

# DAVID LLOYD GEORGE

**T**HIS SPECIAL ISSUE of the *Journal* commemorates the 150th anniversary of the birth of David Lloyd George, arguably our greatest Liberal in peace and in war, certainly our most radical Prime Minister.

Lloyd George was always to be linked with his almost native Wales, although his birth actually took place in New York Place, Manchester, which allowed LG opportunities, as appropriate, to declare himself to be a 'Lancashire lad'. It was an astonishing life, packed with crisis and controversy. This was captured in February 1934 by the *Daily Express* cartoonist, 'George' Strube, who always depicted his subject accompanied by a pheasant and a mangold wurzel, thereby never allowing him to forget a famous agricultural error from one of Lloyd George's speeches in his pre-1914 land campaign. Strube's cartoon is on the theme of one man in his life paying many parts. Two columns of Lloyd George effigies are lined up. The one on the left depicts, among others, the Birmingham Policeman, the Ratscatcher of Limehouse and the Munitions Minister; the one on the right includes the Welsh Bard, the Wizard, the Court Jester. The two lines of effigy meet at the end with the simple depiction 'The Man who won the War'. But these many characterisations only hint at the rich variety of a glittering career that, as Churchill so memorably proclaimed in the Commons in March 1945 at the time of his old friend's death, did so much to shape the domestic and international history of Britain in the early twentieth century.

Many of these aspects are covered by the distinguished team of scholars who have contributed to this special issue. Four of the essays broadly cover Lloyd George's earlier career down to the end of the



First World War in 1918. The present writer covers his subject's ideas of leadership and the influence upon them of two transcendent statesmen: Gladstone, still a great figure in the Commons when Lloyd George entered parliament at a by-election in April 1890, and that other country lawyer, Abraham Lincoln.

Ian Machin shows how central to Lloyd George's earlier ventures in Liberal politics was popular nonconformity, but how nevertheless it enabled him to straddle the Old Liberalism of civic democracy and the New Liberalism of social reform. Martin Pugh recalls Lloyd George's unique contribution to the Liberalism of welfare in the Edwardian years, but also how his partisan Liberalism could be shunted aside by ideas of coalition, as in 1910. Lloyd George was never

a party regular, to his ultimate cost. Richard Toye illuminates a central asset of Lloyd George's political style, his command of rhetoric, never displayed to more powerful effect than during the First World War.

Four other contributions deal with the years after 1918, the time of fleeting international greatness and ultimate marginalisation. Alan Sharp examines the post-war peace settlement when Lloyd George, one of its architects, came to advocate a fundamental revision, and discusses what the components of that revision might have been. Peter Clarke recalls the fascinating relationship between Lloyd George and Maynard Keynes, a bewildering story that moves from Keynes's powerful indictment of Versailles in a famous tract to their brilliant cooperation in proposing remedies for

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long-term depression and unemployment, and finally to the savage *dénouement* when Keynes's *Essay in Biography* created the legend of Lloyd George as purposeless, a man 'rooted in nothing'. Stella Rudman describes Lloyd George as an advocate of appeasement towards Germany and dangerously emollient towards Hitler, though in the end a fearsome critic of Chamberlainite foreign policy who helped to bring down his old foe in 1940 in his last great speech. David Dutton illustrates how throughout the 1930s the ageing Lloyd George remained a formidable front-line politician, though increasingly marginalised in his last years. Controversy continued to dog Lloyd George in the years after his death, and Chris Wrigley, finally, describes how the opening up of the Lloyd George archives in 1967 in the Beaverbrook Library under the incomparable direction of Alan Taylor led to a new, far more creative phase in Lloyd George studies.

There are other important contributions here as well: two relevant book reviews and an authoritative archival study by John Graham Jones of the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth, on the MS materials on which research on Lloyd George can continue to be pursued.

All these admirable contributions, of course, offer only a part of the myriad themes of Lloyd George's extraordinary odyssey. Others could include such immense topics as war strategy, labour relations, Irish independence, women's suffrage, empire, Welsh devolution, his role as the first modern Prime Minister, his radicalism towards parliament, party, the civil service, the City, the Crown. But this is only to reinforce the point that Lloyd George, like Walt Whitman, contained multitudes. His influence penetrated almost every aspect of

the political, social and economic history of Britain, and of Wales. It helped carry his fellow citizens, to quote Adlai Stevenson, kicking and screaming into the twentieth century.

Lloyd George's reputation has gone through many historical phases, with many highs and lows. Down to the end of the First World War, he was hailed as the great democratic social reformer, a brilliant boy from a poor home in rural Caernarfonshire who moved up, in the title of an early biography, 'from Village Green to Downing Street', as his hero Lincoln had progressed from log cabin to President. In 1918 Bonar Law observed: 'He can be Prime Minister for life if he likes'.

After the coalition of 1918–22, which left a sour taste, the victory of his enemies Baldwin and MacDonald saw a total reversal. The popular hero turned universal scapegoat, as Asquithian opponents denounced him for splitting, almost destroying his party, and for the evil record of the Black and Tans in Ireland, Labour condemned him for betraying the miners over coal nationalisation, and Conservatives despised him for corrupting the Lords through cash for peerages, for dangerous liaisons with Hitler and the Soviet Union, and for being, in Baldwin's illuminating description, simply 'a dynamic force', which was 'a very dangerous thing'. Worse still, many studies, including one by his eldest son, Richard, saw Lloyd George condemned as an immoral libertine. The nadir came after the end of the puritanical, hypocritical 1950s, when Earl Lloyd-George's book coincided with the Lady Chatterley trial and Mervyn Griffith Jones, another chapel-bred Welshman, inquiring of the Old Bailey jury whether it was a proper book for their wives or servants to read.

A third and decisive phase has completely changed the approach. The 1960s were marked by a new politics (with men like Macmillan, Wilson and Foot, who greatly admired Lloyd George) and of course they were 'swinging' and their moral climate more liberated. Most important, the treasures of the Beaverbrook Library meant that the release of new sources enabled Lloyd George's career to be explored with a new seriousness, and his importance for Britain and the world in the twentieth century to emerge with new clarity and depth. He now seems relevant to our world as never before. There are, at present, 443 biographies and other studies of him recorded in the Bodleian catalogue in Oxford. Almost all the recent ones, including incomplete multi-volume works by my late friends John Grigg and Bentley Gilbert, take a far more positive view of their subject's achievements and his visionary qualities, the high road of national and global politics as well as the low road of coalitionist manoeuvres.

This issue of the *Journal of Liberal History*, I hope, will take the process further. I am immensely grateful to Duncan Brack for asking me to be the guest editor, a great honour, and to all my colleagues for their efficiency and enthusiasm for the project. David Lloyd George was the subject of my very first book, a short biography published fifty years ago in February 1963. I wrote then as an immature enthusiast. I do so now tempered by age, experience (and a little ermine). But my view remains much the same as it was then: the judgement of my old mentor Alan Taylor, another famous 'trouble-maker' (in a foreword to another book of mine) that Lloyd George was our greatest ruler since Oliver Cromwell.

Kenneth O. Morgan

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