Notwithstanding this range, a weakness of the book is a tendency in places to rely on a small number of texts to illustrate broad arguments about the nature of the 'new Asian cities'. For example, Watson depends heavily on a close reading of Yi Sang's novella *Nalgae* (The Wings) (1937) to support her central argument about the 'connections between the distinct spaces of the colonial city and the experimental narrative space of the text' (p. 73). As a historian, I found this a little unsatisfying, leading me to question how representative such (admittedly important) works can be, but on the whole Watson balances the need for both rigorous close analysis and range. Readers may also question the selection of the three cities themselves: Hong Kong is an obvious post-colonial urban society in the region and the extended period of its colonial status is not necessarily sufficient justification for its exclusion. Yet comparative studies are necessarily selective and Watson's is in many ways exemplary.

The volume is neatly structured, with three parts following a chronological progression which examine the three cities in terms of the ways in which their colonial history, post-war urbanism and industrializing landscapes are reflected in fiction, each concluded in anticipation of the next part of the book in a section entitled 'Transitions'. Watson's style is fluent and engaging, presenting complex theories which in the hands of many other writers are unnecessarily cloaked in impenetrable prose, in an accessible and informative way. Owing in part to the nature of such a heavily theoretical approach, the literature review dominates not only the introduction but also the beginning of each part of the book, but as it is written so well this will be a boon to undergraduate and graduate students of post-colonial theory. The book will also be useful to a wide audience of scholars in urban studies, post-colonial literature, East and Southeast Asian history and film and to all readers interested in understanding an alternative path to 'modernity' to that followed in the west.

**Isabella Jackson**
Institute for Chinese Studies, University of Oxford

**Benjamin Weinstein**, *Liberalism and Local Government in Early Victorian London.* Woodbridge: Royal Historical Society and Boydell Press, 2011. xi + 204pp. Bibliography. £50.00.
doi:10.1017/S096392681200051X

This is an excellent book, succinct, sharply argued and clearly written. It examines London parliamentary and vestry politics in the two decades after the 1832 Reform Act, a topic which has never been properly handled despite the wealth of writing that has been produced on associated topics. It avoids not only a mechanically chronological approach but also a conventionally institutional or constituency-based one. Issues are discussed for their broader significance; Weinstein has no compunction about moving rapidly across time and about focusing on some conflicts and places much more than others. He knows what he wants to say and says it persuasively.

His thesis is that there was a vibrant metropolitan whiggism at the beginning of this period which had stronger roots in the electorate, and better relations with

radicalism, than many critics of whiggery have suggested. This whiggism then lost popularity during the 1830s, partly owing to the inevitable compromises that the party faced on moving from opposition to 'placeholding', but more specifically because of two issues, the 1834 poor law and the failure to abolish church rates. So far, so conventional. However, he argues that the main controversy over the poor law did not concern its perceived harshness to the poor but the challenge that it posed to the vestries democratized by the 1831 Select Vestries Act. Vestries were the core institutions of London local government, since the 1835 Municipal Corporations Act did not apply in the metropolis, and the 1831 Act had allowed some of them to embrace a wide franchise and the secret ballot. Political control depended on the new electoral registration system; radical influence over the register in turn depended largely on overseers' willingness to register those whose poor rate payments were compounded rather than paid personally. The radical vestries saw the new boards of guardians, elected on a plural voting system that favoured property, as a challenge to their hard-won local freedoms – both in principle and because they would replace the overseers – and several declined to adopt the new system. Similarly, the church rate issue in London turned mainly on the right of local vestries to vote to refuse to levy a rate. The whigs lost support by refusing to legislate to this effect in the 1830s, and the issue went to the courts, which finally ruled in favour of vestry majoritarianism in 1853 (a decisive victory for the anti-church rate party, which led Palmerston to come down on their side in 1855). Rather than turning on social or religious policy as such, both issues, therefore, were ultimately about political control and constitutional liberties. Thus, the cry emerged in the late 1830s that the enemy of local self-government was 'Whig centralization', a theme that dominated in a number of electoral contests and led to the defeats of several supporters of government.

This tension was repeated in the conflicts of the late 1840s over public health and the early 1850s over London government reform. Weinstein criticizes those who have portrayed radicals as selfish penny-pinching opponents of 'improving' reforms in order to reduce their rate burdens. He shows how their need to work out a London local government policy eventually led to striking success in the 1855 settlement of the issue, which opened up all the vestries while establishing an overarching and indirectly elected Board of Works with limited powers. He asserts that the charge of 'vested interest' could be laid against their opponents at least as convincingly. Aspiring medical professionals like Joseph Toynbee of the Metropolitan Sanitary Association pressed for a health bureaucracy knowing that it would create positions for people like himself. The great whig landed families, the Russells and Grosvenors, in upholding plural and proxy voting and opposing liberalized vestries, were defending the political influence and the respectability of their own metropolitan estates.

Weinstein's book excels as a contribution to local politics and as a commentary on the social and economic underpinnings of London political culture. Perhaps it does not require us to revise significantly the current consensus about national politics in this period, which already stresses the various connected tensions between whigs and radicals in the late 1830s and 1840s; as he says, the struggle over religious voluntaryism in 1847 was part of a broader conflict about political libertarianism. He follows that consensus also in arguing for the ostentatious (if in some respects superficial) rejection of old whiggism by Palmerston and his allies after 1848, who in the process rebuilt a more or less workable alliance between Liberal leaders

and several strands of parliamentary radicalism. What his book does, very well, is to emphasize the primacy of the political rather than the social in early Victorian politics, and to puncture the ahistorical pieties of those historians for whom a 'vested interest' must instinctively be an opponent of 'social reform'.

**J.P. Parry**
Pembroke College, Cambridge

https://doi.org/10.1017/S096392681200051X Published online by Cambridge University Press