

Reviews

The Jeremy Thorpe Story

Jeremy Thorpe: *In My Own Time* (Politico's Publishing, 1999)

S. Freeman and B. Penrose: *Rinkagate: the rise and fall of Jeremy Thorpe* (Bloomsbury, 1996)

'Jeremy Thorpe' in M. Parris, *Great Parliamentary Scandals* (Robson Books, 1995)

Reviewed by Robert Ingham

'This is not an autobiography' writes Jeremy Thorpe in the introduction to his recent volume of memoirs and, perhaps for once, he does not exaggerate. *In My Own Time* is a collection of anecdotes and episodes, often entertaining in themselves, but offering few insights into Thorpe's own character and motivation or into some of the more controversial aspects of his life.

One key question for any student of Thorpe is how someone of his staunch Tory background – both his father and grandfather sat as Conservative Members of Parliament – came to be drawn into membership of the Liberal Party. Thorpe offers scant explanation of his decisions not only to join the Liberal Party, but to devote his considerable talents to fighting and winning a Parliamentary seat. If motivated by the desire to enter the House of Commons and stay there, Thorpe would surely have taken the easier course of joining the Conservative Party, as a result of which he might well have become a minister. Ideological factors surely played some part, but one explanation might be that, by becoming a Liberal, he automatically became a gigantic fish in a tiny pool.

This approach is given credence by some of the stories Thorpe tells. Thorpe puts himself across as the great fixer in British politics. Whenever a crisis threatened – Ghana,

Uganda, Rhodesia – and whatever issue was at stake – coal, Europe, arms to South Africa – Thorpe was involved, sometimes at the head of a committee of Liberals, sometimes alone, offering his assistance to the government of the day, attempting to broker a solution. A government back-bencher, or opposition front-bench spokesman, would not have been allowed such opportunities. This is not to decry Thorpe's role during, for instance, the passage of the European Communities Bill through the House of Commons, or his genuine internationalism. The impression is given, however, that Thorpe preferred to be at the centre of events rather than to be concerned with the daily grind of third-party politics – the policy papers, local election contests and federation dinners.

This impression is reinforced by the limited attention paid by Thorpe to matters internal to the Liberal Party. He mentions his election as

Treasurer of the Liberal Party, in 1965, and the success he had in raising money to clear the party's overdraft, as well as the Special Aid scheme he established to channel funds towards winnable seats, without letting us into the secret of how his fund-raising was so successful and where the money came from.

This may seem a trivial issue, but it is central to the relationship between Thorpe and his senior colleagues. Thorpe was able to keep some of the money he raised away from the party hierarchy, giving him a degree of political independence from the Liberal Party Organisation. This was controversial to many, and offensive to some. The Special Aid Scheme was the genesis of the targeting policy now pursued by the Liberal Democrats. Thorpe operated the Scheme without accounting for its activities or funds to the party at large, using its resources to remove Liberal officers and candidates from some constituencies and replace them with his preferred choices. A detailed study of why Thorpe was abandoned by his colleagues when the Scott affair blew up must take account of the mysterious nature of Thorpe's financial affairs.

The Scott affair is dealt with by Thorpe in just nine pages, with nothing new added to his standard denials. Some commentators, for instance John Campbell (*Independent*, 10 May 1999), have regretted that Thorpe did not use this opportunity to open up. In fact, *In My Own Time* is Thorpe's attempt to provide some balance to his life story.

Almost everything written about Thorpe concentrates on the end of his career. Little serious analysis of his years as Liberal leader has yet been attempted; that which has been produced is written in the light of the Scott allegations. Thorpe seeks to redress the balance, highlighting his account of the 1974 coalition talks as the centrepiece of the book. It is an understandable, and brave, effort on Thorpe's part, but the Thorpe story cannot be placed in context until the bizarre end to his career is explained. It

seems we must wait for Michael Bloch's biography to provide some long-awaited answers.

Plot upon plot

The Scott affair consisted of a series of inter-locking sub-plots, each comprising a mass of often contested detail which, taken together, can be regarded as either something extremely important, or something tragically trivial. Parris, in *Great Parliamentary Scandals*, describes the Thorpe imbroglio as the most sensational of the century, bar the Profumo scandal. Thorpe admitted, in modern parlance, to an inappropriate relationship with Norman Scott, an aimless drifter, but denied a homosexual one. Around the pair swirled a collection of increasingly unlikely characters, from Peter Bessell to MI5, the South African security organisation BOSS and Harold Wilson. Looking back, what can we make of it now?

Thorpe was tried in May 1979 for conspiracy to murder Norman Scott and for inciting David Holmes to commit the act. He was acquitted on both counts, although one juror later wrote that a conviction could have been secured on different charges.

Scott, victim of a feeble, if terrifying, attempt on his life, cut a pathetic figure throughout the trial, being described by Mr. Justice Cantley as 'a crook, an accomplished liar ... a fraud' as well as a 'whiner', 'parasite' and, for good measure, 'a spineless neurotic character'. The chief prosecution witness, former Liberal MP and close friend of Thorpe, Peter Bessell, was a serial confidence trickster who admitted in court to a 'credibility problem', one which was exacerbated by the revelation that he had signed an agreement with the *Daily Telegraph* to write his account of the Thorpe affair, the fee for which depended upon a successful prosecution. How did these two sorry individuals bring a Privy Councillor, despite his acquittal, to his knees?

Parris comes close to answering this latter question, in his largely sympathetic account of the affair. Thorpe's political career was finished even before he lost his parliamentary seat and appeared at the Old Bailey in May 1979 because the confidence senior Liberal colleagues placed in him had long since evaporated.

Scott's allegations had been brought to the attention of Liberal parliamentarians in 1971, when Scott told his story, fictional or otherwise, to a constituent of Emlyn Hooson, who then informed her MP. Some Liberals, not least Bessell, were already aware of Thorpe's problems with Scott; others suspected Thorpe of homosexuality. The Byers inquiry into Scott's story, hardly exhaustive, exonerated Thorpe; Parris notes that: 'Thorpe emerged as the victim of a spiteful and unbalanced blackmailer'. Scott continued to publicise his story, however, and when it reached the newspapers, in 1976, Cyril Smith resigned as Chief Whip, claiming ignorance of the allegations, and other MPs failed to back their leader. When Thorpe finally resigned as Liberal leader, in May 1976, Richard Wainwright was singled out for particular criticism, after the Colne Valley MP had questioned on radio why Thorpe had not sued the newspapers concerned. Parris reminds his readers that only one Liberal MP, John Pardoe, assisted Thorpe's election campaign in 1979.

Did senior Liberals stab Thorpe in the back, as Parris implies, by believing rumours and falsehoods rather than the word of an honourable man? Steel, Smith, Wainwright and others have written little or nothing on the affair and are unlikely to do so while Thorpe is alive. If they did, however, they might reveal that the reasons for Thorpe's downfall were connected more to internal party events than to the Scott case, as noted above. There were also many Liberals who considered Thorpe to have subjugated Liberal policy to showmanship and strategy; he could seem particularly out of

touch with the Young Liberals of that era. Regardless of the veracity of Scott's allegations, they focused further unwelcome press attention on Thorpe's private life and personality and away from Liberal policy and shed bright lights on some of the dubious company Thorpe kept. When the Scott story broke, Thorpe had to go.

Scandal

While Parris's account of the Thorpe scandal is low-key, Freeman and Penrose take 400 pages to tell the tale. They attempt to merge two older books – *The Pencourt File*, by B. Penrose and R. Courtiour (Secker & Warburg, 1978) and *Jeremy Thorpe: A Secret Life*, by L. Chester, M. Linklater and D. May (André Deutsch, 1979). The latter was written in expectation of a guilty verdict being served on Thorpe, and suffers accordingly. The former is written in a truly awful third-person style and is clearly inspired by a desire to prove a conspiracy theory encompassing Thorpe's downfall, the resignation of Harold Wilson, the post-war decline of the UK and any other political mystery of the era.

Freeman and Penrose do not attempt to repeat that mistake, but the odd episode involving Wilson describing himself as 'the big fat spider in the corner of the room' who 'might tell you to go to the Charing Cross Road and kick a blind man standing on the corner' is retained. Freeman's introduction talks unconvincingly of 'important issues ... such as the amorality of politics, official secrecy and cynicism and idealism in journalism', but they do not come across in his book. The only compelling passage is the cruel description of Thorpe's current condition; Parris provides a kinder but more genuine portrayal. Thorpe also describes his illness and the frightening means by which it is currently treated. However you review the facts and fiction of the Thorpe case, the tragic result of it is incontestable.