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Matthew Roberts, ed., Memory and Modern British Politics: Commemoration, Tradition, Legacy

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► **To cite this version:**

Marc Calvini-Lefebvre. Matthew Roberts, ed., Memory and Modern British Politics: Commemoration, Tradition, Legacy. E-rea - Revue électronique d'études sur le monde anglophone, 2026, 22 (2), <10.4000/144qp>. <hal-05499225>

HAL Id: hal-05499225

<https://hal.science/hal-05499225v1>

Submitted on 8 Feb 2026

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E-rea

Revue électronique d'études sur le monde anglophone

22.2 | 2025

1. Cultural diversity and popular music in the UK / 2.
Reading and Writing (In-)Between Languages in the
English-Speaking World

Matthew Roberts, ed., *Memory and Modern British
Politics: Commemoration, Tradition, Legacy*

London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024, 284 p. ISBN: 978-3501-9046-7.

106,48 €

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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/erea/19844>

DOI: 10.4000/144qp

ISSN: 1638-1718

Publisher

Laboratoire d'Études et de Recherche sur le Monde Anglophone

Provided by Aix-Marseille Université (AMU)



Electronic reference

Marc CALVINI-LEFEBVRE, "Matthew Roberts, ed., *Memory and Modern British Politics: Commemoration, Tradition, Legacy*", *e-Rea* [Online], 22.2 | 2025, Online since 15 June 2025, connection on 08 February 2026. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/erea/19844> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/144qp>

This text was automatically generated on November 5, 2025.



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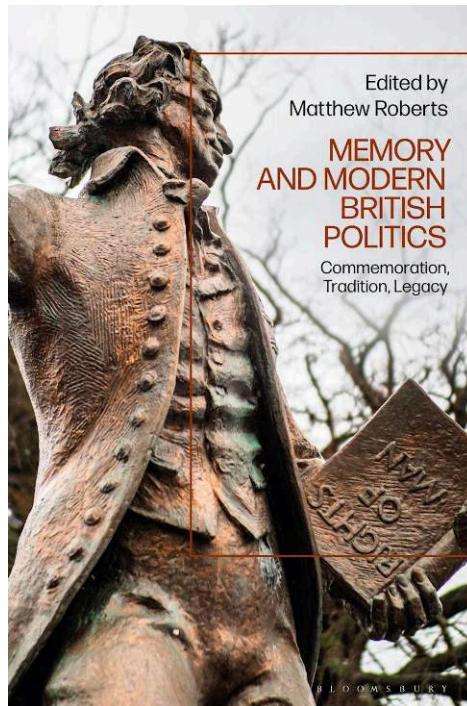
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1 With this wide-ranging collection of eleven case-studies spanning three centuries, editor Matthew Roberts wishes to demonstrate that memory—a “portmanteau term” used here to broadly designate the “political uses of the past” (3, 1)—is at least as ubiquitous and as potent a force in British political culture as scholarship has shown it to be in continental and North American political cultures (1-2). This claim is largely substantiated by the chapters that follow, which, though carelessly proof-read¹, wonderfully illustrate just how much time, money and effort British political actors poured into the creation of a veritable cornucopia of mnemonic rituals and objects, large and small, between the 1790s and the 1960s.



- 2 The rituals discussed range, to give but two examples, from the grand national festivals held to commemorate the Great Reform Act immediately after its passing in the summer of 1832 (ch. 6) to modest Chartist tea parties, complete with emotional “toasts to departed heroes” (102, ch. 5). Similarly, the memorial objects encountered include the stone and marble statues erected across the country’s public squares to local MPs during the Victorian period (ch. 7); but also the “Wellesbourne Oak in Warwickshire,” used by the Agricultural Labourers’ Union for annual commemorations from the 1870s (203, ch. 10); and a framed “print of Sir Robert Peel” in a “tenement cottage” in Wolverhampton, spotted by none other than Enoch Powell himself (186, quoted in ch. 8). That British political culture is saturated by memory—or what could be more accurately termed, to underscore the agency of those who mobilise the past in this way, “memory work” — and the material culture it produces, then, is undeniable. But, as even this very small sample of the collection’s riches suggests, the manner in which this work is carried out and the forms its productions take vary depending on whether the political actors behind them occupy the centre or the periphery of British politics and society.
- 3 To see this clearly, it is helpful to read the chapters not chronologically, as they are organised here, but according to that centre/periphery dichotomy. Indeed, half of the chapters are primarily concerned with elite figures—seen debating the memory of the Glorious Revolution (Rémy Duthille, ch. 2), engaging in the instantaneous memorialisation of the Great Reform Act (Gordon Pentland, ch. 6), putting Victorian MPs on pedestals (Kathryn Rix, ch. 7), remembering Robert Peel (Richard A. Gaunt, ch. 8), or grounding Anglo-American relations in a shared worshipping of Magna Carta (Sam Edwards, ch. 11)—while the other half ask how Welsh Dissenters (Marion Löffler, ch. 3), Irish Republicans (Colin W. Reid, ch. 4), Chartists (Matthew Roberts, ch. 5), plebeian radicals (Antony Taylor, ch. 9) and the Tolpuddle Martyrs (Marcus Morris, ch. 10) have been remembered (or, more often than not, forgotten) by the radical political actors and movements that claim them as their own.²

- 4 The first group is characterised, in its “memory work”, by the agency that comes with privilege and power. We thus see its representatives time and again shaping the master memorial narratives surrounding key events in British history—the Glorious Revolution, the Great Reform Act, Magna Carta, the death of Peel—and decisively moulding the urban political memoryscape, not only in deciding *who* (usually someone of their number) or *what* (usually a cause they championed) would be remembered there, but also *where* in the city (hint: not on the outskirts), *for what purpose* this was being done—in gratitude, of course, but also for the moral edification of the masses (150, ch. 7), *who should pay* for it (appeals for public subscriptions, including for monuments to figures known to have been hostile to the working-class, were not uncommon), and *how* the ceremony should unfold (with themselves at the helm, presiding firmly over great shows of civic unity (131, ch. 6). Thus does the memory work of the elites serve to support their competing political positions (ch. 2) and identities (ch. 11), but also to project their shared values (ch. 7) and cement their social position (chs. 6 & 8).
- 5 The second group, by contrast, finds its memory work severely constrained by a lack of resources, particularly the kind of money necessary to erect monuments (110, ch. 5³). With rare exceptions (200-202, ch. 9), theirs were (and are) more likely to be “paper pantheon[s]” (110, ch. 5), collections of texts by and about major past figures, the list of which was (and is) constantly evolving and disputed. Beyond the diversity of the radical movements surveyed, at least three themes recur here. First, the instability of these pantheons and the frequency with which figures drop out of them and are forgotten (e.g. ch. 4, 80 & ch. 5, 95). Second, how often the subjects of those pantheons find their radicalism either sanitised—the fate of the Welsh Dissenters of “Generation 1789” (49, ch. 3)—or distorted out of all recognition—as were the ideas of the Irish Republican Wolf Tone—by their erstwhile admirers (84, ch. 4). Third, no matter how unstable and unreliable they prove to be as *histories*, these *memorial narratives* emerge as absolutely essential to those movements, providing them with the political and emotional “strength, legitimacy and tenacity” (93, ch. 5; see also ch. 4, 85 and ch. 10, 219) necessary to pursue their struggles and contest the elites’ domination of the urban memoryscape (ch. 9), as well as proving “a unifying force” in times of division (229, ch. 10).
- 6 Thus does the collection succeed in substantiating the claim that memory matters in British political culture. It also, in passing, allows the reader to glimpse at least three characteristic features of that political culture. First is the centrality of the liberal tradition, seen in those elite narratives about the Glorious Revolution (ch. 2) or Magna Carta (ch. 11), but also quite literally in the urban furniture celebrating “the liberal reforming spirit” in the squares and streets of British cities (198, ch. 9; and chs. 6 and 7). Second is the striving of radical movements in Great Britain, eschewing internationalism, for *inclusion* into the national family, for a distinctively *British* lineage of their own (as illustrated 224, ch. 10). And last, though certainly not least, is how profoundly *male-centric* this political culture is. Indeed, whether in stone or paper, only one woman is fleetingly mentioned as having been a subject of commemoration (Annie Kenney, ch. 7, 158), and only a handful appear (albeit extremely briefly) engaging in “memory work” (ch. 4, 77; ch. 8, 183-5).
- 7 Surprisingly, however, bar Gordon Pentland’s observation that commemorations of the Great Reform Act were “clearly gendered events” (131, ch. 6), the male-centrism of the

practices they are describing and analysing is too rarely if ever remarked upon by the authors, leaving unquestioned the deep connection in British political culture (by no means alone in this) between masculinity and political subjectivity. This can lead to missed opportunities, such as when, in her otherwise brilliant study of Victorian “statuemanía”, Katheryn Rix quotes without comment a contemporary who claimed that statues were “the highest reward of the state to its distinguished sons” (146, ch. 7, my emphasis), a remarkable statement alerting us to the *gendered* dimension of the moral virtues those statues were meant, she tells us, to convey. Overlooking the connection between masculinity and political subjectivity can also lead to uncritically reproducing it, as when the blunting of the political radicalism of Welsh Dissenters by their Victorian descendants is described by Marion Löffler, in another otherwise fine study, as resulting in... “emasculated biographies” (37, 48, ch. 3, my emphasis), no less! But perhaps the most significant way in which this blind spot in the collection manifests itself is in the total absence of discussion of the memory work done within the British feminist tradition, and this despite the opportunity offered by the recent women’s suffrage centenary, spectacularly commemorated throughout the British Isles in 2018, including via a significant number of statues. Alas, the very figures whose inclusion would have caused much greater attention to be paid by all involved to just how gendered Britain’s political culture is, appear—not unlike so many of the radical figures discussed in this rich and rewarding collection which reflects so deeply on how, and with what effects, canons and pantheons are constructed—to have been simply, but characteristically... forgotten.

NOTES

1. By no means a paragon of typing perfection myself, I do not usually mention typos in the books I review. However, there are a considerable number here, in the acknowledgments and eight of the twelve chapters, as well as the blurb. Most frustratingly, in Chapter Five, the 64th endnote does not exist. As there are 142 endnotes in total in that chapter, readers who do not spot this error will be hard put to understand how endnotes 65 to 143 relate to the passages they have just read.
2. Given that the stated aim of the book is to discuss the role of memory in *British* political culture, the final chapter, by Mark Hampton and Florence Mok, which focuses on how British Imperial rule is (mis)remembered by *Hong Kong*’s pro-democracy activists, feels distinctly out of place. Though it certainly has thematic resonances with a number of other chapters, it does not, as they do, tell us anything about the specificities of *British* political culture.
3. Cause or effect, Antony Taylor claims that the “theme of the resigning, unremarked hero, characterized by an absence of commemoration, is a constant in English radical culture (that also co-opted the traditions of Scottish and Welsh radicalism)” (197, ch. 9).

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