

# Westminster Politicians and Rectorial Elections in Scotland's Universities, 1820–1920

*Gordon Pentland*

## ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the relationship of Westminster politicians to rectorial elections at Scottish universities between the first obviously 'political' contest at Glasgow in 1820 and Lloyd George's triumph in Edinburgh in 1920. It argues that the widely reported return of Sir Robert Peel at the University of Glasgow in 1836 underlined the partisan political potential of the elections and established many of the features of the subsequent elections at Glasgow and elsewhere. After mid-century, such political contests – often fierce and bipartisan – were increasingly normal following the Universities (Scotland) Act 1858, and the article examines how rectorial contests functioned to offer parliamentarians and their supporters a range of opportunities. Finally, the article engages in a closer examination of two rectorial contests towards the end of the period to indicate how far these had become sites of professionalization and training grounds for aspiring politicians by the early twentieth century.

**Keywords:** Scotland, universities, rector, Westminster, elections.

A rectorial election is a peculiarly Scotch institution, and, however it may strike the impartial observer, it is regarded by the students themselves as a rite of extreme solemnity and importance, on which grave issues may depend. To hear the speeches and addresses of rival orators, one would suppose that the integrity of the constitution and the very existence of the empire hung upon the return of their special nominee.

– Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Firm of Girdlestone*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Firm of Girdlestone: A Romance of the Unromantic* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1890), 37–38.

David Lloyd George was elected to the role of lord rector of the University of Edinburgh in October 1920, near the pinnacle of his power within UK politics. He stood against the independent liberal candidate, Professor Gilbert Murray, in a contest that featured rival publications, propaganda and endorsements, the kidnapping of rival committee members, and a somewhat ghoulish echo of the recent war as liberal students attempted to storm the coalition's barbed-wire-protected headquarters and dropped sulphur down their chimney.<sup>2</sup> By the time Lloyd George came to attend his installation as rector and deliver his set-piece address in March 1923, he had fallen from power. Both Pathé and Gaumont newsreels captured the scenes around his installation and showed a smiling and indulgent Lloyd George, carried on the shoulders of a large crowd of male students to McEwan Hall, which had been the site for grand university ceremonials since its completion in 1897.<sup>3</sup> He had been drawn to the hall in a richly decorated carriage by the members of the university boat club, and, on arrival at the venue, he was mobbed and jostled. Of course, the silent film cannot communicate the noise of the event, which must have been colossal. Press reports dwelt on singing, shouting, laughing, and constant interruptions accompanied by streamers, balloons, and showers of peas and other missiles.<sup>4</sup>

The theme for Lloyd George's address—the practice and vocation of politics—would seem to have been aptly chosen for his youthful audience. It was delivered, however, in the face of constant barracking and interruptions, which included the release of fireworks and live hens and the manipulation of an effigy of a giant bearded man. Two arrests were made. The former prime minister had to rely on the wider press and print interest in the event to communicate his message: 'He did not attempt to deliver the entire rectorial address which he had prepared, knowing that it would be available otherwise.'<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> 'Edinburgh Rectorial Election: Progress of the Campaign,' *The Scotsman*, 14 October 1920; 'Edinburgh Rectorial Election: Students' Campaign of Pamphlets, Paint, and Physical Force,' *The Scotsman*, 30 October 1920; 'Edinburgh Lord Rectorship,' *The Scotsman*, 1 November 1920; 'Mr Lloyd George as Lord Rector,' *The Times*, 1 November 1920.

<sup>3</sup> 'Mr. Lloyd George (1923),' *British Pathé*, accessed 15 November 2023, <https://www.britishpathe.com/asset/49953>; 'Lloyd George Is Honoured in Edinburgh (1923),' *British Pathé*, accessed 15 November 2023, <https://www.britishpathe.com/asset/119004>.

<sup>4</sup> 'Mr. Lloyd George in Edinburgh,' *The Scotsman*, 2 March 1923; 'Mr. Lloyd George Baited,' *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 2 March 1923; 'Students' "Rag" at Edinburgh,' *Dundee Courier*, 2 March 1923.

<sup>5</sup> 'Mr. Lloyd George's Speech,' *The Scotsman*, 2 March 1923; 'Mr. Lloyd George on Politicians,' *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 2 March 1923; 'Courage in Politics,' *The Times*, 2 March 1923.

This article aims to explore why, how, and with what consequences parliamentarians of the stature of Lloyd George came to be rectors of Scotland's universities. Rectorial elections have recently attracted some scholarship, which has illuminated important questions around the student electors, their relationship to Scotland's civic landscape, and the places, spaces, and rituals of the elections.<sup>6</sup> It has also focused overwhelmingly on the period from the final decade of the nineteenth century when students' representative councils, students' unions, and other aspects of the university environment coalesced into a recognizably 'modern' form of collective student life. In addition to this work, the elections feature in wider accounts of Scottish education and its relation to citizenship as well as in institutional histories and form the subject for a series of diligently researched volumes by the late *Guardian* sub-editor Donald Wintersgill.<sup>7</sup> As political events in Scotland, however, rectorial elections have shared in the historiographical neglect accorded to parliamentary by-elections. In historical terms, they also shared some of the key features of these latter contests.<sup>8</sup> Rectorial elections took on special significance and were reported in the press nationally as bellwethers of wider political developments or as lighting rods for particular political issues.

This article focuses on the relationship of Westminster politicians to these rectorial elections across the hundred years from the first obviously 'political' contest at Glasgow in 1820 to Lloyd George's triumph in Edinburgh in 1920. By 1920, the character of elections as political contests between front-rank politicians had matured. The precursors of these politicized rectorials were established at the University of Glasgow and, to a lesser extent, at Marischal College in Aberdeen during the 1820s and 1830s, and the first half of the article is concerned with the

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<sup>6</sup> See especially, Catriona M. M. Macdonald, "'To Form Citizens': Scottish Students, Governance and Politics, 1884–1948," *History of Education* 38, no. 3 (May 2009): 383–402; Catriona M. M. Macdonald, 'Rhetoric, Place and Performance: Students and the Heritage of the Scottish Universities, 1880–1945,' in *Heritage from Below: Heritage, Culture and Identity*, ed. Iain J. M. Robertson (London: Routledge, 2012), 59–74.

<sup>7</sup> R. D. Anderson, *Education and Opportunity in Victorian Scotland: Schools and Universities*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1989), chs. 2, 3, 7; R. D. Anderson, Michael Lynch, and Nicholas Phillipson, *The University of Edinburgh: An Illustrated History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003); Máirtín Ó Catháin, "'No Longer Clad in Corduroy'?" *The Glasgow University Irish National Club, 1907–1917*, *Scottish Historical Review* 99, no. 2 (October 2020): 271–94; Donald Wintersgill, *The Rectors of Glasgow University 1820–2000* (Glasgow: University of Glasgow, 2001); Donald Wintersgill, *The Rectors of the University of Edinburgh 1859–2000* (Edinburgh: Dunedin, 2005); Donald Wintersgill, *The Rectors of the University of St Andrews 1859–2005* (Edinburgh: Dunedin, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> T. G. Otte and Paul Readman, 'Introduction,' in *By-Elections in British Politics, 1832–1914*, ed. T. G. Otte and Paul Readman (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell, 2013), 1–22.

foundational role of these early nineteenth-century contests in establishing the tradition of the ‘political’ rectorial. Student-elected rectors became the norm with the reform of Scottish universities in the 1850s, after which there was a strong tendency towards enshrining elsewhere some of the key features and practices that had characterized the Glasgow and Marischal contests since the 1820s. After mid-century, politician candidates became the norm, especially at Edinburgh and Glasgow. The water was muddied by the proliferation of three-way contests into the twentieth century, but it was only in the second half of the twentieth century that the rectorial elections really dwindled as a venue for contests primarily between front-rank Westminster politicians.

This focused treatment of a little-known corner of the complex and overlapping world of sub-parliamentary representation in the United Kingdom offers insights into both the motivations and approaches of those politicians who took part and links these to the rich and distinctive political culture and practices that developed around the elections in Scotland. First, it examines the role of the rector and the ways in which rectorial contests developed from the early nineteenth century. In the 1820s, with the electoral franchise stubbornly restricted in Scotland, the universities witnessed some fierce electoral contests. They constituted one of those spaces—along with various elections around the Church of Scotland and the legal profession—in which emerging ‘liberal’ politicians could achieve some national voice. It was, however, the widely reported return of Sir Robert Peel at the University of Glasgow in 1836 that both underlined the partisan political potential of the elections and crystallized many of the features of subsequent elections at Glasgow and elsewhere. Second, the article analyses how rectorial elections developed after mid-century. Political contests—often fierce and bipartisan—were increasingly normal following the Universities (Scotland) Act 1858.<sup>9</sup> This legislation expanded the rectorial role across Scotland’s universities, removing it from being the preserve of churchmen and professors. Rectorial contests offered parliamentarians and their supporters a range of opportunities. Finally, the article engages in a closer examination of two rectorial contests towards the end of the period to explore how far these had become sites of professionalization and training grounds for aspiring politicians by the early twentieth century.

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF RECTORIAL CONTESTS

The office of university rector was a medieval inheritance. In common with the other parts of Scotland’s ancient institutions, its presence drew

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<sup>9</sup> Universities (Scotland) Act 1858, 21 & 22 Vict., c. 83.

Scotland closer to the ethos and practices of the ‘civic’ universities of continental Europe than to the institutional patterns of its southern neighbour.<sup>10</sup> It was and has remained a distinctive feature of Scotland’s universities within the UK context, something that has intermittently required explanation for English readers. This could often underline its essential ‘foreignness,’ as did the *Daily News* in the late nineteenth century in describing the rectorial elections as ‘that curious relic of French manners in Scotland.’<sup>11</sup>

Before the Reform Act (Scotland) 1832, the institution was, according to *The Scotsman*, the leading whig paper, ‘a solitary instance of the popular election of a public officer in Scotland.’<sup>12</sup> As such, it fitfully provided a public venue for the development of liberal and radical critiques of existing institutions. In this, it had a shared role with other distinctive Scottish institutions, such as the general assembly of the Church of Scotland (as well as its subordinate elective bodies), charitable organizations such as the board of Edinburgh’s royal infirmary, and legal bodies such as the faculty of advocates. All of these provided space within what has been caricatured as a very closed political system pre-1832, not least because peculiar institutional concerns—around patronage in the Church of Scotland or corruption within the local charities—mapped neatly onto wider national issues.<sup>13</sup>

The university politics of the early nineteenth century did similar work. Indeed, certain *causes célèbres* around professorial appointments had demonstrated the potential for the universities to act as lightning rods for broader national political debates. Such had been the case with the notorious ‘Leslie affair’ of 1805, when the election of John Leslie to the chair of mathematics at the University of Edinburgh had prompted vigorous contests at a national level taking in both secular and ecclesiastical politics.<sup>14</sup> Rectorial elections could play a very similar role. At Marischal College in Aberdeen in 1824, the students elected Joseph Hume, the notable radical member of parliament (MP), who had been returned in 1818 for the Montrose burghs. Hume promptly convened a rectorial court for the following year, the first to sit since 1738. Professors

<sup>10</sup> Nicholas Phillipson, *The Scottish Whigs and the Reform of the Court of Session 1785–1830* (Edinburgh: Stair Society, 1990), 42–61.

<sup>11</sup> *Daily News*, 29 November 1895.

<sup>12</sup> ‘Glasgow University,’ *The Scotsman*, 11 March 1820; An Act to Amend the Representation of the People of Scotland, 2 & 3 Will. IV, c. 65.

<sup>13</sup> Gordon Pentland, *Radicalism, Reform and National Identity in Scotland, 1820–1833* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell, 2008), 7–48.

<sup>14</sup> J. B. Morrell, ‘The Leslie Affair: Careers, Kirk and Politics in Edinburgh in 1805,’ *Scottish Historical Review* 54, no. 1 (April 1975): 63–82; Charles Bradford Bow, ‘In Defence of the Scottish Enlightenment: Dugald Stewart’s Role in the 1805 John Leslie Affair,’ *Scottish Historical Review* 92, no. 1 (April 2013): 123–46.

were compelled to attend to be harangued by their students with Hume as ‘a sort of umpire between the governors and the governed.’<sup>15</sup> Hume’s successor, Sir James McGrigor, kept up the practice, and the press praised the ‘spirit of scrutiny and improvement’ that it evinced.<sup>16</sup>

During the 1820s, it was Glasgow University that hosted the most high-profile and most-politicized contests. The victory in 1820 of Francis Jeffrey, editor of the *Edinburgh Review* and lord advocate of Scotland during the reform crisis, over the Glasgow tory and cotton magnate Kirkman Finlay, was pivotal. It inaugurated a long series of whig successes in the 1820s, which appeared to provide a dry run for the following decade in Scotland, during which whigs and liberals took command of many elected offices and institutions. Over the decade after Jeffrey’s election, the partisan nature of the elections became even sharper. The office was contested three times by Walter Scott who, by the 1820s, was the most famous author in Europe and vied with the Duke of Wellington as its most famous tory. He was beaten at Glasgow first by James Mackintosh (MP for Knaresborough), then by the rising star of Henry Brougham (MP for Winchelsea), and, finally, by the whig poet and Glasgow alumnus Thomas Campbell.<sup>17</sup>

The first of these contests—Jeffrey’s—illustrates how rectorial elections could draw together local and wider national concerns in fertile ways. In 1820, the rumour that Finlay as the sitting rector was preparing to disallow student voting at rectorial elections—by narrowing the constituency to professors and graduates only—was exactly the sort of issue that chimed with a broader assault on old corruption and tory domination and restriction of Scotland’s institutional life.<sup>18</sup> Jeffrey’s widely reported speech—pointedly in the context of recent discussions of parliamentary reform—made much of his having been elected on ‘something that approaches very nearly to a popular suffrage.’<sup>19</sup> *The Scotsman* included letters from Glasgow students with copies of their resolutions and hailed their resistance to ‘an act of voluntary self-degradation’ and hoped that ‘this election will prove the era of the emancipation of the University.’<sup>20</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Anderson, *Education and Opportunity*, 37–39; ‘Rectorial Court,’ *Caledonian Mercury*, 21 November 1825.

<sup>16</sup> ‘Aberdeen University,’ *The Times*, 8 September 1826.

<sup>17</sup> ‘Glasgow University,’ *The Times*, 30 November 1822; ‘Election of the Lord Rector of the University of Glasgow,’ *The Scotsman*, 30 November 1822; ‘Election of Mr Brougham as Lord Rector of the University of Glasgow,’ *The Scotsman*, 6 April 1825.

<sup>18</sup> ‘University of Glasgow,’ *The Scotsman*, 11 March 1820; ‘Glasgow University,’ *Morning Chronicle*, 2 December 1820.

<sup>19</sup> ‘Mr Jeffrey’s Installation,’ *Glasgow Herald*, 15 January 1821; ‘Mr Jeffrey’s Installation as Lord Rector of the University of Glasgow,’ *Scots Magazine* 8 (January 1821): 57–62; ‘Speech of Mr Jeffrey,’ *Calcutta Journal* 5, no. 265 (1821): 398.

<sup>20</sup> ‘Glasgow University,’ *The Scotsman*, 18 November 1820.

It was, however, Robert Peel's election at Glasgow in 1836 that is perhaps the most well-known of these little-known events in the nineteenth century. Peel's biographers have been chiefly concerned, quite naturally, with evaluating its impact on, and consequences for, Peel's leadership of conservatism in the 1830s.<sup>21</sup> There is something to say as well about its impact on, and consequences for, rectorial elections in the longer term. Peel's election did the most to establish and cement many of the formal and informal features of rectorial contests in the decades that followed.

The rectorial platform from the 1830s was used to address genuine national questions. This represented a departure from earlier decades, whose contests had been party political in a very limited sense. Candidates and their pronouncements in the 1820s dwelt very pointedly on the literary and intellectual rather than on the political qualifications required of the rectorial office. While their supporters and friends might make comparisons with live national political contests, candidates only linked the elections to contemporary political issues by allusion and analogy rather than by explicit references and appeals. For all that his election stood as an embodiment of liberal challenge to the closed tory-dominated institutional landscape of early pre-reform Scotland, for example, Francis Jeffrey presented his only credentials as 'love of letters, and of the establishment which is here dedicated to their honour.'<sup>22</sup>

This changed in the 1830s, partly from the fluid and tense context that was the fallout of the reform crisis as UK politics and parties repolarized around a range of issues. Lord Stanley's election to the Glasgow rectorship in 1834, which had broken the whigs' long hold on the rectorship, was a precursor to Peel's very politicized election. Stanley took his election as an indication of the wider political opinion of Scotland's educated and propertied classes and utilized the occasion of his installation to propagate a nakedly political statement. He used the platform of the rectorship to essay his so-called 'Knowsley Creed,' a new, more moderate, and 'centrist' confession of faith for conservatism (albeit one trumped by Peel's much more famous Tamworth election address by a matter of days). Stanley's principal audience for the address in December 1834 was less the assembled students than it was the thousands of readers of the *Times*, the *Morning Post*, the *Morning Herald*, and the

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<sup>21</sup> Norman Gash, *Sir Robert Peel: The Life of Sir Robert Peel after 1830* (London: Longman, 1972), 151–57; Richard A. Gaunt, *Sir Robert Peel: The Life and Legacy* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010), 94–95.

<sup>22</sup> 'Mr. Jeffrey's Installation,' *Glasgow Herald*, 15 January 1821.



*Morning Chronicle*, whose editors he ensured received a faithful version of his speech.<sup>23</sup>

These previous experiences helped to convince Peel of the value of accepting nomination, and the election generated considerable interest among conservatives. Sir Daniel Sandford, MP for Paisley and professor of Greek, provided a local source of knowledge. While there was a student chair of the committee in the shape of Norman Macleod, Peel's contact with the university occurred via established individuals such as Sandford rather than through the student electors. That said, there were some interesting networks of information involved. The sons of prominent Scottish Tories, including Alexander Maconochie (Lord Meadowbank) and Sir George Clerk, boarded as students with Macleod's father in Glasgow and clearly fed back news of its politics to their own fathers.<sup>24</sup>

On his election, Peel received a flood of correspondence from prominent conservatives, urging him to take the position. One reason was the intimate relationship between university politics and the church question around which Peel framed much of his own conservatism, which had especial resonance in the Scottish context. Stanley presented the contest in these terms to Peel. Refusal to accept the honour, he argued, would constitute 'a heavy blow and a great discouragement to the Church party in Scotland, who, from what I can learn, are beginning to be able to make a little more head against their opponents than they could a year or two ago; & on whom a disappointment just now would have a very bad effect.'<sup>25</sup> Peel evidently agreed, framing the duty in a letter to Graham as part of the 'unremitting exertions' required on behalf of those 'who wish to preserve a National Church, and the Constitution of their Country.'<sup>26</sup>

As well as offering a platform from which to address these national questions, an even greater sense of opportunity was invested in the rectorial as a means of meeting the particular strategic challenge of reviving and reshaping conservatism in 1830s Scotland. After their decimation at the general election of December 1832 (the first 'reformed' election), any recovery in Scotland had been slow. The larger urban constituencies, in particular, proved especially difficult contexts in which

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<sup>23</sup> Angus Hawkins, *The Forgotten Prime Minister: The 14th Earl of Derby. Volume I Ascent: 1799–1851* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 153–60; Gaunt, *Robert Peel*, 89.

<sup>24</sup> Reverend Donald Macleod, *Memoir of Norman Macleod D. D.*, 2 vols. (London: Daldy, Isbister & Company, 1876), 1:86; Alexander Maconochie to Robert Peel, 16 November 1836, ff. 177–78, Add. MS 40442, British Library (BL).

<sup>25</sup> Lord Stanley to Robert Peel, 20 November 1836, ff. 205–6, Add. MS 40442, BL.

<sup>26</sup> Cited in Gash, *Robert Peel*, 152.



to mount any effective challenge.<sup>27</sup> Rectorial elections were a proxy for, and a contribution towards, launching contests in large and popular constituencies. This sense of revival found expression in the foundation, immediately after the election, of a conservative association within the university, which was given the name of the Peel Club.<sup>28</sup>

Very few Tories anticipated large or immediate electoral dividends outside of the university context. A number of Peel's correspondents nonetheless saw the rectorial as a golden opportunity to provide some leadership to ongoing efforts to enlist and shape new constituencies of political support. John Hope, for example, who was as close as the conservatives had to a manager in post-reform Scotland, fastened on what he called the 'moral effect' of the election. It provided the chance to 'unite in a manner so grateful to both Classes now acting together ... under the name & Banner of Him whom Ultra Tories, Conservatives & Reclaimed Whigs all equally look to & trust in.'<sup>29</sup> Sandford too was quick to point out how Stanley's acceptance of the rectorship and his visit to Glasgow had been salutary to the wider conservative cause.<sup>30</sup>

Politicians saw Scottish universities through their rectorial elections in a similar light to English ones through their parliamentary contests: as both bellwethers of changing opinion and platforms from which to give direction and support to that change. Elections to university constituencies in England had hosted fierce and nationally significant contests and reversals, not least for Peel himself.<sup>31</sup> Political dimensions were clear even in the more ceremonial functions of these institutions. The installation of a somewhat reluctant Duke of Wellington to the chancellorship of the University of Oxford (the academic honorific most desired by Peel) in June 1834 was a calculated celebration of high Toryism after the setbacks of the reform crisis.<sup>32</sup> The whig successes of the 1820s had been attended

<sup>27</sup> Gary Hutchison, "'A Distant and Whiggish Country': The Conservative Party and Scottish Elections, 1832–47," *Historical Research* 93, no. 260 (April 2020): 333–52.

<sup>28</sup> 'The Peel Club,' *The Times*, 29 December 1836; *Proceedings of the Peel Club, University of Glasgow, Session 1836–37* (Glasgow: John Smith and Son, 1837).

<sup>29</sup> John Hope to Robert Peel, 16 November 1836, ff. 167–74, Add. MS 40442, BL (emphasis in original). For Hope, see J. I. Brash, ed., *Papers on Scottish Electoral Politics 1832–1854* (Edinburgh: Scottish History Society, 1974), ix–lxiv.

<sup>30</sup> Daniel Sandford to Robert Peel, 15 November 1836, ff. 160–61, Add. MS 40442, BL; see also C. S. Parker, ed., *Sir Robert Peel from His Private Papers*, 3 vols. (London: Murray, 1899), 2:327–30.

<sup>31</sup> D. R. Fisher, 'England,' in *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons 1820–1832*, ed. D. R. Fisher, 7 vols. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1:60–62.

<sup>32</sup> 'Installation of the Duke of Wellington,' *The Standard*, 11 June 1834; 'Installation of the Duke of Wellington,' *The Times*, 14 June 1834; Rory Muir, *Wellington: Waterloo and the Fortunes of Peace, 1814–1852* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 436–38.

by celebratory dinners, a well-established means of advertising whig politics in a generally hostile institutional environment.<sup>33</sup>

This sense of university electorates as broadly representative of the opinion of educated and propertied classes in Scotland and expressive of national opinion on questions to do with the established church were especially prominent from the 1830s. Archibald Alison, the historian, laid out the notion of Peel's election being evidence of a sea change of opinion most clearly and added a clever inducement to Peel's notorious sense of self-importance. He also related the Glasgow experience to the wider traction of university politics and compared it to the entirely unsurprising adherence to the conservative cause that could be seen at Oxford and Cambridge:

But that Glasgow College filled with the descendants of the inveterate Whigs of Bothwell Brig & the Ayrshire Covenanters, or the sons of the reforming Merchants of Glasgow, who were so deeply imbued with democratic Principles in 1832, should so soon have reverted to Constitutional Principles, is indeed surprising; and highly descriptive of that powerful change in the public mind, in which your Exertions have borne so memorable a part. And even Sir Robert Peel may feel himself noways degraded by standing in a situation where Adam Smith faltered and Burke failed; which Sir Walter Scott Anxiously desired.<sup>34</sup>

In that sense, the rectorial provided a public platform from which to encourage the kind of realignment around a more moderate conservatism that Peel had proposed at Tamworth and that Stanley had articulated at his own rectorial installation. James Lindsay, for example, highlighted the same important opportunity to stake out a middle position: 'We are sadly ultra on both sides and require to be moderated.'<sup>35</sup> Indeed, the students themselves presented it in these terms. J. F. Morier, the secretary to the Peel Club, characterized the election as 'one of the clearest proofs of re-action that has yet occurred.'<sup>36</sup> It was this wider sense of its political and electoral importance that saw the rectorial election broadened out to include a public dinner. One function of this swollen installation was to allow Peel to use the occasion to speak more explicitly and directly on current political issues than the conventions of a rectorial address would

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<sup>33</sup> 'Public Dinner to Sir James Macintosh [sic],' *The Times*, 8 April 1825; T. E. Orme, 'Toasting Fox: The Fox Dinners in Edinburgh and Glasgow, 1801–1825,' *History* 99, no. 337 (October 2014): 588–606.

<sup>34</sup> Archibald Alison to Robert Peel, 19 November 1836, ff. 190–91, Add. MS 40442, BL.

<sup>35</sup> James Lindsay to Robert Peel, 2 December 1836, ff. 269–70, Add. MS 40442, BL.

<sup>36</sup> 'Election of Sir R. Peel to the Lord Rectorship of the University,' *John Bull*, 27 February 1837.

allow. As Hope advised, ‘the opportunity of separating wholly Politics from your Academical Oration ... the Dinner leaves open the better occasion for invigorating and elevating political opinions and political hopes.’<sup>37</sup>

The series of events around Peel’s installation as rector quickly came to be referred to as a ‘festival,’ and this usage helps to highlight their wider significance within the landscape of UK politics in the 1830s and beyond.<sup>38</sup> Of course, historians have long been interested in the festive dimensions of electoral and popular politics in Georgian and Victorian Britain.<sup>39</sup> The way in which the passage of the Reform Acts in 1832 was marked, especially in Scotland, saw a step change in the size and scale of political festivity. The summer of 1832 saw an essentially nation-wide ‘jubilee’ or ‘festival,’ one largely divorced from the kind of royal and military baggage that had attended earlier versions. Reform celebrations such as these were taken up with particular alacrity in Scotland.<sup>40</sup>

This association continued when Edinburgh and Glasgow became the sites of other political ‘festivals’ in the years immediately following reform. In September 1834, the whigs held the massive Grey Festival in Edinburgh. In itself, this was intended as a national political moment, a political festival celebrating Earl Grey as an individual and the achievements of whiggism as a creed.<sup>41</sup> Hot on the heels of this event, Grey’s stropky and erratic son-in-law the Earl of Durham was the main attraction at the Glasgow ‘Durham Festival’ at which he was wooed by local liberals and radicals into making a bold statement of principles to a national audience.<sup>42</sup> The following year saw the ‘O’Connell Festival’ in

<sup>37</sup> James Hope to Robert Peel, 16 November 1836, ff. 172–73, Add. MS 40442, BL.

<sup>38</sup> Anonymous, *Authentic Report of the Glasgow Festival, with Biography and Essay on Sir Robert Peel’s Personal and Political Character*, 8th ed. (London: C. Mitchell, 1836).

<sup>39</sup> The literature is too large to reference here, but key highlights include John Brewer, ‘Theater and Counter-Theater in Georgian Politics: The Mock Elections at Garrat,’ *Radical History Review* 22 (Winter 1979–80): 7–40; Frank O’Gorman, ‘Campaign Rituals and Ceremonies: The Social Meaning of Elections in England,’ *Past & Present* 135 (May 1992): 79–115; James Vernon, *Politics and the People: A Study in English Political Culture, c. 1815–1867* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Robert Poole, ‘The March to Peterloo: Politics and Festivity in Late Georgian England,’ *Past & Present* 192 (August 2006): 109–53.

<sup>40</sup> Gordon Pentland, ‘“A New Political Baptism”? Memorializing the Reform Acts in 1832,’ in *Memory and Modern British Politics: Commemoration, Tradition, Legacy, 1789–Present*, ed. Matthew Roberts (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), 121–38.

<sup>41</sup> ‘Grand Dinner to Earl Grey,’ *The Times*, 17 September 1834; *The Grey Festival; Being a Narrative of the Proceedings Connected with the Dinner Given to Earl Grey at Edinburgh, on Monday the 15th September 1834, and a Corrected Report of the Speeches* (Edinburgh: A. & C. Black, 1834).

<sup>42</sup> ‘Glasgow Festival to the Earl of Durham,’ *The Times*, 1 November 1834; *The Durham Festival: Glasgow, Wednesday, October 29, 1834* (Glasgow: Muir, Gowans & Company,

September as the famous Irish agitator toured the lowlands and used dinner and conviviality as a national platform.<sup>43</sup> Archibald Alison himself, in his sprawling history of British and European politics, placed the Peel banquet at Glasgow within this politics of conviviality.<sup>44</sup>

The elaboration and inflation of the rectorial installation was a direct move in this marketplace of political festivals. It was a conservative effort to carve some space in a politics of festivity that was being dominated, in Scotland at least, by whigs and radicals. This also helps to explain the attention given to the public perception of the installation event, which betrayed an awareness that the performance was not for Glasgow alone but also for the national press. Hope, for example, was keen to ensure that the Edinburgh conservatives did not tack on their own individual dinner for Peel. His concerns were pre-eminently to do with public image. Such an event would wheel out ‘constant supporters who can be got for all conservative dinners’ and, thus, only remind audiences of ‘the old and somewhat ultra Scotch Tory Party [of which] I must own, the Scotch are thoroughly tired.’<sup>45</sup>

Rectorial elections thus contributed notably to notions of party recovery and revitalization. Tory papers gleefully reported the election of Lord Lyndhurst at Marischal College the following year as some of the fruits of the ‘complete revolution of political feeling’ initiated by Peel’s victory.<sup>46</sup> The momentum was retained with the election of Sir James Graham as Peel’s successor at Glasgow. He too used the occasion as a thinly concealed political platform, delivered a controversial address on church and state, and boasted to the conservative agent Francis Bonham that ‘I really think I have given the Enemy a blow in the Heart of Scotland.’<sup>47</sup> While Peel’s rectorial may not have had an immediate or quantifiable effect on conservative electoral fortunes (in Scotland or elsewhere), it does provide a useful lens onto conservative preoccupations with revival at this important moment. Similar narratives would be even more prevalent later in the century, especially when, in 1873, Benjamin

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1834); *Report of the Proceedings at the Glasgow Festival to the Earl of Durham* (Stamford, UK: n. pub., 1834).

<sup>43</sup> ‘The O’Connell Dinner at Edinburgh’ and ‘Mr O’Connell in Scotland,’ *The Times*, 22 and 30 September 1835; *An Address to the Reformers of Edinburgh; on the Manner in Which the O’Connell Festival Should Be Conducted* (Edinburgh: A. & C. Black, 1835).

<sup>44</sup> Archibald Alison, *History of Europe from the Fall of Napoleon in 1815 to the Accession of Louis Napoleon in 1852*, 8 vols. (Edinburgh: W. Blackwood, 1852–59), 6:218–20.

<sup>45</sup> John Hope to Robert Peel, 27 November 1836, ff. 250–1, Add. MS 40442, BL.

<sup>46</sup> ‘Editorial,’ *The Age*, 12 March 1837.

<sup>47</sup> Sir James Graham to Francis Bonham, 27 December 1838, f. 39, Add. MS 40442, BL; ‘Inauguration of the Right Hon. Sir James Graham as Lord Rector,’ *The Times*, 25 December 1838; *Inaugural Address, on Being Installed Lord Rector of the University of Glasgow* (Glasgow: n. pub., 1839).

Disraeli was elected as lord rector of Glasgow, then re-elected the following year as Lord Derby was returned for Edinburgh.<sup>48</sup> Needless to say, the election of William Gladstone at Glasgow in 1877, and then John Bright and the Earl of Rosebery at Glasgow and Edinburgh respectively in 1880, was made to fit a similar narrative of liberal resurgence.<sup>49</sup>

### THE SPREAD OF RECTORIAL CONTESTS

As a shaping influence on the conduct, content, and wider function of rectorial elections in Scotland, the effects of Peel's election were more profound and longer lasting. It was substantially his election that elevated the rectorial contest as both a platform for Westminster politicians and a nationally reported event. In terms of embedding the partisan character of rectorial contests, the Peel Club at the university formed the kernel of the conservative politics at the university and prompted the revitalization of a rival liberal association.<sup>50</sup> It provided occasion for a debate in 1840, when the radical MP Robert Wallace called for the suppression of political clubs at Glasgow and questioned the wisdom of permitting 'mere children like these to hold convivial meetings, at which they were encouraged by the excitement of toasts and speeches to prolong their sittings to late hours of the night, and to drink wine ad libitum.'<sup>51</sup> No one seemed to point out in debate that, in sitting late and drinking long, these student associations were role playing long-standing parliamentary habits.

A number of those with experience as rectors took part in the debate. Hume sided with Wallace in condemning the use of public money to fund politicizing professors such as Daniel Sandford. For their parts, Graham and Peel identified the origins of political clubs and partisan rectorial elections with the whig challenges of the 1820s and suggested that the opposition by 1840 was simply a bad case of sour grapes.<sup>52</sup> The shape of parliamentary debate mirrored the wider ongoing discussion around political rectorials. Such concerns were not new. In the 1830s, the liberals had decried meddling from professors like Sandford who politicized their classrooms, especially when Sandford himself had run for the

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<sup>48</sup> 'The Scotch Rectorial Elections,' *The Examiner*, 21 November 1874; 'Inaugural Address and Speeches of the Right Hon. Benjamin Disraeli, M.P., Lord Rector of the University of Glasgow, delivered November 1873,' *Edinburgh Review* 139, no. 283 (January 1874): 271–88; 'Young Scotland's Choice,' *Judy, or the London Serio-Comic Journal*, 25 November 1874.

<sup>49</sup> 'Lord Rectors,' *The Graphic*, 24 November 1877.

<sup>50</sup> The 'liberal' organization had itself come into existence in 1828 to support the election of Thomas Campbell and thwart Walter Scott's supporters for the third time in a decade.

<sup>51</sup> Hansard, *Commons Debates*, 3rd series, lii, column (col.) 1205, 17 March 1840.

<sup>52</sup> Hansard, *Commons Debates*, 3rd series, lii, cols. 1206–14, 17 March 1840.

rectorship.<sup>53</sup> Depending on the results, either side was ready to dismiss the politics of untrained youth. In 1831, for example, *The Age* dismissed the election of Henry Cockburn, a whig, as the choice of ‘ragged boys’ exercising a ‘nonsensical privilege.’ Five years later, it lauded the choice of Peel and berated the ‘*Grunticle*’ (the whig’s daily *Morning Chronicle*) for making similar claims of a constituency that it now characterized as ‘the élite, and, consequently, the future hope of the land.’<sup>54</sup>

These politicized party contests continued at Glasgow, albeit with some flexibility as to the party-political credentials of candidates. For example, in 1846, the conservatives put up William Wordsworth to contest the rectorship against Lord John Russell.<sup>55</sup> It was more than twenty years after Peel’s election, however, that the institution of popularly elected rectors became common across Scotland’s universities. The model of direct elections by matriculated students followed at Glasgow, and Marischal College was expanded, but not standardized, by the Universities (Scotland) Act 1858.<sup>56</sup>

The reforms that the act embodied sought to implement the recommendations of a royal commission from 1826 to 1830 and were aimed at adapting Scottish universities to a more competitive environment where religious tests had been removed from English universities and competitive examination introduced into the civil service. They also addressed considerable local demand for the ‘improvement’ of Scottish higher education, which was believed to be falling behind its English and European neighbours.<sup>57</sup> Education reform of any description was a delicate topic in the nineteenth century, cutting across religious sensibilities and national and regional vanities. Part of the reason for the long gestation of any legislation was the controversial recommendations it made, which included the merger of King’s College and Marischal College in Aberdeen and the removal of Edinburgh’s town council from the principal managing role of the city’s university.<sup>58</sup>

Within this much wider conversation about national education, the rectorial election was a relatively minor issue. The initial bill, however, did away with student-elected rectors completely, augmenting the role and

<sup>53</sup> ‘Glasgow College: Election of Lord Rector,’ *The Scotsman*, 20 November 1833.

<sup>54</sup> ‘Editorial,’ *The Age*, 20 November 1831; ‘The Lord Rectorship of Glasgow University,’ *The Age*, 20 November 1836.

<sup>55</sup> ‘Glasgow University: Election of Lord Rector,’ *The Scotsman*, 18 November 1846.

<sup>56</sup> Universities (Scotland) Act 1858, 21 & 22 Vict., c. 83.

<sup>57</sup> James Lorimer, *The Universities of Scotland: Past, Present, and Possible* (Edinburgh: n. pub, 1854); ‘Scottish University Improvement,’ *The Times*, 2 January 1858; Anderson, *Education and Opportunity*, 53–68.

<sup>58</sup> ‘Town Council of Edinburgh,’ *Caledonian Mercury*, 8 May 1858; ‘The University Question: Public Meeting of the Inhabitants,’ *Aberdeen Journal*, 19 May 1858.

authority of the rector but stipulating his election by the university council.<sup>59</sup> The parliamentary debates therefore provided an opportunity for clarification as various speakers and, ultimately, the architect of the legislation, Lord Glencorse, the lord advocate, had to articulate clearly the role and function of the rector and of elections to the office. It featured most clearly in sometimes ill-tempered discussions around the legislation's regulations for Edinburgh University, which Adam Black represented as 'a *coup d'état* to destroy the liberal and constitutional government of their University, and to substitute in its place an irresponsible junto.'<sup>60</sup> Subsequent speakers in debate, such as the liberal Edward Ellice Jr., called for the retention and expansion of student-elected rectors as a mechanism 'to popularize the university court.'<sup>61</sup>

The most eloquent and expansive advocate for student-elected rectors was Alexander Murray Dunlop, the Free Church pioneer. He dwelt on elected rectors as providing the 'popular' element of university governance and addressed their wider function: 'It was of great value to the students to be brought into contact with such men, and it was of importance to the universities that an extraneous element of such a character should be introduced into their governing bodies.' The elections were, for Dunlop, not only an intrinsic good but also a key aspect of the distinctiveness of Scottish universities when set next to their English peers. The latter might enjoy a 'higher standard of learning,' but they enjoyed no popular and public mission 'of spreading throughout the land a vast amount of general and popular learning.'<sup>62</sup>

The lord advocate was apparently convinced.<sup>63</sup> The legislation made sweeping changes to the governance of Scottish universities, including the provision of general councils and university courts. It also legislated for and expanded the direct election of rectors by matriculated students, and it opened the role at St. Andrews, Edinburgh, and King's College to figures outside of the universities and the Church of Scotland. Rectors would chair the meeting of the university courts with a deliberative and casting vote. Student-elected rectors were hard-wired from this point on into the life of Scotland's universities and, increasingly, became a badge of their national distinctiveness.

Further reform in 1889 revisited many of the earlier debates about the popular and political role of the rector, enhanced the powers of the office, and tied the role to new students' representative councils.<sup>64</sup> By this

<sup>59</sup> 'Universities (Scotland) Bill,' *The Scotsman*, 8 May 1858.

<sup>60</sup> Hansard, *Commons Debates*, 3rd series, cl, col. 1883, 10 June 1858.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, col. 1903.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, col. 1894–96.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, col. 1908.

<sup>64</sup> Anderson, *Education and Opportunity*, chs. 2, 7.



point, there had been three decades of student-elected rectors across Scotland's universities. The politicized nature of these elections had been further underlined by the introduction, from 1868, of university seats into Scotland's electoral map, with two twinned constituencies comprising Glasgow and Aberdeen and Edinburgh and St. Andrews.<sup>65</sup> The rectorial elections continued or developed their own rituals and a rich participatory politics as well as practices around the selection and installation of rectors. With Peel's Glasgow election once again being the most obvious stepping stone, the rectorial elections from mid-century, especially those at Glasgow and Edinburgh, increasingly became national events, which were widely reported in the press. Elections were more frequently and fiercely contested affairs marked by elaborate ceremony and licensed disorder.

All elected rectors were public men of some description. Until the early decades of the twentieth century, the vast majority were front-rank politicians. While there was a strong prejudice for political figures from, or with links to, Scotland, this was eroded across the course of the century. Of the prime ministers between Lord Palmerston and Ramsay MacDonald, only two (the Marquess of Salisbury and Henry Campbell-Bannerman) were not elected as rectors of at least one Scottish university, and the latter started for Glasgow in 1908. Some were elected rectors of more than one Scottish university and the Earl of Rosebery managed the rare feat of being elected to all four (Aberdeen in 1878, Edinburgh in 1880, Glasgow in 1899, and St. Andrews in 1910).

Within this general pattern of political rectors, local variations and traditions quickly developed. There had always been some debate, voiced during the Glasgow contests of the 1820s and reprised regularly thereafter, about divorcing the rectorial role entirely from literary or academic merit and about embracing non-resident political figures.<sup>66</sup> St. Andrews proved far more receptive of men whose public role was based on their writing alone. J. S. Mill, J. A. Froude, John Ruskin, and the American poet and ambassador James Russell Lowell were successful there. Even St. Andrews's more obviously political rectors, such as Lord Bute and Arthur Balfour, also boasted strong intellectual and literary

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<sup>65</sup> Michael Dyer, *Men of Property and Intelligence: The Scottish Electoral System Prior to 1884* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1996). On the shape of and debates surrounding university representation, see Joseph Meisel, *Knowledge and Power: The Parliamentary Representation of Universities in Britain and the Empire* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

<sup>66</sup> 'Election of Lord Rector of the University of Glasgow,' *The Scotsman*, 30 November 1822; 'The Rectorship of the University: Meeting of Lord Neaves' Supporters,' *Caledonian Mercury*, 9 November 1859; 'Our University Rector and the Conservative Club,' *The Scotsman*, 12 March 1862.

credentials. In Aberdeen, the junction of Marischal and King's Colleges meant a single rector after 1858. Whether from the difficulty of convincing 'strangers' to come to Aberdeen in November or, more likely, from a strong sense of local patriotism, the preference for men of the north-east was clear. Alexander Bain, for example, was the son of a poor Aberdonian weaver, and the political rectors, such as Charles Ritchie (born in Dundee), Mountstuart Elphinstone Grant-Duff (both in Eden), or Baron Strathcona (born in Forres), had strong local connections.<sup>67</sup>

As the last two examples suggest, there also developed a strong predilection for imperial figures and men with connections to, and experience of, the wider British Empire. Unsurprisingly, this trend was especially marked from the final third of the nineteenth century and took in active front-line politicians with imperial responsibilities such as James Grant Duff, imperial businessmen-cum-statesmen such as Baron Strathcona, and retired consuls and proconsuls such as Lord Dufferin, who was elected for St. Andrews in 1890 and for Edinburgh in 1899.

Politicians availed themselves of the opportunities of the rectorial contest, but they also had to discharge its duties and endure its absurdities. Considerable importance was attached to the rector attending his own installation. Along with the naming of an assessor, this visit and the accompanying rectorial address came to be really the only formal duty required of the rector. Those who could not make time to attend faced strong criticism. Very prominent statesmen could find themselves unseated or at least challenged at subsequent elections. Gladstone was warned in 1879 by the liberal whip, for example, about the dangers of being close to Glasgow (to whose rectorship he had been elected in 1877) on his Midlothian campaign and not taking the opportunity to deliver his address.<sup>68</sup> Lord Curzon's delay in appearing in Glasgow after his election in 1908 led to a motion of censure, which his campaign manager assured him was down to 'a large number of irresponsible men who have come to college since the Rectorial & are still young enough to think they are doing a clever thing in offering impertinence to a man who the country acclaims as great.'<sup>69</sup>

This youthful impertinence functioned in similar ways to the kinds of inversions and confrontations of the hustings and elections meeting as

<sup>67</sup> 'Procurators of the Four Nations to M. E. Grant Duff, 22 March 1867, Eur F234/327, India Office Records, BL.

<sup>68</sup> W. P. Adam to William Gladstone, 18 November 1879, ff. 189–93, Add MS 5644, BL; Richard Shannon, *Gladstone: Heroic Minister 1865–1898* (London: Allen Lane, 1999), 239.

<sup>69</sup> Robert Mathams to Lord Curzon, 22 February 1910, f. 265, Curzon Papers F112/28a, India Office Records, BL; 'Glasgow Rectorship: Decision of the Representative Council,' *The Scotsman*, 25 February 1910.

examined by Jon Lawrence.<sup>70</sup> Prior to the installation, the election itself was notable for its richly developed culture of disorder and rowdiness.<sup>71</sup> From mid-century, rectorial elections and installations across all of Scotland's universities developed their own traditions of ritualized brawling between rival sets of supporters and the throwing of flour, peas, rotten fruit, and other projectiles.<sup>72</sup> These frequently occasioned a police presence and arrests. By the end of the century, rival sets of supporters in Edinburgh and Glasgow rented premises as headquarters from which to launch hostilities.<sup>73</sup>

The transmission of the content of the rectorial address via print was prompted partly because the development of this rich tradition of licensed rowdiness stretched to regular disruption of the 'live' event of the address.<sup>74</sup> This emerged quickly after mid-century. At the installation of the solicitor-general Edward Maitland as lord rector of Aberdeen in 1861, for example, amid 'a very Babel of noises ... his performance was a mere dumb-show, not a single syllable could be caught for the clamour.'<sup>75</sup> By the 1880s, the inaudibility of the address was well established, and the experience of Alexander Bain, psychologist and emeritus professor, elected to the rectorship of Aberdeen was quite typical: 'I was, of course, too familiar with the reception given to Rectorial Addresses, to expect a patient hearing, or indeed any hearing at all. ... I proceeded to read for a few minutes. ... The Provost came to my aid by the timely suggestion that the address should be held as read, and given to the reporters.'<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Jon Lawrence, *Electing Our Masters: The Hustings in British Politics from Hogarth to Blair* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Robert Anderson, 'Ceremony in Context: The Edinburgh University Tercentenary, 1884,' *Scottish Historical Review* 87, no. 223 (April 2008): 129–30.

<sup>71</sup> Macdonald, 'To Form Citizens,' 389–92; Macdonald, 'Rhetoric, Place and Performance,' 64–72.

<sup>72</sup> See, for example, 'Earl Russell at Aberdeen: Installation as Lord Rector and Inaugural Address,' *The Scotsman*, 12 November 1864; 'The Lord Rectorship of Edinburgh University,' *The Scotsman*, 13 November 1871; 'The Scotch Lord Rectors,' *Weekly Press*, 11 December 1874.

<sup>73</sup> 'Glasgow University Rectorial Election: Return of Lord Rosebery,' *The Scotsman*, 30 October 1899; 'The Lord Rector and His Constituents,' *The Scotsman*, 25 January 1904; 'The Edinburgh Rectorial Election: Nearing the End,' *The Scotsman*, 23 October 1908.

<sup>74</sup> Macdonald, 'Rhetoric, Place and Performance,' 69–72.

<sup>75</sup> 'University of Aberdeen: Installation of the Solicitor-General as Lord Rector,' *The Scotsman*, 18 March 1861.

<sup>76</sup> Alexander Bain, *Autobiography* (London: Longmans, Green & Company, 1904), 367–68. The seventy-year-old Carlyle related a similarly traumatic experience in 1866: 'Monday, at Edinburgh, was to me the gloomiest chaotic day, nearly intolerable for confusion, crowding, noisy inanity, and miserable till once I got done. My speech was delivered in a mood of defiant despair, and under the pressure of nightmares. Some feeling that I was not speaking lies sustained me.' See Archibald Stodart Walker, ed., *Rectorial*

This formal speech rapidly became the centrepiece of the installation ceremony. By the turn of the century, this had taken on a number of trappings redolent of this golden age of invented traditions.<sup>77</sup> At Edinburgh, for example, torchlight processions had been customary since mid-century and, along with the address, formed an elaborately choreographed 'Rectorial Festival.'<sup>78</sup> The content of the addresses themselves had been fitfully reported from the 1820s, but, especially since Peel's election, rectorial addresses were regularly circulated in print. They took their place in a culture characterized by large-scale meetings and printed speech that emerged rapidly from mid-century.<sup>79</sup> Rectorial addresses were intended and prepared to be read rather than heard. Even accomplished political speakers could find the address challenging. Both George Wyndham in 1904 and David Lloyd George in 1923 indicated their struggle to compose an appropriate address.<sup>80</sup> Most were published in stand-alone versions and, where the incoming rector shared a version of the address ahead of the installation, could be available on the day itself and later as part of compilations of addresses.<sup>81</sup> The first such compilation, which traced the origin of the rectorial address to Francis Jeffrey's speech in 1820, appeared in 1839, and such addresses became more common as the century progressed.<sup>82</sup> Some individual addresses,

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*Addresses: Delivered before the University of Edinburgh, 1859–1899* (London: Grant Richards, 1900), xxi.

<sup>77</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, 'Mass-Producing Traditions: Europe, 1870–1914,' in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 263–308.

<sup>78</sup> 'University of Edinburgh: The Election of Lord Rosebery,' *The Scotsman*, 16 November 1874; 'The Edinburgh University Rectorial Festival,' *The Scotsman*, 14 November 1901; Anderson, 'Ceremony in Context,' 129; Macdonald, 'Rhetoric, Place and Performance,' 68–69.

<sup>79</sup> H. C. G. Matthew, 'Rhetoric and Politics in Great Britain, 1860–1950,' in *Politics and Social Change in Modern Britain: Essays Presented to A. F. Thompson*, ed. Philip J. Waller (Brighton: Harvester, 1987), 34–58; Joseph S. Meisel, *Public Speech and the Culture of Public Life in the Age of Gladstone* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

<sup>80</sup> Guy Wyndham, ed., *Letters of George Wyndham 1877–1913*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: privately printed, 1915), 2:99–102; A. J. P. Taylor, ed., *My Darling Pussy: The Letters of Lloyd George and Frances Stevenson, 1913–41* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975), 57, 61.

<sup>81</sup> Wyndham, *Letters of George Wyndham*, vol. 2, 107.

<sup>82</sup> John Barras Hay, ed., *Inaugural Addresses by Lords Rectors of the University of Glasgow* (Glasgow: D. Robertson, 1839), vii; William Knight, ed., *Rectorial Addresses Delivered at the University of St Andrews: Sir William Stirling-Maxwell, Bart. to the Marquess of Bute 1863–1893* (London: A. & C. Black, 1894); Peter John Anderson, ed., *Rectorial Addresses Delivered in the Universities of Aberdeen 1835–1900* (Aberdeen: University of Aberdeen, 1902).

such as Andrew Carnegie's address at St. Andrews, went into multiple editions.<sup>83</sup>

In these addresses by prominent politicians, historians have a superb body of material through which to trace the ways in which they expressed their sense of the relationships between higher education, citizenship, character, youth, and empire across this period. Macdonald has noted that, following the 1880s, the most prominent politicians of the period proved reluctant to introduce politics into their rectorial roles, even in the context of politicized debates around education.<sup>84</sup> Such concerns were long-standing ones. Peel had been apprised that the conventions of the rectorial address dictated that it could not be a partisan political address. Nonetheless, in addressing general themes of intellectual and public life, active politicians could hardly avoid politics. Indeed, one of the chief attractions of the rectorial office was the opportunity to address a wide audience on a weighty and substantial theme.

Disraeli, for example, reflected on the evils of attempts to achieve social equality and presented an essentially imperial vision of Scottish patriotism 'as vehement on the banks of the Ganges as on the banks of the Clyde, and in the speculative turmoil of Melbourne as in the bustling energy of Glasgow.'<sup>85</sup> In 1882, Rosebery addressed how multinational states like Britain could sustain a common bond and still adequately recognize separate nationalities. In 1900, he turned to discuss Britons as 'a conquering and imperial race' and assessed how far Britain's cities were rearing men for this destiny. Given the shape of political debate and the choice of rectors, similar themes of imperial politics dominated the subject of addresses elsewhere.<sup>86</sup> Overall, very few politician rectors could or did avoid contemporary political questions or were able to approach them with a studied neutrality.

## THE PROFESSIONALIZATION OF RECTORIAL CONTESTS

The mechanics and culture around these elections developed to accommodate front-rank politicians, who took the opportunities they provided ever more seriously and suffered their associated indignities

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<sup>83</sup> Andrew Carnegie, *A Rectorial Address: Delivered to the Students in the University of St Andrews, 17th October, 1905* (St Andrews: Editing Committee of SRC of St Andrews University, 1905).

<sup>84</sup> Macdonald, 'To Form Citizens,' 393.

<sup>85</sup> Benjamin Disraeli, *Address of the Rt. Hon. B. Disraeli M.P., as Lord Rector of the University of Glasgow* (Glasgow: J. Maclehose, 1873), 10–11.

<sup>86</sup> Lord Rosebery, *A Rectorial Address Delivered before the Students of the University of Edinburgh November 4th* (Edinburgh: David Douglas, 1882); Lord Rosebery, *Questions of Empire: A Rectorial Address Delivered before the Students of the University of Glasgow November the Sixteenth Nineteen Hundred* (London: A. L. Humphreys, 1900).

willingly if not always enthusiastically. Rosebery provides a good example of this, actively intervening in all of his elections, building party influence through his victories, and using the opportunities provided to make interventions of national and international significance.<sup>87</sup> This engagement from Westminster politicians prompted professionalization of the rectorial elections, which paralleled the important developments that Kathryn Rix has analysed within party politics more widely across the same period.<sup>88</sup> This can be seen in two well-documented three-cornered campaigns from 1908.

At Glasgow, Nathaniel Curzon, the former viceroy of India, ran against Henry Campbell-Bannerman, the sitting prime minister, and Keir Hardie, the Labour leader and MP for Merthyr Tydfil. The Edinburgh rectorship was contested by George Wyndham, the intellectual former chief secretary for Ireland, Winston Churchill for the liberals, and a 'non-political' candidate in the shape of William Osler, regius professor of medicine at Oxford University. The national political context was important in explaining the intensity and seriousness of the campaigning during both of these contests. In particular, the liberal landslide at the general election of 1906 invested the rectorial elections with added import for conservative candidates and activists.

As in a number of the nineteenth-century contests, the rectorial elections of 1908 were especially important to conservative politics in Scotland. The unionists had been reduced from thirty-six to ten seats in Scotland in 1906. Their efforts both to reform constituency organizations and campaigning and to attract new bases of support provided the background to their activities in Glasgow and Edinburgh in 1908. The latter efforts were notably focused on generating conservative appeals to younger generations. In England, the foundation of the Junior Imperial and Constitutional League in 1906 (for young men aged between sixteen and twenty-one) was a response to this 'Edwardian crisis' of conservatism; in Scotland, dedicated efforts at the rectorials fulfilled a similar function and would be followed by similar moves to create Junior Imperial Unionist Leagues.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> R. Akroyd, 'Lord Rosebery and Scottish Nationalism, 1868–1896' (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 1996), 74–85, 98–103, 128–29.

<sup>88</sup> Kathryn Rix, *Parties, Agents and Electoral Culture in England, 1880–1910* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2016).

<sup>89</sup> I. G. C. Hutchison, *A Political History of Scotland 1832–1924: Parties, Elections and Issues* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1986), 218–23; David Thackeray, *Conservatism for the Democratic Age: Conservative Cultures and the Challenge of Mass Politics in Early Twentieth Century England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 70–71; Stephen Heathorn and David Greenspoon, 'Organizing Youth for Partisan Politics in Britain, 1918–c.1932,' *The Historian* 68 (2006): 94–96.

Growing organization and professionalism was reflected in the advanced preparations made for the rectorial contests. In contrast to the breakneck speed of Peel's election, Curzon was approached nearly a year and half before the election in the summer of 1907. He was out of parliament and had his recent victory over Rosebery for the chancellorship of Oxford in March to recommend him.<sup>90</sup> An additional personal inducement arose when it became known that Campbell-Bannerman, who had denied Curzon an earldom, was to be the liberal nomination. Quite such long lead-ins were not the norm—Churchill was approached for Edinburgh in March for an election in November—but acquiring a candidate at least six months before the election was important.<sup>91</sup> This highlights the growing competition to secure candidates, especially front-rank political candidates, for rectorial berths. The early approach allowed Curzon, for example, to turn down a nomination from Edinburgh quickly afterwards. It also highlights a professional sense of the electoral advantage to be gained from having a candidate in front of his constituency for a reasonable amount of time before the election.

By contrast, Lloyd George's short campaign on replacing Campbell-Bannerman was used to explain his loss to Curzon in 1908. He was somewhat reluctantly adopted by the liberal students, who doubted his weightiness for the role. The playwright Osborne Mavor (later James Bridie) was a prominent member of the Liberal Club and later reflected: 'He was all we could get, and with heavy hearts we set to work to make the best of him.' As well as his prime ministerial credentials, a longer run-in and the full-throated support of those student politicians who nominated him all but ensured Lloyd George a landslide at Edinburgh in 1920.<sup>92</sup> A letter to Curzon from Wyndham, who had been rector at Glasgow in 1902 and would go on to be the successful candidate for Edinburgh in 1908, further revealed how the tenor and direction of these campaigns had changed and become formalized:

Yes. That is the way they begin, to the best of my recollection. It suits them to come up to London in the *summer*. They proceed with great solemnity. The matter is wholly in the hands of the undergraduates. When you name a day and hour for them, two extremely young Scotchmen will call in their London clothes &

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<sup>90</sup> David Gilmour, *Curzon: Imperial Statesman 1859–1925*, 3rd ed. (London: John Murray, 2003), 362–81.

<sup>91</sup> D. Stanley Dickson to Lord Curzon, 27 June 1907, f. 2, Curzon Papers F112/28a, India Office Records, BL; J. Wales Cameron to Winston Churchill, 14 March 1908, CHAR 2/33/37, Chartwell Papers, University of Cambridge.

<sup>92</sup> 'University Intelligence,' *The Times*, 26 October 1908; Wintersgill, *Rectors of Glasgow University*, 105–6.



expound the mysteries. Having done so they will, no doubt, enjoy themselves at the Empire & return to their alma mater next day.<sup>93</sup>

An infinitely greater degree of student autonomy and leadership is apparent, which was of a piece with changes in university governance and, in particular, the establishment of students' representative councils.

At Glasgow, each candidate was supported by his own regular publication, which combined active campaigning, political intelligence, songs, and satires. While this kind of printed ephemera had long been a part of the culture around elections, the scale and professionalism of the efforts by 1908 are striking.<sup>94</sup> The blue-covered *Lord Rector* for the unionists, for example, dwelt on the 'long and honourable record' of the conservative association at the university, its visual imagery presenting a particular narrative of conservative successes, grouping Curzon with Disraeli, Lord Lytton, Sir John Gorst, Balfour, and Joseph Chamberlain.<sup>95</sup> The *Four Nations*, published in red covers for the Glasgow University Liberal Club, was similarly professional as was the *Socialist Torch* for the Glasgow University Socialist Society, the only one that featured paid-for advertising from local businesses. These were accompanied by a host of songbooks, posters, and other ephemera as well as carefully crafted programs of supporting events.

These efforts on the ground were made by committed groups of activists, who sought to keep their candidates apprised of the campaign. Curzon received a stream of letters from various officers of the Conservative Club. Students dug up positive statements about Curzon by Campbell-Bannerman and other liberal statesmen; sent agents to Cumnock to rustle up dirt on Hardie; and solicited from Curzon statements and positions on a range of issues, including women's education and women's votes. Club officers sometimes overstepped the mark and had to apologize for badgering the candidate, asking impertinent questions such as 'whether the Conservative leaders have yet admitted their mistake in 1905' and generally acting the part of 'combative political agents.'<sup>96</sup> Churchill's correspondent at Edinburgh described an equally professional campaign involving innovations such as 'temperance "smokers",' and a whole host of volunteers in specialized roles all

<sup>93</sup> George Wyndham to Lord Curzon, 29 June 1907, ff. 4–5, Curzon Papers F112/28a, India Office Records, BL (emphasis in original).

<sup>94</sup> See, for example, the reports on 'pictorial squibs' and songs in 'The Lord Rectorship of Edinburgh University,' *The Scotsman*, 13 November 1871.

<sup>95</sup> *The Lord Rector*, January–October 1908, 1–9; handwritten appeal to subscribers, n.d., f. 142, Curzon Papers F112/29, India Office Records, BL.

<sup>96</sup> Robert H. Napier to Lord Curzon, 6 and 28 January and 1 February 1908, ff. 18–20, 28–29, 34–35, Curzon Papers F112/28a, India Office Records, BL.

aimed at breaching ‘the dead wall of toryism at the University.’<sup>97</sup> Westminster politicians were generally indulgent of this youthful behaviour. In 1908, for example, Wyndham received and dined with the vanquished student leaders of Churchill’s rival campaign after they presented their cards at the House of Commons.<sup>98</sup>

Candidates for the rectorial elections seem also to have coordinated their efforts along party lines. Wyndham and Curzon, for example, were in correspondence over their respective campaigns at Edinburgh and Glasgow.<sup>99</sup> Front-rank politicians beyond the candidates themselves were increasingly drawn into public roles around the rectorial contests. This was perhaps most notable in the platform speeches made by senior politicians in support of rectorial candidates. At Glasgow, for example, Curzon’s candidacy was announced and endorsed by Balfour, a former prime minister and a former rector; Campbell-Bannerman and then Lloyd-George were introduced by Alexander Ure, the solicitor-general; and Hardie had the support of Robert Cunninghame Graham and would have been endorsed by Victor Grayson, who had been sensationally elected in Colne Valley the year before, had the two not very publicly fallen out.<sup>100</sup>

The efforts of the so-called ‘Rectorial Representation Committee’ to depoliticize the rectorial context was a novel feature at Edinburgh in 1908.<sup>101</sup> Otherwise, the contests embodied the tensions and landmarks of the wider UK political landscape. In 1908, Lloyd George’s candidacy was defeated, in part by the intervention of a labour candidate and possibly by the campaigning of student suffragettes. In 1920, as prime minister, his candidacy as a coalition candidate was arranged by a joint committee of conservatives and liberals reflecting post-war arrangements at the national level. He stormed to victory over an independent liberal nominee. The professionalism of the campaigns, the coordination of the candidacies, and the widespread involvement of other Westminster politicians all indicate that, by the early twentieth century, a rectorial contest at Glasgow

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<sup>97</sup> J. Wales Cameron to Winston Churchill, 19 November 1908, CHAR 2/36/20, Chartwell Papers, CU.

<sup>98</sup> Wyndham, *Letters of George Wyndham*, vol. 2, 315–16.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:281–82; George Wyndham to Lord Curzon, 29 June 1907, 6 April 1908, and from Patrick Spens to George Wyndham, 6 April and 20 October 1908, ff. 4–5, 42–43, 44, 55, Curzon Papers F112/28a, India Office Records, BL.

<sup>100</sup> ‘Rectorship of Glasgow University: Announcement of Candidates,’ *The Scotsman*, 18 January 1908; ‘Glasgow Rectorial Election Address,’ *The Scotsman*, 23 October 1908; ‘Attack on John Burns,’ *Dundee Courier*, 20 October 1908; ‘Violent Speech by Mr Grayson MP,’ *Lichfield Mercury*, 23 October 1908.

<sup>101</sup> ‘A Non-Party Lord Rector,’ *Dundee Courier*, 9 June 1908; ‘Edinburgh University Rectorial Election,’ *Aberdeen Journal*, 3 October 1908.

or Edinburgh had transcended its particular origins to become what *The Times* called 'a parliamentary election in miniature.'<sup>102</sup>

This highlights a final area for consideration: how far the rectorial elections and their focus on, and involvement of, politicians as candidates acted to shape the future personnel of UK politics. The year before these two case studies, Sir William Turner, the University of Edinburgh's principal, had addressed the members of the conference of student representatives on the crucial role of student politics as 'training for public life.'<sup>103</sup> It was a common enough theme of rectorial addresses themselves, but, beyond university as a generalized training of this sort, there was no simple or direct relationship between student politicians and later political careers.<sup>104</sup> Neither of Churchill's and Curzon's principal handlers, for example, developed their political roles any further. James Wales Cameron went on to a long career in the United Free Church. His opposite number at Glasgow, Robert Hellier Napier, became a missionary in Africa, but like so many of the student politicians of his generation, was buried by the Great War—in his case, as part of the Nyasaland Field Force.<sup>105</sup>

While it is difficult to quantify overall, any cursory investigation of named student politicians across this period certainly does reveal a rich range of connections. Broadly speaking, of course, rectorial elections did act to prepare students for playing roles as active citizens within public life—as Cameron and Napier did—whether those future roles were expressly party political or not. The Reverend Norman Macleod, for example, the 'leader of the Peel party' in 1836, was to become a very prominent public figure in later decades, an activist church minister in the mould of Thomas Chalmers.<sup>106</sup>

One natural route through to politics was a sustained involvement in the politics of the universities themselves. The campaign to institute a students' representative council at Edinburgh, for example, was led by Robert Fitzroy Bell, the chairman of the Edinburgh University Conservative Association, who had played a prominent role in the return of Stafford Northcote as rector in 1883. The campaign involved a range of others who had cut their teeth in the rectorial elections, including J. F. Sturrock, Bell's opposite number as chair of the University Liberal Association. Bell himself would go on to become an unsuccessful

<sup>102</sup> 'University Intelligence,' *The Times*, 26 October 1908.

<sup>103</sup> 'Scottish Students' Conference in Edinburgh,' *The Scotsman*, 16 January 1907.

<sup>104</sup> See, for example, William Edward Forster, 'The University a Trainer of Politicians,' in Anderson, *Rectorial Addresses*, 199–222.

<sup>105</sup> 'General Assemblies: Church of Scotland Work in the Foreign Mission Field,' *The Scotsman*, 23 May 1913; 'Casualties in the Army,' *Aberdeen Journal*, 12 April 1918.

<sup>106</sup> Macleod, *Memoir of Norman Macleod*, 1:101–2.

unionist parliamentary candidate, while his signal contribution to student representation had a wide influence.<sup>107</sup>

As well as these more general routes through to public life, the politicized rectorials helped to create a pipeline between the Scottish universities and front-rank politics. Robert Stevenson Horne, the future conservative chancellor of the exchequer, for example, cut his teeth leading Balfour's successful campaign at Glasgow in 1890.<sup>108</sup> The three-party contest at the same university in 1908 provides a very rich case study of these elections as training grounds for aspirant politicians. Indeed, with Walter Elliot as member of the University Conservative Club and vice president from 1910 and Thomas Johnston as founder and chairman of the University Socialist Club, the rectorial contest saw contributions from two future Scottish secretaries.<sup>109</sup> The president of the University Liberal Club rose to be editor of the *Glasgow Herald* and was knighted for his services to politics. Others may have enjoyed the less stellar, but equally revealing, experience of Robert Mathams, president of the Glasgow University Conservative Club. He became a unionist party agent in the north and north-west of England before holding a series of offices in the party machinery.<sup>110</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The century in between Francis Jeffrey's election as lord rector at Glasgow and David Lloyd George's at Edinburgh saw the development of a rich culture of electoral contests at Scotland's universities. These offered front-rank politicians and their supporters a range of opportunities, including a political platform not dissimilar to a by-election and the opportunity to deliver a widely reported and published set-piece speech. The elections thus provided a vehicle for individual politicians, a valuable chance to essay strategies for, or narratives of, party renewal in Scotland, and an opportunity for historians to examine politicians' public addresses on themes including youth, education, character, public life, and citizenship over a long period. The highly ritualized elections also provided a meeting point between local and national political cultures. In the rich mixture of invented traditions, solemn ceremony, and licensed rowdiness, rectorial contests evolved as both a distinctive form of politics

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<sup>107</sup> 'Election News: Berwickshire,' *The Scotsman*, 19 January 1905; 'Fitzroy Bell: Founder of the S. R. C.,' *The Scotsman*, 25 February 1937; R. F. Howie, *The Outside of the Inside* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1919), 25–26.

<sup>108</sup> 'University of Glasgow: Balfour Banquet,' *The Scotsman*, 19 October 1891.

<sup>109</sup> Graham Walker, *Thomas Johnston* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 7–9; Thomas Johnston, *Memories* (London: Collins, 1952), 41–43; David Torrance, *The Scottish Secretaries* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2006), 135–38.

<sup>110</sup> 'R. M. Mathams,' *The Times*, 22 April 1924.

and as a process whose development paralleled changes in many other areas of public life. For students involved in these contests as strategists, activists, and electors, there is plentiful evidence that the elections provided meaningful training for a range of political and para-political roles. As in the twenty-first century, in the late nineteenth, many MPs, candidates, organizers, journalists, and strategists cut their teeth in student politics.

Given these many dimensions, there is every reason to take Scotland's rectorial elections seriously as a neglected patch in the rich tapestry of sub-parliamentary forms of representation that characterized Victorian and early twentieth-century politics. Historians have rightly engaged in past decades in the relative downgrading of the parliamentary franchise as the only marker of democratization and political change. They have developed a broader and richer understanding of a participatory political nation, characterized by petitioning, local politics, debating clubs, and many other spaces that speak to the creation of political subjects in the nineteenth century.<sup>111</sup> Rectorial elections were clearly a robust and enduring part of that ecosystem, albeit one that came under significant pressure and came to be substantially reshaped in the second half of the twentieth century.

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<sup>111</sup> For excellent recent examples, see Henry J. Miller, *A Nation of Petitioners: Petitions and Petitioning in the United Kingdom, 1780–1918* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2023); Helen Sunderland, 'Politics in Schoolgirl Debating Cultures in England, 1886–1914,' *Historical Journal* 63, no. 4 (2020): 935–57.