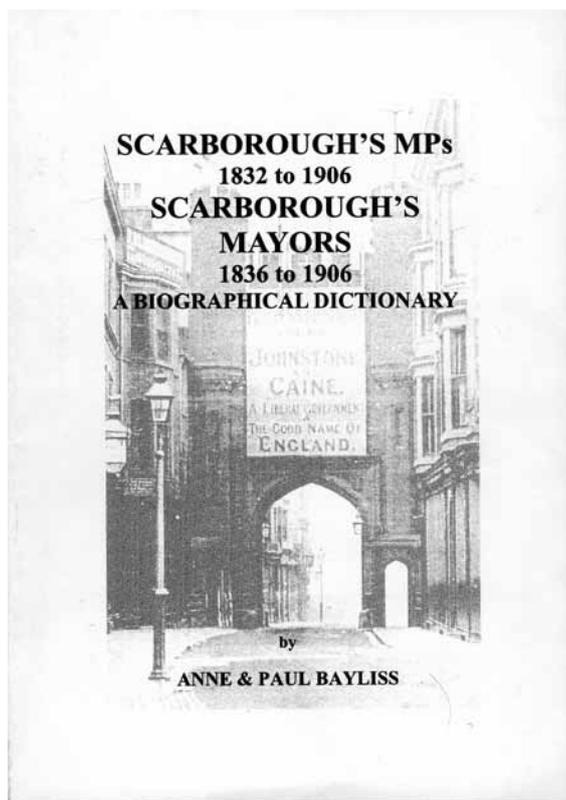


electoral system prior to the Great Reform Act and the municipal reforms of the 1830s.

This points to the main problem with this volume for anyone interested in wider themes in political history than the history of Scarborough: the lack of political context which could be illuminated by the primary material provided by the biographies. The authors do not seem to have consulted Pelling, for example; their local knowledge could usefully have added to his assessment and helped explain Scarborough's political eccentricity. It would have been interesting to know more about how elections were conducted in Scarborough, the party organisations in the town, and links with other institutions such as the churches.

The authors have written a number of biographical dictionaries relating to Scarborough and are clearly performing a valuable service to students of the town's local history. There is some interesting material in this volume for the political historian, principally to indicate questions about politics at the grassroots in the nineteenth century rather than to provide any answers.

*Robert Ingham is Biographies Editor of the Journal of Liberal History.*



## Testament of hope

Shirley Williams, *Climbing the Bookshelves* (Virago Press, 2009)

Reviewed by Tom McNally

ONE ALWAYS approaches reviewing the autobiography of a very old friend with a certain trepidation. What if it is awful? How candid a critic can one be without being hurtful? Thankfully Shirley Williams has written a memoir which gives me no such conflict of interests. She has written a kindly book; but one which deals frankly with her own emotions and failures. She also gives a stark reminder of the difficulties for a woman politician in the sexist, male chauvinist world of the 1960s and 1970s.

Like many political biographies, it is her childhood and youth which proves most fascinating to someone already familiar with the political career. Hers was not an orthodox middle-class family life, given her two distinguished academic and politically active parents. In addition it was lived in the shadow and then the reality of the Second World War. I have to confess, however, that, as I read the chapter on childhood and youth, the picture which came in to my mind was that of 'George', the tomboy heroine of Enid Blyton's 'Famous Five' books.

As youth gives way to early womanhood the friendships and love affairs are remembered with due discretion; but with colour and flavour to capture the mood and personalities of post-war Oxford and fifties London.

The book is a useful reminder that public figures have to live their public life whilst surviving all the trials and tribulations which beset the rest of us. Love, marriage, births and bereavements do not work to a politically convenient timetable. Shirley deals with all of these with candour and poignancy which will make the book of interest to those not closely involved in the minutiae of politics.

On a second level, I hope readers of Liberal Democrat

history will find the book of interest in giving a very accurate telling of the story of those who made the often emotional journey from the heart of the Labour Party, via the SDP, to the Liberal Democrats. There is not doubt that, if she had remained in the Labour Party, Shirley Williams would have gone on to hold one of the highest offices of state. Her book, however, is happily free of the 'might have beens'. Although she does concede two errors during the SDP days which made the journey travelled by both the SDP and the Liberals more painful than it might have been.

Her decision not to contest the Warrington by-election in 1981, which she would probably have won, was a major failure of nerve. As she frankly admits, 'My reputation for boldness, acquired in the long fight within the Labour Party, never wholly recovered.' That lack of confidence also revealed itself in her willingness to defer first to Roy Jenkins and then to David Owen in the leadership of the SDP. She is equally candid about this failure: 'Like many women of my generation and of the generation before mine, I thought of myself as not quite good enough for the very highest positions in politics.' That self-deprecation meant that in the 1987 general election the Alliance was 'led' by the uncomfortable Owen/Steel partnership which the electorate sussed as a mismatch long before election day. A more confident and decisive Shirley might have avoided a few of the missed opportunities on the way to the birth of the Liberal Democrats. However, she made, and continues to make, a massive contribution to the work of our party, both in policy development and campaigning. In many ways she reminds me of one of her American heroes, Hubert Humphrey, in her optimism in the political process to find solutions to difficult problems.

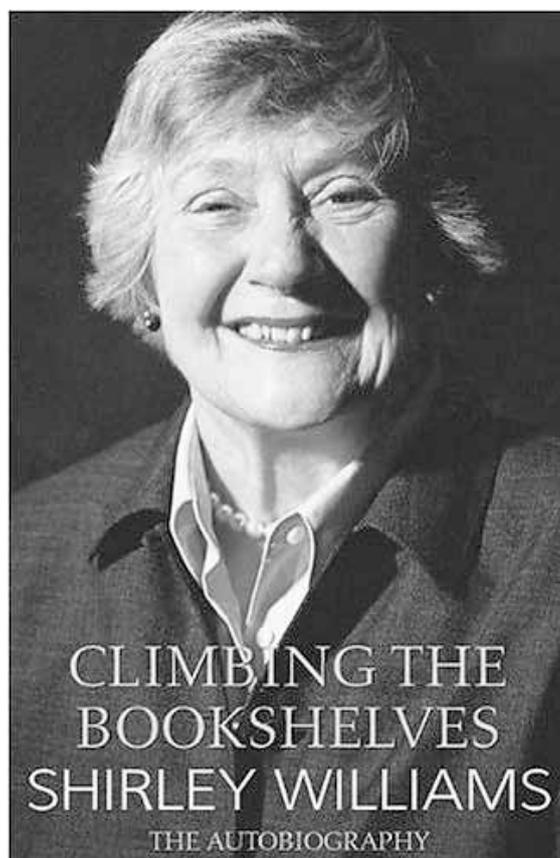
In that respect the book has further value as a story to be commended to any young person who is considering becoming involved in politics; but who is deterred by modern-day cynicism about the parliamentary and political process. Here is a story of someone who came from a comfortable middle-class background which provided her with the education and the opportunity to choose almost any profession she wanted. Not only that, she could, more than once, have quit the political arena and settled for a comfortable academic berth on either side of the Atlantic. Instead, she chose to stay with the rough and tumble of party and parliamentary politics. The book is an affirmation of both the parliamentary and the democratic process by someone who has walked the walk and got the scars to show for it. What is more, she has done so not by delivering great thoughts from Olympian heights, but by getting down in the trenches with the poor bloody infantry. Many a time I have asked Shirley her plans for the weekend after a very full week in the Lords, only to be told that she was off to speak at a party event in some location far from the Westminster village. Her book reveals the difficulties, and sometimes the pain, of a woman trying to make her way in politics and parliament, and as such it should provide as inspirational a read for

young women as any feminist tract.

Memoirs are, by their very nature, backward looking, particularly when written by a woman in her eightieth year. Yet, as the final chapters of the book show, here is a politician deeply concerned about nuclear proliferation and using her amazing network of contacts to influence disarmament policy on both sides of the Atlantic, or using her experience and democratic credentials to promote good governance in the Ukraine and Latin America. With no large party or high office to underpin her ventures, she is received at the highest level in Africa, in the Middle East, China and India, as well as in any capital in Europe. She is still someone influencing policy and policy-makers in many parts of the world.

Shirley's mother, Vera Brittain wrote one of the greatest books to come out of the First World War: *Testament of Youth*. It was a unique book written in unique circumstances. Her daughter, however, has written a testament of hope by someone with eyes still firmly fixed on the possibilities of tomorrow.

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of public funds rather than their private lives.

*Screwing Up* is an unusual political memoir. Oaten's prose is written in a sympathetic if somewhat dull way, and he comes across as ordinary and genuinely likeable. The tone is self-deprecating, and he reserves bad words only for the party activists typified by the 'Liberator collective' who were opposed to his right-wing leanings and for bloggers who indulged in innuendo about what Oaten may have got up to in his private life.

The structure of *Screwing Up* is also different to many political memoirs. Chapters focus on MPs' foreign trips and, presumably due to the mood of the time when the book was published, the intricacies of parliamentary expenses. The book seems to assume its readership has only a casual knowledge of the work of an MP and therefore gets bogged down with these weaker chapters.

There is, unfortunately, little in *Screwing Up* for either political anoraks or scholars of recent Liberal Democrat history to get their teeth into. The chapter on working with Charles Kennedy

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## The end of the affair

Mark Oaten, *Screwing Up* (Biteback, 2009)

Reviewed by Tom Kiehl

**P**UBLISHED ON the eve of the Liberal Democrats' 2009 Autumn Federal Conference, *Screwing Up*, the political memoirs of the former leadership candidate Mark Oaten, who resigned from the party's frontbench in January 2006 following tabloid revelations of an affair with a rent boy, received criticism from some activists for reopening a wound during

the party's last major spectacle ahead of the 2010 general election. However, coming as it does in the aftermath of the parliamentary expenses scandal that dominated British politics for much of 2009, *Screwing Up* was suitably timed for Oaten, who did not seek re-election, to rehabilitate himself at a period when public contempt for politicians is reserved for the extravagant use