

REVIEWS

The English Rothschilds. Richard Davis, pp. 272. Collins, 1983. £12.95.

Dear Lord Rothschild. Birds, Butterflies and History. Miriam Rothschild, pp. xxiv + 398. Hutchinson, 1983. £14.95.

Beechwoods and Bayonets: the Book of Halton. Andrew E. Adam, pp. 132. Barracuda Books, 1983. £13.95.

Like the first Duke of Wellington the Rothschild family 'have been much exposed to authors' and the many books written about the family have generally been more concerned with speculation and scandal than with hard facts. The authors of the first two books noticed here have had the advantage of access to the family archives kept at New Court and both add greatly to our knowledge of this extraordinary family.

The Rothschilds built up not only an extensive landed estate but also immense influence in mid-Bucks in the century from 1850 and even today still occupy two of the six great houses which they either built or converted in the Vale of Aylesbury. Professor Davis (whose admirable study of mid-Bucks politics *Political Change and Continuity* was published in 1972) is not directly concerned with the county but provides a commentary on the family's impact on English business and society from Nathan's arrival in Manchester in 1799 to the death of his grandson Natty in 1915. The latter, who was Lord Lieutenant of Buckinghamshire from 1889 to his death, was the first Jew to hold such an appointment and the first practising Jew to be made a peer, just as his father Lionel had been the first Jewish M.P. Professor Davis has made good use of the archives to provide a readable and at times lively narrative.

Miriam Rothschild is the niece of Walter, the second Baron, and like him is a very distinguished scientist in her own right. This long and detailed biography of her uncle covers a

wide field, as it incorporates a full history of the Natural History museum he built up at Tring Park and the many scientific expeditions he financed all over the world. The character of this remarkable man — rich but unworldly, eccentric yet shrewd — is built up with remarkable skill and of course from personal memories. Although quite uninterested in the family bank or politics, he served in the former for many years and was M.P. for Aylesbury from 1899 to 1910; he was also involved in Zionism, and the Balfour Declaration was addressed to him. His museum survives as part of the Natural History Museum but without the great bird collection, which he was forced to sell because of financial difficulties, caused by an unnamed peeress who blackmailed him for over thirty years. The book is well illustrated.

The third book is ostensibly a history of Halton village on the lines of the several town histories issued by this publisher but over eighty of its pages are concerned with Alfred Rothschild, the chateau he built and his impact on the local community. Dr. Adam, who served at RAF Halton for twelve years, has assembled valuable information and written a readable account of yet another eccentric member of this endlessly fascinating family.

E.V.

Dr John Lee of Hartwell. H.A. Hanley, vi + 34 pp. Buckinghamshire Record Office, Aylesbury, 1983. £1.00, paperback.

You can buy maps of France showing the *routes parallèles*, the network of secondary roads by which you can cross the country circuitously and picturesquely. Occasionally you cross a major road or skirt a town, not that you would know it from the map as the main features are scarcely coloured in. Likewise you can trace obscure and sometimes interesting routes through the hinterland of history. Who when visiting Athens in 1811 was

found by the young Byron to be 'vastly amiable and accomplished'? Who in 1812 met Burckhardt in Aleppo, and in 1814 witnessed Napoleon's arrival on Elba?

These were the accidents of youthful travel. In 1827 the same man by a further chance inherited at Hartwell, by Aylesbury, an 1800-acre estate once improved by Capability Brown, and there for 40 years lived the life of the brilliant dilettante that we ourselves aspire to, had we either the estate, or the brilliance. This man built his own observatory, and named new features on the moon after his friends. He created a museum around his own collections. He was the founder of learned societies in London, and of the County Infirmary in Bucks. He had the virtue of growing more radical as he grew older. On his estate he conducted a Peace and Temperance Festival and in his house the 'Hartwell Gatherings' — 'equivalents of the modern scientific conference'.

This man was John Lee, now commemorated in a biographical memoir by Hugh Hanley, Bucks County Archivist. His account makes some amends for the 'brief obituary' offered by *The Times* upon Lee's death. Surely a life of so many achievements deserves more remembrance? But there were thousands like him beavering through the nineteenth century. No wonder Victorian society was so ordered and institutionalized; it was the age of the perfectibility of institutions, if not of man. No wonder they thought it, in the phrase of Alfred Wallace, the wonderful century.

In county history John Lee is a significant and an eccentric figure. This brief biography makes interesting reading and provides a useful list of sources for Lee's papers and correspondence. To extend the value of the memoir from local interest to period reference, it would have been desirable to add an index of the persons he was in communication with. The wider accessibility of the work would also have been assisted if it had been granted the formalities of publication with a standard book number and a British Library catalogue entry.

J.M.D.

The History of Beaconsfield. Ed. A.W. Taylor. Beaconsfield and District Historical Society, Publication No. 4. £3.00 from booksellers and newsagents, £3.40 by post from the Society.

The Beaconsfield and District Historical Society has shown that it is not necessary to embark on the perilous sea of original research in order to do useful work (though had they done so they would have learned that the Gregory family was in Beaconsfield long before 1370 and that John Warren of Whites was a victim of murder). Other courses present fewer pitfalls and less daunting obstacles, and it is most helpful to non-specialists to bring together in one compact and readable volume a mass of information printed only in rare or inaccessible works — especially when this is integrated with the recollections of older residents. It is probably an inevitable consequence of this approach that it should limit them to the post-Restoration period, but perhaps this limitation should have been indicated in the title.

Mr. Taylor and his team are to be congratulated in putting together so lucid an account. Their 108 page book answers a high proportion of the questions that new — and not-so-new — residents are likely to ask, and answers them very acceptably. That it cannot be said to answer them all is due partly to the absence of any comprehensive or easily read map, unfortunately a very common failing in books of this kind. Discussion of the farms, for example, is difficult to follow without such an aid to comprehension. Perhaps the next revision (this is the second) will remedy this defect.

It is good to find soberly factual accounts of, for example, coaching and coaching inns, and the operation of the poor law. There are careful potted histories of the principal estates, and biographies, equally potted, of notable inhabitants: Edmund Waller, Edmund Burke, G.K. Chesterton. And there is much valuable detail about the social life of the more recent past.

It is interesting to note that there was a dutch

barn on the site of 49 London End in the 1660s, as this was the heyday of a short-lived fashion for storing hay in buildings with adjustable roofs. It may be taken to indicate a progressive farmer.

A stance of omniscience is a tiresome one in a reviewer. Let this one avow gladly that this modest little book told him things he did not know before. It will do the same for other people, and deserves every success.

J.C.T.