

REVIEWS

significantly, which has a rather 'potted history' air about it.

Perhaps the only real disappointment here is the failure to provide photographs of at least some of the prime ministers described in the volume. There is also no general bibliography of

relevant sources, but the footnote references are always full and genuinely helpful.

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Survival and revival

Mark Egan, *Coming into Focus: The transformation of the Liberal Party 1945–1964* (VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2009)

Reviewed by Malcolm Baines

LIBERAL PARTY history during the fallow years between the failure of Lloyd George's 'last hurrah' – the 1929 election campaign – and the Orpington by-election victory of March 1962, has long been neglected by academics and party members alike. What awareness there is largely revolves around Beveridge, the split between Liberals and National Liberals and Churchill's offer of a Cabinet post in 1951 to the then Liberal leader, Clement Davies. By contrast, Mark Egan's book attempts to put some organisational flesh on the party's grassroots during the post-war part of this period. He succeeds admirably, and anyone interested in the party's organisation, youth groups and local government representation will find much background not readily available elsewhere.

Coming into Focus aims to provide a different perspective on much of what has been written on the party's history in the immediate post-war period. Other historians and sociologists have looked at Liberal Party survival in that period in the context of either the high politics of its relationship with the Conservative Party or sociological explanations revolving around an antipathy to collectivism or the survival of an older form of society in the Celtic fringe where Nonconformity remained strong and the trade unions weak. Egan is unusual in concentrating on the party itself in the constituencies across the UK.

In style, it does come across as the book of the D.Phil. thesis, with lots of tables providing, for example, information about the regional

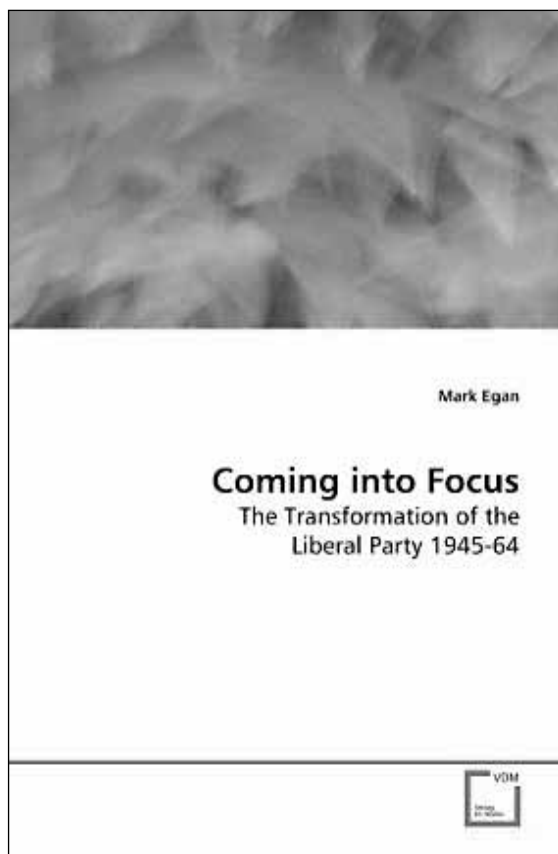
distribution of Liberal borough councillors, how interviewees joined the Liberal Party and sources of Liberal Association income, interspersed with commentary and book-ended by short essays on the historiographical background to Liberal survival and a review of how the 1945 party had changed by 1964. Egan has researched local Liberal records avidly and supplemented these with interviews with some 140 Liberal activists from the period and it is the use of this data which gives weight to the book's argument.

Coming into Focus begins with the aftermath of the 1945 election and points out that the party's representation of twelve MPs elected to Westminster was not matched again for over twenty years. The party's electoral weakness in the post-war period is highlighted by the fact that the party came first or second in only thirty-six seats in 1945, as compared to eighty-three at the previous general election in 1935. Egan compares this with the party's improved position in 1964 – highlighting in particular the growth in local government representation as well as the fact that all the party's MPs were elected in three-way contests – and asserts that 1964 did amount to a significant step on the road to revival. It leaves hanging, however, the significance of the 1970 election in which only six MPs were elected to parliament, many with only wafer-thin majorities.

Egan goes on to make the very powerful point that none of this would have been relevant without there being local Liberal

organisations in place. This is very much the focus of the book, which deals in turn with constituency and district organisations, the role of the Young Liberals, the attitudes of the party's activists and its representation in local government.

On local organisation, Egan looks at funding, candidate selection, and decisions to contest elections and by-elections. He compares what happened on the ground – as reflected in the Liberal Association records he has reviewed and his interviews with activists – to the theory of British political organisation as set out in the Robert MacKenzie's classic, *British Political Parties*, and to the results of the surveys carried out contemporaneously by the American political scientist Jorgen Scott Rasmussen and used in his book, *The Liberal Party: A Study of Retrenchment and Revival*, published in 1965. Interestingly, Egan points towards the local district parties, often based in small towns, being the key building blocks of Liberal organisation rather than constituency parties themselves. He also emphasises the importance of the Young Liberals and the Union of University Liberal Students to the Liberal Party during that period, especially as a vehicle through



which new members of the party elite were recruited.

One of the most interesting sections reports on Egan's research into the views and attitudes of the party's activists during that period. Issues that he examined included why they joined the Liberal Party, family and religious background, ideological factors and political opinions. Many of those interviewed were still active in the Liberal Party when I first became involved in the early 1980s and there is a real sense of the continuity of the party in this section.

The local government part is also one of the highlights. Although Egan admits that the data is incomplete, he makes an attempt to analyse the changing numbers of Liberal councillors during the period, including their regional distribution. This shows that, during the 1940s and 1950s, the party's local government heartland was in Lancashire and Yorkshire. Indeed, by 1956, over two-thirds of Liberal borough councillors in England came from Lancashire, Cheshire and the West Riding of Yorkshire. From 1956 to 1963, however, the number of Liberal borough councillors from south-east England exploded from eight in 1956 to 277 in 1963, presaging a more significant shift in the party's geographical base in later decades. Furthermore, after 1956 there were significant declines in representation in such former local government strongholds as Rochdale, Halifax and Huddersfield. Egan selects a number of case studies to look at in more detail, including Rugby, Southend and Liverpool. Rugby, in particular, is highlighted as one of the birthplaces of community politics, with innovations such as grumble sheets and regular report-back newsletters, but other pioneers such as Cyril Carr in Church Ward, Liverpool, and the Liberal group in Greenock near Glasgow are also looked at in detail.

Coming into Focus is a valuable contribution to the limited amount of literature on the Liberal Party in the immediate post-war years. It provides a wealth of detailed information about the party's activists in that period based on some excellent research. The conclusion is that many of the changes and developments in the Liberal Party in the late 1950s and early

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1960s were taking place without any significant input by the party's MPs or parliamentary leadership. Indeed, Egan shows that there was no real connection between them, arguing effectively that Grimond and Bonham-Carter did not show any greater interest than Clement Davies had in the local Liberal associations or Liberal councillors elected in the towns of Britain. To a substantial extent, there were two parallel Liberal revivals in this period – one in local government, focused on the south-east of England; the other in parliament, the media and academia,

revolving around the personality of Grimond. Despite the rather pedestrian style, the content of Dr Egan's book makes it essential reading for any academic study of the Liberal Party during this crucial period of survival and the first, Orpington, period of revival.

After reading history at Selwyn College, Cambridge and the University of Lancaster, Malcolm Baines completed a D.Phil. at Exeter College, Oxford, entitled 'The survival of the British Liberal Party 1932–1959' in 1990. He now works in taxation for a hotel and property group.

The land question explored

Matthew Cragoe and Paul Readman (eds.), *The Land Question in Britain, 1750–1950* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010)

Reviewed by **Dr J. Graham Jones**

THIS IMPRESSIVE collection of essays, full of highly original material, certainly fills a distinct gap in our historiography. The ownership of the land and the use made of it was a political hot potato in all four nations of the British Isles from the mid-eighteenth century almost through to the mid-twentieth. According to many radical Liberal politicians, the very concept of 'landlordism' was in itself full of attendant evils, an idea perpetuated by many socialists thereafter. Conversely, the landlord class and the concept of political landlordism were defended by political Conservatives.

Curiously, comparatively little attention has been paid to 'the land question' by modern historians. The one exception, Roy Douglas's *Land, People & Politics: a history of the land question in the United Kingdom, 1878–1952* (London: Allison and Busby, 1976), though still useful and readable, is inevitably by now somewhat dated.

This collection of essays is basically the published proceedings of a conference convened at the University of Hertfordshire back in 2005 and organised by the book's editors, Professor Matthew Cragoe (who has recently migrated

from Hertfordshire to take up the position of Professor of Modern British History at the University of Sussex), and Dr Paul Readman, presently senior lecturer in modern British history at King's College, London. All the contributors are distinguished scholars, most holding senior university posts, many considered expert historians in this field of study. The individual essays are arranged strictly chronologically within the volume.

In the opening chapter, Ian Waites uses mainly the evidence of landscape paintings (supported by interesting images) and contemporary literature to examine the widespread impact of the enclosure movement upon the common field landscape from about 1770 to the mid-nineteenth century. His conclusion (pp. 32–33) is that the effects of enclosure were reinforced by the arrival of the railway and modernity in general by the mid-nineteenth century. Kathryn Beresford then discusses the role of the 'yeoman' during the early nineteenth century, a period of far-reaching social structural change throughout rural England. Her chapter examines how this distinctive yeoman class 'formed a crucial element in the idealisation of the