

ASQUITH AND THE

A hundred years ago, in April 1908, Herbert Henry Asquith became Prime Minister. In this lecture, given in the Convocation House, Oxford, on 15 May 2008 to mark the centenary of the formation of Asquith's administration, **Lawrence Goldman** assesses Asquith's record. If we admire Asquith's constitutional and reforming legacies from the Edwardian years, we must likewise recognise the role that he played in a third and less benign bequest to the future, which was to have an enduring impact on the politics of the century to come: the decline of the Liberal Party.

Asquith as Prime Minister, 1911



E LIBERAL LEGACY

ONE HUNDRED years ago, on 8 April 1908, Herbert Henry Asquith kissed hands in the King's hotel room in Biarritz where Edward VII was then holidaying. Asquith had travelled across France alone and incognito to meet the King and receive his commission to form a government.¹ That the King required this of his next Prime Minister, and had not thought it necessary to return to London to assist in the creation of the new ministry, was to become the subject of adverse comment. On his return to London, on 29 April, the parliamentary Liberal Party endorsed Asquith's leadership. This was the first time in British political history that a political party had ratified the monarch's choice in this manner. He went on to hold the office of Prime Minister for nearly nine years, the longest continuous tenure since Lord Liverpool at the end of the Napoleonic Wars.

On 7 May 1908, Asquith introduced the budget he had been preparing that spring as Chancellor of the Exchequer. It was in fact his third and most momentous budget, including provision for old-age pensions – non-contributory weekly payments, financed by general taxation, for those over seventy years of age. The idea was hardly new – a whole generation of social investigators and reformers, as

well as some politicians, had already recognised the need to support the aged poor. But, in the spring of 1908, the introduction of a new type of 'outdoor relief', a national benefit paid without contribution, broke all precedent. No single measure better exemplifies the Edwardian Liberal legacy to us today; in the spring of 1908 we may, without exaggeration, note the origins of what came to be called the welfare state, and Asquith's role in that beginning. Asquith's promotion from 11 to 10 Downing Street likewise had political and personal consequences: it was left to the new Chancellor, David Lloyd George, to introduce and administer old-age pensions, and thus to reap the social and electoral kudos that naturally followed. The old-age pension rapidly became known as 'the Lloyd George', not 'the Asquith'. This was a foretaste of the later confusion and rivalry between the two men that was to compromise them both and came to imprison British Liberalism, at its moment of crisis, in a cage of their joint making.

Asquith has been well served by his major biographers who have all, in their ways, appreciated his political style and admired his achievements, while passing over his weaknesses and failings. In Roy Jenkins, Asquith had a biographer who shared his temperament and outlook, one who revelled in the world of

Edwardian progressivism that he tried to perpetuate throughout his own political career. Jenkins' discretion was so complete that, at the end of his account, he could not bring himself to sum up and pass judgement on Asquith's life as whole. Jenkins gave Asquith the benefit of the doubt at every turn; and did not discuss, least of all question, the motives underlying Asquith's choices.²

The entry on Asquith in the third of the twentieth-century supplements of the *Dictionary of National Biography* was written by another of his admirers, in this case his personal friend J. A. Spender, the notable Liberal journalist and editor of the *Westminster Gazette*, among other papers.³ Prior to the publication of this entry, Spender had collaborated with Asquith's youngest son, Cyril, in a generous biographical tribute to Asquith.⁴ The author, whose life also figures in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, is described as having been 'an ever dependable ministerial loyalist' when Asquith was in power, and had, like Asquith, been a Liberal Imperialist in the 1890s.⁵ Later, Spender's position at the *Westminster Gazette* was undermined by an attempt, traceable to Lloyd George, to have him removed from the editor's chair. The plot failed, only reinforcing Spender's complete suspicion of Lloyd George. Fastidious and fair-minded though he was, the

Asquith has been well served by his major biographers who have all, in their ways, appreciated his political style and admired his achievements, while passing over his weaknesses and failings.

effects of this are clearly read in Spender's memoir of Asquith, which praised his friend above all for the virtues of a Liberal attitude – for his 'dignity, fortitude and charity'; 'his sense of decorum in public affairs, his dislike of mob-oratory and self-advertisement, his high sense of honour'. Spender's praise for Asquith's personal qualities chime with Asquith's own assessment of political requirements: as he told his second wife, Margot, in 1914: 'In public politics as in private life, character is better than brains, and loyalty more valuable than either'.⁶ Neither Spender nor Asquith had much stomach for what they perceived as Lloyd George's recurrent *disloyalties* to his colleagues and party.

The same qualities of quiet dignity and character appealed to Colin Matthew whose memoir on Asquith in the *Oxford DNB* is surely one of the best and most judicious pieces among the many that he wrote in the last years of his life as the first editor of the dictionary.⁷ According to Matthew, who particularly admired Asquith's stoicism in taking Britain into war in 1914, the leader remained a democratic statesman, determined that the normal rituals and processes of democratic government should go on and that a liberal nation should continue to think and act in the same measured and calculated manner of peacetime. Matthew recognised that the very attempt to continue with business as usual brought Asquith down; but with the rest of Europe falling victim to hysteria and jingoism, he paid tribute to Asquith's early control of the war effort. Matthew's portrait of Asquith is of an effective chairman and facilitator, a man who encouraged his subordinates and gave them their heads, rather than leading from the front. According to this biography, Asquith was closer in style to Attlee, the next Prime Minister to preside over

the deliberate expansion of the social and welfare services of the nation, than to the other twentieth-century war leaders, Lloyd George and Churchill. Indeed, it was Churchill who in 1937 left us one of the best portraits of the Asquith *modus operandi*:

In Cabinet he was markedly silent. Indeed he never spoke a word in Council if he could get his way without it. He sat, like the great judge he was, hearing with trained patience the case deployed on every side, now and then interjecting a question or brief comment, searching or pregnant, which gave matters a turn towards the goal he wished to reach.⁸

These were the techniques of peacetime – they did not, however, translate easily to world war. Vaughan Nash, the public servant and Asquith's wartime assistant, later recalled that 'Mr Asquith saw everything down to petty points of routine and detail'.⁹ He meant it as a compliment. Lloyd George was less charitable about the same trait: in a letter of 1915 he complained that 'Asquith worries too much about small points. If you were buying a large mansion he would come to you and say, "Have you thought there is no accommodation for the cat?"'

More recently, Andrew Adonis (Lord Adonis, Minister of Schools, now Transport) has challenged the essentially respectful consensus among historians and biographers who have assessed Asquith's career and legacy.¹⁰ Adonis blames Asquith for not reforming the composition of the House of Lords after having led the great constitutional struggle to limit its powers between 1909 and 1911. Where others have praised Asquith's commitment to ending the Lords' veto of bills sent up from the Commons, over which he was prepared to fight two general elections in 1910, Adonis convicts him of failing to find

a solution to a problem that has not been answered by any government since that time, including the present government of which Adonis is a member.

Asquith and his government were also at fault, according to Adonis, in their handling of the Irish question, although he does not clarify how a Liberal government in London could have prevented the mass resistance of Ulster to the Home Rule Bill of 1912. Adonis also fails to specify how the Asquith government might have dealt with home rule differently once the First World War had begun, and therefore how it could have prevented the incipient civil war that followed and which ended in the partition of Ireland in 1921–22. He recognises that it 'took nearly a century to overcome the bitter legacy' of events in Ireland, in tacit admission of the intractable nature of the situation, but does not acknowledge that the problem was bitten deep into the history of Ireland, rather than having been created by the Asquithian Liberals. Subsequent British administrations, including the Lloyd George coalitions between 1916 and 1922, found no easy solutions to Ireland's religious, economic and national divisions.

Adonis is even more critical of Asquith's failures of statesmanship in the days before the outbreak of the Great War, impugning him for neglecting the crisis in favour of trivial personal pleasures, for failing to understand its gravity, and for failing to deliver a clear and decisive warning to Germany concerning the consequences of its aggression. If it is generally agreed that the signals sent to the German government in the days before the conflict began lacked the severity required by the situation (a criticism which encompassed Asquith's meeting with the German ambassador, Prince Lichnowsky, on 1 August 1914 at which the issues of Belgian neutrality and German naval actions

The same qualities of quiet dignity and character appealed to Colin Matthew whose memoir on Asquith in the Oxford DNB is surely one of the best and most judicious pieces among the many that he wrote in the last years of his life as the first editor of the dictionary.

in the Channel were discussed), it is also generally agreed that most governments across Europe were taken by surprise in July and August 1914 – Asquith and his cabinet were not alone.¹¹ It is also very widely understood that there was little the British could have done to prevent a continental war on two fronts, once mobilisation had begun on the Russian front, for this was the essence of Germany's strategy, planned long in advance of the 1914 conflict. Meanwhile, the old lament that Britain would have done better to stay out of the war, usually the card played by nostalgic imperialists and worse, neglects Britain's historic commitment to a balance of power on the continent, her longstanding guaranty of Belgian neutrality, her alliances with France and Russia and the ideological animus of some British liberals to an aggressive, authoritarian and expansionist German state. Among British progressives in 1914 were those who believed that the war had to be fought and that the fate of Liberalism depended on it: that in fighting they were defending liberal values rather than burying them, as Adonis implies.

With the benefit of hindsight, Adonis convicts Asquith's leadership of various sins of omission, just as the subsequent carnage of the Western Front has led us to underestimate the rational commitment of many Britons who went to war in 1914. But this was not how it appeared to contemporaries, nor did solutions come freely to hand in any of these situations, whether matters of parliamentary reform, self-determination in Ireland, or the fate of Europe. If Asquith's leadership is to be criticised, we must focus instead on the period after the First World War had begun, on his handling of the conflict itself and on his unwillingness to cede power in a dignified manner, in the interest of his party.

After Asquith had settled into his new position as Prime

If Asquith's leadership is to be criticised, we must focus instead on the period after the First World War had begun, on his handling of the conflict itself and on his unwillingness to cede power in a dignified manner, in the interest of his party.

Minister, later in 1908, he came to Oxford, and to his old college, Balliol, to attend a dinner in his honour. It was here, in his after-dinner speech, that he pronounced that statement about Balliol men that has dogged them, and other Oxford men and women trailing in their wake, ever since: 'effortless superiority'. But Asquith's career had not been effortless, and though his maiden speech in the House of Commons in 1887 on the subject of an Irish crimes bill had impressed everyone who heard it, Mr Gladstone included, Asquith had experienced professional struggles and personal sadness in his formative years.¹²

Born into a relatively humble family in Yorkshire in 1852, his father, who was a minor employer in the local wool trade, died when he was eight, and his mother was an invalid. His stroke of luck arrived when he was sent to London to live with relatives and to attend the City of London School, where he won a classical scholarship to Balliol in 1870. A double first and a clutch of university prizes then followed; he was also President of the Union. But perhaps the greatest prize of all, and the most influential of Oxford's legacies on Asquith, was to have been at Balliol during the opening years of Jowett's Mastership of the college, when T. H. Green, the great liberal moral philosopher, was at the height of his powers. Asquith was never, by his own admission, a devotee of Green, but the ethos of social and political service that Green preached at Balliol, which was supported by Jowett, rubbed off. Other Oxford men were more directly affected by their teachings, and argued more vigorously and publicly for a rebalancing of the state's relationship to the citizen in the late-Victorian period – a phenomenon which would become known as the 'New Liberalism' of the Edwardian era. But it was under Asquith's leadership, between 1908 and 1911,

that some of those new plans were transformed into practical policies and politics.

Despite all his brilliance and promise whilst at Oxford, on leaving the university Asquith struggled for a decade as a briefless barrister and occasional Liberal journalist, chafing at his relative poverty and obscurity, though gradually coming to the attention of the leaders in his profession and in his party. He was first elected to the Commons for East Fife in 1886, and continued to represent the constituency until the coupon election of 1918 at the end of the Great War. In 1891 the sudden death of his first wife, Helen, left him chiefly responsible for five young children. Though Asquith's talents brought him to the Home Office for the three years of Liberal government between 1892 and 1895, this was not an easy passage in the history of the Liberal Party, and the era as a whole is more notable for Liberal divisions and the absence of direction than for the purposeful preparation for future power.

When, on the occasion of the election of 1906, after a generation of Conservative dominance, the Liberals' opportunity came again, it was more the consequence of Tory mistakes and unpopularity than the positive endorsement of Liberal values. If the electorate was moved at all by a commitment to Liberalism, it was of an older variety, a recrudescence of the principles of Gladstonian free trade and religious equality, rather than an endorsement of New Liberalism.

Thus Asquith's first legacy as Prime Minister was one he had himself inherited from the past rather than one that he and his generation had fashioned for themselves and subsequently handed down: it was the finishing of constitutional business concerning the House of Lords and Ireland, begun earlier in the nineteenth century. It is doubtful

that Lloyd George's People's Budget of 1909 was deliberately aimed at the Lords – first and foremost it was a genuine and necessary measure of revenue-raising in order to pay for the unexpected costs of welfare and national defence. However, when the Lords rejected the budget, the Chancellor and Prime Minister were ready to use the opportunity to settle the outstanding question of the powers of the upper house. In the first two years of the Liberal administration under Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, from 1906 to 1908, the Lords had vetoed or heavily amended a clutch of lesser Liberal welfare measures. If the Liberals were to fulfil their historic responsibility to Ireland they would first have to deal with the Lords veto, for Gladstone's two previous home rule bills in 1886 and 1893 had been defeated in the upper house.

The epic struggles between 1909 and 1911, the matter of 'the peers versus the people', brought out the best in Asquith and should be regarded as his most notable achievement. In the public defence of historic Liberal principles he had no match. In complex parliamentary negotiations with the Liberal Party's allies, the new Labour Party and the Irish Nationalists, in consultations with the court over what two different kings, Edward VII and George V, would and would not support, and in calculations of electoral mood and advantage which these struggles required – there were, after all, two general elections in 1910 to be conducted and won – Asquith was in his element.

The Asquithian Liberals achieved what their Gladstonian fathers had not: an end to the conflict of powers between Commons and Lords under the Parliament Act of 1911, and the passage of home rule for Ireland in 1912. That the realisation of Irish independence took longer than planned owing to the First World War, that it also took very

many lives, and that the outcome in 1922 was not what any of the parties in London, Dublin and Belfast had desired, was not the responsibility of the Liberal Party that framed and passed the legislation in 1912. In the long history of Liberal attempts to pacify Ireland and to bring justice to its people, Asquith's government deserves the highest credit for the lengths to which it went to fulfil an inherited commitment to Irish self-determination.

Asquith's second great legacy was his government's commitment to the legislative foundations of the welfare state. Old-age pensions were only a part of this; there were also trade boards to regulate minimum wages and conditions in the so-called 'sweated' trades, labour exchanges to help the unemployed find jobs and contributory National Insurance to protect the unemployed when they fell sick or were laid off. Likewise, the People's Budget of 1909, when eventually agreed by both houses of Parliament, not only confirmed the pre-eminence of the Commons in all financial matters, but also established the principle that progressive taxation would be used thereafter to fund redistributive social programmes.

The ideas underpinning this historic series of changes in the role of the state and the responsibilities of the individual had, in fact, been developing and maturing since the 1870s and 1880s. Stimulated by the social investigation into poverty of the late-Victorian era, and debated and disseminated by the organs of Liberal opinion and by Liberal intellectuals outside of the government, they were fashioned into workable policies by New Liberals in parliament and the cabinet, such as Lloyd George and Churchill. Key civil servants inside government departments, like the Board of Trade and Board of Education, also played an important role in their dissemination. The filtration of

ideas from T. H. Green's Balliol was slow and complex, without doubt, but nonetheless reached Asquith's cabinet. As Chancellor, Asquith had the energy and initiative to devise social policy and as Prime Minister he had the requisite sympathy and vision to encourage other ministers in social innovation.

But the price exacted on Asquith's personal life over these years – surely among the most intense and also the most exciting in modern British political history – was high indeed. His colleagues noted his growing fondness for alcohol from about 1910. According to Churchill in April 1911, Asquith was perfectly competent until dinner – 'serene, efficient, undisturbed' – but after that he was forced to entrust proceedings to his younger colleague. As Churchill wrote to his wife, 'only the persistent freemasonry of the House of Commons prevents a scandal'.¹³ We can sense the pressure Asquith was under from the teasing letters he wrote to Venetia Stanley in the years leading up to the war, which have now been brought together and edited in a single volume by Michael and Eleanor Brock.¹⁴ In their very playfulness and sometimes even in their triviality, these letters tell us how desperately Asquith needed a release from the concerns of office. The problems only intensified after August 1914, when Asquith's quest for such release not only conflicted with the pressing needs of government but also with the public's perception of how a leader during a world war should behave. As Bonar Law, the leader of the Conservative Party in the wartime coalition, had warned him in a letter of February 1916, 'In war it is necessary not only to be active but to seem active'.¹⁵

We know from Colin Matthew's memoir that Asquith enjoyed playing bridge in the evenings but that he never played cards after lunch or

The Asquithian Liberals achieved what their Gladstonian fathers had not: an end to the conflict of powers between Commons and Lords under the Parliament Act of 1911, and the passage of home rule for Ireland in 1912.

before dinner. Matthew said nothing about cards in the *morning*, however. There is a fateful story of Asquith's premiership in June 1916 in which bridge *before* lunch features, though the story is disputed and the events may never have occurred in this manner. Following the death at sea of the War Minister, Lord Kitchener, Bonar Law apparently went in search of the Prime Minister to discuss the ministerial succession. Told that Asquith was still at his home in Sutton Courtenay on a Monday morning three weeks before the Somme offensive, he was forced to motor down to talk with him. 'He found the Prime Minister engaged in a rubber of bridge with three ladies. Asquith genially requested him to wait till the game was finished. Bonar Law, by now considerably annoyed, declined to wait.'

'Asquith immediately offered the War Office to Bonar Law', but the latter explained that he had already bowed to Lloyd George's determination to follow Kitchener. 'So Asquith agreed to offer the post to Lloyd George'. Little wonder that 'the episode left a lasting impression upon Bonar Law'.¹⁶ Little wonder also that in the second half of 1916, as the shocking news from the Somme registered in the national mind and in its soul, the Conservative press should have begun a campaign against Asquith's handling of the war that assisted in his replacement as Prime Minister by Lloyd George in the first week of December. We must note here that Bonar Law's passenger as he motored to Oxfordshire on that Monday in June was none other than Max Aitken, later Lord Beaverbrook, the owner of the *Daily Express*, who was to play a large public and also a private role in Asquith's demise.

As early as the spring of 1915 even the loyal Spender had privately criticised Asquith's war leadership: the reason for much of the hostility of the press, he

had written, 'is A's laziness & lack of ideas'.¹⁷ By the autumn of 1916 Lloyd George and many others had come to believe that the organisation of the government and its consequent policy could not win the war, and that Asquith should stand aside. As Kenneth Morgan has suggested, the problem with Asquith by this stage was 'not so much political as psychological. Lloyd George simply looked like the vigorous, dynamic leader who could win the war, while the faltering Asquith, so dominant in peacetime, did not'.¹⁸ Lloyd George's plan for a new War Cabinet, excluding Asquith, precipitated the crisis and Asquith's fall.

According to Enoch Powell, 'All political lives, unless they are cut off in midstream at a happy juncture, end in failure, because that is the nature of politics and human affairs'.¹⁹ No one knew this better than Powell himself. That he should have written it in his biography of Joseph Chamberlain is, in the present context, not without interest. Though Chamberlain's career was cut short by a sudden stroke rather than a happy juncture, no one did more in 1903 to worst Chamberlain and his campaign for tariff reform than Asquith himself, whose speeches across the nation at that time in defence of free trade were among his most notable contributions to the re-emergence of his party and to the history of British Liberalism. But Powell's dictum points us towards one of the great problems of political life in any age or any type of political system: how to make a good ending. For it may be argued that by making a *bad ending*, Asquith's third legacy was his contribution to the division of the Liberal Party that destroyed it as the major party of the British left.

Historians have long debated the reasons for the decline of the Liberal Party during this period. For some, the origins of the problem can be found in the 1880s and 1890s when the

It may be argued that by making a bad ending, Asquith's third legacy was his contribution to the division of the Liberal Party that destroyed it as the major party of the British left.

party's historic attempt to unite the workers and the bourgeoisie in a political coalition began to break down. The middle classes moved towards Conservatism; the workers felt ignored and unprotected and their trade unions provided the basis for the new Labour Party. Others have pointed to the decay of local Liberal organisations across the country, often as a result of the defection of richer local Liberals to the right, who took their money and flair for local politics with them.²⁰ Prior to the Second World War, the American historian George Dangerfield saw the 'death of Liberal England' prefigured in the industrial and social conflicts of the years immediately preceding the First World War: Liberal rationalism was unable to manage the violence and emotionalism of nationalists, feminists and syndicalists.²¹

Asquith, indeed, was a notable opponent of women's suffrage until 1918, speaking as well as voting against it on many occasions. Nor was his handling of industrial disputes sure or instinctive. His use of the Metropolitan Police to control disorder among locked-out miners at Featherstone in 1893, resulting in two deaths, haunted him for the rest of his career; just as Churchill was always reminded of the deaths at Tonypandy in 1911, the cry of 'Remember Featherstone!' was often heard at an Asquith rally. At the very end of his life he took a public stance against the General Strike, though Lloyd George, whose condemnation was reserved for Baldwin's government, contradicted him once more.²² Concerning important issues of the present and future – the rights of workers and women in these cases – Asquith provides some evidence in support of the so-called 'Dangerfield thesis'.

For Colin Matthew and Ross McKibbin, meanwhile, the crucial development came later in the mass enfranchisement at

the end of the First World War. From this point of view, it was inevitable that the millions of working-class men and women now voting for the first time would automatically align with values of the Labour Party. It is undeniable that in the years following 1918, a crucial stage at which the electorate was changing and when many of its new members were forming political allegiances for the first time, the division of Liberalism between supporters of Asquith and of Lloyd George fatally compromised Liberal identity and encouraged the anti-Tory vote to drift towards Labour.²³

That the major cause for this division was Lloyd George's decision to prolong the wartime coalition and to campaign against those Liberals who were not granted the 'coupon' (the joint letter of endorsement that he and Bonar Law had signed) is not in doubt. But it may be argued as well that Asquith could have chosen to try to conciliate. Beyond the enmity caused by the manner of his removal from office, there is no doubt that Asquith was also taking a principled stance against Lloyd George's ambition and vanity, and in favour of traditional Liberal principles and codes of political behaviour. But for the rest of his life he would remain locked in a fatal embrace with his former ally – a dance of political death, in fact – which undermined his party as it was being squeezed away from both the left and the right. This essentially resulted in both Asquith and Lloyd George being deprived of high office.

Asquith could have bowed out with dignity in the early months of the war at a stage when he had successfully overseen mobilisation and the transition to a war footing in government. He might have resigned when the coalition was formed in May 1915, even if it had been interpreted as accepting some of the blame for the 'shell shortage' of that spring. He

could have followed the public mood more sensitively and made way for Lloyd George at almost any stage in 1916. In September of that year, his brilliant and charismatic son Raymond was killed on the Somme. A month later when he became seriously ill as a consequence of this news, coupled with the general strain of wartime leadership, Margot thought him 'absolutely done', and he might have bowed to the evidence of growing fatigue.²⁴ After his fall from power he could have retired with dignity to the backbenches and worked to minimise Liberal divisions. But Asquith's decision to move a motion of censure on the government in May 1918 over the question of troop numbers on the Western Front – which failed when Lloyd George mounted a bravura defence of his conduct in the subsequent Commons debate – irreparably divided the party.

True, he had performed wonders behind the scenes as a wartime Prime Minister holding together the cabinet and the wider administration (despite its often fissiparous tendencies). Asquith no doubt imagined that these skills were still required and at a premium. However, in light of the numerous opportunities which had presented themselves – and which Asquith had failed to take – that would have enabled him to finish on a more positive note and to reduce the divisions in his party, it is difficult to sympathise with his case. His incapacity to bow out gracefully at an appropriate time essentially contributed to the undermining of Liberal identity and the party's political authority which has endured to this day.

There is no better example of Asquith's lack of self-awareness at the end of his career than his request, put to Lloyd George in person, that he should be made a member of the British delegation at the Paris peace conference in 1919.²⁵ Would Gordon Brown take Tony Blair with him to the next summit? Could John Major

Asquith's decision to move a motion of censure on the government in May 1918 over the question of troop numbers on the Western Front – which failed when Lloyd George mounted a bravura defence of his conduct in the subsequent Commons debate – irreparably divided the party.

have taken Margaret Thatcher with him to Maastricht in 1992? Merely to think of these alternative scenarios from our own age is to recognise the impossibility of Asquith's position. Instead of statesmanship on a global scale Lloyd George gave Asquith a little piece of local parish-pump politics as a sort of consolation: chairmanship of the Royal Commission on Oxford and Cambridge in 1919–22. He performed his duties well, though in a conservative fashion, sticking closely to the patterns that had been laid down by the preceding Victorian Royal Commissions on the two ancient universities. As the Oxford historian Sir Charles Firth wrote at the time, 'My impression is that Asquith's views on higher education are those prevalent at Balliol in 1870 and that he has learnt nothing about it since.'²⁶

As his committee collected evidence on the state of the two institutions, an exchange took place that illustrates the impression made by Asquith on the younger generation – those who had fought in the war and were hoping to set about social reconstruction in the following years. This was, in fact, an exchange between two Balliol men, with Asquith in the chair and the economic historian and socialist thinker, R. H. Tawney, twenty-eight years his junior, giving evidence on how to make Oxford more open and accessible to the children of the working class. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*, we might say. But the tone of the exchange and Tawney's evident frustration with his interlocutors on the committee, Asquith included, suggests that more than university politics were at issue.²⁷ For Tawney had come within an inch of his life, quite literally, on the first day of the Somme, taking two bullets in his chest. When he had recovered, convalescing in Oxford in the Examination Schools, which had become one vast military hospital for the duration of the

conflict, he dedicated himself to a democratisation of the war, which, he argued, had been fought by a traditional class in a traditional manner and to the detriment of the nation.²⁸

We might hypothesise that when Tawney confronted Asquith in 1921 he saw before him a prime specimen of 'the old gang' whom he held responsible for multiple national failings after 1914, and even perhaps before. Asquith, the Edwardian progressive, now seemed to personify the weakness of a played-out ruling elite to a new generation of more radical and impatient reformers. Tawney was perhaps the pre-eminent intellectual guide and inspiration of the inter-war left in Britain, arguing, in this case, for the accessibility and therefore the reduction in cost of a university education and the opening up of Oxford and Cambridge to the sons and daughters of the middle and working classes. For him, Asquith was a figuration of the politics and social values of the past. Later, in 1925, when Asquith was a candidate for the Chancellorship of Oxford, he was beaten soundly, by more than two to one, by the candidate of the right, Lord Cave, the then Conservative Lord Chancellor. The centre did not hold; at the end of his career Asquith was assailed from right and from left, as well as from sections of his own party who had remained loyal to Lloyd George.

At this stage Asquith was referred to as the 'last of the Romans'; this was meant as a compliment.²⁹ However, whereas the Romans knew when to fall on their swords, Asquith may simply have stayed too long. Given the nature and strength of the historical forces that were challenging Liberalism after 1911, the last year of the heroic phase of Asquith's career, it would be impossible to argue with any certainty or conviction that the outcome would have been different if he

If we admire Asquith's constitutional and reforming legacies from the Edwardian years, we must likewise recognise the role that he played in a third and less benign bequest to the future, which was to have an enduring impact on the politics of the century to come: the decline of the Liberal Party.

had shown more self-awareness and self-possession. But if we admire Asquith's constitutional and reforming legacies from the Edwardian years, we must likewise recognise the role that he played in a third and less benign bequest to the future, which was to have an enduring impact on the politics of the century to come: the decline of the Liberal Party.

Dr Lawrence Goldman is Fellow and Tutor in Modern History, St. Peter's College, Oxford and has been Editor of the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography since its publication in 2004.

- 1 J. A. Spender and Cyril Asquith, *Life of Herbert Henry Asquith, Lord Oxford and Asquith* (2 vols., London, Hutchinson, 1932), I, pp. 196–97.
- 2 Roy Jenkins, *Asquith* (London, Collins, 1964)
- 3 J. A. Spender, 'Asquith, Herbert Henry, first Earl of Oxford and Asquith', *Dictionary of National Biography, Supplement 1922–1930*, pp. 29–40.
- 4 Spender and Asquith, *Life of Herbert Henry Asquith*.
- 5 A. J. A. Morris, 'Spender, John Alfred', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) vol. 51, 899–902.
- 6 Margot Asquith, *The Autobiography of Margot Asquith* (London: Thornton Butterworth, 2 vols, 1920–22), II, p. 202.
- 7 H. C. G. Matthew, 'Asquith, Herbert Henry, first earl of Oxford and Asquith', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), vol. 2, 735–54.
- 8 Winston S. Churchill, *Great Contemporaries* (London: Butterworth, 1937), p. 140.
- 9 Spender and Asquith, *Life of Henry Herbert Asquith*, II, pp. 376–77.
- 10 Andrew Adonis, 'A Liberal Tragedy', *Prospect*, April 2008, pp. 14–15.
- 11 Stephen Koss, *Asquith* (London: Allen Lane, 1976), p. 158.
- 12 Spender and Asquith, *Life of Herbert Henry Asquith*, I, p. 56; Jenkins, *Asquith*, pp. 44–45.
- 13 W. S. Churchill to Clementine Churchill, 22 April 1911, in Randolph S. Churchill, *Winston S. Churchill*, vol. II (1901–1914) (London: Heinemann, 1967), p. 344.
- 14 M. Brock and E. Brock (eds.), *H. H. Asquith: Letters to Venetia Stanley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).
- 15 Spender and Asquith, *Life of Herbert Henry Asquith*, II, p. 230.
- 16 Robert Blake, *The Unknown Prime Minister* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1955), pp. 289–90 There is an unresolved dispute about the details of this incident and about Bonar Law's recollections of it. See Jenkins, *Asquith*, pp. 321n–322n and p. 457n.
- 17 E. T. Cook's diary, 1 and 3 April 1915, cited in Stephen Koss, *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2 vols, 1981 and 1984), II, p. 272.
- 18 K. O. Morgan, 'Lloyd George, David', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), vol. 21, 890–912, quotation at 899.
- 19 J. Enoch Powell, *Joseph Chamberlain* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977), p. 151.
- 20 Paul Thompson, *Socialists, Liberals and Labour: The Struggle for London 1885–1914* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967).
- 21 George Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (London: Constable, 1936).
- 22 Spender and Asquith, *Life of Herbert Henry Asquith*, II, pp. 361–62.
- 23 H. C. G. Matthew, R. I. McKibbin and John Kay, 'The Franchise Factor in the Rise of the Labour Party', *English Historical Review*, 91, 1976, pp. 723–52.
- 24 Jenkins, *Asquith*, pp. 465–66.
- 25 *Ibid.*, pp. 538–9, 546.
- 26 Koss, *Asquith*, p. 244.
- 27 Royal Commission on Oxford and Cambridge Universities, oral evidence, Bodleian Library, MS Top Oxon b 109, fos. 524–42, Evidence of R. H. Tawney, 21 September 1921.
- 28 Lawrence Goldman, *Dons and Workers: Oxford and Adult Education Since 1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 198–200.
- 29 See Jenkins, *Asquith*, ch. xxviii, 'The Last of the Romans'.