

# The *Dictionary of Liberal Biography*

*Ben Pimlott, Bill Rodgers and Graham Watson* give their thoughts on the History Group's first major publication.

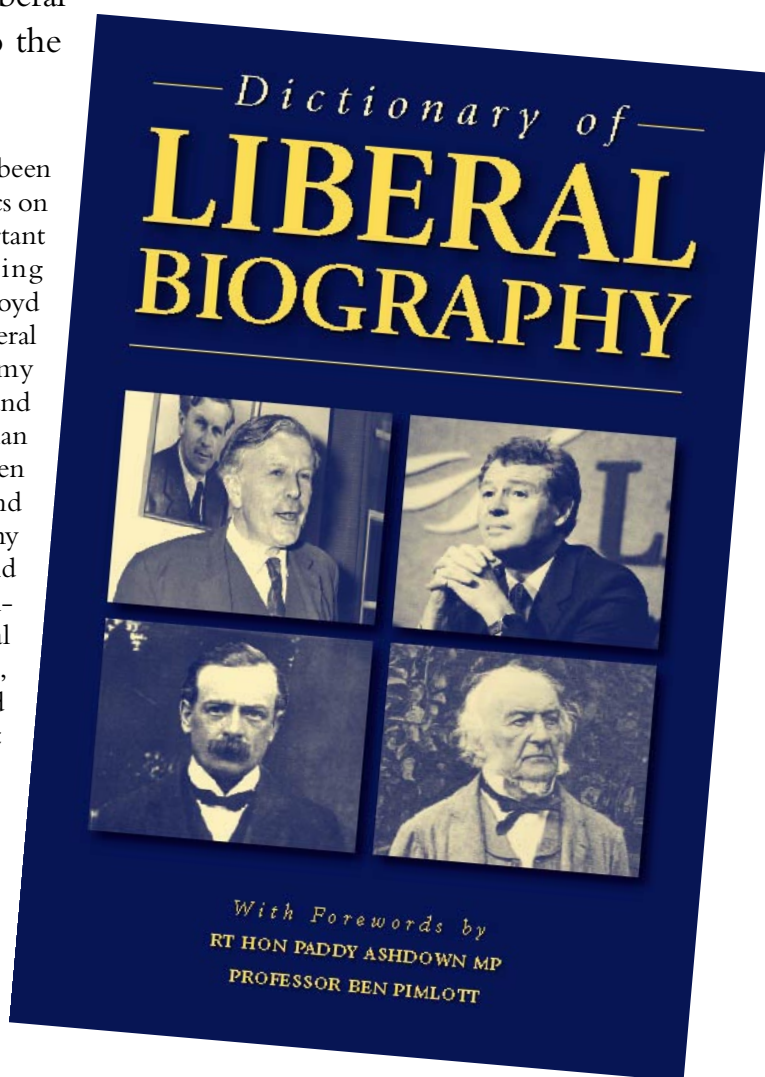
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The Liberal Democrat History Group produced its first book in September 1998. Published by Politico's Publishing, and edited by Duncan Brack, with Malcolm Baines, Katie Hall, Graham Lippiatt, Tony Little, Mark Pack, Geoffrey Sell and Jen Tankard, the *Dictionary of Liberal Biography* brings together in one volume the biographies of over 200 individuals who have made major contributions to the Liberal Party, SDP or Liberal Democrats, or to the development of British Liberalism.

Significant new essays have been contributed by senior academics on some of Britain's most important historical figures, including William Gladstone, David Lloyd George and Jo Grimond. Liberal thinkers, including Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill and John Maynard Keynes; Victorian statesmen, such as Lord Aberdeen and Viscount Palmerston; and post-war MPs, including Jeremy Thorpe, Cyril Smith and David Penhaligon, have also been critically profiled. All the Liberal Democrat MPs elected in 1997, including Paddy Ashdown, and leading Liberal Democrat peers, such as Shirley Williams and Roy Jenkins, are also included. Over 120 individuals, both academics and party activists, contributed. Appendices include details of party leaders, leaders in the House of Lords, chief whips, and party presidents; cabinet

ministers since 1859; and byelection winners since 1918.

The *Dictionary* was launched at the History Group's fringe meeting at the Liberal Democrat conference in Brighton in September, and in Politico's Political Bookstore in Westminster in November. We reprint here Professor Ben Pimlott's foreword to the book, and a report of the launch meeting in Brighton.



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# Foreword

by Professor Ben Pimlott

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There is a continuing debate about the validity of biography, and how it should be categorised. Is it history? Is it politics? Arguably, it is both or neither. Certainly there have been many politicians and historians who have regarded it circumspectly. Socialists have sometimes been wary of it, on the grounds that it elevates star performers above the classes and movements that really count. Aneurin Bevan once remarked that he preferred his fiction straight: after his death, he got it – in the form of a great, romantic, polemical biography of him, by his Liberal-turned-socialist friend Michael Foot, which brilliantly captured the mood and spirit of its subject, while treating inconvenient facts with cheerfully Olympian abandon.

Some regard biography as anecdote, others as propaganda. It was E. H. Carr – to some extent reflecting a marxian view – who advanced what is still the negative orthodoxy, when he wrote in *What Is History?* about ‘the Bad King John theory of history’ – namely, ‘the view that what matters in history is the character and behaviour of individuals’, which he considered out of date. ‘The desire to postulate individual genius as the creative force in his-

tory,’ he observed, ‘is characteristic of the primitive stages of historical consciousness’.

That biography is primitive can scarcely be denied. It may even be the oldest form of literature – it long predates the novel (the Christian religion, it should be pointed out, is based on four biographies). That individual genius is not a creative force in history, however, is certainly open to challenge, and thirty-seven years after Carr wrote so dismissively on

the topic, biographers have gained ground against his position, rather than lost it. The genre is still very much with us, widely consumed, ever-more serious and scholarly, and constantly discussed. Whether or not biography is identical with history (and politics) it is often the best entry route into both – as well as an essential building block. It is not just that, as Thomas Carlyle put it, ‘history is the essence of innumerable biographies’ (in the end, every movement and idea rests on participation, and frequently the inspiration and leadership, of individuals). It is also that historical understanding becomes arid and two-dimensional, if people are left out of the picture.

It is no accident that one of the finest traditions in British biographical writing should be associated with liberalism and the Liberal Party, for liberals have always placed particular emphasis on the uniqueness and limitless potential of the individual. If one of the great monuments of the late nineteenth century biographical scholarship (and hagiography) was Morley’s life of Gladstone, it was Bloomsbury – playground and cauldron of the liberal spirit – that revolutionised biography in the twentieth. Lytton Strachey’s *Eminent Victorians* and *Queen Victoria*, in particular, poked disrespectful fun at their subjects, tearing to shreds the notion that biography was the art of glorification, and showing how it could be used to explore the human soul in all its complexity. Biographical essays by Winston Churchill (himself then a Liberal, of sorts) were written in such a spirit. So are the distinguished biographical writings of Roy Jenkins (always a Liberal at heart), which have always used biography as the most sensitive of dialectical tools – from his early biographies of Attlee, Asquith and Dilke through to his most recent collection, *The Chancellors*.

A dictionary of Liberal biography, therefore, can claim to celebrate many things. On the one hand, it is part of a proud literary heritage. On the other, it is a vital contribution to history and to political thought,

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and a recognition of the textured nature of a liberal tradition that included Keynes as well as Gladstone, Mill and Lloyd George, and which – out of office even more than in it – had done so much to shape the ideas and policies that exist in turn-of-the-millennium Britain and the wider world. This is a work of reference, of value to politicians, historians and journalists, who want to check up on the facts. But it is also

considerably more than that. Taken together, the essays by a range of leading authors provide fascinating jigsaw pieces for a rich and varied history of the – ever developing – liberal ideal.

*Ben Pimlott is Warden of Goldsmith's College, London and author of biographies of Hugh Dalton, Harold Wilson and the Queen.*

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## No More Heroes Any More?

Fringe meeting, 20 September,  
with Bill Rodgers and Graham Watson  
*Report by Graham Lippiatt*

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It was definitely standing room only for those not arriving early in the Osborne Room in the Metropole Hotel in Brighton, with an interested and eclectic crowd gathering to hear speakers Bill Rodgers (Lord Rodgers of Quarry Bank) and Graham Watson MEP (former aide to David Steel and one of the party's first two Euro MPs).

The meeting, smoothly and amusingly chaired by our Vice President Graham Tope (Lord Tope of Cheam) marked the launch of the newly published *Dictionary of Liberal Biography*, and the speakers were invited to consider what lessons today's Liberal Democrats have to learn from liberal or social democrat heroes of the past. Who, we waited to hear from our speakers, would they select as their heroes? Who, in their estimation, had contributed most to the development of the party, or of Liberalism? What were the common themes that bound the famous figures of our parties' past to the Liberal Democrat supporters and activists of today?

No doubt it added to the charm of the evening that a number of those present, not just the platform party, were the subject of entries in the *Dictionary*. Was not that Tony Greaves (pp. 141–43) sprawled on the floor against the wall at the front of the room? Was

not that Gordon Lishman (pp. 220–22) struggling to hear from the crowd at the rear? Was not that Michael Steed (pp. 339–41) raising a point from the floor? And how many shades of Liberals past were hovering over the copies of the *Dictionary*, straining to read their own entries?

After the disappointment of Professor Ben Pimlott's not being able to be present as advertised, and a little technical difficulty resulting in the proceedings from a neighbouring room being piped through the speaker system into our meeting was overcome, Graham Tope got us under way. He reminded us that, whoever the speakers chose, or those of us in the audience picked as our personal heroes, in one sense, all members (past and present) of the Liberal Democrat family are heroes.

In the question and comment session which followed the presentations, one participant regretted the small number of women represented

in the *Dictionary* and asked the speakers to pick out their female heroes. Graham Watson chose Nancy Seear (who is in the book, pp. 324–25) for whom a great wave of affectionate recollection came from the room. He also remembered Lady Glen-Coats who had been prospective Liberal candidate for Orkney & Shetland in the late 1930s and early '40s and who recommended Jo Grimond as her successor.

Interested by this reference, I did some reading about Lady Glen-Coats after the meeting. Grimond commented in his memoirs that without her support he would probably never have become an MP at all. She was also the patron of another young Liberal in the late 1930s. John Junor, later editor of the less-than-Liberal *Sunday Express* and an ardent supporter of the even lesser-than-liberal Mrs Thatcher, was invited by Glen-Coats in 1938, along with the then President of Edinburgh University Liberal Club, Ivor Davies, on a speaking and campaigning tour of Orkney & Shetland. When a byelection vacancy arose in Kincardine & West Aberdeenshire in March 1939, Glen-Coats gave Junor her support and he was adopted as candidate. Despite his anti-appeasement stance at the time of Hitler's invasion of Czechoslovakia, Junor lost. He fought the seat again in 1945 and failed to be elected by only 642 votes. After the byelection Glen-Coats asked Junor to become her private secretary, a post he held before he went back up to university. Over the summer of 1939, as war approached, they visited Poland and Germany and had to make a hurried exit from Europe, negotiating troop movements and war preparations. They arrived home on 1 September, the very day of the German invasion of Poland and just 48 hours before Britain's declaration of war.

In his choices of female heroes, Bill Rodgers caused some wry amusement by saying he was eliminating the living. He too praised Nancy Seear, recalling working with her in the House of Lords where she commanded great respect, attending

at all hours, always speaking very knowledgeably, usually without notes. His other choice (also in the *Dictionary* pp. 155–56), was Laura Grimond. It has been the fate of some women to win a place in history as a result of their family connections. Laura Grimond, notwithstanding that Asquithian pedigree, earned her entry in the *Dictionary* fully in her own right.

To end the evening, Richard Moore entertained us with a terrific anecdote about another outstanding but, by the time of the story ailing, Liberal woman, Lady Violet Bonham-Carter. Insisting on being present in the House of Lords to

make an attack on the government of the day, she refused to be told by Richard that she was not really well enough. Her son had flunked the job of telling her, passing the buck to Richard, who was working in the Whips' Office. He too was unable to resist the unstoppable object that was Lady Violet, who demanded, if the worst came to the worst, to be carried to the Liberal benches by the bewigged flunkeys in attendance on members of the House.

Enjoy the text of Lord Rodgers' and Graham Watson's speeches – those present at the meeting certainly did.

particular walks of life, celebrities in their time – or heroes, as we would all define heroes to be – what do they do in their after years? So often, when one reads obituaries, the subjects have a short glorious period in their early twenties and then they disappear, perhaps to be a Lord Lieutenant of a county or to do sheep farming somewhere in the Scottish Highlands. And so my interest in this book, in respect of many of the names in it, is as a book of obituaries, though newly written for this occasion.

But also I must confess, and I confess on behalf of everybody who has lived their lives in politics and who has found their names in the newspapers from time to time, that when you get a book, a book which perhaps is not a book of biography at all, the first thing you look up is the index. You do not look for the Liberal Democrats, you do not look for the Liberal Party, you do not look, in my case, for the Gang of Four, you look for your own name. And so, on this occasion we can say, that again about eighty people who are alive and well to the best of our knowledge, will be picking that book up and the first name they will be looking for is their own. (I have to say I have not yet been able to do it but if Graham were to open it at the right page I might read it over his shoulder. In due course I will look at the book and see what it has to say.)

I think that we can say it is an eclectic selection. It includes Adam Smith and it also includes Horatio Bottomley, two men more unlike, one could not find. It also has a lot of pre-Liberals. It has Charles James Fox, for example, who would not really fit into a definition of Liberal, as I understand it. It has Palmerston, a Whig rather than a Liberal, and a lot of his instincts were very unliberal by our measure. It has got Bentham. It has got Tom Paine. It has got David Ricardo. I should be very interested to know how they can be linked; of course their ideas were important, but how they can be linked to the chain of Liberals and social democrats we have today?

It also includes some black sheep.

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## Of Obituaries and Great Men

### *Bill Rodgers*

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Duncan Brack wrote to me in July asking me to speak at this meeting, and although those who have lived their lives in politics seldom ask themselves why, on this occasion I did so. Many years ago I published a short book of biographical essays, but I cannot claim to be a biographer as Ben Pimlott certainly is and (I will say something about this at the end) I do not find it easy to have heroes. For these reasons it is perhaps a little unclear about why I am here at all. But I can say that I am an avid reader of obituaries. Whereas there are eighty people in this book who will buy it because they are in it, there are many others who will not buy because they can no longer do so. And so I shall be turning less to my contemporaries, I think, than to those who have had their obituaries in my time.

I think obituaries are most interesting when they involve people I have never met, have never heard of and who have lived lives very different from my own. I am particularly fascinated by the obituaries of servicepeople found mainly in the *Daily Telegraph* but also in *The Times*. A very large number of them, particularly those who served with the RAF, seem to have spent the inter-war years bombing the Kurds in Iraq,

or Mesopotamia as it was then called. Those in the army spent the inter-war years on the North West Frontier, dealing in a similar fashion with the Afghans. Now I find that very interesting because I have never had anything to do with either Kurds or Afghans. Equally I am always interested to know what happened when these individuals stopped bombing the Kurds and Afghans. Famous people, people who make their names in

I notice the name of Peter Bessell, though possibly he is dead, and the name also of Wallace Lawler, a fairly notorious figure in his time and not very liberal (with a small l) although he fought under the Liberal banner in Birmingham at that stage. There are even one or two, and I ask this slightly nervously in an audience like this – where are they now? Twenty or twenty-five years ago, when I was not able to call myself a Liberal Democrat, the name of Pratap Chitnis always came up on behalf of the Liberal Party. Now I am looking forward to the book because the question I asked about him – where is he now? – this book will tell me.

But there are some interesting omissions, in my view. There is Charles Kennedy but not Ludovic Kennedy; although Ludo has played his part in the life of the Liberal Party, fought a notable byelection at Rochdale and has been loyal to us today.

There is Sir Trevor Jones but not Sir Sidney Jones, Lord Mayor of Liverpool during the last war. So why one Jones, Trevor – ‘Jones the vote’ – but not another Jones, Sir Sidney Jones, a highly respected figure in the city of Liverpool and perhaps the last great Liberal before the revival? Indeed I would be fascinated if it would be possible in a future edition to look at some of those Liberals who made a distinctive contribution in their own areas. I mention Liverpool because I was born and brought up there. So, I know a bit more about Liverpool than some of you. There were the Rathbones, there were the Roscoes and they had three interesting characteristics. They were mostly in the shipping industry. They were Unitarian in their religion and they were Liberal in their politics. And they made an immense contribution to the civic life of that great city in the nineteenth century. So, perhaps next time, if I might say to Duncan, look at the Rathbones, look at the Roscoes. They will not be able to buy the book but they are well remembered in the city where they grew up and worked.

Here I am going to be very con-

troversial indeed. You are going to shake in your shoes at my point. There is Frank Owen – we all know Frank Owen – but not David Owen. Now you may say there are very good reasons ... and yet, and yet, if we think of the history of Liberal Democracy we have to consider that David, for good or for ill – perhaps, not good – deserves a place in the history of our times.

Now, what about the role of great men? Some clearly greater than others but all of them prominent in some way or another. How far can history be read through their lives? Or is history an inexorable process, as Marx would have said, and, indeed the Whig theory of history would maintain? The Victorians believed in progress, they believed in change upward and better all the time. How far did the great political figures listed in this book make a real difference? I think it is a very difficult question to answer, particularly difficult for those whose names appear in the book, because, of course, we all like to believe that history is at least a little bit different for our having lived.

Now men of ideas, Bentham, Paine, Hume, Ricardo, all influenced thinking and did therefore influence the political climate of their time. I think we can say the same of Gladstone, of Asquith, of Lloyd George, of Churchill. All of you know, of course, being well-informed about these things, that Churchill was a Liberal in his early days and yet he found his way into the book – where David Owen does not – although his later career was in another party. Now I think the answer for Gladstone, for Asquith, for Lloyd George and for Churchill is that they did have their chance on a large enough scale. They all became Prime Minister. They all played, because of the circumstances of their time, a major part in our lives. And I have to say, it is more difficult for those, who may have been distinguished in their ideas, in their intentions, in their personal lives in one way or another but, at the same time, did not have the opportunities for government.

I think, for example, of Jo

Grimond, whom I remember when he was in the House. Now Jo played a tremendous part in raising the morale of the Liberal Party after old Clem Davies. And I think – and I notice that all Liberals old (and less old) pay tribute to him, and I would not for a moment take that away – but I wonder whether if one looks at it in a very hard-headed fashion, whether Jo’s was not a silent, personal, pilgrimage, which in the end achieved very little, for all his personal qualities. When Jo became Leader of the Liberal Party it had six members of Parliament. When Jo ceased to be Leader of the Liberal Party it had six members of Parliament. The proportion of votes won by the Liberals in the election of 1970 was very much larger than in 1955 – but one has to ask, did Jo really achieve that much because of the circumstances of his time?

I remember him well. It was a very difficult process. He would not be called to speak in the House. You would have the main speakers in the Commons, the government speaker, the opposition speaker, but Jo would not be called in the way that Paddy Ashdown very often is; and as we in the Lords always have the privilege of being the next party to speak. Jo might be called at half past five; the press gallery was empty, and many members of Parliament were having their first drink of the evening, or as they would prefer to put it, signing letters to their constituents. Jo would make his speech and then he would leave the chamber in a slightly lonely way and make his way down the corridor with his head held slightly to one side; and I often felt I wanted to say something to him which would be a comfort and an encouragement but I did not know what. And so, like others, I passed by on the other side. And so, when we look at Jo, and I think he is a hero of many people and I would not take that away, we have to say: what changes did he make?

And then, if you consider, and this is rather a different point, the SDP and the Gang of Four, of whom I was one. There is a very interesting book by Patricia Sykes, an

American academic, called *Losing from the Inside*. She came to this country in about 1983 and then came back again for the 1987 election. She was meant to write a thesis about the deep-seated ideological differences between members of the Gang of Four. She could not find any. She thought that if you took the perspective of politics as a whole, there was not much difference between us. And so, she felt, we lost from the inside, for personal reasons of one kind or another.

Now, it is true that the 1983 general election was a huge disappointment. So near for the Alliance, and yet so far; 25.4% against 27.6% – a very narrow gap. It is true that was the case but I think, looking back, it was most importantly the Falklands War which changed the fate of the Alliance. Thinking in particular of the SDP – and nobody has really thought hard about this, and perhaps I should have the most to say about it – was the failure to win the Darlington byelection immediately after the Bermondsey byelection, just before the general election of 1983. So, for all the differences there were, between the Jenkinsites and the Owenites (the Jenkinsites did not feel it but the Owenites did) I think the reasons why we did not do better, why we did not win that extra 2.2% of the vote in 1983 cannot be seen in terms of personality but of events outside.

And so, what about the question which Duncan asked us: no more heroes any more? I think that very few people in politics are heroes to their contemporaries. They are respected, they are admired, they are even loved. They may be momentary heroes, at the moment they win an election or do something great. But I do not think one can say more than that. It needs the passage of time and the verdict of history to really decide. The living eighty of us do not know our fate. Only subsequent editions will find them out. But because I am required to, I will pick now from the list four heroes. Only four because I would perhaps pick some more and go on too long.

First, of course, Asquith, because of his great reforming government. Secondly, Charles Bradlaugh, because of the way he fought to change the oath. Thirdly, Sir Edward Grey, for a phrase we all remember about the lights going out all over Europe. If it had not been for Sir Edward Grey, we would not have had that description; and I think it is a rather

good one. And finally, David Lloyd George for reminding us of what you could once get away with, which President Clinton cannot get away with today.

*Bill Rodgers (Lord Rodgers of Quarry Bank) was a member of the SDP 'Gang of Four', and is now leader of the Liberal Democrat peers.*

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## Six Characters in Search of an Author

### Graham Watson

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The *Dictionary of Liberal Biography* is the story of two great families, Social Democrats and Liberals – one young and vibrant, the other the scion of older stock; a marriage, perhaps, of new money with old?

It is a living history of our party. It sets in context individual effort and achievement. Uniting figures of the past with those of the present, it shows how ideology runs thicker than blood. It traces what Lloyd George called 'the golden threads of reason and altruism which weave unbroken through the history of mankind's actions and aspirations'. Yet it is not hagiography. It serves as a needle to puncture the vanity of the living and recognise even the weaknesses of the deceased.

I am responsible for only one entry in this *Dictionary*: that for Lord Steel of Aikwood, the former leader David Steel. I imagine when it was mooted that I should speak here that it was expected I should speak of David Steel. As we languish in the opinion polls at around 17%, there must be some hankering after the heady days of regular 25% poll ratings and even, on one delusive occasion, 51%. The boy David had a youthful appeal up against Michael Foot and Margaret Thatcher which some might envy today. But I suspect that our party is not quite ready to evaluate the leading figures of our

immediate predecessors. A decade has barely passed. The bird of liberty has soared, but a parrot left for dead still occasionally flinches.

And so I have chosen today three couples, each of which demonstrate different characteristics of our party, its present and its past. I hope they will allow us some reflection on context.

My first couple is John Bannerman and Mark Bonham-Carter, both, alas, deceased, but both succeeded, in daughters Ray Michie MP and recent party press officer Jane Bonham-Carter, by active Liberal Democrats. Their standards, which they bore most effectively in the most difficult of times for Liberals, the 1950s, have been kept flying.

John Bannerman was a product of Scotland's establishment, just as Mark Bonham-Carter represented part of England's. Mark was an Asquith, with the self-confidence of the English Victorian Liberal heyday behind him. John was as near as Scotland came to a Liberal tradition; the sharp, enquiring mind of an Enlightenment-inspired education. Mark was a dab hand at tennis,

though a trained amateur. Johnnie was an accomplished rugby player, a Scottish international and the greatest Scottish forward of the 1920s. Though twenty years separated them in age, both entered active politics just before the second world war. Both had been scholars at Balliol and across the pond in New England. Johnnie came within a whisker of winning a byelection at Inverness in 1954; Mark was returned in Torrington four years later. Each prepared the political ground for another Liberal to take and hold the division soon after.

I have no idea whether they ever met, but I have no doubt their common modesty would have resulted in a quiet mutual respect, though Johnnie may have grumbled into his whisky glass about soft southern ways. Both men served as lieutenants to Jo Grimond in keeping alight the flame of Liberalism, a task bigger even than a man of Jo's stature.

Lord Bonham-Carter was, literally, a man of the world. He had a perfect command of Italian, a country of which he was immensely knowledgeable and where he spent lengthy holidays, and chaired for many years the Anglo-Polish round tables. As Chairman of the Race Relations Board, Governor of the Royal Ballet and Vice Chairman of the BBC he combined concern for society with contempt for the Conservative establishment – I recall his remark at a Liberal International meeting in Oxford that while Mrs Thatcher hated the BBC, most people outside this country thought rather more of the BBC than of Mrs Thatcher. As a Member of both houses of parliament he was active and incisive. His intellect was colossal and his energy none the less so.

A well travelled Englishman and a stay-at-home Scot seem contrary to popular mythology. Yet Lord Bannerman, a sheep farmer, rarely travelled outside his native Scotland. Nonetheless, he presided over the Scottish RFU, was Chairman of the National Forest Parks and president of An Comunn Gaidhealach. He turned the government spotlight on

to the Highlands and the plight of Highland communities from which his own family had been driven during the clearances. His enquiring mind set a wider context for his politics than many of his SNP contemporaries; the failure of the self-government crusade in those years is because there were so few like John Bannerman. Professor Christopher Harvie tells us that post-war Scotland produced no gods and precious few heroes. Since he died at 68, barely eighteen months after his ennoblement, I plead at least for sanctification for Lord Bannerman of Kildonan.

John Bannerman and Mark Bonham-Carter were both, in their way, individuals. If they never quite figured as Leaders, they were uncontestedly leading figures. They led by example rather than by encouragement. Their education had bred them to govern their fellow men and they did so with ease. Their Liberalism, though unusual in their generation, was instinctive and self-confident. It was the product of a confident age.

My next couple, Lord Russell-Johnston and Lord Geraint, bring us in to the present, if only just. Towards the end of their careers, both have a proud history of contribution to our enterprise.

Geraint Howells came from modest farming stock in Ceredigion, Russell Johnston from a slightly less modest rural hinterland on Skye. Battered by the squalls of the Atlantic on the western reaches of our islands, both brought the cadences of the Gaelic tongue to their wider English-speaking mission. Though not born great, fate had sown in each the seeds of greatness; both were to engage, to inform, to inspire. Philosophers both, they encapsulated and distilled, for their audiences to savour, the essence of Liberalism in their respective countries. If Russell relished the rostrum, Geraint was the stronger at the other art in which both were gifted – a keen ability to listen.

Steeped in the cultures of their respective countries, Russell and Geraint were ardent devolutionists

and campaigned strongly for a 'yes' vote on 1st March 1979. As so often for Liberals, their efforts were not immediately to bear fruit. And yet they flinched not in their endeavours. 'A Liberal society', as Russell once said, 'will not be built without the bricks of effort and the mortar of persistence'. Geraint was a bulwark against nationalism because of his very Welshness. Russell was his counterpart north of the border.

Perhaps more than John Bannerman or Mark Bonham-Carter, Russell and Geraint were reassuring figures. Genial, astute, safe pairs of hands. Each coaxed, guided and motivated a generation of younger Liberals (myself among them). Neither looked particularly youthful, even at a young age: an advantage in politics since it suggests wisdom. Yet both reflected enduring Liberal values and applied them intelligently to the present. Nor was either man, despite his peaceful Gaelic charm, a slacker. I doubt whether Russell or Geraint, however far-flung their constituencies, would have failed to show up to vote on the amendments to Northern Ireland Terrorism and Conspiracy Bill.

Scotland 33, Wales 18. Geraint Howells' years in the Commons are no match for Russell's. Yet the Welshman showed in Parliament the same unwavering commitment to the interests of his farmers and small businessmen which he had maintained for almost twenty years as a county councillor. And Lord Geraint, a shrewd tactician, became Deputy Speaker of the House of Lords. Lord Russell-Johnston, with a similar curious desire to enter the upper house on first-name terms, took to the Lords his long-standing commitment to international Liberalism. On a wider canvass however, as the first UK Liberal in the European Parliament, a quarter of a century ago, he developed the taste for political tourism which has made him the current leader of the Liberal group on the Council of Europe.

Russell, the university graduate, has left more of his thoughts on paper, whether in printed form or in a

flowing hand in friends' letterboxes, than his Welsh hill-farming colleague. Just as he preached from the podium, so has he prodded with the pen, and we are the wealthier for it. But if the pen for Geraint was more a place to keep a welcome for sheep – he was, after all, President of the Royal Welsh Show and a member of the Wool Marketing Board – he nonetheless inspired through regular cultivation a generation of Welsh Liberal activists. Liberalism would not be the same in either country without them.

My third and final pair were described by one of those I consulted as 'the odd couple'. Ronnie Fearn and Brian Cotter, my correspondent thought, were from a different mould. I disagree. Neither man is any less representative of Liberalism in his age and his constituency than any of the aforementioned.

True, both came to Parliament late in their careers. In territory not traditionally ours, each had to wait until their electors were prepared to honour their effort. Ronnie Fearn was elected in 1987 after forty years in the wilderness, Brian Cotter a decade later after fourteen. But both had served previously (and Ronnie does still) in local government.

With their education interrupted by the war, neither grammar school boy Ronnie Fearn nor privately educated Brian Cotter attended university, but both have first class honours from the university of life. After two years' National Service, Cotter spent twenty years distributing merchandise to shops and another twenty running a small plastics company. His experience is of people, in their daily lives at work and at play. Fearn worked as a bank clerk during the day and as a Liberal or a thespian in every free waking moment. Each brings to Parliament a feeling for the people of England, bent on the anvil of experience, which evades most modern politicians.

'Smile at us, pay us, pass us, but do not quite forget; for we are the people of England, who have not spoken yet', wrote that great poet and Liberal MP G. K. Chesterton. As the experienced helmsman prefers a

sextant even in the age of Global Positioning by Satellite, so neither of these MPs needs a pollster or a spin doctor to guide him through the shoals of public opinion.

Coming from commerce, Ronnie and Brian believe in a businesslike approach to politics: an efficient operation with an emphasis on service quality for the customer. Self-made men, they are self-made Members of Parliament. Each is motivated by an appreciation of and respect for others that has made him a local celebrity. Loyal and likeable, they have stuck with the party in good times and bad, reaching out to those whose turn is yet to come.

If Brian returned from London to Bristol's seaside resort, so Ronnie was born and bred in commuter land for that other great port, Liverpool. Both represent those first liberated from the cities by the great car economy. Typical of our eight English seaside-town constituency MPs, both know the problems of decaying Victorian splendour and post-modern squalor. Both are local as well as national politicians, intimately concerned with Liberal Democrat action in local government.

So Liberalism has spread from the bonnie brae to the bed-and-breakfast. It's a sign we've come a long way. Middle England now stretches out ahead: row upon redbrick row of terraced houses, where leaflets can be left in an instant and residents' surveys rapidly recovered.

If these six characters were in search of an author, they have found one in this book. As a reference work, as a bedtime dipper, the reader gains access to them here. It helps us to look backwards with pride as we look forwards with imagination. I think it's a good book despite what it says about me.

I am painfully aware that in this short exercise I have chosen only men. It is a sad fact that this biography contains entries for ten times as many men as women. But it is a biography of the nineteenth and barely three-quarters of the twentieth century. Let us strive to ensure that the current and future generations of our great party throw up a more equal gender balance to grace future such biographies.

I may have erred too in focusing too much on members of Parliament. Much of history is really made by those around them. If too few of those are recognised in this biography, it is on account of their modesty in not seeking the spotlight. (I have searched in vain, for example, for an entry for Mr Duncan Brack.) Those and such as those are often nonetheless the real heroes of our history.

Finally, let me enjoin you to rejoice. This book is a celebration. So as we would say in Scotland: 'Here's tae us; and wha's like us!'

*Graham Watson was aide to David Steel when leader of the Liberal Party, and is now MEP for Somerset & Devon North.*

## History Group Publications

The History Group will be publishing more books in association with Politico's – and readers of the *Journal of Liberal Democrat History* are invited to help.

The *Dictionary of Liberal Quotations* is scheduled for autumn 1999, part of a set of three political quotations books. Quotations from, or about, any famous (or obscure) Liberal, Social Democrat or Liberal Democrat are very welcome; please include full details of the source.

The second edition of the *Dictionary of Liberal Biography* is provisionally scheduled for 2002 or 2003 – but we would like to hear ideas now for the inclusion of major figures omitted from the first edition. Please also tell us about any mistakes you spot in the current edition; errata will be included in the History Group's web site, and corrections made in the second edition.

Please write with ideas to Duncan Brack, Flat 9, 6 Hopton Road, London SW16 2EQ; [ldhg@dbrack.dircon.co.uk](mailto:ldhg@dbrack.dircon.co.uk).