

pressure. The Conservatives tabled a censure motion against the government to which the Liberals added an amendment seeking a select committee inquiry into the matter. When it was passed in the Commons, Macdonald took it as a vote of no confidence and resigned. Macdonald had handled these crises badly, partly because he had been distracted and exhausted by his diplomatic negotiations.

In the election which followed, Baldwin offered no new policies to solve the country's economic problems but campaigned on a one-nation policy and vigorously attacked Labour's supposed Bolshevik tendencies, despite the actual moderation of their approach in government. Baldwin was helped just before the general election when the *Daily Mail* (again) produced the banner headline 'Civil War plot by socialists'. It had a copy of the letter allegedly written by Grigory Zinoviev, President of the Communist International, to the British representative on Comintern urging revolutionary action in Britain. It was alleged that Macdonald and Henderson had copies of the letter weeks before and had done nothing, implying their collusion in the supposed red plot. Macdonald was convinced the letter was a forgery, as has since been proved, but was loath to defend himself, again handling the affair badly, and this was taken as evidence of his guilt.

It is doubtful whether the Zinoviev letter decisively affected the outcome of the general election, which the Conservatives won comfortably, but it didn't help Labour. Labour did increase its overall vote share but got fewer seats on a higher turnout. The Liberals slumped; even Asquith lost his seat in Paisley. So the election was really fought as a war between Labour and Conservatives and many former Liberals chose their sides. Baldwin abandoned tariffs during the campaign, eliminating one distinctive stretch of clear water between the Liberal and Conservative parties. The Liberals were seen to have done very little during the Labour government. They had been ineffectual and divided. They seemed to have few distinctive policies and little hope of achieving much. It seemed that Labour's performance as a minority administration had

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convinced enough people that they were, after all, capable of responsible constitutional government. Its core vote turned out in strength while the larger number of people who were terrified of socialism flocked to the Conservatives abandoning the Liberals. Labour had established itself as the main opposition party to the Tories and made a better showing in 1924 than has usually been credited. So in conclusion, Pat Thane agreed with Michael Steed that the decline of the Liberal Party was essentially one of natural causes.

The one important issue which emerged during the question and answer session concerned the distribution of the women's vote and how this had affected the position of the Liberals. In answer to questions on how women voted, Steed cited Chris Cook's figures showing how middle-class constituencies swung from the Conservatives to the Liberals in 1923 much more than agricultural ones. As female electors were significantly more numerous in middle-class constituencies, Steed speculated that this was due to women voting more on the issue of free trade/cheap food. Re-examining the data afterwards, Steed reported that he had done enough preliminary work to establish that:

- Constituencies with more women voted Conservative to

a significantly greater extent in this period, and therefore it is very likely that the newly enfranchised female voters voted more Conservative and less Labour; the evidence for the Liberal Party is less clear. How far this was a matter of gender or one of social environment (age, class, occupation, etc.) is open to debate; more exhaustive work might throw some light on that.

- Women voters swung more than men to Lab/Lib in 1923, swinging more back to Conservative in 1924. There is no real doubt about this differentiation, presumably on the free trade issue, though the precise extent and how far it was a gender or social context effect again needs more work and may be difficult to establish.

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- 1 These simple party descriptions include candidates who were fighting each other as pro-Lloyd George or Asquithian Liberals or pro-Coalition Conservatives. There were hardly any Independents or others except for Northern Ireland.
- 2 Made up of 63 Labour and 10 National Democratic Party MPs.

## REVIEWS

### Elegant and concise

David Dutton, *A History of the Liberal Party Since 1900* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2013)

Reviewed by **Duncan Brack**

**W**HEN MATT COLE reviewed the first edition of this book in the *Journal of Liberal History* back in 2005, he concluded that David Dutton had provided an answer to the question 'why bother with Liberal history?' that was 'as full and effective as could be expected by

his most demanding reader, or the willing non-specialist'. The History Group's own introductory reading list described the book as 'a definitive guide to the decline, fall and revival of Liberalism in the twentieth century; meticulously researched, by far the best of the short histories now available'.

This remained the case until the publication of the History Group's own *Peace, Reform and Liberation: A history of Liberal politics in Britain 1679–2011* – so it would be fair to say now that the second edition of Dutton's book is one of the *two* best short histories now available!

It is of course different in scope and style: it covers a much shorter period than ours, starting only in 1900 (with a very brief introduction summarising the party's roots and record before the twentieth century), it's shorter in length (376 pages compared to 432, and a smaller page size) and, of course, it's written by a single author rather than fifteen (which included Dutton himself). This second edition adds one chapter to those of the first edition, taking the party's story up to spring 2011 (in the end finishing slightly earlier than *Peace, Reform and Liberation* even though the book came out two years later – such is the speed with which academic publishers work), and also including a revised conclusion.

All of Matt Cole's conclusions from his review of the first edition remain valid: this is an excellent book, bringing together a wide and varied body of research – including unpublished theses, Dutton's own work and articles from a huge range of sources (including this *Journal*) – and written in an engaging style and with a real sense of momentum.

In considering the reasons for the Liberal Party's twentieth-century decline and eclipse, Dutton joins other authors in concluding that in 1914 Liberalism was 'a varied, but generally robust, political force – but one that was beset by more than its fair share of problems'. The fatal damage was done by a twenty-year 'civil war', Asquith's decision to support Labour's first administration in 1924, which 'smacked of the fatal "wait and see" style', and the effects of descent into third-party status with its inevitable consequences in the British electoral system. As Cole summarised, 'there were further misjudgements and vanities in the 1930s, but it seems that for Dutton the killer episodes for the Liberal Party were the outflow – rather than simply the initial substance – of the wartime Asquith–Lloyd George split. In this analysis, Dutton shows a subtlety lacking in some earlier studies,

notably showing the "kaleidoscopic" variations in the Liberal factions of the inter-war period.'

For the remainder of the century, Liberalism was subjected to a 'two-pronged pincer assault launched by its political opponents', and revival from the 1960s onwards came primarily from the votes of disillusioned Tories. Dutton acknowledges, however, the 'continuity of Liberal principles', the role of 'key figures ... who managed to convince at least themselves that the Liberal cause was not lost', and the shrewd electoral tactics of 1997 and 2001, which took the party to a parliamentary representation unmatched since the 1920s.

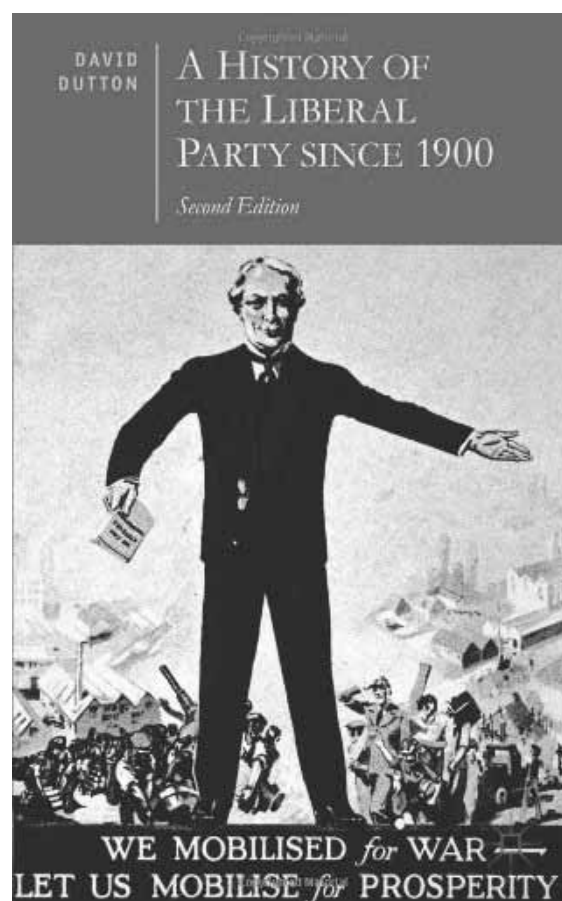
The new chapter, 'Right into government, 2001–11' is more descriptive and less analytical than the others – always a tendency with very recent history – but none the less insightful for that. Dutton traces the gradual disintegration of Charles Kennedy's leadership, paying due attention to the ideological debates triggered by the publication of *The Orange Book* in 2004. He observes, quoting Conrad Russell, that 'technically as well as ideologically', the blend between the two traditions of economic and social liberalism is 'extremely difficult to mix in the right proportions' (p. 278). He reaches a balanced judgement on Menzies Campbell's qualities as leader – 'reliable, dignified, intellectually capable and, in every sense of the word, sober', but also, 'at least in the context of a television age dominated by the political soundbite – unequivocally dull' (p. 281); and also on his achievements, recognising that he restored a degree of professionalism to the party organisation.

The Clegg leadership, of course, is always now seen through the lens of the 2010 coalition with the Conservatives. While arguing that Clegg's election as leader did not make this outcome inevitable, Dutton nevertheless observes the importance of the generational change in the party's leadership: 'at its top the party now had a group of individuals including Clegg, [Chris] Huhne, [David] Laws and Danny Alexander who were both more pragmatic and more market-orientated than their predecessors' (p. 285). Combined with the disappointments of New Labour and the perceived (though in the end

illusory) detoxification of the Conservatives under Cameron, this ended the assumption under which the party's previous three leaders had adopted, that any kind of deal was only possible with Labour. This was reinforced by the more economic-liberal policy agenda of Clegg and most of his shadow cabinet appointments.

Dutton provides a good concise summary of the 2010 election campaign; I particularly liked his observation on the first leaders' TV debate that 'at one level it was all a sad commentary on the state of British democracy that a single television programme, which had more to do with emotional engagement than rational debate, should have had such an impact' (p. 291). He covers only the first year of the coalition, up the spring 2011 party conference revolt over the NHS reforms, finishing the chapter by concluding that 'such signs of independence and differentiation were only likely to increase' (p. 304).

Dutton's conclusion – almost entirely rewritten in this second edition – traces the continuity of Liberal ideology, policy and ideas throughout the last century:



... arguably, a continuity of Liberal principles has been upheld. Liberalism remains committed to the rights of the individual and to personal liberty ... The party retains its faith in the market and the need to restrict the intrusions of government. It continues to proclaim the need for social justice and a fairer society ... It insists on a moral component in the conduct of British foreign policy. (p. 306)

He also, however, argues that the triumph of liberalism in British society – in that Britain possesses a more liberal society than it did a hundred years ago – poses the party the problem of appearing relevant; why is there a need for a Liberal party any more? Identifying the lack of much of a core group as a continuing problem, he pays tribute to the Liberal Democrats' ability increasingly to concentrate their vote, overcoming, to an extent, the barriers of the first-past-the-post electoral system. Nevertheless, he ends on a note of warning:

Even if, as academic investigation has shown, the party draws its strength disproportionately from the educated professional and managerial classes and attracts a high percentage of university graduates, its chequered course has sometimes challenged comprehension and has not been best designed to consolidate voter loyalty.

Obviously I'm biased, but I think *Peace, Reform and Liberation* is still the best single-volume history of British Liberalism now available. But if you prefer to acquire a different one, or to add a second book to your collection, or just to enjoy a scholarly, accessible and elegant analysis of Liberal politics from 1900, David Dutton's book is unquestionably the one to buy.

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insists that Stanley's knowledge of the East Fife area is significant because this was Asquith's constituency. But he ceased to be the MP there in 1918 when Stanley was only six; the explanation for his familiarity with East Fife is surely that he was keen on golf.

Yet despite the reservations, one must agree that Neate is justified in her scepticism about much that has been written about Asquith's life. In the first biography, *The Life of Herbert Henry Asquith, Lord Oxford and Asquith* (1932) by J. A. Spender and Cyril Asquith, Venetia Stanley was not even mentioned. This was no longer the case when Roy Jenkins published his biography in 1964: correspondence that left no doubt about the nature of the relationship had been passed by Venetia Stanley's daughter, Judith, to Mark Bonham-Carter who in turn passed it on to Jenkins. Initially, however, he summed up their relationship as 'both a solace and a recreation' – but no more. However, Jenkins admitted he had cut some of his text in deference to objections by Violet Bonham-Carter. Dedicated to preserving the memory and reputation of her father, she was understandably loath to accept that he had effectively used her as cover for frequent and injudicious meetings with young girls who were her contemporaries and friends. But by the time of his third edition Jenkins had rejected Violet Bonham-Carter's view as simply implausible. Subsequently little was added by Stephen Koss's 1976 biography, although Michael and Eleanor Brock had published *H. H. Asquith: Letters to Venetia Stanley*. Remarkably, the Brocks declared themselves convinced that the two were not lovers, though Neate's interview with Michael Brock suggests how very embarrassed he was about this.

This treatment by academics and biographers is a reminder that it has become fashionable to warn against misreading the flowery, extravagant language employed by the Edwardians as proof of their love for one another. Today we are so obsessed with sex, so runs the argument, that we see it at every turn. Thus when Asquith writes as 'your devoted lover' this is merely routine, conventional stuff.

However, this approach has made writers unduly cautious. For

**Asquith vigorously pursued relationships with women much younger than himself, and engaged in an industrial-scale correspondence with Venetia Stanley much of which is available to researchers (though, significantly, some remains closed in the Bodleian Library until 2015).**

## Son of Asquith?

Bobbie Neate, *Conspiracy of Secrets* (John Blake, 2012)

Reviewed by **Martin Pugh**

**T**HIS IS AN UNUSUAL book, to say the least. In it Bobbie Neate gives a detailed account of her researches into the secret life of her distant, intimidating and abusive stepfather, Louis T. Stanley, who, she concludes, was the illegitimate son of H. H. Asquith and Venetia Stanley, the daughter of Lord Sheffield of Alderley Edge (an extensive estate now owned by the National Trust). In the process she establishes that Stanley and his relatives went to extraordinary lengths to conceal his origins, including the falsification of birth, marriage and death certificates, and worked hard and successfully to obscure his background beneath a veneer of respectability. He was continually torn between the desire to maintain secrecy on the one hand and the temptation to flaunt his connections with prominent people on the other. The resulting fear of

exposure and frustration at what might have been helped to make Stanley the edgy, irritable individual he was.

Although shocking, the idea is perfectly credible, as it has been well known for many years that Asquith vigorously pursued relationships with women much younger than himself, and engaged in an industrial-scale correspondence with Venetia Stanley much of which is available to researchers (though, significantly, some remains closed in the Bodleian Library until 2015). But although the author has amassed a huge quantity of circumstantial evidence for her claim, conclusive proof that Stanley was the son of Asquith and Venetia remains elusive. Her case is somewhat undermined by a tendency to flourish every trivial piece of evidence as the key to the mystery and to see significance where there is none. For example, she