

REVIEWS

The man who sold the honours

Andrew Cook, *Cash for Honours: The Story of Maundy Gregory* (The History Press, 2008)

Reviewed by Duncan Brack

WHO WAS Maundy Gregory? Most *Journal* readers probably know little more than the fact that he was the man who sold the honours that raised the money for the Lloyd George Fund. Now Andrew Cook, a historian and author of, among other books, *Ace of Spies: The True Story of Sidney Reilly*, has written his biography, drawing on newly available sources including family papers.

Cook has done a thorough job. Arthur John Maundy Gregory was born in 1877, the second son of an Anglican vicar in Southampton. After school he began to study theology at Oxford, but his real love lay in the theatre, and after his father's death in 1899 he gave up university for a precarious career as drawing-room entertainer, actor and stage and theatre manager. By 1909, however, he had abandoned it, leaving his backers to meet substantial losses. After disappearing for a year, he resurfaced as editor of a weekly society magazine called *Mayfair and Town Topics*, which generated revenue largely from fees from nouveau-riche industrialists seeking to make their way into society and keen to see 'man of the day' pieces appear about themselves.

This proved not only a more successful financial venture than the theatre, it also gave Gregory the opportunity to make connections. Building up a network of contacts among hotel managers and staff, well aware of social indiscretions, he started a sideline career as a private investigator and – possibly – blackmailer.

Cook also claims – though without providing any sources – that Gregory started to sell honours on behalf of the Liberal Whip Percy Illingworth. The

cash-for-honours system was by then well established, but Cook argues that Asquith's government exploited it so blatantly that 'it threatened to bring the ruling class into disrepute' (p. 27). He implies on the same page that this was connected with the list of names Asquith drew up in 1910 in the expectation that he would have to create enough new Liberal peers to overcome the Tory opposition first to the 'People's Budget' and then to the Parliament Bill – again without providing any evidence. In fact Asquith's government did raise substantial sums in sales of honours, largely because of the expenses of the two 1910 elections, but this was not regarded at the time as especially unusual.

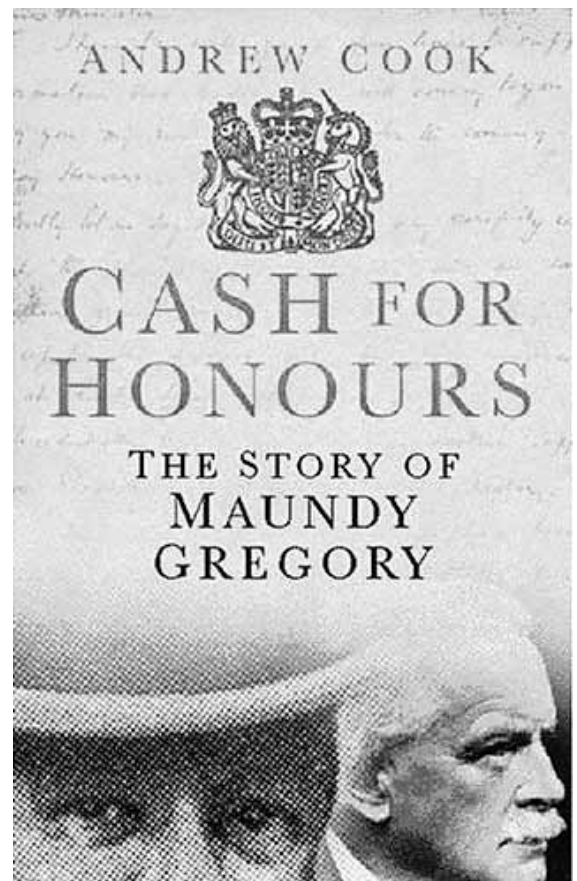
After the outbreak of war in 1914, Gregory offered his information to Special Branch, probably in the hope of payment, and in 1917 he applied for a job with MI5, in the hope of avoiding being called up. Cook repeats one MI5 officer's rather splendid assessment: 'I was very unfavourably impressed by him ... He is not a "Sahib", and he is evidently talkative, boastful etc. ...' (p. 47). In the end he joined the Irish Guards, but does not seem to have seen active service.

After the war Gregory was approached by Alick Murray (otherwise known as the Master of Elibank, Liberal Chief Whip 1910–12 and something of a kindred spirit, with a love of intrigue and a taste for wealthy and slightly raffish company) to act as an intermediary in the sale of honours for Lloyd George's Coalition Liberal party; in exchange he was to be paid a retainer plus a percentage of the purchase price for the honours. Operating ostensibly as

the editor of a new paper, the *Whitehall Gazette and St James' Review*, he set up an office in Parliament Street, from which he operated the trade in honours. As usual, hard evidence of Gregory's precise role in individual sales is largely lacking, so the author supplies a fictional account of how he operated, and repeats what is known about the activity, and the general political background.

What is known is certainly dramatic. The Lloyd George Fund was ultimately to top £4 million, equivalent to about £130 million today. Going rates were £10,000 for a knighthood £30,000 for a baronetcy, and £50,000–100,000 for a peerage (multiply by 33 for today's prices). Gregory used his commission to subsidise a lavish lifestyle, buy properties including the Ambassador Club in Soho and Deepdene Hotel in Surrey (which he allegedly used for gathering gossip about the sex lives of contemporary celebrities) and throw parties for prominent members of society.

The end began to come in sight when Lloyd George



annoyed his coalition partners by retaining control of the Fund personally and by using the award (or the sale) of honours to poach Unionist supporters, and annoyed the King because of the character of many of those ennobled. Despite mounting parliamentary and press criticism, Lloyd George and the Unionist leader Austen Chamberlain doggedly refused to establish a public enquiry. This contributed to the political crisis of October 1922, when the Unionists decided to withdraw from the Coalition, overthrowing both Lloyd George and Chamberlain in the process.

The following year, under a new government, the Royal Commission on Honours reported, recommending that all names included on an honours list should be accompanied by a statement from the Prime Minister 'that no payment to a political fund was associated with the recommendation' (p. 111). Such a complete end to the old system was not particularly welcome to the new Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, and legislation was delayed for two years. And in the end the 1925 Honours (Prevention of Abuses) Act left a number of loopholes and made the person who had paid money in the expectation of an honour liable to prosecution along with the official or middleman who had sold the honour. As Cook observes, this provision effectively deterred recipients from ever admitting what had happened.

Although Gregory's role diminished substantially after Lloyd George's departure from office, he continued to take payments, often in advance of honours that were never in the end awarded. In 1932, however, he tried to sell Lieutenant Commander Billyard-Leake a knighthood, or baronetcy, for £12,000. Leake was not interested but strung him along and informed the authorities. In February 1933 Gregory was charged under the Honours Act. After some initial blustering, he eventually pleaded guilty, possibly being persuaded to do so by the Conservative Party to avoid revealing embarrassing details in court, or possibly as a plea bargain in order to avoid a long prison sentence. In

Maundy Gregory remains the only person ever to have been convicted under the 1925 Honours (Prevention of Abuses) Act.

the end he was fined £50 plus 50 guineas costs, and gaoled for two months. He remains the only person ever to have been convicted under the 1925 Act.

Gregory faced the possibility of a further enquiry over the death of Edith Rosse, an actress and friend who had altered her will in his favour a few days before her death. The enquiry was delayed, however, until after his release from gaol and flight to France, and in the end, although Rosse's body was exhumed on suspicion of poisoning, nothing could be proved. Cook hints that Gregory was being protected, but, as usual, fails to supply any evidence.

Gregory lived the rest of his life in France, receiving a pension, probably from the Conservative Party, on condition that he revealed nothing about his past. He kept his side of the bargain, and eventually died in September 1941 after being interned after the German invasion.

The main problem with *Cash for Honours* is that there is simply not enough known about Gregory – or not enough of interest, at any rate – to fill a decent-sized book, and too many details – such as the names of those who paid for honours – have never been revealed. The author is

therefore forced repeatedly to revert to speculation about what might have happened. Worse, he speculates at considerable length about things that Gregory might have been involved in, but almost certainly was not, including the forging of Roger Casement's diaries in order to discredit him as a closet homosexual, the still unexplained disappearance of the one-time Independent Labour Party MP and suspected Soviet spy Victor Grayson in 1920 (to which an entire chapter is devoted), and the forged Zinoviev Letter of 1924, used to discredit the first Labour government.

Similarly, extensive but often essentially irrelevant details are provided about Gregory's acquaintances and contemporaries and general political developments; an awful lot of the text is basically padding. Combined with the author's prolix style this makes the book an uphill struggle to read. But for anyone wanting to find out what is known about Maundy Gregory, his life and career and involvement with the honours scandal behind the Lloyd George Fund, it is a highly useful source.

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Northern Liberal

Alan Beith, *A View from the North* (Northumbria University Press, 2008)

Reviewed by Michael Meadowcroft

I HAVE AN immense personal regard for Alan Beith and for his long years of service to the cause of Liberalism. Following the miseries of the merger negotiations and vote, I believed that the only chance for the Liberal cause to be safeguarded was for Alan to become the leader of the new party. It needed someone who not only was an instinctive Liberal but who also knew Liberal history and had the intellectual depth, plus the tactical skills, to keep the party relatively sound, despite its social democratic

component. Consequently, in the summer of 1988 I campaigned for him to become leader of the new party. Had he succeeded it would have been impossible to have remained outside the party. That didn't happen, alas, and it has taken a somewhat long and winding road to be back in the same party.

His chapter on Liberal philosophy and beliefs, included deliberately to give positive reasons why Liberals and Liberal Democrats continue to put such time and energy into a cause