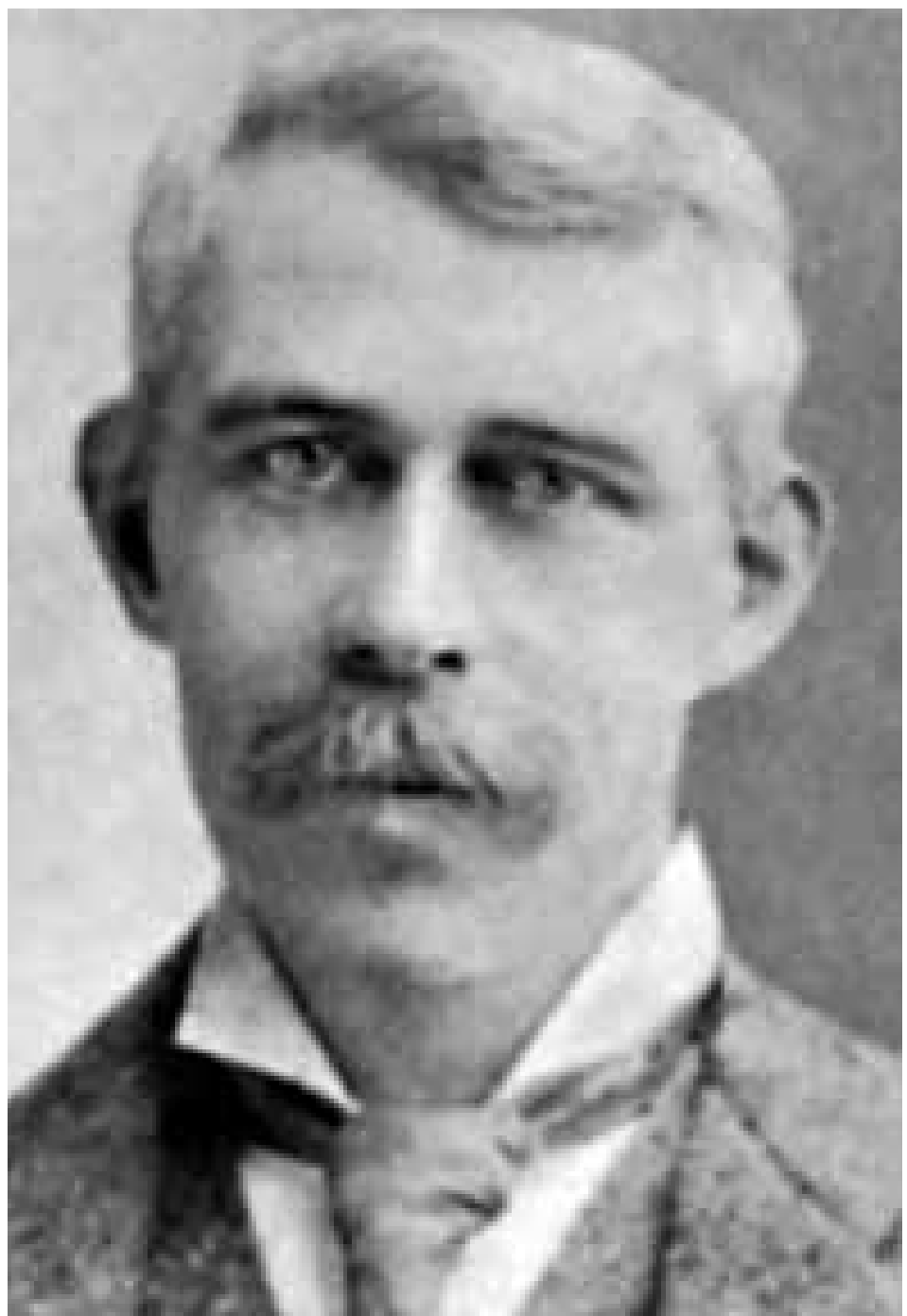


C. E. MONTAGUE, LIB AND THE G

C. E. Montague, in *Disenchantment* (1922) and his essays, novels and short stories of the 1920s, was one of the most prolific early critics of the way the Britain waged the First World War militarily, politically, and morally. The works we most closely associate with prose 'war literature' are those published from 1928, for example by Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon. In the past, historians associated Montague with these 'anti-war' writers, whose work they often accused of naivety and romanticism in its treatment of war, prejudicing public opinion against the conflict. By **Will Pinkney**.



LIBERAL WAR WRITERS REPEAT WAR

YET MONTAGUE WAS part of an older generation of writers that criticised aspects of Britain's participation in 'the war to end all wars' from the standpoint of veteran Liberal journalists. Their work highlights the controversial and politicised debate in the early 1920s over the understanding and commemoration of the war in British public life.

Montague was one of a number of influential Liberals who were quick to publish war reminiscences in the early 1920s, including Philip Gibbs of the *Daily Chronicle*, one of Britain's most widely-read and influential war correspondents, and H M Tomlinson of the *Daily News*. Montague described the war to readers as an exercise in comradeship across class and sectarian boundaries. Joining up in 1914, A J P Taylor considered that Montague personified 'the zest and idealism with which nearly three million Englishmen had marched forth to war'.¹ His commitment to the ostensibly liberal purpose of the war gave an edge to his criticisms of the reactionary politics of the peace, and fuelled his desire to shape public understanding of the conflict. He felt it had been a lost opportunity to heal class divisions at home and to achieve comity of nations, wasted by the class prejudice of the army and the terms of the Versailles treaty. While the Liberal Party was gravely wounded by wartime infighting, Montague and other professedly Liberal writers adapted the classless ethos of pre-war Liberalism to influence public understanding of the war as a noble aim paid for with the lives of ordinary, usually working-class men.

Liberal war writers faced resistance in print from Conservatives who insisted, amid the social strife of the early 1920s, that the cost of the war did not justify wholesale social change in the peace. The war correspondent Colonel Repington claimed that he coined the term 'First World War', denying the war a unique or exceptional bearing on domestic politics by suggesting that there may be more in future.² Montague and others condemned literary depictions of the war like the self-exculpatory account published by the controversial Field Marshal Lord French and Repington's memoirs of a Unionist aristocracy that had sacrificed few of its material comforts. The politics of its writers primarily defined the Liberal canon of war literature, but it also contained celebrations of the sacrifices made by all ranks and criticisms of the generals and Coalition government politicians, both ideas of central importance to British public understanding of the war ever since.

However, historians have since downplayed the role of politics in the formation of public attitudes towards the war. The historiography of war memory has only recently admitted the effect of the 'evolving mnemonic culture' of the years after 1918 on the way the war was remembered.³ Historians neglected the domestic political arguments in Montague's writings in particular by treating literary critics of the war as romantics disillusioned by the experience of war itself. A J P Taylor and Corelli Barnett compare Montague's disillusion to that of the war poets, implying that he was as shocked by the unchivalrous nature

of twentieth century warfare as they supposedly were when 'the war turns out to be like war, and not like Lady Butler's paintings'.⁴ Dan Todman criticises Barnett's caricature of how middle class writers were affected by their experiences.⁵ The 'military historian's view' of Montague and others obscures how pre and post-war political life influenced their writings and impedes our understanding of the early political influences on public conceptions of the war in British society.

The context of Liberal politics in the pre-war years had a direct bearing on Montague's presentation of the war in the 1920s. He found himself a 'war writer' in middle age, already head leader writer for the *Manchester Guardian*, the Liberal mouthpiece, and established writer of didactic novels for middle-class readers on brotherhood with the working classes. Asquith's government faced bitter Unionist opposition over Irish home rule, culminating in a shocking breakdown of military discipline in the months before the outbreak of war in Europe.⁶ In August 1914, Montague took the rare position among former 'pro-Boers' (opponents of the Boer War) of supporting British intervention in Europe, justifying it in the *Manchester Guardian* as the culmination of an existential struggle between liberal democracy and 'Prussianism'. He described the purpose of the war in terms from the Liberal lexicon: an affirmation of public service and a moral foreign policy, forging 'new patriotism' without class 'selfishness'.⁷ The white heat of war, he believed, would strengthen national unity by undermining class consciousness

Charles Edward
Montague
(1867–1928)

C. E. MONTAGUE, LIBERAL WAR WRITERS AND THE GREAT WAR

and religious bigotry. Montague's first criticisms of the conduct of the war were aimed at the War Office for its sectarian recruiting policies in Ireland.

Though Liberals were divided on the question of intervention in August 1914, both enthusiasts like Montague and those more sceptical Liberal war writers who came to support a 'just war' both staked their support on the achievement of liberal war aims. Montague's pro-Boer colleagues like L T Hobhouse and the *Manchester Guardian's* legendary editor C P Scott opposed intervention, which seemed to them to undermine European progress and civilisation. In *World in Conflict* (1915) Hobhouse expressed his disgust that 'force had a greater part to play than we had allowed'.⁸ However, while the war exposed fault lines between Liberal thinkers over foreign policy and the use of force, future Liberal war writers could at least hold their noses when war was declared, and were even enthusiastic about defence of the 'liberal comity of modern Europe'.⁹ When a new liberal Europe did not materialise in the peace, their frustration informed their retelling of lofty aims forfeited.

Montague was concerned with using the war to define English national identity in Liberal terms, a claim that would become even more controversial after the war as commentators debated the motivation of British combatants. The struggle to wrest control of patriotic rhetoric from the Tories was already a longstanding feature of Victorian and Edwardian Liberal rhetoric in the era of high empire.¹⁰ Facing claims by the Tories and the anti-war clique to represent 'the nation' in a time of crisis, Montague argued the case for war by associating intervention with historic English identity, weaving Gladstonian foreign policy into a narrative of a shared European liberal heritage: the war was 'Garibaldi's cause in Italy ... Gambetta's in France, and it would be a strange countryman of Hampden's whom it would not thrill'.¹¹ Montague's political faith was idiosyncratic and romantic, but his belief in the case for war would remain fundamentally unchanged over time. The importance of classless participation in patriotic service and the defence of republican and democratic values in Europe

would define the manner in which he presented the 'meaning' of the war to readers in the 1920s.

Aged forty-seven Montague dyed his white hair brown to enlist, a story retold in the international press. Though Oxford-educated, he enlisted without commission and was accepted into a volunteer 'Kitchener' battalion, the 24th 'Sportsman's', Royal Fusiliers. Montague lost his moustache to a grenade he dropped during training, and spent three weeks at the front before his health gave way. Scott, his father-in-law, had him assigned to Intelligence. From June 1916 he worked as a press censor and propaganda writer, escorting visitors including H G Wells, George Bernard Shaw, J M Barrie and the press baron Lord Northcliffe to the front. The visitors were left in no doubt as to Montague's physical bravery when he brought them dangerously close to artillery fire. Field Marshal Douglas Haig was bemused by 'our white-haired lieutenant's' zeal for service, surprised that 'the Radical paper's anti-militarist should have joined up at once'.¹² Contrary to Barnett's suggestions about his experiences, Montague left France in 1918 with only the growing suspicion that 'the British nation's greatest chance of distinction in all its history would be thrown away' in the peace.¹³

However, in the reactionary political atmosphere of 1919, Montague felt that the war aims of 1914 as he understood them had been betrayed. The Versailles treaty had levied astronomical reparations on the war's losers, encouraging the famine and political extremism wracking central and eastern Europe. Republican violence in Ireland was met with the brutality of the Black and Tan paramilitaries, whilst labour unrest gripped British industry as ex-servicemen re-entered the depressed economy. Montague was further embittered by the collapse of the Liberal Party's claim to moral authority, split between the former Prime Minister Asquith and the Coalition government leader Lloyd George. He had not retained his pre-eminent position on the *Manchester Guardian* and did not believe, as Scott did, in the possibility of a Liberal resurgence. He turned to essays with *Disenchantment* and to further fiction in *Rough Justice* (1926) and *Right*

In the reactionary political atmosphere of 1919, Montague felt that the war aims of 1914 as he understood them had been betrayed.

Off The Map (1927), among others, writing primarily on the wartime experiences of British and Irish fighting men.

Though there were varying opinions on the war's justification within the stable of Liberal war writers, its apparently liberal purpose meant that they had generally supported it in print. The *leitmotif* of the Liberal literary response to the war and the peace was that politicians and diplomats had betrayed the hopes of the men who had volunteered in 1914. They articulated and amplified wider discontent among Liberals that the war's exceptional cost had not been recompensed by a peace to distinguish it from imperialist or dynastic squabbling. In *Disenchantment*, Montague quoted General Sir Ian Hamilton's belief that the Versailles treaty contained 'Not a line ... to show that those boys ... had been any better than the emperors; not one line to stand for the kindness of England'.¹⁴ In foreign and domestic policy, the Coalition seemed to Montague to represent an illiberalism alien to British tradition: 'You finish the long race, and only then you find out that the "you" who has won it is not even the same "you" who once had it to win ... Prussianism, in its own fall, has infected its executioners'.¹⁵ To Montague, the failure to achieve a liberal peace settlement and domestic polity was a condemnation of the nation's moral stature.

His response was to propagate a Liberal interpretation of what the war had been fought for, as a condemnation of post-war politics. In doing so, his criticisms of the peace treaty and of politicians, and his demand for greater respect for those who had fought, helped shape the way the war was perceived in Britain. In the unsettled atmosphere of the early 1920s, amid mass unemployment and working class discontentment, anti-war Liberals like Norman Angell criticised democracy and the working classes as threats to, rather than expressions of, liberal England.¹⁶ By contrast, Montague recounted the war as a battleground between conservatism and liberalism in which British society had failed to address the class divisions that he blamed for post-war illiberalism and the revolutionary Left. Alienated from the bickering Liberal Party, Montague's

rallying cries of liberal national identity, public service and humanity, derived from his pre-war politics, were redirected to defend ex-servicemen without jobs or homes, who found themselves vilified as 'Bolsheviks' by the Right and ignored by the Liberals.¹⁷ Montague was quick to point out that strikers, socialists and even IRA volunteers had previously been British servicemen and were not served by the reactionary tone of the post-war parliamentary classes. In *Ten Years After: A Reminder* (1924), Philip Gibbs noted how wartime phrases like 'homes for heroes' and 'a world safe for democracy' had been abandoned by Coalition and Conservative governments in peacetime.¹⁸

Montague and other Liberal war writers were prolific participants in the contemporary debate over the collective character of ex-servicemen, defending them from charges that they had been brutalised by war, resulting in demobilisation riots and accusations of Bolshevism in the press and Commons. The writer Henry de Man warned of the damage done to the working class mind in war, contravening the Edwardian Liberal assumption of man and society's forward progress.¹⁹ Gibbs described this as a 'foul libel', and argued that most soldiers had never accepted the normality of killing.²⁰ Montague presented ex-servicemen in his writings as heroic and humane representatives of a national identity defined by liberal values. He described to H M Tomlinson how he sympathised not with 'intellectual reasons' for patriotism, a 'blasted "rough island story"'. Instead, 'my England is ... the crowd at a League football match ... and the look of the common soldier in France ... that special kind of good-temper and humour and relating decency that the man of the working classes has here'.²¹ Montague's sympathetic representation of working class soldiers foreshadowed the wider acceptance in the 1920s of 'peaceableness', and particularly the peacefulness of the working class, as a facet of Englishness. Gibbs echoed a common perception that the peaceful resolution of the General Strike in 1926 was the product of working class moral character and good humour, which weathered the national crisis as it had endured during the war.²²

Montague's writings and their reception are evidence of the resurgence of liberal values divorced from the Liberal Party in the settling polity of the 1920s.

Liberal war writers drew less of their political sentiment from their experiences of war, as Barnett suggests, than from pre-war Liberalism, which Barnett holds had essentially failed them. As he had done before the war, Montague contested Conservatives' use of the language of patriotism and national identity, and attacked the partisan use of state apparatus like the military. He cried foul when Ian Hay, a Kitchener volunteer and author of the popular war book *The First Hundred Thousand* (1916), wrote a pamphlet for the Board of Trade entitled 'The New Hundred Thousand', which appropriated the memory of wartime national struggle for use in peacetime against striking miners.²³ He also denounced Churchill's attempt to use the Territorials to widen Britain's military intervention in revolutionary Russia. To varying degrees, Liberal war writers were distanced from the party, but influenced public understanding of the war in distinctively Liberal terms. Gibbs felt that Labour's victory in 1924 was attributable to the failure of Conservatives and Liberals to sense anger 'among ex-soldiers who had not received reward for service'. Yet Montague and Gibbs asserted that working class ex-servicemen constituted a peace party that believed in 'anti-militarism and world peace ... democratic liberties' and 'more pay for less work', all phrases which echoed pre-war Liberal campaigns.²⁴ Liberalism infused the Labour Party while overlapping with the moderate Conservative leader Baldwin's outlook. Montague reflected both the dissipation of the Liberal vote and the wider dissemination of Liberal assumptions. He supported both Baldwin and Labour as forces that addressed the question of what was owed to ex-servicemen.

Criticism of the generals became particularly important to public understanding of the war in later decades, but was formatively influenced by Liberal viewpoints. Contrasted with working class decency in Liberal war literature is the theme of aristocratic bungling and inhumanity that defeats the enthusiasm of working and middle class volunteers. Philip Gibbs's *Ten Years After* attacked the bloodiness of contemporary tactics that wasted the ardour of

volunteers and allowed what had originally been seen as a 'conflict between idealism and brutality' to become a 'crime against humanity'.²⁵ The cynicism displayed by the aristocracy recalled in Colonel Repington's memoirs galled Tomlinson and Montague and sparked controversy about the war record of the ruling classes, which Montague claimed had been common in the New Army in 1914.²⁶ Sir John French's unchivalrous attacks on Kitchener and the New Army provoked Montague to criticise the 'honest, plodding ... ungifted tactics' of the Regulars that he felt had starved the army of new ideas.²⁷ Barnett criticises Montague for such statements that passed retrospective judgement on the war and showed little sympathy for the generals. However, this evaluation ignores the didactic purpose of Liberal war literature: even faulty grenades, Montague felt, had 'moral reverberations'.

Montague's writings and their reception are evidence of the resurgence of liberal values divorced from the Liberal Party in the settling polity of the 1920s. *Disenchantment* was well received on the Liberal and Socialist Left on its publication in February 1922, praised by Gibbs, Tomlinson, Bernard Shaw, John Masefield and Wells. The most successful early books on the war were generally conventional military overviews like Kipling's *The Irish Guards in the Great War* (1923). Tomlinson felt that the wooden literary depiction in the immediate post-war years of the 'Nobodies', working-class soldiers, who had won the war would 'disgrace pantomime'.²⁸ While *Disenchantment* had sold under 10,000 copies by autumn 1927 – far fewer than the celebrated books to be published the next year – it was recognised by contemporary critics as being one of the most respected and influential works of its kind.²⁹ The importance to Left and Right of adapting public memory of the war to political needs is encapsulated in Montague's recollection of how his more conservative wartime colleague John Buchan, author of *The 39 Steps*, halted Montague's plan to write a school textbook on the war in 1923, telling him that he had already begun one himself at Stanley Baldwin's invitation.³⁰

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The critical debate that met Liberal war literature was to an extent a proxy battle between parties. Conservative commentators, sensing that Coalition government with Lloyd George would not long serve their interests, began 'appropriating part of the new story of the war emerging and using it to blame the declining Liberals'. Orlo Williams, a Conservative and major in the Middle East, railed in the *Times Literary Supplement* against the perceived wisdom of the soldier-writer's critical viewpoint as early as 1919, almost a decade before Remarque, Sassoon and Graves published novels that were taken by many to represent 'the truth' about the war.³¹ To defuse the Liberal claim that soldiers had been ill-used, Williams asserted that *Disenchantment* told 'what everybody knows' about the war, and suggested that Montague and Tomlinson were bound to be disappointed by their experiences, given their lofty notions of for what the war had been fought.³² Robert Lynd in the *New Statesman* gave Montague the double-edged compliment of being 'a soldier of chivalry, [who] hated all those who were doing their best to make him a soldier of shabby spite'.³³ Political opponents duelled over the actual importance in wartime of the ideals attributed to combatants in Liberal literature, with Conservatives claiming that Liberal writers imposed their idealism on those who had not, in reality, found the war's finale disillusioning.³⁴

Yet the suggestion that ex-servicemen had been ill-used by generals and politicians became less controversial in the 1920s and 1930s, finding expression in the Oxford Union's resolution in 1933 to refuse to take up arms for King and Country. This interpretation of the combatants' experience drew heavily from Liberal commonplaces of the post-war era. It was widely believed among Liberals that Liberalism and 'classless' politics had been smothered between Socialism, Conservatism, unemployment and high income tax. The embattled self-perception of middle class readers, argues Alison Light, encouraged pride in war literature in the status of the 'disenfranchised and dispossessed'.³⁵ Contemporary conservative critics denied that the war should have been understood as

The assumption that Liberalism's decline meant that Liberal writers had no ideas to offer the post-war world ignores the debt that influential early accounts of the war owed to pre-war Liberalism.

a sea change in British politics: that a pre-war 'Arcadia' was destroyed by 'a horror that was transitory, though bad enough'.³⁶ However, the commercial success from the late 1920s of novels critical of the cost of the war suggests that the tastes of the reading public were increasingly sympathetic to what had been the Liberals' argument: that profiteers and imperialist adventurers had squandered wartime sacrifices and the peace.

Historians of Liberal war literature, though, have tended to describe the books as a counter-cultural undercurrent that existed solely in relation to dominant conservative interpretations of the war as a war like any other. Clearly, conservative critics did not regard the books as an undercurrent, but a dangerous grab by Liberals for moral authority.

Montague has been contextualised in the 'inky war' between conservative and Liberal writers.³⁷ However, the most influential interpretation of Liberal war writers is that of Samuel Hynes, which obscures the crucial political dimension. Hynes argues that books like *Disenchantment* were attempts to expose a 'reality' in the war distinct from the 'value-bearing abstraction' contained in such forms of commemoration as 'buildings or statues or soldiers' graves', which Hynes assumes represent 'celebrations' of the war. Hynes understands the debate over the legacy of the war to be between 'a conservative culture that clung to and asserted traditional values, and a counter-culture, rooted in rejection of the war and its principles', that included Montague and Gibbs.³⁸ Yet Gibbs and Montague did not reject the war or its principles; and while Gibbs and Tomlinson did express a desire to expose the 'truth' about the horrors of war, Montague was sceptical about presumption by writers to suggest what the war 'really' signified and anticipated the wave of 'prickly' books about the war that was to come.³⁹ While Liberal war writers were divided on whether or not they were exposing the 'truth' of what they had seen as journalists or otherwise, they were largely united by their opposition to Coalition and Conservative policies, and their desire to draw attention to the condition of ex-servicemen.

The importance of Liberal political thought in the formation of understanding of the war is not fully recognised in Hynes's account. Alex King has drawn attention to the implications of Hynes's argument, that 'anti-monument makers' like Gibbs only reacted against permanent expressions of war memory and did not shape them, left lamenting the failure of an irrelevant political philosophy.⁴⁰ Rather, Liberal war writers made positive claims to influence war memory, in literature and public ceremony. Illustratively, Gibbs and Montague both wrote prolifically on war memorials: Montague wrote in the *Manchester Guardian* in support of Lutyens's Cenotaph and the controversial decision to forbid individualised headstones in British war cemeteries to avoid class distinctions among the dead. The ubiquity of simple war memorials and classless commemoration of the dead in British public life is lasting evidence of how far Liberal values moulded the way the British public understood the war.

The debates over the public commemoration of war dead, over criticism of British strategy, and the peace, provoked comment from across the political spectrum, from art and literature without party politics, from religious organisations, from debate within rural and urban communities and elsewhere. Yet the early post-war years were an identifiable moment of Liberal cultural influence when pre-war Liberal ideals, no longer so closely associated with the struggling party, influenced the changing way the war was described in print, and subsequently perceived and commemorated. Montague longed for his books to place the war in its British and European context, alongside Marlborough and Wellington's campaigns, and for *Disenchantment* to be 'a book that could be read for ever' as a testament to liberal European values.⁴¹ Yet the assumption that Liberalism's decline meant that Liberal writers had no ideas to offer the post-war world ignores the debt that influential early accounts of the war owed to pre-war Liberalism. Our understanding of war literature and remembrance would benefit from more fully acknowledging the influence of contemporary political ideas on lasting traditions.

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This article was first published in the *RUSI Journal* (Vol. 155, No. 5, October/November 2010) and is republished courtesy of the editor.

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LETTERS

D. S Macdonald

Reading David Dutton's fascinating account of Liberalism in Dumfriesshire in *Journal of Liberal History* 76 I was struck by his references to a 'D.S. Macdonald' in the 1930s. This must surely have been the same elderly man who in 1959 was agent to the Hon Simon Mackay (now Lord Tanlaw) in the by-election in Galloway when we secured a creditable second place. Eight student Liberals from Edinburgh University, of whom I was one, spent a good deal of time campaigning there.

D.S. Macdonald conducted it from his house, and I recall him barking down the

telephone to party HQ in London: 'Macdonald, Galloway here'. He also nearly killed several of us with his erratic driving, when he mistook a single oncoming headlight to be a motorbike and it turned out to be a tractor. He was a truly unforgettable and dedicated fighter for Liberalism.

David Steel

Immigration policy

I would counter what Nick Clegg has suggested about requiring a cash deposit from certain visa applicants by quoting what Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman said about

the Conservatives' Aliens Bill in the House of Commons on 18 July 1905:

'The hardest working man, the most laborious and intelligent man, the man most likely to make a good citizen if he settles here ... has no chance to come into this country unless he has money in his pocket. But the worthless man, the scamp, the lazy man ... can come in if he has money in his pocket.'

Dr Sandy S. Waugh

Roy Jenkins and Lloyd George

In his review of Roy Hattersley's biography of Lloyd George

(*Journal of Liberal History* 77), Ian Packer repeats the comments Hattersley attributes to Roy Jenkins about Lloyd George. But was Lloyd George 'a politician he disliked so heartily'?

Lord Hattersley does not give us the date or context of the comments. Was it over a claret-fuelled lunch or in more serious discussion? If this was the substantial view of Jenkins, the author of major biographies of Gladstone, Churchill and, most relevantly, Asquith, it might contribute to an assessment of LG. But in his only significant review of LG (*The Chancellors*), Jenkins rates him

/continued on p. 31