

own ministers, John Gladstone agreed to finance the building and endowment of a new Church of Scotland Church (St. Thomas') in his native Leith on condition that its patronage (the right to present ministers) was vested in himself with reversion to his son, William. (The Congregation of St. Thomas' united with another Leith Congregation in 1975 with the former St. Thomas' building being reopened as a Sikh temple in 1976!)

Then, when the last political attempt to avert the Disruption of the Church of Scotland in 1843 was made by Fox Maule (then an opposition Whig MP and later, as 2nd Lord Panmure, Secretary of State for War in Palmerston's Whig/Radical/Peelite Cabinet of 1855–58), W.E. Gladstone (then Vice-President of the Board of Trade in Peel's Tory administration) voted with the majority (211–76) in the House of Commons on 8 March (1843) against Fox Maule's motion, although it was supported by a majority (25–12) of Scottish MPs present and voting. The Disruption of the Church of Scotland (with the departure of 480 ministers to form the original Free Church) was then inevitable and followed some ten weeks later on 18 May (1843).

W.E. Gladstone published his own views on the Disruption in 1844, stating that as all Presbyterians had rejected the prelatial 'apostolic succession' – the only true basis of ecclesiastical authority – none of them were capable of resisting the Erastian doctrine that authority over their churches' spiritual functions lay ultimately with civil authority. The future Prime Minister had clearly not understood the assertion that the Presbyterian form of church government is agreeable to the Word of God or that in the New Testament the words bishop, presbyter and elder are used to refer to exactly the same office in the Church.

Although in later life, and then depending on the votes of nonconformists in England and Presbyterians in Scotland, W.E. Gladstone came to modify his views on Church–State

relations, it really is somewhat perplexing to know how he ever came to secure such support.

Dr. Alexander (Sandy) S. Waugh

REVIEWS

An extraordinary life

Paddy Ashdown: A Fortunate Life: The Autobiography of Paddy Ashdown (Aurum Press, 2009)

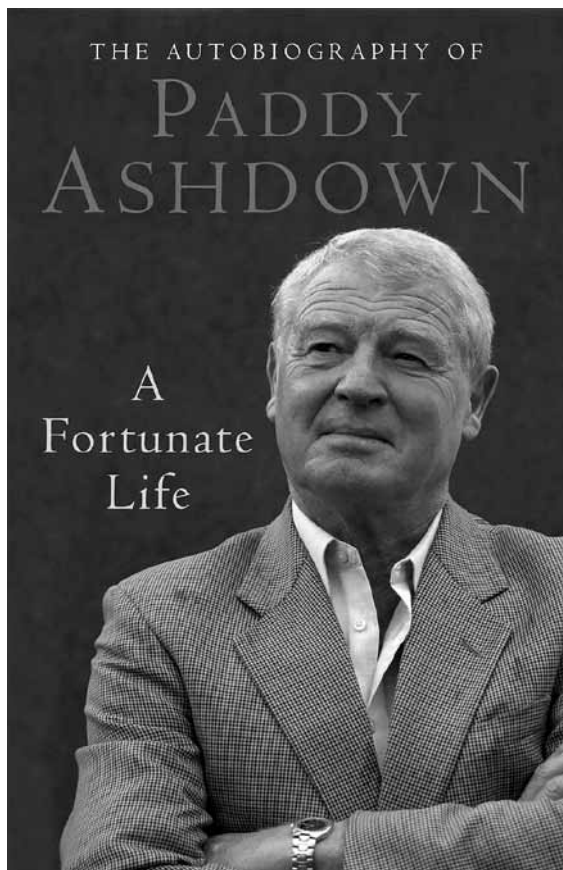
Reviewed by **Duncan Brack**

THE ONLY real problem with this book is that its readers are likely to end up feeling a little inadequate. By the time he was my age, Paddy Ashdown was on to his fourth main career, having spent thirteen years in the Royal Marines and Special Boat Service, four years as a diplomat and spy, another seven years in a variety of jobs (or unemployed) while trying to win Yeovil, and a further seven years as an MP, including almost two years as the first leader of the Liberal Democrats. After standing down as leader in 1999 (the only Liberal Democrat leader to date to resign entirely of his own volition), he had another two years as an MP before becoming, effectively, governor of Bosnia & Herzegovina for four years – and he is still carrying out a variety of jobs and roles while being a member of the party's team in the House of Lords.

The huge degree of energy and commitment this demanded shine out from this highly engaging autobiography. In fact only five chapters (out of

sixteen) cover Ashdown's political career, from 1976 to 2001, and much of the material in the three chapters dealing with his leadership will be familiar to anyone who has read his *Diaries* (reviewed in *Journal of Liberal History* 30 and 41). Nevertheless, the earlier chapters are of course relevant to the story of Ashdown the politician, in helping to explain why he became the MP and leader he was. His father, for example (ex-Indian Army, argumentative, politically radical and never afraid to hold a minority opinion) was clearly a key figure in his life; indeed, he claims that 'if there has been a single driver during what I suppose has been a pretty driven life, it has been to do things which would have earned the approval of my father' (p. 28). His upbringing in Northern Ireland left him with a dislike of sectarianism (reinforced by a period of soldiering in the province in 1970–71), and his years at boarding school in Bedford gave him self-confidence and self-discipline, together with an enquiring mind and a drive to

The huge degree of energy and commitment this demanded shine out from this highly engaging autobiography.



learn and to compete; also self-sufficiency and a dislike of clubbishness. His years in the army, and the social structure behind its officer class, reinforced his progressive beliefs. All these characteristics were still strongly evident to those who worked with him in the party thirty years later.

In general Ashdown is frank and open (and self-deprecating) in his opinions of himself, but there are a few odd omissions; for example, no reflection is offered on his years in the Marines and the Special Boat Service (including combat in Borneo and Northern Ireland) upon leaving them in 1972. Rather more explicable is his lack of comment on his activities as a spy from 1972 to 1976 (or perhaps later, who knows?) – as he says, he ‘undertook a lifetime obligation never to reveal in public either the name of the organisation for which I worked or anything beyond the barest outline of what I did’ (p. 151). Instead, this chapter focuses on his public activities

for the Foreign Office, mainly at the UK mission to the United Nations in Geneva.

Ashdown only joined the Liberal Party by a lucky chance. In January 1974, while digging in the garden of his cottage in Yeovil, he was interrupted by a Liberal canvasser, who ‘wore an orange anorak, looked rather unprepossessing and had a squeaky voice to match’ (p. 156). Despite his scepticism, he invited him in, and ‘two hours later, having discussed liberalism at length in our front room, I discovered that this was what I had really always been. That Liberalism was an old coat that had been hanging in my cupboard, overlooked all these years, just waiting to be taken down and put on’ (p. 156). The party has much to thank for the fact that the unnamed visitor (Ashdown tried to locate him later, but never could) was not one of its modern canvassers, trained only to identify existing or probable supporters and to move on, not to waste time discussing politics with them ...

The most fascinating chapter, for me, was ‘The Winning of Yeovil’, the story of Ashdown’s seven years’ work to take what seemed like a hopelessly unwinnable seat – which did not feature, of course, in the leadership *Diaries*. When Ashdown was selected in November 1976, the Tories had held Yeovil since 1911, the Liberals had generally come third in general elections and had only one councillor in the constituency. The sheer hard bloody slog of the following seven years ought to be compulsory reading for everyone who thinks MPs are in it for their own personal gain; having given up a promising civil service career (a decision he describes as ‘naïve to the point of irresponsibility. It just happens also to be the best decision I have made in my life.’ (p. 162)), Ashdown had to find a succession of jobs, and spent a year unemployed. He ran down

the family savings to the point (in August 1982) where he was virtually bankrupt; only a completely unexpected cheque from the Rowntree Trust saved him from returning, in desperation, to the Foreign Office (another of the might-have-been moments of Lib Dem politics).

Ashdown’s strategy for winning Yeovil assumed it would take three elections, including beating Labour into second place in the first one, and concentrating on local elections, delivering leaflets, using the local press and developing and using local, not national, messages. All this is standard orthodox now, of course, but was much less common in the mid-1970s (though not unknown; Ashdown acknowledges his debt to Liberals in neighbouring constituencies). The implementation of the strategy included establishing weekly surgeries – to which Ashdown’s wife Jane’s free coffee and biscuits provided an important enticement – setting up a printing press and running auctions and discos. It also required targeting the Labour-voting areas of the seat – the reverse of the normal Liberal strategy – and recruiting working-class activists. The strain of all this effort on Ashdown and his family is clear. But it worked – he took second place from Labour in 1979, achieving the highest Liberal vote since the war, and the party won all ten council seats it contested on the same day. And in 1983 – at the second try, not the third – he won the seat (a result which was misheard by someone at party HQ, which then issued press releases claiming the Liberals had won ‘The Oval’).

Several of Ashdown’s characteristic features become clear in this chapter. First, his self-belief and love of a challenge, perhaps fuelled by not thinking about it too clearly ahead of time – exemplified by deciding to fight Yeovil in the first place; as he says, quoting David

Penhaligon, he won because ‘he was too naïve to know it was impossible (p. 166). Second, his penchant for plans – as in his three-election strategy for the constituency. Third, his political courage; he cites a couple of instances where he took principled positions (over the siting of a care home, and over sales of Westland helicopters to Pinochet’s Chile – Westland was the largest local employer) which were unpopular locally. Although his comments caused some local difficulty, they did not appear to damage his prospects in the long term; ‘Many voters want their MP to do what is right and often respect those who do, even while disagreeing with them. The scope for a bit of courage in politics is far greater than we think it is.’ (p. 199). And finally, his love for the party and his respect for its activists – not a universal characteristic of leaders:

... all my life I had, I thought, gained satisfaction from working among the elites – from mixing with those who were the best of the best of their profession. The Liberal Party and its members, then and now, do not pretend to be the elite. They are, for the most part, the very ordinary in the best sense of that word. And yet, somewhat to my surprise, I have felt a greater sense of privilege working with them, and been more humbled and inspired by what they were able to achieve through dedication, sacrifice and a refusal to accept the odds, than I ever felt amongst the elites of my previous careers. (p. 170)

One other characteristic of these early days was a reluctance to appear on the national stage; Ashdown was, he admits, ‘far too frightened’ to speak at his first Liberal Assembly, in 1976. This one didn’t last, of course, although he deliberately avoided getting too involved in

national party politics, preferring to concentrate on Yeovil. Nevertheless, he opened the – successful – debate on a motion against cruise missiles in 1981 (which led to one of the party’s peers asking ‘Who is this bloody by scout, Paddy Ashdown?’ (p. 200)), which gave him an unwarranted (as he warned the party radicals at the time) reputation as a unilateralist.

The next chapter, about Ashdown’s experiences as an MP from 1983 to 1987, is rather sketchier, though it reveals one more characteristic – his tendency to sound self-righteous, and sometimes rather shrill, when speaking in the Commons, which stemmed, he believed, from his dislike – and perhaps fear – of the parliamentary style. It also describes his early planning, which started in late 1986, for the leadership election which was expected to follow the general election.

The three chapters dealing with the leadership, from 1988 to 1999, will be much more familiar to *Journal* readers: the struggle for survival post-merger, as membership, finances and support all crashed disastrously; after that was successfully overcome, beginning to establish distinctive positions for the party, initially over Hong Kong and the Gulf War (which Ashdown reckons was the key event crystallising his own public image), later over education, the environment, Maastricht and Bosnia; the careful attempts to edge the Liberal Democrats and Labour closer together in the wake of Labour’s third election defeat in 1992; ‘the project’ with Blair, and its ultimate failure in the light of New Labour’s electoral landslide in 1997 and Blair’s inability or unwillingness to deliver anything much of substance.

Along the way Ashdown freely admits his mistakes, including most notably the decision to back the short name ‘Democrats’ for the merged party in 1988 – ‘being a relative

outsider compared to the older MPs ... I had, in my rush to create the new party, failed to understand that a political party is about more than plans and priorities and policies and chromium-plated organisation. It also has a heart and a history and a soul ...’ (p. 246). It is also clear how much he relied on his predecessor, David Steel, to help him manage the parliamentary party in the early days.

He does not discuss whether ‘the project’ may itself have been an error, though this has been a case argued by many, including, for instance, Tony Greaves (‘The “what if” question must be how much more could have been achieved if all that time at the top and personal energy had been spent on something other than “The Project”.’) The sheer number of times that Tony Blair claimed he needed more time, after his election in 1997, to deliver major constitutional reform and a closer relationship with the Lib Dems, with Ashdown effectively powerless to press him to move faster, must lead the reader to question whether Blair was ever serious about the relationship. In retrospect, Ashdown reckons he should have pushed for a coalition immediately after the 1997 election:

It is my experience that far more mistakes are made in life by being too careful than by being too bold ... I have come to deeply regret the decisions both of us took that morning, and I suspect that Blair has too. For what we lost in the very early hours of 2 May [1997] was, I think, a unique opportunity to do something really historic: to enter into a partnership government at the optimum moment – not because we have been forced to do so ... but on the high ground of principle and in the aftermath of a great victory. This could, in my view, have led to a complete realignment

‘The Liberal Party and its members, then and now, do not pretend to be the elite. They are, for the most part, the very ordinary in the best sense of that word.’

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of the Centre Left in British politics ... and a partnership with the Lib Dems might, I also allow myself to believe, have prevented some of the worst aspects of the Blair government ... (p. 303).

In the end, Ashdown thinks that Blair was sincere, but did not care about it enough – so that John Prescott or Gordon Brown were able to talk him out of the coalition strategy. The result was that the two leaders spent much of the following three years ‘trying to blow as much heat as we could into the dying embers of a partnership that had lost its fundamental purpose: to “change politics and heal the schism”, as Blair himself had put it’ (p. 304). Ashdown now recognises

that the best chance for a coalition had gone by October 1997, but in the event it took another twelve months for it to disappear entirely: it was Labour’s response to the report of the Jenkins Commission on electoral reform in October 1998, which failed to set any timetable for a referendum, and Jack Straw’s rubbishing of the proposals in public, which led Ashdown to conclude that ‘the project’ had failed and that his time as leader should end. (He had already decided, before the 1997 election, that he would stand down at some point in the next parliament.) All of this is explained in more detail in the *Diaries*, of course, but they were in many cases so detailed that readers will gain a better overall picture from reading this

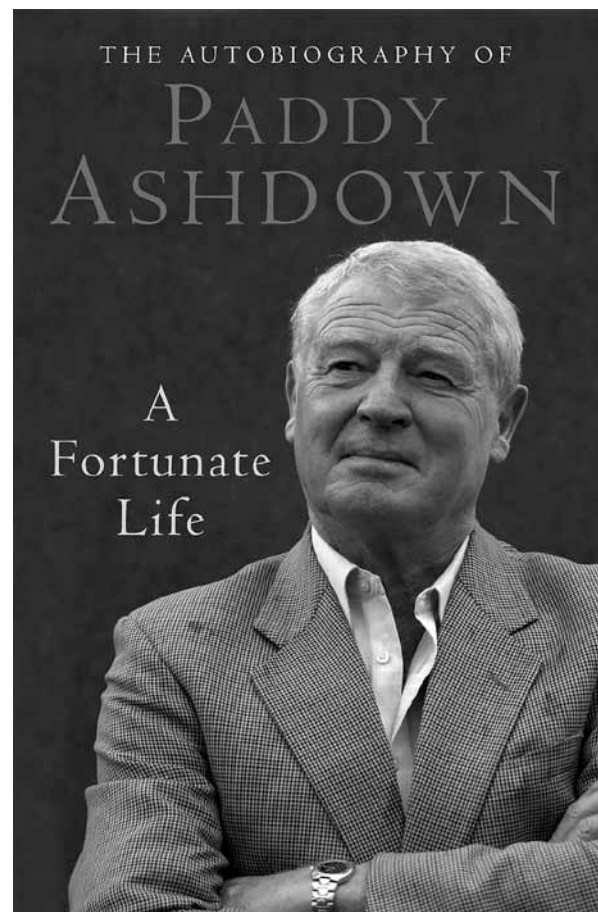
book. There is also a little extra material, most notably a comment by Robin Cook (kept out of the *Diaries* because he was still alive at the time of publication) after the Cabinet debate on the Jenkins report that ‘he was really worried about Blair’s lack of leadership and inability to make decisions sometimes’ (p. 322).

The rest of the book is mainly taken up with Bosnia, where Ashdown served as High Representative and EU Special Representative from 2002 to 2006. I could have done with more detail here – Ashdown paints a broad, and often personal and moving, picture, but without explaining at much length the actions he took – but perhaps that’s waiting for another book.

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Paddy Ashdown is the most significant Liberal leader since Jo Grimond. It is probable that the party would have collapsed entirely without his leadership – instead, it recovered from a standing in the opinion polls within the statistical margin of error of zero to win a higher number of Commons seats than at any time since 1929. Although his ultimate aim – to change the system of government in Britain – failed, it was worth the attempt (and some aspects of Labour’s constitutional reforms would probably not have been implemented without the pre-election agreement with the Liberal Democrats).

This book is of substantial importance to the history of the

Liberal Democrats and to the study of Liberal leadership. And more than that, it is a highly engaging and readable record not just of a remarkable political career but of an entire life lived at a furious pace – as Ashdown himself says in conclusion, quoting Lao Tse, ‘with the speed of a galloping horse’.

Duncan Brack is the Editor of the Journal of Liberal History, and the author of ‘Liberal Democrat Leadership: The Cases of Ashdown and Kennedy’, Political Quarterly 78:1, 2007.

1 Tony Greaves, ‘Audacious – but fundamentally flawed’, review of *The Ashdown Diaries – Volume 1: 1988–1997*, *Journal of Liberal History* 30 (spring 2001).

led him to the books he bought and read? What was it about him – his personality, aspirations, anxieties – that made him read?’ (p. 3)), and partly historical, such as the author’s systematic and usually successful attempt to decipher the way specific books influenced Gladstone’s attitude to political and social problems, such as the Pope’s claims to infallibility or Irish Nationalist demands for Home Rule. Her analysis of the GOM’s annotations and diaries is revealing even when applied to apparently unpromising works: for example, his collection of travel guides discloses that ‘Gladstone was an inquisitive, independent-minded, and interactive traveller. His reading and use of tourist guides and maps ... reveals both his desire to be informed about the foreign environments in which he found himself, and also his determination not to be passively reliant on such information’ (p. 75).

Reading the man through his books

Ruth Clayton Windscheffel, *Reading Gladstone* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008)

Reviewed by Eugenio F. Biagini

THE GRAND Old Man (GOM) has inspired so many biographies and monographs that writing something new about him is – one would be justified in believing – pretty hard. Yet, Dr Windscheffel deserves to be congratulated on producing one of the most original and thought-provoking books to have appeared on this subject since Colin Matthew’s 1998 masterly biography. Her strategy is simple: ‘read’ the man through the books he read. Such method would not necessarily work with politicians who were less intellectual than ‘Mr G.’ – although the reading habits of, let us say, Thatcher or Major might yield enough materials for interesting *short* articles. By contrast, in Gladstone’s case there is an embarrassment of

riches, and even this substantial monograph does not fully exhaust the subject (indeed, Windscheffel herself has recently produced a further important paper on a related topic, which she delivered at the Chester Bicentenary Conference in July 2009).

According to the entries in his diary, by the time he died in 1898, Gladstone had read about 20,000 volumes, written by over 4,500 different authors. His personal library included 30,000 titles, many containing his annotations and comments (which were often refreshingly frank, such as ‘A “rollicking”[.] impudent, mendacious book’ in William Cobbett’s *Protestant Reformation*). The questions on which *Reading Gladstone* focuses are partly biographical (‘What

