

# REVIEWS

## Comprehensive Liberal history

Robert Ingham and Duncan Brack (eds.), *Peace, Reform and Liberation: A History of Liberal Politics in Britain 1679–2011* (Biteback Publishing, 2011)

Reviewed by **Malcolm Baines**

**P**EACE, REFORM and Liberation is the latest publication under the aegis of the Liberal Democrat History Group. Unlike previous books, which contained biographies of Liberal and Liberal Democrat politicians and thinkers, extracts from speeches, quotations or thought, and were marketed as handy reference works, this is an altogether more ambitious attempt at a comprehensive history of the party from the Exclusion Crisis of 1679–81, which crystallised opposition to the succession of Catholic James to the English throne, to the decision of the party to join a coalition with the Conservatives in 2011.

This book is unusual in that it is a collection of essays by different authors covering the history of the Whigs, the Liberal Party and the Liberal Democrats over that 330-year period. Unlike other histories of the Liberal Party, *Peace, Reform and Liberation* offers a complete chronology as well as the official stamp of an introduction by Nick Clegg. Consequently, although the momentum of the narrative of the party's history sometimes falters it is nevertheless a superb reference book for the party's history throughout the period. One very effective feature of the whole book is a series of insets looking at individual Liberals, places or events in greater detail, which very handily are separately indexed. These give the book additional weight as a reference volume as do the superb appendices dealing with party organisation, electoral performance and party leaders, as well as providing a timeline of party history.

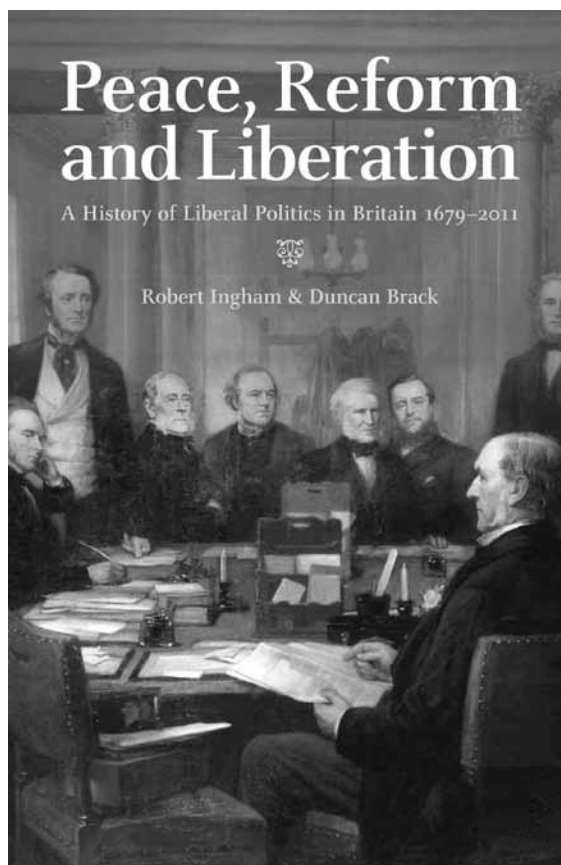
If the book has a weakness it is that the earlier chapters seem a little bit rushed, covering as they do 150 years to 1832 followed by another twenty-nine to 1859, the year of the famous meeting in Willis's Rooms which traditionally marks

the formation of the Liberal Party as a coalition of Whig, Radicals and Peelites. Also missing is some more background on nineteenth-century politics – it seems puzzling, for example, that the Liberals obtained substantially more votes than their Conservative rivals in many of the elections in the 1830s and 1840s, but often had only a small majority or even a deficit of seats. Presumably the reason is that more Tories were unopposed or that the Liberals represented larger constituencies, but the electoral context is not fully explained. However the Introduction by Michael Freedon giving an overview of the Liberal Party and Liberal politics throughout the whole period is a real tour de force and is almost worth buying the book for on its own.

From 1859 onwards, the action moves forwards with considerable pace through the Gladstonian period to the splits and disagreements of the 1880s and 1890s and on to the New Liberal years before the First World War. Chapters are written by a mixture of History Group stalwarts like Tony Little and Robert Ingham and respected historians such as Eugenio Biagini, Martin Pugh and David Dutton. These provide well-written summaries of the party's history in the twentieth century, including charting the disintegration of the party in the 1920s and 1930s, the disappointment of the immediate post-war years and the revival under the leaderships of Grimond, Thorpe and Steel. There are especially strong chapters on the party under the leadership of Samuel and Sinclair in the 1930s, including the split with the Liberal Nationals, and the editors have rightly chosen to look at this in detail rather than glossing over these years as is often the case. Also particularly good are the sections covering the Alliance

and Liberal Democrats. I was a reasonably active member in the 1980s and found that chapter rang true to my own experiences at the time – whilst likewise the penultimate section, dealing with the Liberal Democrats since the merger of the Liberal Party and the SDP in 1988 and written by Duncan Brack from his inside perspective, gives a real insight into the story of the party in recent years.

However, whilst the book gives an excellent account of the party from the perspective of its head office and Westminster leadership, it could have benefitted from more examination of Liberal activity in wider civil society, including local government since 1979, looking at for example the role of ALDC in the growth in council representation and the attempts by Liberals in places like Liverpool, Kingston and Tower Hamlets to implement their values at local level. Also interesting would have been more on the social character of the party's areas of traditional electoral strength – the background to its enduring appeal in Cornwall and parts of the 'Celtic fringe' for instance. More generally over the whole period, there could have been more on Liberal relations with external



# Peace, Reform and Liberation

## A History of Liberal Politics in Britain, 1679–2011

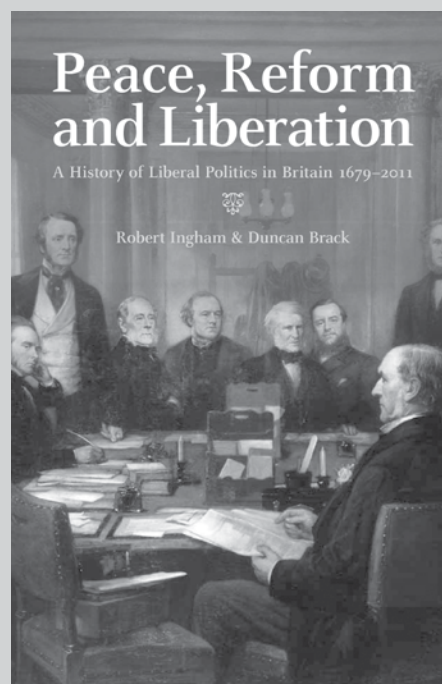
The British Liberal Party, and, by extension, its successor, the Liberal Democrats, has a good claim to be regarded as the oldest political party in the world. This book is a comprehensive single-volume history of that party, its beliefs and its impact.

Written by academics and experts, drawing on the most recent scholarly research, *Peace, Reform and Liberation* is the most comprehensive and most up-to-date guide to the story of those who called themselves Liberals, what inspired them and what they achieved over the last 300 years and more.

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groups such as the Nonconformist churches, trade unions, manufacturing, the City and the professions. These would have given *Peace, Reform and Liberation* a wider perspective on the party and set it in a broader political and electoral context.

These minor caveats aside, though, the History Group is to be commended for producing this history of the party and Liberalism since the end of the seventeenth century. Other party histories are either rather dated like Roy Douglas's *Liberals: The History of the Liberal and Liberal Democrat Parties*, dry and academic like *A Short History of the Liberal Party: the Road Back to Power*, or primarily cover the twentieth century like David Dutton's *A History of the Liberal Party*. Ingham and Brack is not a substitute for the range of more academic studies of the party at different periods – indeed each chapter ends with a list of suggestions for further reading

– but it is both an excellent introduction for the student and a great reference book for both the party member and those interested in politics more generally.

*Following completion of a D.Phil. on Liberal Party survival in Britain, 1932 to 1959, at Exeter College, Oxford, Malcolm Baines now works in tax for a well-known hotel and serviced offices group.*

### Personalities and causes of the left

K. O. Morgan, *Ages of Reform: Dawns and Downfalls of the British Left* (I.B.Tauris, 2011)

Reviewed by **Martin Pugh**

**R**EADERS OF the *Journal of Liberal History* will find much to interest them in *Ages of Reform*, a collection of nineteen essays, lectures and articles written by Ken Morgan over a long period and ranging widely across left-wing politics in nineteenth and twentieth century Britain. They reflect an emphasis on the prominent

personalities, including Keir Hardie, Lloyd George, Nye Bevan, Jim Callaghan and Michael Foot, four of whom have been the subject of biographies by Morgan, and also on the great issues and causes of progressive politics, as opposed to questions of party organisation and elections. Some chapters are short, though none the worse for that, notably