Liberty and Poetics in Eighteenth Century England

Michael Meehan


The qualities and achievements of eighteenth century English literature have suffered denigration as a result of a prevailing Whig interpretation of literary history. It is the contention of this book, originally published in 1986, that an alternative form of Whig interpretation is possible and even desirable. It has as its sphere of interest the ways in which views on the nature and benefits of political freedom, and various "whiggish" readings of literary history, political theory and aesthetics, did in fact shape literary and social changes through the eighteenth century. While it seeks to show that political behaviour cannot be properly understood by concentrating only on the structure of politics and the struggle for power, it does not claim that political ideas alone caused the significant political changes of the eighteenth century. In seeking to establish the importance of political ideology and the structure of political argument it does not aim to offer an idealist interpretation of eighteenth-century politics and it quite deliberately eschews any attempt to present a work of political philosophy. The book strives to relate political ideas to political a