

REVIEWS

values and market imperatives, in contrast to civic responsibility and the normative function of the common good.

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'Women's rights and women's duties'

Ursula Masson (ed.), *'Women's Rights and Women's Duties': the Aberdare Women's Liberal Association, 1891–1910* (South Wales Record Society, 2005)

Reviewed by **Eugenio Biagini**

LOCAL WOMEN'S Liberal Associations began to be established in various parts of the country from the early 1880s, but it was the 1886 home rule crisis which gave new impetus to local initiatives and generated a national movement culminating in the formation of the Women's Liberal Federation (WLF) in 1887. The WLF counted 20,000 members by 1888 and continued to grow in the following years. There were several reasons for this development, including the democratisation of the UK electoral system in 1883–85 (which required larger numbers of party workers for tasks at which women excelled) and the intrinsic nature of the issues under discussion from 1886. For Home Rule was more than merely the cause of Irish Nationalism. It was also about participatory citizenship, civil rights, the end of authoritarian rule from Dublin Castle and the plight of the evicted tenants and their families. Thus, supporting Gladstone's Irish policy soon came to signify a commitment to an all-encompassing humanitarian crusade, with clear implications for spheres as diverse as British social reform and foreign policy.

Morality and religion had long been perceived as the twin pillars of the women's 'duty to society', but from 1886, under the combined pressure of

Gladstone's haunting rhetoric and the dictates of the 'nonconformist conscience', they also became central to national party politics. Exploiting the newly-blurred divide between public policy and the private sphere, women started to expand their claims to political rights, hitherto limited to local authority affairs. Feminine Liberalism developed a distinctive agenda, which was formally consistent with contemporary conventions about women's duties in society, and yet subversive of such roles and tasks. As one leaflet proclaimed, 'religion is not more important to our spiritual wants than politics to our material wants ... Religion tells us we should be helpful to one another, and politics shows us how to be helpful, wisely and effectively.'¹ This line of argument was effectively summarised by Lady Aberdeen when she declared that 'Liberalism was the Christianity of politics'.² There was no longer any legitimate room for the selfish pursuit of naked national interest, because politics had become the arena in which moral standards were upheld and religious imperatives applied to the solution of social and constitutional problems. By the same token, humanitarianism, both at home and overseas, emerged as the defining feature of the Gladstonian faith. In the

process, women felt politically empowered and legitimised and rank-and-file female Liberals were gradually won over to suffragism.

Ursula Masson has produced a splendid edition of the papers of one of the best documented local organisations, the Aberdare Women's Liberal Association. The latter was formed in 1891–92 and at its peak had a membership of 500, including eminent nonconformists such as Anne Griffith Jones and Maria Richards, herself a pioneer of women in local government (she served as a Poor Law Guardian from 1894–1929).

Especially in its first ten or fifteen years, the Association attracted suffragists and campaigners for women's rights, issues so hotly debated that they led to a nationwide split within the WLF as a whole in 1892 (a minority of anti-suffragists left the Federation). But the Aberdare WLA was also passionately involved in a range of other issues, especially those pertaining to the humanitarian agenda of contemporary Liberalism – such as the campaign to stop the massacre of Armenian and other Christians in the Ottoman Empire (1894–97) and the 'pro-Boer' agitation to stop British brutalities against civilians in South Africa (1899–1902). These Gladstonian issues were closely related to a parallel concern for human rights at home, which inspired the Association's campaigns on behalf of working-class women and children. For Masson, Liberal women's associations 'considered themselves to be working, above all, for women, rather than party' (p.23), but by so doing they extended the meaning and depth of Liberalism as a whole. The minute book records the meetings of the executive and general committees and includes also the reports of public meetings and speeches. Masson has contributed a substantial introductory essay

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(pp.1–79), which sheds light on the context and meaning of the episodes mentioned in the minutes. *Women's Rights and Women's Duties* is an extremely valuable source for both the history of modern Liberalism and the study of women's political activism at the turn of the century.

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History and a Fellow of Robinson College Cambridge.

- 1 From a leaflet of the Warwick and Leamington Women's Liberal Association, 1890, cit. in L. Walker, 'Party political women: a comparative study of Liberal women and the Primrose League', in J. Rendall (ed.), *Equal or Different: Women's Politics 1800–1914* (Oxford, 1987), p.177.
- 2 Ishbel, Lady Aberdeen, 'We Two'. *Reminiscences of Lord and Lady Aberdeen*, vol.1 (London, 1925), p.278.

From Walpole, 1720, to Blair, 2005

Roger Ellis and Geoffrey Treasure, *Britain's Prime Ministers* (London: Shephard-Walwyn, 2005)

Reviewed by **Dr J. Graham Jones**

THIS IMPRESSIVE, eminently readable tome fills a distinct gap and is to be very warmly welcomed. We are presented with splendid biographical entries for each British Prime Minister from Sir Robert Walpole, generally considered the first to occupy the office, until the present incumbent, Tony Blair. Writing from the vantage point of the summer of 2005, the authors conclude, 'It is too soon to hazard a verdict on Blair's New Labour governments', although they admit that a risk exists that they may well 'be written down as the most disappointing governments of modern times' (p. 292).

Though Walpole never officially held the title of 'Prime Minister', his long tenure as principal minister of the Crown and the dominant figure in the House of Commons effectively established him as Britain's first Prime Minister. The circumstances of the Hanoverian succession left him and his successors more answerable to a majority in Parliament than to the King. Although George III sought a more active role in government, leadership of Parliament became the

determining factor of who was Prime Minister.

The nineteenth century into the twentieth marked a new shift in emphasis. At the beginning of this period, Parliament was dominated by a land-owning oligarchy, but as the franchise was gradually extended to adult male and, finally female, suffrage, the Prime Minister became answerable to the democratic vote. The creation of the welfare state and management of the economy gave a different emphasis to the role in the second half of the twentieth century. These essays, revealing how each holder moulded the office in response to the situation of the time, make a valuable contribution to the current debate about the nature of the office.

The length and detail of the individual entries vary considerably. The average length is about 2,500 words. The longest are reserved for Walpole and Churchill, but several other premiers also receive extended treatments, among them William Pitt the Elder, Pitt the Younger, the Earl of Liverpool, Gladstone, Lloyd George and Margaret Thatcher. By far the

shortest piece is on the little known Duke of Devonshire, who held office for just eight months in 1756–57. But there are also surprisingly brief articles on much more prominent individuals like Rosebery, Sir Henry Campbell Bannerman and Sir Alec Douglas-Home. Even Harold Wilson, who headed four Labour governments and dominated the Labour Party for a long time, is accorded no more than four and a half pages. The authors were no doubt constrained by considerations of space.

All the entries show evidence of wide, thoughtful and up-to-date reading, and the authors have skilfully woven their findings into a coherent narrative with a succinct, accessible style. Their assessments and conclusions are unfailingly judicious and penetrating. The seams of dual authorship are totally invisible, and it would be interesting to know the precise division of labour. Personal details and political history mingle freely. Most of the entries give information on the formative influences on their subjects,

