

north of the Meuse, and to stay quiet. It was not appreciated that the German general staff meant to attempt the apparently impossible.

On 29 July the Cabinet reviewed Britain's obligations should continental Europe be engulfed in war. Two days later Grey asked the French and German governments for assurances that they would respect Belgian neutrality. While the French complied, the German government refused to do so. On Sunday 2 August the leaders of the Conservative opposition, Bonar Law and Lansdowne, told Asquith of their view that 'it would be fatal to the honour and security of the United Kingdom to hesitate in supporting France and Russia at the present juncture,' and offered their 'full support' for 'any measures' which the government might consider necessary. Bonar Law's letter did not mention Belgium, but for Asquith it was the key. The Cabinet met twice on that Sunday. At the first meeting, it was decided that the Royal Navy would not allow the German fleet to enter the Channel and bombard the French coast. This decision had less importance than was thought; the German battle fleet was not designed to operate at any considerable distance from its bases. At the second meeting, the Cabinet agreed that a 'substantial violation' of Belgian neutrality would 'compel us to take action'. In replying to the Conservative leaders, Asquith had written: 'it is right, ... before deciding ... what action on our part is necessary, to know what are the circumstances and conditions of any interference with Belgian territory'. Even these cautious decisions brought the resignations of Burns and Morley.

By midday on 3 August, it was clear that Asquith's calm, wait-and-see approach had been the right one. As the ministers dispersed after the second of those Sunday Cabinets, an ultimatum demanding passage for the German armies through the whole of Belgium was being delivered in Brussels. This transformed the government's position. Liberals were very doubtful about intervening on the side of France and Russia, but about the need to honour Britain's obligations under the Belgian treaty, and to prevent a small and pacific country from being trampled underfoot, they had no doubt. Grey's plea in the Commons on Monday afternoon for intervention met with overwhelming support. An ultimatum was sent to Berlin

to expire at 11 p.m. (London time) on Tuesday 4 August. That hour represented the first moment at which the British Navy could be in complete readiness. A leading Conservative historian, Lord Blake, concludes: 'Asquith's able management, aided by German folly, had achieved the seemingly impossible – a united Liberal Cabinet convinced that England must fight.'

By midday on 3 August, it was clear that Asquith's calm, wait-and-see approach had been the right one.

Asquith's conduct during the crisis needs little explanation. His ability to wait for the right opportunity, and to prevent cabinet splits, had been proved time and again by July 1914. The clue to the 'German folly' lies in the fact that the last word lay, not with the government, but with the general staff. The Schlieffen plan had been much modified by 1914. Specifically, it had been decided some five years earlier that the great encircling movement must be achieved without any incursion into the Netherlands. This meant that, to open the route through central and northern Belgium, the German army had to seize Liège. It was the difficulty of doing this quickly which had convinced so many observers that the Ardennes route would be used. Surely the general staff would not adopt a strategy which seemed beyond German strength when it was subject to an enormous initial difficulty. It was not known that Moltke and his colleagues had just acquired an overwhelming temptation to embark on this reckless gamble. They had seven new howitzers of 420 mm (16.5 inches) calibre – just enough to batter down the Liège forts. That their strategy entailed political risks even greater than the military ones was of secondary importance to them. Asquith controlled his country's decisions; the Kaiser and his Chancellor had no such control.

Dr Michael Brock was Warden of Nuffield College, Oxford, 1978–88, and Warden of St George's House, Windsor Castle, 1988–93. Publications include The Great Reform Act (1973); H.H. Asquith: Letters to Venetia Stanley (ed., with E.H. Brock, 1982); 'The Liberal Tradition', in Liberal Party Politics (ed. Vernon Bogdanor, 1983).

The Impact of War

Book Review: The Downfall of the Liberal Party 1914–1935 by Trevor Wilson (Collins, London, 1966)

Reviewed by Dr Malcolm Baines

Trevor Wilson's book is now best known for setting out the metaphor of the early twentieth century Liberal Party as an ailing man run over by the bus of the First World War. This has provoked considerable debate: over the issue of the man's illness; whether it was fatal or not; and even, more recently, over whether he was ill at all. With such a powerful image, it is not surprising that the bulk of the book looks at the Liberal Party's reaction to the war. The remainder is a very long coda, covering the Liberals' sorry performance in the postwar elections until 1935, when it was finally clear to all that the party was in near-terminal collapse.

The war's impact is seen primarily in ideological terms; in particular Wilson argues that it fitted better with both Conservative and Labour world outlooks than it did with Liberal. For the Tories, the war reinforced their role as the nationalist party *par excellence*,

and confirmed their pre-war anti-German jingoism as justified by events. For Labour, despite its pacifist wing, the war provided an opportunity for the trade unions to become part of the political establishment, and powerfully reinforced impulses towards economic collectivism everywhere. By contrast, the war dealt a serious blow to a whole range of Liberal beliefs. Internationalism, free trade, peace with Ireland, and personal liberties were all put under question. The pressure under which the Asquith government gave way to introduce censorship and the draconian Defence of the Realm Act left many Liberals doubtful that the party was still a fit custodian of their values.

More recent commentators have often labelled Wilson as falling firmly into the Asquithian camp in the perpetual dispute over which of the two great Liberal leaders, Asquith or Lloyd

George, was more to blame for the party's demise. In fact his position is more complicated. Whilst recognising the abilities of both men, he points out that neither were at their best when it came to piloting the Liberal Party through the war years. Asquith is presented as wishing to remain in office at any price, and making a series of debilitating concessions to Unionist opinion throughout the final period of his premiership – though other commentators, notably Roy Jenkins, have seen this as skilful politicking on Asquith's part. Neither does Wilson have any plaudits for Lloyd George. His political manoeuvring is described as hopeless – for example, alienating Bonar Law in 1915 when he favoured McKenna rather than the Tory leader for the post of Chancellor of the Exchequer. Wilson's view is that if Lloyd George had been more politically adept he could have become Prime Minister twelve to eighteen months earlier than he did.

The greatest strength of this book is that it is a joy to read, particularly if the reader already has a firm grasp of the framework of events and personalities. It is a study focused on parliamentary politics and laced with quotations and comments from often minor, but nonetheless idiosyncratic and entertaining, figures involved in the Liberal Party's decline. One particularly good example of this is the meeting at the Reform Club immediately after Asquith's resignation from the premiership on 8 December 1916. Wilson describes how a taxi had drawn up at the club containing Josiah Wedgwood, MacCallum Scott and Winston Churchill. Stemming from different background within the pre-war Liberal Party; all three had gone their separate political ways by 1924.

Another interesting point Wilson makes is that Asquith does not move into opposition to Lloyd George after December 1916 while the war continues. He does not oppose the government on

such potentially Liberal issues as the attempt to introduce conscription to Ireland, or to support the Lansdowne negotiated peace initiative. Similarly Lloyd George acts in March 1917 to prevent a Coalition Liberal being run against an official Liberal at the Aberdeen South byelection. As late as 1918, Wilson considers that Lloyd George could have put his weight behind Liberal reconciliation, as the party was not split into two hostile camps at that point in either Parliament or the country. The war was therefore not something that split the party irrevocably, but rather an event which destroyed long-standing Liberal verities and removed the party's self-confidence that it had a role to play in postwar Britain – only partially restored by free trade in 1923 and *We Can Conquer Unemployment* in 1929. Many Liberals began to see that the inexorable logic of the two-party system most saw as axiomatic led them towards joining either the Labour or the Conservative Parties.

Despite its thirty-year age, Trevor Wilson's book has a number of interesting things to say about the Liberal Party and the war years. Most notably, it focuses on the ideological impact of the Great War, rather than its effect on any weaknesses in the Liberal position which already existed in 1914. In that respect, it is part of the historiography of Liberal decline which blames the war rather than looking for sociological explanation or the politics of the 1920s. In Wilson's view, the party was fatally wounded by the 1918 election, and as such his study is still of value to anyone interested in the story of the party's shift from government to the margins of British politics.

Malcolm Baines completed his Ph.D thesis on The Survival of the British Liberal Party 1932–59. He is a member of the Liberal Democrat History Group committee.

Asquith and Lloyd George: Common Misunderstandings

The rivalry between Asquith and Lloyd George grew out of the Great War. John Grigg argues that the points of similarity between the two were at least as important as their differences.

H.H. Asquith is often described as the last Liberal Prime Minister, and so is David Lloyd George. Both statements are true, though in different senses. Lloyd George was the last Liberal to be Prime Minister of Britain, as the leader of a coalition. Asquith was the last head of a Liberal government.

It is also repeatedly said that the split between Asquith and Lloyd George at the end of 1916 contributed to, if it did not wholly cause, the destruction of the Liberal Party as one of the alternating parties of government (under our peculiar electoral system), and its relegation to third-party status. This is true as well, though it needs to be explained that the characters of the two men, and their relationship with each other before 1916, have been gravely misunderstood and misrepresented since their time.

Rival historiographical camps have sustained a tedious feud in which the truth has been obscured. It has become normal to expect any book with good things to say of Asquith to rubbish Lloyd George, and vice versa. A recent example of the former is Professor George Cassar's *Asquith as War Leader*, in which the author is fair to Asquith but shows himself incapable of giving any credit at all to Lloyd George. But there are plenty of examples

of the opposite distortion, deriving in part from Lord Beaverbrook's preemptive treatment of the subject.

Asquith partisans have tended to depict their man as noble, 'Roman', patrician, and free from base motives, while they have presented Lloyd George as a crude demagogue and relentless self-seeker. On the other side, Lloyd George's dynamism and modernity have been contrasted with Asquith's caution, lethargy and essential conservatism. Yet the reality of both men is far more interesting, and their points of similarity are at least as important as their differences.

Of course they were different in a number of obvious ways. One was English (of Yorkshire extraction), the other Welsh. One was a classical scholar, a prize product of Balliol College, Oxford; the other had little Latin and no Greek, and never went to a university. Asquith enjoyed London dinner parties and weekends spent in large country houses. He married (as his second wife) an upper-class woman, and another became his close confidante. Lloyd George steered clear of high society, and resisted the aristocratic embrace, literally and metaphorically. Both his wife and his mistress were middle-class. Asquith had (like Gladstone) a certain contempt for businessmen, and a strong distaste for the

'My Own Most Loved'

Book Review: H. H. Asquith: *Letters to Venetia Stanley* edited by Michael & Eleanor Brock (Oxford, 1982)
Reviewed by **Tony Little**

As Britain entered the First World War, Asquith had been Prime Minister for six years. A quick-brained lawyer, whose easy grasp of administrative affairs gave an impression of laziness, Asquith had led one of the most successful governments of the twentieth century. As a Liberal Imperialist, in 1906 he had helped broadened the party's appeal against that wily campaigner Joe Chamberlain. In office, he had presided over a programme of social reform which had allowed the party to escape some of the dead ends to which Gladstonianism had seemed to condemn Liberals. His Cabinet contained, almost harmoniously, some of the most charismatic characters seen in British politics, including Lloyd George and Churchill. And yet in 1914 his was a government in trouble, deep in that quagmire of British ambition, a solution to the Irish Question. At an election in 1914 the Liberals would almost certainly have lost.

As a form of relaxation, the 60 year old premier liked to write letters, and enjoyed the companionship of young clever and attractive women. Venetia Stanley was the daughter of Lord Stanley of Alderney, and originally came into his life as a friend of his daughter Violet. When their correspondence began in earnest in 1912, she was 25 years old. Effectively, the correspondence ended when, in 1915, she announced her intention to marry Edwin Montagu, a 36 year-old member of Asquith's government.

To Asquith, Venetia initially represented a frivolous distraction and relaxation from the toils of politics and from the strains of his wife Margot, well known for her sharp tongue, strong advice but limited political nous. If it had remained that way, the letters would have had little historical value. However, it is quite clear that Asquith became infatuated with Venetia. More importantly, he used her as a sounding board for political ideas and used the letters as a way of keeping her up to date with his latest thoughts. It is hard to get a full measure of her commitment to the relationship, as her letters to Asquith are not available. Almost certainly, it was not a physical relationship, but her fondness for men of power shows not only in her marriage to Montagu but her later affair with Lord Beaverbrook. (Anyone wishing to follow on the story of Venetia and Edwin Montagu should consider reading Naomi Levine's *Politics, Religion and Love* (New York University Press 1991).)

'A Very Treacherous Return'

The letters cover Asquith's career from the Curragh incident through the entry into war until the Dardanelles. Unfortunately, Venetia's engagement to Montagu cut short the flow of letters just as the war reached the crisis that resulted in the first coalition. Indeed, Roy Jenkins has suggested that Asquith's emotional reaction to the loss of Venetia may have led him to play the crisis badly, setting up the strains that led to Asquith's downfall at the hands of Lloyd George. These letters throw light on government thinking as the country entered the war and as it encountered the unexpected difficulties which prolonged the war beyond the expectations of most of its participants. They show the frustrations of government when effective control was in the hands of the military in France, but do not substantiate the picture sometimes

painted of Asquith as a man losing his grip as a minister. They are an important source for these early months of the war and as such have been used in Roy Jenkins' *Asquith and Beaverbrook's Politicians and the War*, though in neither case is the full flavour given, as in the selection made by the Brocks.

It is unusual for historians to complain about their sources and yet these letters have been treated with some disdain (cf Daphne Bennett's *Margot*). Asquith wrote some of them from the cabinet room and he entrusted war secrets to a complete outsider in letters sent through the ordinary post. Yet I suspect the complaints mostly arise from the wet lovey-dovey outpourings in which Asquith's letters are drenched. It is well worth persevering, however, while recognising that even great administrators have human weaknesses.

The Brocks have made a superb job of the editing. The book comes with full background explanatory text, which is nevertheless unobtrusive, and appendices giving potted biographies of the main characters and places. The degree and method of selection is given and a list provided of the full extent of the correspondence. The final years of the last truly Liberal government are portrayed with a vivid insight into the vanished Edwardian political culture, still with the confidence of a mighty empire but also unfortunately with all its snobberies, and even anti-semitism.

Tony Little is a member of the Liberal Democrat History Group committee and a regular book reviewer for the Newsletter.

Research in Progress

This column aims to assist the progress of research projects currently being undertaken, at graduate, postgraduate or similar level. If you think you can help any of the individuals listed below with their thesis - or if you know anyone who can - please get in touch with them to pass on details of sources, contacts, or any other helpful information.

The Liberal Party and foreign and defence policy, 1922-88. Book and articles; of particular interest is the possibility of interviewing anyone involved in formulating the foreign and defence policies of the Liberal Party. Dr R. S. Grayson, 8 Millway Close, Oxford OX2 8BJ.

The grass roots organisation of the Liberal Party 1945-64; the role of local activists in the late 1950s revival of the Liberal Party. Ph.D thesis. Mark Egan, University College, Oxford OX1 4BH.

If you know of any other research project in progress for inclusion in this column, please send details to Duncan Brack at the address on the back page.