reconstituted ‘largely on a Labour basis.’”

It is right to admit that Edwardian Liberalism was relatively successful in drawing its support from across the social spectrum. But it had made markedly less progress in broadening the class base of its parliamentary candidates. Just 27 of those nominated in 1906 could be styled manual workers. The typical Liberal MP of this era remained a middle-aged, middle-class businessman or lawyer. Most local Liberal associations had shown themselves extremely reluctant to adopt working-class candidates and it was this more than anything else which had driven working men towards independent political action to further their own sectional interests. Figures such as Keir Hardie, Arthur Henderson and Ramsay MacDonald had all sought adoption as Liberal candidates before deciding that only a new party could secure their goals.

Yes, the Labour threat to Liberalism was by no means fully apparent in 1906, or even 1914. But we should be careful not to underestimate the extent of Labour’s achievement in a period of less than a decade and a half since the Labour Representation Committee was first set up. And, if Labour was not doing well in the by-elections of 1911–14, Keith Laybourn and Jack Reynolds have pointed to considerable Labour progress at a municipal level as early as 1906, and possibly irreversible Liberal decline by 1914. ‘By any yardstick’, they conclude, ‘Labour had made substantial political gains in West Yorkshire between 1906 and 1914. Whilst Liberalism remained the preponderant force at the parliamentary level, the roots of its parliamentary success were being rapidly eroded by Labour at the local level.’

The extent to which the ideas of the New Liberalism had genuinely permeated the ranks of the party remains open to question.

### Reviews

**Prime Ministers of the 20th century**

Haus Publishing’s new series of biographies of British Prime Ministers covers every incumbent of No.10 from Salisbury to Blair. All are written to a uniform template of 176 pages in length, with three illustrations. The authors are a mixture of historians and ‘journalists with a deep sense of the past and a track record of writing history’. Here we review the four biographies of most relevance to the 1906 election and its aftermath. (See advert on page 2.)

#### Campbell-Bannerman


Reviewed by Alison Holmes

Full marks are due to Haus Publishing for their new series. That said, the use of a very broad range of authors, while not in itself a bad thing, especially as so many of them are notable in their fields, seems to have resulted in a lack of consistency of voice and style of analysis that would have been helpful for lay readers and academics alike.

Roy Hattersley’s contribution on Campbell-Bannerman seems a good case in point. As a particular kind of historical writer, Hattersley makes many insightful points about CB’s career. However, whatever his political pedigree in terms of...
the subject matter, his approach also had three specific limitations in this context.

First, Hattersley’s own political experience gives him a particularly interesting perspective and response to many of the events in CB’s life – but a political reflex is not the same as his historical. The book suffers slightly from a sense of not quite knowing if it was meant to be an historical analysis or a political comment on Campbell-Bannerman’s term in office, for the first time. This approach also makes more apparent the habit of a regular writer of repeating certain turns of phrase under different headings. This is not a problem in terms of the content as much as it makes more obvious in this deliberately brief format the devices used for speed by the time-pressed author.

For readers already broadly familiar with Campbell-Bannerman’s leadership, the most important aspect of the book is the bringing together of an examination of CB’s young life and key points in his early political career with his time as Prime Minister. It seems clear that his personality and his background, as well as those first experiences in the political arena, shaped this steady – some might even say boring – man into the radical or progressive he became. The juxtaposition of his personality and political position on various topics of the day is of enduring interest to all those involved in the study of this period of history.

The enjoyment of the book is derived not from being an attempt at a definitive history of a Prime Minister – because it is not. Instead, Hattersley provides a light touch and the easy style of an author happy in his task and familiar with his subject. Hattersley brings his own command of a broad sweep of political history to bear in such a way that you can almost feel that he is writing about friends. To the satisfaction of the reader, the subject matter lends itself to his more intimate political style. This approach may not work so well for other Prime Ministers in this series, but this volume is well worth a read.

Alison Holmes is a post-doctoral fellow at the Rothermere American Institute at Oxford University. She worked for the Liberal Democrats from 1987 to 1997 including three years in Paddy Ashdown’s office and senior positions in both the 1992 and 1997 general election campaigns.

Asquith

Reviewed by David Wrench

When C. L. Mowat, writing in 1955, referred to the ‘giants of the Edwardian era, and of the war’, he undoubtedly regarded Herbert Henry Asquith as one of the foremost among them. The last custodian of a Liberal majority, and the last leader of a Liberal government, he has had few equals in the art of looking and sounding the part of Prime Minister. Revelations about his drinking and his infatuations...