished Thackeray's early career as a journalist, survived the excesses of Chartism, and persisted even through his acceptance into smart upper-class society in the wake of *Vanity Fair.* Biographers have never had any difficulty in establishing that Thackeray loved a lord, but he undoubtedly saw it as his task to build bridges between a remote, paternalist Whiggery and what he realised were the genuine grievances of the lower classes. An address given on 10 July at the Town Hall took up this theme. 'The popular influence must be brought to bear on the present government of the country', he declared; 'If they flinch remind them that the people is outside and wants more and more.'

Meanwhile there were the face-to-face practicalities of electioneering to be got through. Thackeray claimed that he found the experience of calling on potential supporters humiliating, and discovered only two people who knew who he was. He paid a particularly disillusioning call at a house where the maid enquired: 'Are you Mr Neate's friend? Master's h'out, but he said I was to say he would vote for yeow.' All the same, as polling day loomed, his prospects looked sufficiently promising for the Whigs to take serious fright, sack Viscount Monck and re-draft Cardwell. They also determined to fix on Sunday Observance as the topic most likely to undermine Thackeray's campaign. The novelist's advocacy of Sunday opening of museums and similar places had annoyed extreme Sabbatarians, and on 18 July, three days before the poll, he was forced to issue a pamphlet restating his support for public access to picture galleries and gardens, but denying that he ever 'spoke of opening theatres on Sunday'.

Assuming he would lose against a highly competent opponent – Cardwell ended his career as Secretary for War – with whose opinions he rather sympathised (he told his daughter Annie that he was secretly a Cardwellite), Thackeray nonetheless went down by a surprisingly narrow margin – a mere 65 votes out of the 2,075 cast. He made a well-received valedictory speech, invoking the memory of the prize-fighters Gully and Gregson, and Gregson's willingness to shake the hand of his victorious opponent, and retired, he told the crowd, to resume his place with the pen and ink at his desk 'and leave to Mr Cardwell a business which I am sure he understands better than I do'.

Portrait of William Makepeace Thackeray, 1867, by Samuel Laurence (1812–84)



The parallels with the quixotic Colonel Newcome's parliamentary ambitions in *The Newcomes,* completed two years before, should not perhaps be overdrawn. Thackeray knew what he was doing, and the kind of behaviour he would find. His own motives, too, were far from disinterested. For one thing, a parliamentary seat offered the route to a public appointment and a safe salary which would absolve him from the need to write. If anything disappointed him it was how few of the enfranchised college servants – except at St John's – had taken his side. His election expenses came as a further blow. 'I can't tell you how disappointed we were he didn't get in', Annie told Mrs Stoddart. 'We minded it a great deal more than he did, but I think the bills affected him a great deal more than us.' In the end the election cost £895, which Thackeray, perpetually harassed by money worries, could ill afford.

As well as signalling the end of Thackeray's parliamentary ambitions – though he expressed vague notions of wanting to stand again for a year or more – the contest also had a direct effect on the constituency itself. Once again the whiff of corruption hung over the campaign – Thackeray himself admitted that even had he been elected he would have suffered Neate's fate on account of the activities of his agents, and the historian J. R. Green, who canvassed on his behalf, was openly asked for money by an Oxford bargemaster supposed to control many votes. Hearing this and other evidence, the Royal Commission of 1881 concluded that a sixth of the city's electorate might be affected by illegal inducements, temporarily disenfranchised 141 people, and reduced the number of seats to one. Oxford moved on towards the age of parliamentary democracy proper, but the contest of 1857, and Thackeray's involvement in it, remains as one of the liveliest episodes in its volatile electoral history.

This article originally appeared in Oxford Today *(Trinity 1999), and is reprinted here by kind permission of the Editor, Christina Hardyment, and the author. It is taken from* Thackeray, *by David Taylor (Chatto & Windus, 1999).*