

had contained at least a new preface to take account of recent developments in the historiography about Liberalism before 1914 and to relate Emy's work to these developments.

Ian Packer is Reader in History at the University of Lincoln and author of several works on Edwardian politics, including Lloyd George, Liberalism and the Land and Liberal Government and Politics, 1905–15.

British intellectual life, 1918–39

Richard Overy, *The Morbid Age: Britain Between the Wars*

(London: Allen Lane, 2009)

Reviewed by Dr J. Graham Jones

RICHARD OVERY, Professor of History at the University of Exeter, is renowned for his numerous highly esteemed volumes on the history of the Second World War, notably *The Origins of the Second World War*, *Why the Allies Won* and the award-winning *The Dictators: Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Russia*, which was awarded the prestigious Wolfson Prize for History and the Hessel Tiltman Prize.

The present voluminous tome is really a history of ideas during the predominantly sad inter-war period when many people became convinced that the West was facing a real crisis of civilisation. Overy's research work is awesomely impressive and complete, comprising material from a wide range of archival repositories (most notably the holdings of the London School of Economics, the British Psycho-Analytical Society, King's College, Cambridge, and the British Library, London), newspapers and journals, and a huge amount of contemporary literature and more recent secondary sources. This wide range of disparate source materials is skilfully brought together in a compelling narrative and analysis.

A good number of fascinating individuals are covered in this study, many of them literary figures like Aldous and Julian Huxley, Sidney and Beatrice Webb (also very much political activists, too, of course), H. G. Wells, and George Bernard Shaw. There are also political figures like J. A. Hobson, historians like the Oxford don Arnold Toynbee and G. D. H. Cole, and psychoanalysts

such as Sigmund Freud and Ernest Jones (both of whose papers the author has extensively quarried).

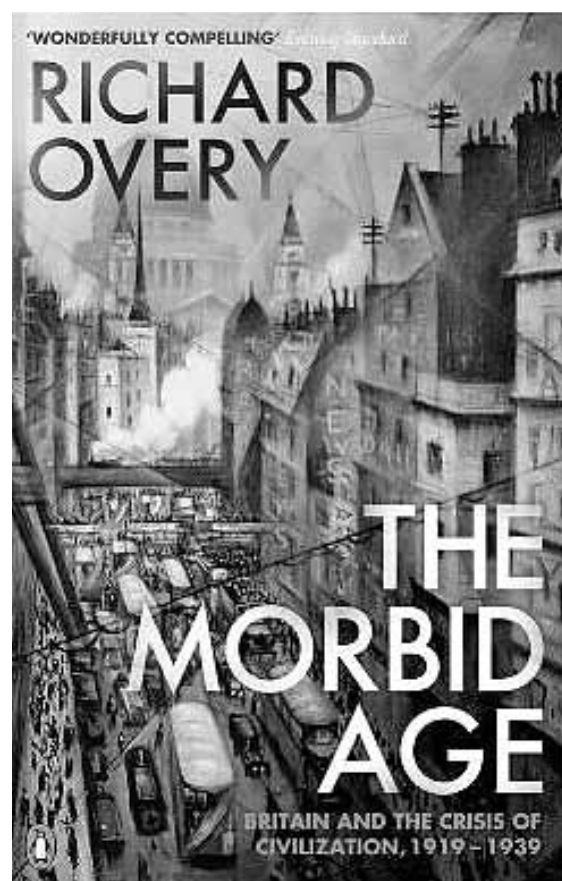
Readers of the *Journal of Liberal History* devoted to the history of their party in a strictly narrow party-political sense are likely to be disappointed. There is a passing reference to former Liberal J. A. Hobson joining the Labour Party (p. 62), and a mention of Lloyd George, as premier of the post-war coalition government, arguing powerfully the case for practising birth control – 'it was not possible to run an A1 empire with a C3 population' (p. 98). Long-serving Labour MP Philip Noel-Baker, lover of Megan Lloyd George, is described as 'a tall, distinctively good-looking man, a sociable teetotaler well known for his dizzying energy, who sustained a lifelong commitment to sport' (p. 225), and here discussed in the context of pacifist movements in the 1920s and 1930s.

But devotees of 'liberal' history more broadly will find much of interest here on the role of pacifist movements like the League of Nations Union (pp. 225–26), the most prominent anti-war society of the 1920s, and the 'People's Front' of the 1930s, championed by the so-called 'Popular Front' (pp. 302–04). The varying fortunes of more minor parties like the Communists and the British Union of Fascists are discussed in the context of inter-war British political evolution (pp. 266–68).

There are many passages here of exceptional interest and highly readable too, among them the story of Walter Greenwood's ground-breaking, highly timely

novel *Love on the Dole* (1933), an acclaimed best-seller almost overnight, which quickly spawned a stage play which ran for no fewer than 400 nights (pp. 70–74). Equally compelling is the analysis of the publication and impact of the Webbs' massive tome *Soviet Communism: a New Civilisation?*, which eventually appeared in two volumes, running to no fewer than 1,174 pages, in the high summer of 1935. It was a major enterprise which had cost the ageing Webbs dearly during the first half of the 1930s. As Overy outlines, the work developed a fascinating history all of its own and made a major impact at the very time of the Soviet purges and the growing cult of Stalin in Russia (pp. 294–95).

Equally absorbing is the story of the success of the Left Book Club launched by Victor Gollancz in 1936, which attracted a membership exceeding 50,000 within two years (pp. 304–05). Its growth and influence prompted bookshop owner W. A. Foyle to launch a rival (but rather less successful) Right Book Club in the following year. The other great publishing success of the second half of the 1930s was the series of Penguin



A Liberal Democrat History Group evening meeting

WHAT'S LEFT OF GLADSTONIAN LIBERALISM IN THE LIBERAL DEMOCRATS?

Since the publication of *The Orange Book: Reclaiming Liberalism* in 2004, there has been an ongoing discussion in the Liberal Democrats about whether the party needs to return to its nineteenth-century Gladstonian inheritance of non-interventionism in economic and social affairs, self-help and an emphasis on personal and political, as opposed to social, liberalism.

Now, in celebration of the bicentenary of the birth of William Ewart Gladstone in 1809, the History Group is holding a meeting to find out what Gladstonian Liberalism was and how it came to dominate late Victorian politics – and to discover just how much of the classical liberal inheritance the Grand Old Man has actually passed down to the current-day Liberal Democrats.

Speakers: **Dr Eugenio Biagini** (Sidney Sussex, Cambridge; author of many works on 19th century history and ideas, including *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform: Popular liberalism in the age of Gladstone, 1860–1880*); **Chris Huhne MP** (Liberal Democrat Shadow Home Secretary).

7.00pm, Monday 25 January 2010 (immediately following the History Group AGM at 6.30pm)
David Lloyd George Room, National Liberal Club, 1 Whitehall Place, London, SW1A 2HE

Specials launched by Allen Lane to reach 'a vast reading public for *intelligent* books at a low price'. No fewer than seventeen paperbacks, mostly priced at 6d, appeared during 1938 alone and made a major impact on the British reading public who bought hundreds of thousands of copies and trebled the takings of Penguin Books (who, by a happy coincidence, have published the present volume).

Another absorbing read is the story of George Orwell, who travelled from London to Barcelona in December 1936, but was soon compelled by a sniper's bullet to return to England where, exceptionally lucky to have escaped with his life, he wrote his brilliant book *Homage to Catalonia* (pp. 322–24). Probably the most substantial (and

indeed compelling) section of the book is the closely argued Chapter 8, which traces the ideas which evolved and developed during the long, tortuous build-up to the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939, particularly the circumstances of, and reaction to, the Munich Conference of September 1938 and subsequent agreement. The growing fear, present ever since 1918, that a terminal crisis of civilisation was about to engulf the Western world reached its crescendo during these fateful years.

From beginning to end the book is a good read, but it is sometimes a shade verbose and rather heavy going at times; on occasions the facts crowd in and become difficult to absorb. The volume is well illustrated with a wide range

of contemporary photographs and illustrations, but these are simply printed as part of the main text rather than published as independent plates, which would have been more effective and enjoyable. The reproduction of the front covers of numerous books and pamphlet publications discussed in the text is especially welcome.

Strangely, there are but few references to the impact of the First World War and the huge trauma which inevitably resulted for the survivors and the bereaved, all of which formed the backdrop to the obsession with pessimism which followed and the visions of a catastrophic future to come. Subsequently, the traumatic experiences of the General Strike of May 1926 and the

subsequent long lock-out in the coal industry, the international slump of the period 1929–32, the rise of the dictators on the continent, and Stalin in Russia in the 1930s, and the politics of appeasement, all added to the development of this, the 'morbid age'. As Overy argues convincingly, the outbreak of World War Two was almost welcomed as a means of resolving the many contradictions and anxieties which had been building up over the previous two decades. The second war, it was widely believed in 1939–40, would either save or totally destroy Western civilisation as it was known.

Dr J. Graham Jones is Senior Archivist and Head of the Welsh Political Archive at the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth.