

## REVIEWS

more traditional/pragmatic elements of the right by their greater concerns about trade union power, and this too formed part of the backdrop to the foundation of the SDP. In addition, Jenkins himself, increasingly detached from Labour, offered lurid warnings about the threat to freedom posed by high public spending; whereas Crosland, although prepared to rethink his own earlier hopes about the benefits of high spending, believed this position was extreme. The disunity, of course, was fundamentally a product of the difficult and confusing economic situation that Britain found itself in the 1970s. It is worth remembering, though, that Labour kept the show on the road for a long time in spite of it. It was Callaghan's remarkable achievement to keep his Cabinet together throughout the 1976 IMF crisis, laying the groundwork important steps to recovery over the next two years, although he eventually provoked the Winter of Discontent by pushing his anti-inflation stance too far.

The book is thoughtful, well researched and written in a clear style. I would have liked to learn a little more about the 'parliamentary' aspect of the 'parliamentary right'. After all, the management of the Commons formed one of the Labour government's major

problems, especially after it lost its narrow majority. Overall, though, this is a sensible and interesting book that refines our comprehension of an important period.

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## Political theory and political thought

Duncan Kelly, *The Propriety of Liberty: Persons, Passions and Judgement in Modern Political Thought* (Princeton University Press, 2010)

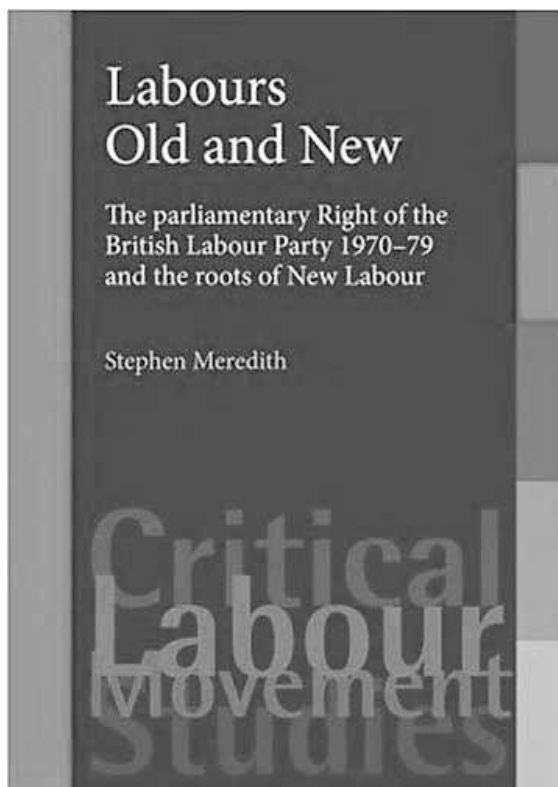
Reviewed by **Eugenio F. Biagini**

**T**HIS is a challenging and thought-provoking book which spans two disciplines, political theory and the history of political thought, using the latter as a tool to advance the former. It argues that 'classical' liberalism conceived of freedom as the sphere of man's 'appropriate agency', or 'propriety', understood as 'the capacity of individuals to choose between alternative courses of actions ... and then act on their choices both in private and in public' (p. 1). It involves choice, self-restraint and judgment, the three essential components of a 'progressive or developmental, not fixed or teleological' understanding of liberty (p. 5). It affects two dimensions: the 'quality of agency ... [for which] one can be held responsible ... as an autonomous agent'; and 'shared or intersubjective judgments about the propriety of particular actions, rooted in a common conception of justice' (p. 15). Using such framework, Kelly tries to identify a middle course between 'negative' freedom ('non-domination') and 'positive' liberty (civic entitlement and participation).

Using such framework the author revisits a number of well-known liberal philosophers and economists, including John Locke, Montesquieu, Adam Smith Tocqueville, J. S. Mill and T. H. Green. The section on Green is perhaps the most stimulating, partly because here the author engages with the question of religion (which the rest of the book curiously neglects). Green was not a believer, but he championed the civic virtue of the Nonconformist tradition.

He thought that the latter was strengthened by nineteenth-century 'Higher Criticism', with its rigorous analysis of the texts and demolition of the 'mythical' parts of the Bible. Green elaborated '[the] idea of the religious character of rational, moral action ... [a] metaphysical claim [which] can ... be explored historically and contextually through Green's engagement with historical biblical criticism and modern German philosophy ... through his assumption that rational societies progress historically towards a stage whereby the prerequisite of real freedom, legal freedom, can develop' (p. 255).

Both for its emphasis on Protestant Dissent and reliance on 'Higher Criticism', Green stood for what must inevitably be perceived as an 'anti-Catholic' definition of Christianity. It was a view which had parallels with Giuseppe Mazzini's idealisation of non-hierarchical, non-dogmatic, rational religion. Strangely, Kelly misses the Mazzini parallel, and instead presents Green's liberal religion in racial, rather than civic humanist or republican, terms: 'Catholic countries in general and the "Romance nations" in particular, Green argued, remained content with the unreconciled character of religion and morality', an attitude 'which stood in contradistinction to the spiritual completeness craved by the Teuton'. Green criticised the 'Jesuitry' which in Catholic countries "derationalised" the state from its position as the "passionless expression of general right", rendering it instead the "engine of individual caprice under alternating fits of



appetite and fear” (p. 230). This was largely a caricature of the situation in the late nineteenth century, when France, Italy and Spain saw vigorous struggles to establish the rule of law on liberal principles. However, Kelly’s interpretation of Green is sadly more relevant to the situation in the early twenty-first century, when it seems to provide a fitting epitaph for *Berlusconismo* as a system of degenerate democracy. By the same token, it is unfortunate that the philosophers considered by Kelly are all British or French: Italians and Spanish liberals would have provided an interesting counterpoint here. Moreover, Green, despite his eulogy of Dissent, drew his main inspiration not from British and French philosophy, but from German idealism, and it is

somewhat difficult to understand his thought – including his secularised Protestantism – without reference to his models and sources of inspiration. Finally, it is a pity that Kelly does not pay more attention to religion, not only because of its centrality to political cultures in general, but especially because the thinkers which he studies – most obviously Locke, Smith and Tocqueville – operated within an explicitly Christian definition of liberty and took the view that religious freedom was essential to liberalism.

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## Judy’s story

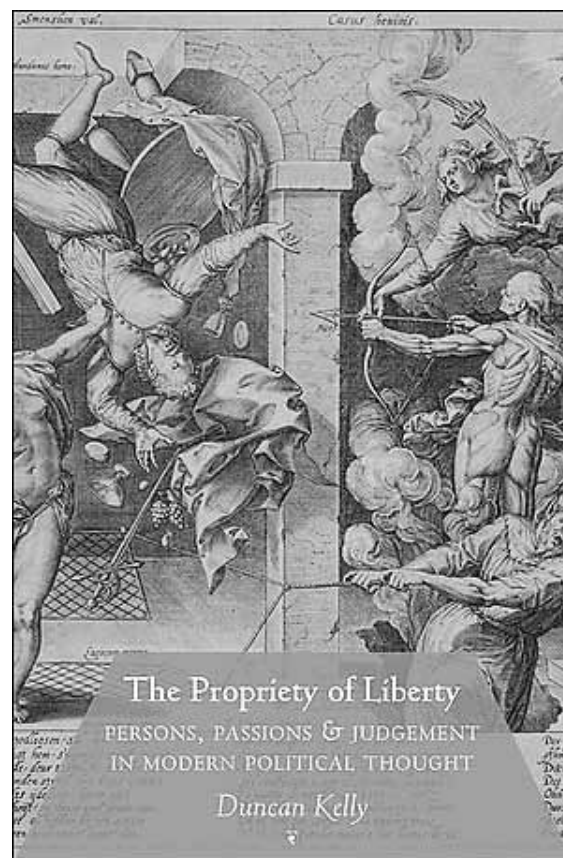
Judy Steel, *Tales from the Tap End* (Birlinn Ltd, 2010)

Reviewed by **Celia Thomas**

ANYONE THINKING *Tales from the Tap End* might be just a light, gossipy book of memoirs about David Steel and his fellow politicians by a sycophantic wife should think again. This is very much Judy’s own story, proudly starting with her Orca-dian great-great-grandparents who left for the mainland around 1867. Their granddaughter, ‘Auntie G’, is quite a presence throughout the book, starting with her crucial role in Judy’s childhood when she and her three siblings were left by their parents who, for long spells, were working in West Africa. Although born in Scotland, Judy spent part of her childhood in Buckinghamshire, when her father took a job at a timber research laboratory in Princes Risborough. Coming back from school one day, she was handed a leaflet by a Liberal by-election candidate in which she discovered that the party was in favour of, among other things, a Scottish parliament. Thus at the age of ten she became a fervent Liberal, so passionate was she about all things Scottish, although she only joined

the party formally towards the end of her time at university.

Judy met David when they were both students studying law at Edinburgh University; but while she practised briefly as a solicitor, working first as a Parliament House assistant, David chose politics – becoming assistant secretary with the Scottish Liberal Party. They married in 1962. From then on, we are reminded not only of the main political events since then, starting with the Profumo scandal, but also the early by-elections – particularly crucial to Liberal fortunes. Within six weeks of the 1964 general election, when David stood for the first time for Roxburgh, Selkirk and Peebles, the MP died suddenly, and at the subsequent by-election, vividly described by Judy, David won with a majority of 4,657. (“‘It’s Boy David!’ screamed the headlines, and I found myself in bed with a Member of Parliament.’) Soon they were both on the campaign trail again for the 1966 general election, during which time they met a constituent whose brother Sandy ‘won the Border Burghs for Mr Gladstone in 1886’, and Judy finds the



perfect family house which they subsequently buy. The interweaving of political and family events, together with tales of the social and cultural history of the towns and villages of the Borders in Judy’s lively style, characterises the whole book.

The first political milestone Judy chronicles from her own point of view is the Abortion Act of 1968, which David bravely pilots through the Commons, having come third in the ballot for private members’ bills. ‘At Cherrydene, I received some mail directed at me personally which either begged me to intervene or told me I was married to Herod.’ She sets out the arguments clearly and succinctly concluding: ‘Halting that traffic in women’s misery was no mean achievement for a politician who was only thirty years old when the Bill was given its Royal Assent.’

Other milestones follow – the plight of Ugandan Asians, the indecisive February 1974 election, the referendum on Europe in 1975 – all interlaced with the life of the Borders – the Common Ridings and the rivalry between the towns, a potted history of many of their friends, their growing family, and Judy’s involvement in the arts. In 1976 she recalls events