

Reviews

Great and Terrible Occasions

Christopher Silvester (ed.):

The Pimlico Companion to Parliament

(Pimlico, 1997)

Reviewed by Tony Little

This is an entertaining and informative book and I am glad to see that Pimlico have changed the title for the paperback edition. The hardback 'Literary Companion to Parliament' did not do justice to the contents. This is not a work which samples literary types expanding on their views of parliament or even extracts from novels centred on Westminster, though Dickens does feature. Rather it is a collection of short extracts on all aspects of parliamentary life, written by a vast range of MPs, journalists and diarists who have surveyed Parliament from the era of Cromwell to modern times.

Each chapter has a short introduction, each new author a potted biography and where necessary some background to the incident described. When I say all aspects of parliamentary life, there is one further qualification. The vast majority of entries are about the Commons but as this is the more powerful house, I suppose it is fair, though I suspect rather more on the Lords would have added some piquancy to the flavouring.

Silvester describes the arrangement of chapters as arbitrary, with pieces appearing in one which could as easily have appeared in another. Some might describe it as eccentric, with no clear progression from one to another, but I feel this adds to the charm of the book. Anthologies are meant for dipping into, not ploughing through. The chapter titles are enticing, not forbidding, and encourage opening at random pages to see what is there.

The editor takes the view that Parliament reached its greatest influence in the second half of the nineteenth century, and this is fairly heavily reflected in his choice of events and authors. Post-second world war, the entries thin out and there is nothing to illustrate the era of Callaghan, Thatcher and Major. As the Commons ascended to its zenith, so did the political press. Great speeches were fully reported and a need developed for a sketch-writer to add a flavour that the words of even the greatest speeches cannot convey on their own. Some of the greatest are represented – White and Lucy for the nineteenth century, Massingham and Shrapnel for this but the cut-off point means that we are without Parris and Pearce.

Only two men are selected for the honour of their own chapter – W. E. Gladstone and W. S. Churchill. Perhaps it is no coincidence that they

share not only an initial but also membership of both the Conservative and Liberal Parties. Both had a mastery of the House and both had the longevity of service that made them revered as well as feared opponents. Most of us would have given Disraeli a chapter to rival Mr. G's, but Silvester has not neglected the great showman, spreading his coverage of Dizzy over several sections.

Those who wish to see how effective a third party can be in the House, as well as to discover some of the worst incidents in Parliamentary history, should explore the chapter on the 'Blasted Irish' and the Irish incidents in the sections on Law and Order, or Great and Terrible Occasions, in which, of course, they made their presence felt. The Irish Home Rule Party sought to force Britain to dispense with their presence at Westminster by the most skilful exploitation of the rules of the House but instead forced those changes in the rules which have gradually maximised power in the hands of the executive and undermined the effectiveness of the Commons.

Christopher Silvester claims to have worked on the book for five years, and his endeavours show in the breadth and depth of the finished product. I am sure those dipping in will follow up the short extracts given by hunting down the books from which they are drawn. I am also sure that, like me, anyone dipping into this work will find they keep reading for longer each time than they intend.

Help Needed!

The Liberal Democrat History Group will be having an exhibition stand at the Liberal Democrat conference in Brighton (20–24 September), in order to increase membership, raise our profile and make new contacts. We would like to hear from any member who would be able to spare an hour or two looking after the stand; please contact the Editor.