

# Reviews

## The men and their times

Roy Jenkins: *The Chancellors* (Macmillan, 1998)

Reviewed by Colin Darracott

This book contains nineteen essays about all the Chancellors of the Exchequer from Lord Randolph Churchill, who took up the post in 1886, to Hugh Dalton, who resigned in 1947. It is not a series of records and assessments of their performances as chancellors, nor is it a detailed sixty-year history of state fiscal and monetary management.

Except for four of them, each piece is a personal vignette of the man's character, life and career, with brief but adequate contexts, and Jenkins' views of his subjects as gentlemen of the establishment and of public office. (The four exceptions are Asquith, Lloyd George, Baldwin and Winston Churchill, who have been so extensively written about, including by Jenkins in the case of Asquith and Baldwin, that there seemed no point in doing much more than provide resumé of their circumstances and

performances at the Treasury, thus providing a modicum of continuity.)

There is plenty of judgement about the character of the men and the efficacy or otherwise of their deeds, whether as chancellors or in other public offices. For example, Jenkins is scathing about the unwholesomely ingratiating character of Sir John Simon, the Liberal defector of the 1930s and later one of the wartime (and, in Jenkins' view, satisfactory) chancellors. He is very amusing about Sir John Anderson (later Lord Waverley), as a man of monumental rectitude, and an unstoppable achiever through the sheer inertia of huge and dull authority. The description of the latter reminded me of someone, and I realised later that, as described, Anderson bears marked similarity to Jenkins himself.

He also quotes the famous line on the First Lord of the Admiralty: 'Goschen has no notion of the motion of the ocean'. As a Chancellor of the Exchequer, Goschen was much less memorable. He is surprisingly defensive about Winston Churchill as chancellor, who is commonly criticised for taking sterling back to the gold standard, whereas here we are told about the enormous persuasion required to make him do it.

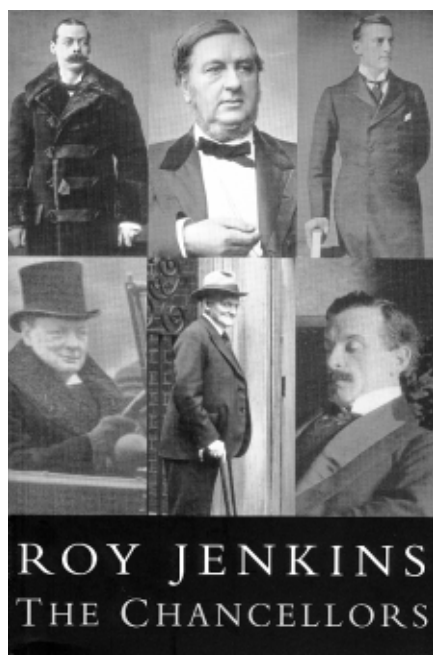
I also thought Jenkins was more than fair to the Chamberlains, Austen and Neville, to whom history has not been generous. Austen has been frequently seen as his father's failed attempt at cloning himself, but Jenkins, while not underplaying Joseph's overpowering influence, grants some credit to Austen as a man, and to some extent portrays him as a victim of

circumstances in his failure to make it to the very top, or to leave a recognised mark on history. Neville does not escape descriptions such as narrow-minded and self-righteous, but is somewhat redeemed by being an efficient minister, notwithstanding his – ultimately tragic – big failure.

The overall impression of the men and their times is that the establishment threw up a mix. There are occasional men of brilliance: Asquith, Lloyd George and Winston Churchill – flawed, but truly historical. There is much mediocrity: Harcourt, Hicks Beach, McKenna, Anderson (notwithstanding his grandeur). But mostly you are left with the impression that there is mostly dross: especially unlucky Bonar Law, Snowden, the two Chamberlains and Simon. In other words, these essays are some pictures, glimpses as if in cameos, of some men who played their parts in the relative decline of the nation, and a few who strove against the grain.

You trust Jenkins with his opinions, because he seems to be balanced enough with the evidence and never truly nasty or encomiastic. It is a very good read indeed: light, informative and entertaining, journalistic rather than learned. Jenkins manages to cram in lots of information and also creates a gentle historical flow. For those not recently well-read about the history of the last 150 years, this book may rekindle an interest. For those who have been students of the detail of the period, the book humanises some of the players, and brings others out of obscurity, but it is not meant to be an historical analysis. The language, as ever, is pleasurable, except where Jenkins indulges his habit of using obscure, ugly words (such as fructuous, bombinating, eleemosynary). There's about eight like this, but at least he didn't use ratiocination, his favourite word of all.

Jenkins doesn't write about living people or the recently dead in the way he does here. I understand why he doesn't, but it's a pity, because if he wrote about all the chancellors since Dalton, we'd be reminded of many we know and grew up with in our press and media. And with Jenkins as our guide, that would be enlightening and fun.



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# Of Liberals and Liberalism

Duncan Brack and Robert Ingham (eds.): *Dictionary of Liberal Quotations* (Politico's Publishing, 1999)

Reviewed by Tony Greaves

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This is a nice smart book in an attractive dust-wrapper with over 2000 quotations 'by and about Liberal Democrats, Liberals and Social Democrats'. It's another collaboration between the Liberal Democrat History Group and Iain Dale at Politico's and it's another 'why hasn't it been done before?' job.

I now declare certain interests. Tony Greaves makes a couple of minor appearances, and Liber Books have copies on sale. In that spirit, this is of course a book that every Liberal Democrat should have on their shelves ... More impartially, that is still true. Readers of *Liberal Democrat News* will know that I'm a fan of quotations, and if you have to write articles or make speeches you'll want this collection. Well done to the eds.

I wondered how to set about reviewing such a book. First I made a quick and rather random list of famous Liberal quotes I remembered, and looked them up. I found Campbell-Bannerman's 'acts of barbarism' but not Asquith's 'acts of blind revenge'. Gladstone ('trust in the people ...'), Grimond ('sound of gunfire') and Steel ('go back to your constituencies') turned up on cue, but I was surprised to find that 'if goods do not cross frontiers armies will' is attributed to Lady Violet Bonham Carter rather than to Richard Cobden as I had long supposed.

At first I couldn't find the famous Liberal bit from the Book of Isaiah ('But the liberal deviseth liberal things; and by liberal things shall he stand') which must have been the text for many a disgracefully political sermon in the chapels of yore. Then I found it with this elegant King James wording in Bob MacLennan's delightful foreword, which is the best thing in the

book! It turned up later under 'Bible' – silly me, thinking to look for 'Isaiah' – but with a slightly different wording which must come from one of the slightly sloppy attempts to 'modernise' the Good Book.

I was pleased to find Penhaligon's 'stick it on a piece of paper' but disappointed to find a fairly feeble offering from Trevor Jones 'The Vote' of Liverpool rather than the rousing 'But the votes, fellow Liberals ... I love the votes!' from his famous presidential address to the Liberal Assembly.

Of course, no collection can include everything. But the overall balance of this one is disappointing. There is too much from the non-Liberal wing of the old SDP – from and about those people like David Owen who do not belong here. There are rather a lot of inconsequential quotes from obscure Americans who may or may not have been Liberals of a sort. Even Thomas Jefferson, who certainly does merit inclusion, begins to weary the reader's interest after nine full pages and more to come! I would have omitted at least a quarter of the entries, which appear to have been dredged up in a trawl of existing collections, and (I suspect) the Internet, for 'liberty', 'freedom' and 'democracy', rather than liberalism as such, from anyone and any perspective. The most ludicrous entry is a comment on 'freedom' from *Mein Kampf*. This goes far beyond items 'by and about Liberal Democrats, Liberals and Social Democrats' and in my view simply does not belong here.

In similar vein there are four pages of Burke and four of Bagehot that I would happily junk. But there is a very big hole consisting of Liberals and the Liberal Party for about forty years after the Great War. Of course

Lloyd George and Keynes are here, though Beveridge is a little disappointing. And lots of Asquithian 'wit', not least from the ascerbic tongue of Lady Vi. But of the rest? The people who kept Liberal ideas and the Liberal Party afloat during the long desolate years and to whom we owe so much? Here's a count at some random: Elliott Dodds two, Richard Wainwright one, Desmond Banks none, Ramsay Muir three, Donald Wade none, Enid Lakeman none. So the Dictionary falls down rather, for this era at least, in another of its functions – to provide dippers-in with some understanding of the history, and historic thought, of our movement.

Just one more gripe. The index is not entirely adequate for such a book since it's based only on words rather than short phrases, and if you look up words like 'liberalism' or 'democracy' it's useless. Presumably it was generated in a modern electronic kind of way rather than by the old-fashioned midnight candle and quill pen! And there is no list or index of the authors, or indeed in many cases any sufficient explanation of who they are or were.

But these are the gripes of a reader seeking perfection. A second edition may get closer, and in the meantime we have a useful and entertaining book to keep close at hand on the desk, by the bedside or in the bog.

