Reviews

Last of the Gang …

Bill Rodgers: *Fourth Among Equals* (Politico's Publishing, 2000; 320pp)

Reviewed by **David Steel**

The most irritating aspect of Bill Rodgers' autobiography is its title. *Fourth Among Equals* is a wholly unnecessary self put-down. It is not even an accurate description of his role in the Gang of Four's founding of the SDP. For while the other three all had their distinctive merits, there is no doubt that Bill was the most clearly capable organiser and strategist of the quartet.

Having overcome my dislike of the title, and before turning to assess this history, let me say at the outset that it's a rattling good read. The early chapters are strikingly evocative of a Liverpool childhood, including some remarkably vivid descriptions of the blitz. His time at Oxford is passed over quickly in favour of his early years in the Labour Party.

Two features of his life emerge which I believe were to colour the differences between SDP culture and Liberal culture (because his and my personal experiences illustrated them). The first was his almost cavalier approach to constituency selection. From Bristol to Birmingham, Gloucester to Grimsby and eventually to Stockton, the prevailing attitude was that these were possible places to send you to Westminster. Second, Bill, like the other three, lived in London, with a second house in what they would call 'the country' – within a 1½ hour drive of London, not in their constituencies.

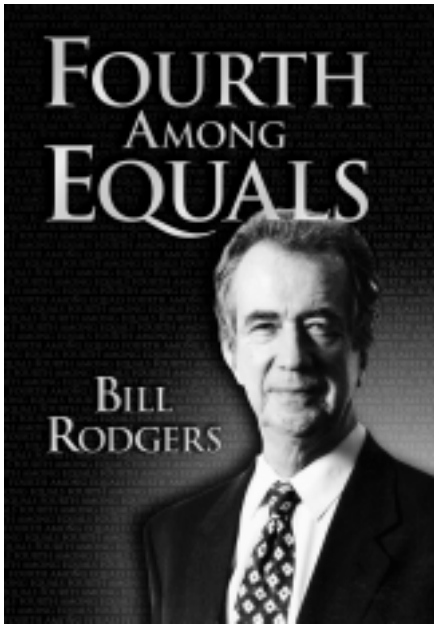
Contrast this with my own – and most recent Liberal – experience, living and working in our constituencies, often a full day's travel from London, sending our children to local schools, attending the parish church and being part of a community. The community politics strategy of the Liberal Party was a key part of its make up, not to be derided except where badly practised as mere 'pavement politics'. The disadvantages of such a life for me was that I was never able to be part of the London/weekend network, as the SDP quartet obviously were. I do not claim universal superiority for the Liberal position. On the contrary, I recall being concerned that in a winnable by-election a few years ago a candidate who would have made a major contribution to the parliamentary party did not even reach the short-list for selection because his tenuous local ties compared unfavourably with the worthy local councillors who did.

But there were similarities for all that. 'I saw too little of my children when they were growing up and now, with families of their own they complain about my failure.' Snap. I also now recall – which I had forgotten, as, I suspect, had Bill – that we served together briefly in the Assemblies of the Council of Europe and Western European Union around 1969. Indeed I wrote as rapporteur (aided by a knowledgeable clerk) a learned report on Russian submarines in the Kola peninsula, about which I can recall nothing except a few words of approval from the junior defence minister, Bill Rodgers.

As junior minister at the Board of Trade he tried to promote a new Central Scotland airport but was stymied by the Secretary of State for Scotland, Willie Ross, who wanted to keep voters happy at Glasgow, Edinburgh and Prestwick. Ross thus prevented Scotland having the major international airport it deserved.

He writes poignantly of the long campaign for European entry in the Labour Party, and his rough relations with Prime Minister Harold Wilson. I must admit that when he recalls the episode of his leaking in advance to the press a 'showdown' meeting with Wilson, my sympathies were wholly on the side of the cross Prime Minister. Other than that I found his account of events leading in 1972 to Roy Jenkins' resignation as Deputy Leader of the Labour Party, and the Labour MPs voting against their whip very moving. Equally, when later the same people trooped through the lobbies against the legislation ratifying entry, and Bill confessed that he was reduced to tears, I realised why I was right to have resisted early blandishments to join the Labour Party.

The 1975 referendum campaign – when we worked together for the first time – is accurately described, especially the material largesse (typewriters, photocopiers, executive jets) which were available, and which opened both our sets of eyes to the fact that these were regularly available to the Tory party. In all of these episodes he has some shrewd and critical pen portraits of colleagues like Tony Crosland, Roy Hattersely and David Owen. But he also has some cryptic one-liners which set me laughing aloud in instant recognition: Merlyn



Rees 'radiating muddled concern and goodwill'; Edward du Cann 'adopted his suavest manner (and that could be very suave indeed)'.

His role in establishing and maintaining the Lib-Lab Pact of 1977–78 is soundly recorded in detail. In retrospect I was too easily wooed by the promise of a free vote on PR for Europe, failing to foresee that the pro-PR Tory vote would not turn out for something that was part of a Lib-Lab agreement. The most interesting part of the chapter dealing with his time in cabinet is his account of the terrible mistake Jim Callaghan made in not calling an election. as expected after the end of the Lib-Lab Pact in autumn 1978, and of the subsequent winter of discontent and the strains and disagreements within the cabinet.

His own account of leaving the Labour Party and helping to found the SDP is familiar to those who have read Roy Jenkins and David Owen. What is more revealing is the level of tension at different times among the four of them. It is to their credit that they concealed it well at the time. The famous by-elections come back to life through these pages and Bill's megaphone. He gives his side of the seat allocation problems, in which he is quite critical of my part, leading to his public outburst at New Year 1982, at which he records 'David Steel put on his disapproving son-of-the-manse face and pretended the row had come as a surprise'. He is right. I did not want to inflame what I considered bad judgement on his part and simply suggested he had eaten too many mince pies for Christmas. But damage was done, and I still believe in retrospect that the SDP wholly underestimated the scale of sacrifice being expected of entrenched Liberal candidates and organisations such as Dumfries (next door to me) where the young Jim Wallace loyally resigned as a hard-working PPC to make way for a passing Social Democrat.

His account of the disastrous by-election at Darlington is understated. Simon Hughes had won Bermondsey only a month before. The SDP had a well-known local TV commentator as candidate and started favourites. But he was politically naïve and they mistakenly allowed him full exposure. I recall coming off the sleeper and breakfasting with Bill, trying to explain to him how it was possible to run a by-election while only allowing the candidate a few carefully scripted words very occasionally. Richard Holme had done this at Croydon with Bill Pitt, but such techniques were unknown to the SDP who truly blew it by coming third.

His version of the 1983 general election and its aftermath is both fair and fascinating, as is the election of David Owen as leader and the row on the joint commission on defence. The disappointment of the 1987 election, the fall-out with Owen and the subsequent unnecessarily long-drawn-out struggle for merger are also robustly portrayed. He is right to trace the satisfying achievement of forty-seven Liberal Democrat MPs and ten MEPs to the foundation laid by the Liberal-SDP Alliance. If we were able to rewrite history, there should have much more declared openness from the beginning about the partnership of the two parties and a willingness to let that flourish organically locally rather than by some blueprint from the top down.

With most of Bill's judgements I concur (including his reservations about the current joint cabinet committee which my ex-leader loyalty prevented me from expressing!). He doesn't quote Jo Grimond's typically mischievous remark about the Alliance – 'the thing is bound to succeed because Jenkins is such a good Liberal and Steel such a good Social Democrat' – but that it succeeded at all was in no small measure due to Bill. Roy and I used to muse that his problem was a name and image one. Was he Bill or William, Roger or Rodgers? It didn't matter to us internally, because he was very much the essential equal, and deserves to enjoy his years as leader of the party in the Upper House of parliament.

David Steel (Lord Steel of Aikwood) led the Liberal Party from 1976 to 1988. He is currently MSP for South of Scotland, and Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament.

Nearly an Eminent Victorian

Roland Hill: *Lord Acton* (Yale University Press, 2000; 548pp)

Reviewed by **Ian Machin**

The first Lord Acton (Sir John Emerich Edward Dalberg Acton, 1834–1902) was nearly an eminent Victorian, who might have reached the undoubtedly eminent rank if he had concentrated on one line of activity instead of several. He was a diverse being by birth, a cosmopolitan aristocrat with English, German, Italian and French forebears, who was born in Naples. He acquired homes in three countries and amassed libraries in all of them, becoming known as one of the most ardent book-collectors as well as one of the most learned men of his time. He was aptly described as an 'international highbrow'. His paternal ancestral roots were in a Shropshire estate and baronetcy. But as his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather in the Acton line had all been born abroad, Englishness was deemed officially to have run out in his case, and a special Act of Naturalisation as a British citizen was passed for him, as a three-year-old, when his father died in 1837. Thereafter he was a Shropshire squire, though often dwelling in Germany or France.

Acton was an unremarkable Liberal MP for an Irish county from 1859 to 1865, and a remarkable and prominent Liberal Catholic journalist and controversialist during the same years. Later,

when his close friend Gladstone's final ministry was formed in 1892, he was disappointed not to receive a cabinet post, but was made a Lord-in-Waiting to the Queen, whom he was as conspicuously able to charm as Gladstone was not. Finally, in 1895, Lord Rosebery appointed this learned historian – who had written little apart from numerous periodical articles (of a contemporary nature) and some general scholarly essays – to the Regius Chair of Modern History at Cambridge. Occupying this position until his death at the age of sixty-eight in 1902, Acton delivered notable lectures (later published) and launched the multi-volume *Cambridge Modern History*. This work had many writers but, characteristically, Acton was not prepared to contribute a chapter himself.

Roland Hill's book is the fullest biography of Acton to date. It well reflects its subject in being physically large, learned and capacious. Its scholarly basis is provided by correspondence from eighteen archives in different countries, especially the Acton papers in the Cambridge University Library, and by numerous contemporary and subsequent published sources. There is a frequent and apt use of quotation, which gives constant freshness to the work. The treatment is generally solid throughout and gives us abundant opportunity to observe Acton on three levels.

The first of these is as a social and family man, solicitous towards his wife and children and entertaining scholars and statesmen such as Döllinger and Gladstone in both Bavaria and England.

The second is as a noted Liberal Catholic thinker, striving without success to stem the rising ultramontane tide in his Church. He did this first in the Catholic journals that he edited (*The Rambler* and its successor *The Home and Foreign Review*) from 1858 to 1864, and then in the fierce controversy which took place over the definition of papal infallibility at the Vatican Council in 1870, and which lasted for several years. The Vatican controversy showed Acton at a peak of intellectual and emotional involvement, clashing not only with Pope Pius IX but with Manning and, to a lesser extent, Newman. This was the central defining moment in Acton's life and it is given very full examination by Hill, extending to nearly a quarter of the book.

The third level on which the book presents Acton is as an unexpected but nonetheless effective professor of history. His own historical research and writing projects had been successively dropped but in his chair he delivered some notable, if debatable, aphorisms, insisting on the duty of the historian not only to be impartial but also to be morally fearless in condemning past evils. He also successfully stimulated the work of others. Today the domination of the periodic research assessment exercise in British universities would prevent his coming anywhere near a chair in this country, but one cannot help feeling that this renders universities the poorer.

While the book gives sound and ample coverage to the main aspects of Acton's life, there are one or two contradictions in the work and some places where the British ecclesiastical and social background might have been more fully sketched in. With regard to the few factual errors it should be noted that the Davis Strait off Greenland, and not 'Davis Street', was the place where a whale was caught in one of Acton's historical anecdotes; that King Louis-Philippe's son was the Duke of Aumale, not Daumale; that Gladstone, as a Puseyite, did not have a 'Low Church image'; that it was actually a Tory government that carried Catholic emancipation in 1829; and that only forty-one votes, not forty-nine, were given in favour of the Irish Home Rule Bill in the House of Lords in 1893.

Ian Machin is Professor of British History at the University of Dundee

Neville Chamberlain: Policy Wonk

Graham Stewart: *Burying Caesar: Churchill, Chamberlain and the Battle for the Tory Party* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999)

Reviewed by **Richard Grayson**

Do we really need another book about Winston Churchill's wilderness years? Almost certainly not. My own shelves, though far from holding the complete Churchill collection, are stacked full of memoirs telling the tale of the 'guilty men' who allowed Britain to sleep while the gathering storm on the continent crept ever closer to the English Channel. And as for biographies, it is difficult to see that there is any way to improve upon the numerous readable and insightful works by historians such as Robert Rhodes James and John Charmley, or the weighty tomes that are Martin Gilbert's life's work.

Neville Chamberlain has not attracted the same following. For obvious reasons, there were never crowds of people waiting to tell of their part in his life. And we even lack a full modern biography, with David Dilks' work stopping in 1929.

Nevertheless, Chamberlain's role in appeasement has been told and told again through countless monographs and journal articles analysing the minutiae of the decision-making that led to Munich and beyond. Meanwhile, general readers are well served by Alastair Parker's *Chamberlain and Appeasement*. So does Graham Stewart's *Burying Caesar* perform any useful function?

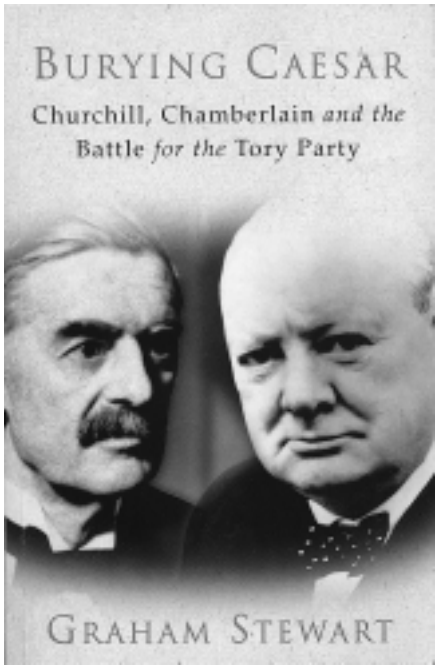
Stewart has not unearthed any new sources. But in other ways he has more than justified this new volume on Churchill and Chamberlain. In particular, he places much emphasis on Chamberlain's relationship with his party; no other writer has treated this as such a serious issue in the past. Meanwhile, he has uniquely presented a fascinating twin biography, examining the links between Churchill and Chamberlain at every twist and turn, rather as Alan Bullock did in his *Hitler and Stalin: A Study in Tyranny*. Underpinning this is the provocative suggestion that the battle for supremacy between the two men was a continuation of the late-Victorian struggle for the Tory soul in which their fathers, Randolph and Joe, were leading figures.

One of the key points to emerge from Stewart's book is that Chamberlain had a strong grip on the Conservative Party's central machine in the early 1930s. In particular, as chair of the Conservative Research Department, and head of the Cabinet Conservative Committee, he was the supreme policy wonk of his era. Combining these posts with that of Chancellor of the Exchequer, Chamberlain was the Gordon Brown of his day, with a grip on policy across the board – so much so that he wrote to one of his sisters in October 1932 that it amused him 'to find a new policy for each of my colleagues in turn'.

It is also clear that Chamberlain's interest in international affairs developed from his time at the Treasury in the early 1930s, as a result of his increasing involvement in the great international economic issues of the day, such as the Ottawa agreements and the 1933 World Economic Conference. When carrying out research on Austen Chamberlain, I was told by a close friend of the Chamberlain family that in the 1920s, whenever Neville had voiced opinions on foreign policy, he would be told by his sisters: 'Do shut up, Neville – you know you know nothing about foreign affairs'. His time at the Treasury may not have remedied that entirely, but it did at least make him think that he was an expert. He successfully persuaded others of this too, prompting Harold Macmillan's comment in 1939, 'if Chamberlain says that black is white, the Tories applaud his brilliance. If a week later he says that black is after all black, they applaud his realism.'

As for Churchill, Stewart demonstrates clearly the differing effects that Churchill's calls for rearming the RAF had on his relationship with the Conservative Party, as distinct to his fight against the Government of India Bill. In the latter case, he was regularly seen to be disloyal to the Conservative-dominated government, supported only by diehards on the fringe of the party. But on rearmament, he was simply pushing the government to pursue its own policy more enthusiastically, thus consolidating his support on the party's right wing, while also securing allies from other areas. As Stewart shows, one should not underestimate the extent to which that campaign was inspired by Churchill's desire to return to Conservative ministerial ranks in the mid to late 1930s. It is all too easy now to forget that even on becoming Prime Minister in 1940, Churchill did not enjoy the unquestioning loyalty of the Conservatives, and this book brings his troubled relationship with the party to the fore.

Missing from the book is any real sense that the Conservative anti-appeasers were only one of several groups working against the government's foreign policy. Liberal and Labour politicians are present in the book, but only in so far as they worked



with people such as Churchill. That overlooks the very vigorous debates on alternative options that took place inside the opposition parties. While there is no doubt that the size of the government's majority made internal Conservative opposition crucial, its full significance can only be understood in the context of activity beyond Conservative ranks.

Had Stewart actually tackled this issue, he might have slightly rebalanced his picture of the anti-appeasement cause. In particular, that applies to the belief in 'collective security' that is so often associated with Winston Churchill. In actual fact, 'collective security' was at the heart of the Liberal concept of international relations from the early 1930s. In the first part of the decade, they associated it with the League of Nations. But by mid 1938, some months before the Munich crisis, Liberals such as Archibald Sinclair were arguing that an alliance between, for example, Britain, France and the USSR, might be the only way to resist Hitler.

Analysis of the Liberal position also reveals the importance of the idea of 'economic disarmament' to the anti-appeasement campaign. That involved restoring free trade and making concessions to Germany on colonies. It was a distinctive aspect of Liberal anti-appeasement and adds an important dimension to any analysis of alternative policies.

Yet despite this reservation, Stewart's book is both accessible and illuminating. It is so well written that devotees of inter-war politics will find it a rip-roaring yarn. But its main achievement is to do all this while at the same time maintaining a sense of balance. Arguably, for the first time, *Burying Caesar* presents the stories of the Conservative appeasers and the Conservative anti-appeasers side by side. As the public's taste for biography and for grand historical narrative seems to grow, we can expect to see much more of this sort of book in the future.

Dr Richard Grayson is Director of Policy of the Liberal Democrats. His book, Austen Chamberlain and the Commitment to Europe, *was published in 1997. His second book,* The Liberal Party and Appeasement, *is to be published in 2001.*

Whigs, Liberals and History

Victor Feske: *From Belloc to Churchill: Private scholars, public culture and the crisis of British Liberalism, 1900–1939* (University of North Carolina Press, 1996; 304pp)

Reviewed by **Iain Sharpe**

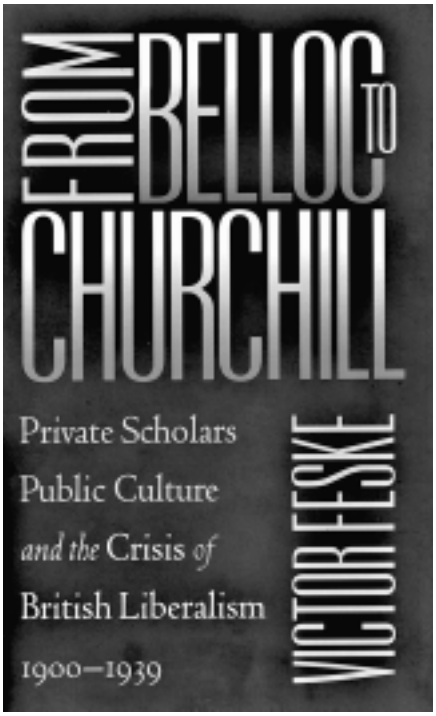
Throughout the period of the Liberal Party's ascendancy in British politics during the nineteenth century, the party was nourished and sustained by a particular view of British history – dubbed the 'Whig Interpretation' – as a story of progress and reform, focusing in particular on the development of Britain's constitution and the growth of individual freedom. Historical practitioners within this tradition were often amateur scholars who were deeply involved in contemporary politics and saw the advance of political liberty from Magna Carta to the Glorious Revolution and the nineteenth-century reform acts as a continuous and continuing justification for contemporary Liberalism.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, this close link between history and Liberalism began to uncouple. History in Britain was becoming a more academic and scientific discipline. It was increasingly written by professionals, working inside universities and relying on primary research rather than mere interpretation. This academic history was, by definition, separate from the political process, not intended to justify any particular party or policy.

Politically engaged history, written by non-academics, continued, but in the political conditions of the Edwardian era, with empire at its height and with increasing pressure for state intervention in social reform, the narrow Whig emphasis on constitutional progress seemed anachronistic. Those seeking to write history in order to influence the present began to focus more on the role of the state rather than just the nature of the constitution. In doing so they ceased to provide sustenance to the Liberal tradition. The purpose of Victor Feske's book is to explore the severing of this connection between political Liberalism and amateur scholarship, by examining the careers of seven historians working outside an academic environment. All of his subjects were in some way linked to the Liberal Party, but their work either subverted the Whig tradition or adapted it to changing circumstances, removing it as a source of strength for the Liberal cause.

The seven subjects of the book (five if one 'merges' the husband-and-wife teams of Beatrice and Sidney Webb and Barbara and J.L. Hammond) all wrote history with at least one eye on its contemporary relevance, although all with different aims and from different political standpoints. Hilaire Belloc wrote history to justify his own Radical and Catholic political philosophy, which saw the pre-Reformation era as a golden age of cooperation between aristocracy and people that he wished to recreate in the present through the concept of 'distributism', in which property would be shared out more equally, but without the dominance of the state.

Sidney and Beatrice Webb, too, had a distinctly anti-Liberal agenda. They sought to emulate the research-based scientific methods of academia, while at the same time writing history to influence social policy in the direction of their own Fabian beliefs. Like the Whigs they saw history as a narrative of progress, but they emphasised the development of public administration and the state, rather than advances in individual liberty. Although not in sympathy with Belloc's Catholic sentiments, they shared with him a hostility to what they saw as the selfish, individualist ideology that prevailed in Britain between 1688 and 1832. Having failed in their efforts to permeate the Liberal party, they increasingly attacked it, aiming through their history to promote rule by experts, something that was anathema to the Liberal tradition.



The remainder of the subjects were less hostile to Liberalism, but were not producing history designed to sustain Liberal politics. J. L. and Barbara Hammond, in their trilogy, *The Village Labourer*, *the Town Labourer* and *The Skilled Labourer,* stressed the damaging human consequences of industrialisation for the working classes. Politically, they were Liberals, and Feske describes their history as a 'subtly shaded attempted to forge a contemporary vindication of Liberalism's ancestry without hiding the warts'. Unfortunately they found themselves condemned by academia and the political right alike for their emotive style, while at the same time they were lionised by the political left, with whom they were not necessarily in sympathy.

The final two subjects, G. M. Trevelyan and Winston Churchill, each tried in slightly different ways to fashion a variant of the Whig interpretation stripped of its partisan political nature. Trevelyan began his career by rejecting academia and stressing in his approach to history his own Liberal convictions and his belief in writing in a literary and accessible style. His trilogy on Garibaldi, published before the First World War, was written in a self-consciously poetic style and dealt with a heroic Liberal cause. But in the wake of the First World War and the decline of the Liberal Party's fortunes, he fashioned a new version of the history of Britain which sought to include the Conservative and Labour traditions within the national history. Churchill, too, in his various historical writings, set out a version of the national history that borrowed from the Whig tradition, but which stressed not just the growth of liberty, but also the extent to which military strength and power was necessary to defend it.

In analysing the relationship between these 'private scholars', the public history they wrote and the decline of Liberal politics, Victor Feske has written a lively and original book which, despite its complex historiographical subject matter, will be accessible to the lay reader. Inevitably in a book devoted to the study of just a few individuals, one is left feeling that some elements of the picture are missing. It would be interesting, for example, to know whether any attempts were made to continue an overtly Liberal historical tradition during the years of the party's decline between the wars. In addition, a more detailed analysis of the impact on Liberalism of the growth of academic history might have helped to give a more complete picture. But, of course, complaints such as these amount to asking the author for a different book from the one he set out to write.

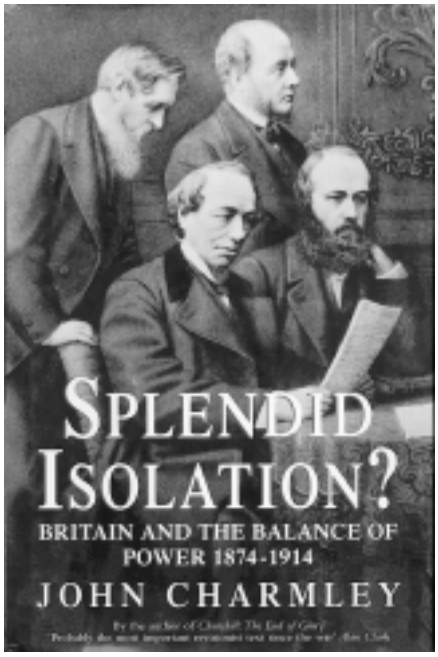
Iain Sharpe is an editor with the University of London External Programme.

I blame Sir Edward Grey

John Charmley: *Splendid Isolation? Britain and the Balance of Power 1874–1914* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1999)

Reviewed by **Peter Truesdale**

The first question about any work of history is 'Why did the author write it?' Charmley, obliging fellow, lays it out for us straight. 'Some historians have argued that Britain has been a power in decline for a good long time. In this version of events, the two world wars were, at most, catalysts which speeded up trends already well under way; at worst, they did no more than validate those trends. One of the implications of the version of events offered here is that participation in the wars was a cause



of British decline. By deciding to abandon the realities of old Conservative tradition for the garish purple of Disraeli's imperial destiny and its Liberal variant, Britain's policy-makers forced her to punch above her weight in global conflict from which she could only emerge severely weakened.'

That tells us all we need to know. Charmley is the great pro-appeaser historian, the sole Tory chronicler of any repute who is willing to say that a deal could (and should?) have been struck with Hitler in 1940 to save the Empire. He could have had Europe, we the colonies. Even Andrew Roberts, cheerleader of the fogey right and worshipper at the shrine of Lord Halifax, has felt it necessary to distance himself from that extremist point of view. Nonetheless, Charmley is a distinguished historian and while his views on current politics, and his wishes of what might have been, shine through the book, we cannot just dismiss it.

To undertake a history, let alone a reinterpretation, of forty years of diplomatic history is no mean undertaking. The history Charmley chronicles is essentially one of Britain's relation to the ebbing and flowing fortunes of the European great powers. This brings us to the great defect of the book. Charmley does not set out the European context of events very effectively. What effect had the unifica-

tion of Germany had on Britain and the other powers? We are not told. What was the Habsburgs' strategy to keep their multi-ethnic Empire on the road? We are left guessing. How dominant in France's foreign policy was a desire to regain Alsace-Lorraine? We are not told. This is a very Anglo-centric book. The intelligent and well-informed reader will be able to infer many of the answers from what Charmley writes but it would have been helpful for him to be explicit.

Charmley is clear about who his own heroes are. The fifteenth Earl of Derby tops the list in the first part of the narrative. Derby was firmly committed to a policy of the avoidance of war and European entanglements. This was for two reasons. The first was the classic old Tory squirearchical argument. It was all very well for the grand noble families to commit Britain to war but its consequences were increased taxation, which fell unduly upon the squires and minor landowners. We hear much of this from Charmley but rather less from him of the Lancashire free trade argument against foreign adventures. A.J.P. Taylor's grandfather, rooted in Lancashire commerce, is supposed to have said on the outbreak of World War One 'Don't they understand that every German as they shoots is a customer?' One would have thought that this argument was rather more important by the end of the nineteenth century than the cry from the shires that fiscal prudence was being sacrificed to the whims of irresponsible grandees.

However, Charmley's focusing on the squirearchical arguments against foreign entanglements allows him to ignore the point of view of the Liberal peace party. He is unwilling to address in any detail the views of the Liberal free trade nonconformist peaceniks. This is a pity. Clearly the central question of British entry into the First World War is how and why Asquith and Grey were able to outmanoeuvre the peace party within the cabinet and parliamentary party. Charmley is clearly unengaged by this question. This is a significant flaw in the book. While it might be convenient in current ideological terms to concentrate on the sanctimonious, interventionist strand within Liberal policy, it is clearly an incomplete picture.

No prizes will be awarded for the second hero of Charmley's narrative. He is the third Marquess of Salisbury. Salisbury is the Tories' Mrs Thatcher of the nineteenth century, the leader who can do no wrong. Salisbury seemingly can lay claim to every strand of Tory virtue. He is the exemplar of *noblesse oblige*, the world-weary Christian pessimist and the visionary of villa Toryism. Doubtless Salisbury was a Victorian Titan but the claims made on his behalf by his latter-day apostles are overblown. On the other hand, Charmley does make out a good case for Salisbury's foreign policy. Salisbury's fundamental perception about the balance of power was that Britain had no overriding interests on the continent beyond shunning entangling alliances and ensuring no one power became dominant. In foreign policy, therefore, Tories should shun dynamic forces and entangling alliances. Clearly this ought to make Britain fundamentally sympathetic to the Austria-Hungarian empire, the power with the most to lose from dynamic action. Britain should be wary too of moves to undermine the Sublime Porte, whose decline could only signal an advance of the European and (worse still) Mediterranean influence of the Russian bear.

Not least of the lamps that were put out for a generation during that hot and ill-fated summer was the lamp of enlightened and peaceful liberalism.

Charmley is not willing to follow through the logic of his own argument by a full and unbuttoned condemnation of Disraeli's flash adventurism. There must be no smashing of crockery within the Tory shrine. Gladstone, however, is dismissed as a sort of John the Baptist to Robin Cook's Messiah. The idea of a moral foreign policy is seen as risible. This poses problems for the historian. Can Gladstone be so lightly dismissed without also dismissing Canning, Palmerston and Russell? At any rate a polite veil is drawn over Dizzy's strayings, while Gladstone is drawn as a stumbler and humbug.

While Charmley is partisan throughout, and has an agenda to which no Liberal Democrat could subscribe, it would be wrong to write him off. His book provides a splendid sweep of the forty years of diplomacy covered and he makes out a good case against Sir Edward Grey. It is hard to see why Grey connived at the hardening of the arteries of European diplomacy in the eight years preceding World War One. The fear of Germany seems particularly ludicrous. Asquith too can surely not escape criticism. To have abandoned Belgium in the summer of 1914 would certainly have been an act of caddishness, but the real question is why had Britain become so thoroughly engaged with France (and thereby Russia) as to be in such a scrape at all. Here Charmley makes out an effective case for the prosecution against Grey. Whether or not Charmley is right in his implicit assumption that Britain was not on a downward trajectory by 1914, he is unquestionably right in asserting that it could not be in Britain's interest to become embroiled in the first Europe-wide war since the days of Napoleon. It is hard to imagine Gladstone embroiling Britain in a full-scale European war. Doubtless he would have slithered out of commitments while maintaining a high-falutin' position of impeccable morality. Sadly Grey had painted Britain into a corner. In the end only Burns and Morley resigned – a victory for Grey but a pyrrhic one. Not least of the lamps that were put out for a generation during that hot and ill-fated summer was the lamp of enlightened and peaceful liberalism.

Peter Truesdale is leader of the Liberal Democrats on Lambeth Council.