been usual in the past, most recently in 1900, in 1915 it looked as though Asquith would lose the prospective election – and since entering the war in 1914 most Liberals felt loath to let the Tories get back into power to undermine all their social reforms. In this situation coalition seemed a brilliant short-term tactic because it made an election unnecessary: already the parties were operating a truce in by-elections and, under the coalition, parliament simply prolonged this arrangement by passing legislation to extend its life for the course of the war.

Of course, seen in medium to long-term perspective, coalition with the Conservatives proved disastrous for the Liberal Party not simply because it led to a split within the party from 1916 onwards but because it destroyed the party's rationale and sense of purpose. Although this fateful decision – for which Asquith was personally responsible as he did not consult his colleagues or the parliamentary party – took many people by surprise, it had been looming for some time, as the Conservatives appreciated. It was not really attributable to the breakdown of Asquith's affair with Venetia Stanley.

Martin Pugh was formerly Professor of Modern British History at Newcastle University. His most recent book is a study of the historical origins of the current crisis of national identity: Britain: Unification and Disintegration*, published by Authors OnLine.*

You don't have to be mad to work there, but …

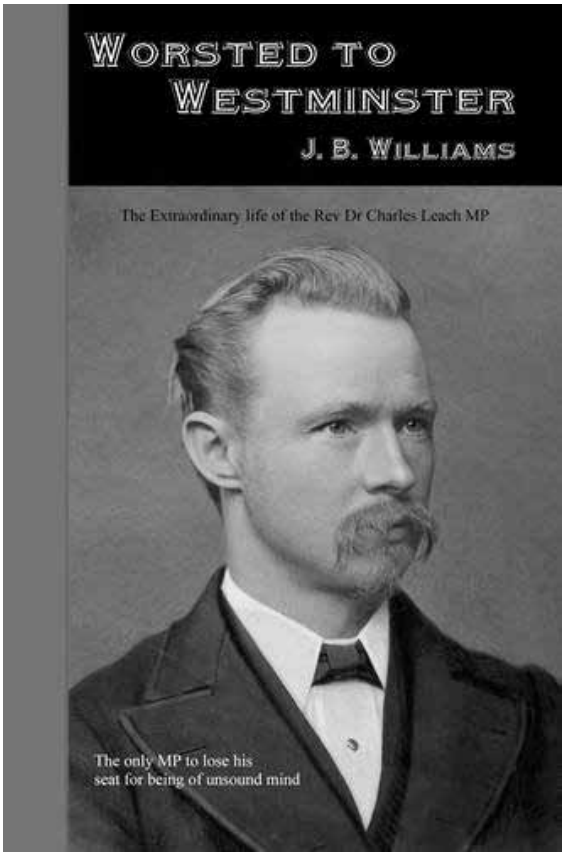
J. B. Williams, *Worsted to Westminster: The Extraordinary Life of Rev Dr Charles Leach MP* (Darcy Press, 2009)
Reviewed by **Tony Little**

While led predominately by Whig aristocrats and a small associated elite, the nineteenth-century Liberal Party drew the bulk of its support from lower down in the class structure. The stereotypical Liberal would almost certainly be a Nonconformist, he would be a supporter of good causes for the uplifting of his fellow man such as education or temperance, and he would be self-reliant, perhaps a self-made businessman. Charles Leach ticked all these boxes and made the best of his opportunities to gain that what Anthony Trollope thought the ultimate desire of an English gentleman, a seat in parliament. Yet, if Leach is remembered at all, it is – as this book's cover proclaims – because he was the only MP to lose his seat for being of unsound mind, a distinction one instinctively feels should have been much more common.

Illegitimately conceived, Charles Leach was born to a family of poor textile workers near Halifax in 1847. His mother died while he was young and, despite switching to the pottery trade, his father remained poor and Charles was sent to work in a factory when he was eight. Since this came with a smattering of education it eventually provided Charles with the opportunity for escape to a better life. Obviously an enterprising child, he went from attending the New Methodist Connection chapel Sunday school to becoming a lay preacher and from a factory worker to a self-employed clog and patten maker with his own boot and shoe shop and eventually six staff. He married young but lost two sons in childhood and two daughters in early adulthood though two other daughters survived. Following his religious vocation, he undertook the training to become a fully qualified minister.

He spent two years at Attercliffe in the east of Sheffield before transferring to Ladywood in Birmingham where he found his true calling as an effective speaker. His Sunday afternoon lectures outgrew the capacity of his church and were moved to the centre of the city. Methodist practice was to move ministers on at regular intervals but Leach had put down roots and rather than accept a transfer to London, he changed his ministry to a newly established Congregationalist chapel. It was in 1870s Birmingham that he came under the influence of the Chamberlainite Liberal Party and campaigned on a number of issues where his Christian morality and radical beliefs overlapped such as temperance, the protests against the Bulgarian atrocities and against the Contagious Diseases Acts. He was elected to the Birmingham School Board, firmly under Liberal control, but this phase of his political career was halted abruptly in 1886 when he sided with the Gladstonians against Chamberlain in the home rule dispute, with the majority in the party nationally but decidedly in the minority in Birmingham.

For Nonconformists, politics could easily overflow into religious life and Williams suggests that Leach's political discomfort was behind his acceptance of the call to a congregation in London. Again he was successful in building a new church community and again he involved himself in radical politics, unsuccessfully standing for the Chelsea School Board but successfully for the Chelsea vestry



(the equivalent to the local council). If he had resisted the temptation to stick to Chamberlain, he temporarily succumbed to the lure of the socialist Independent Labour Party in the 1890s. Williams outlines the reasons for his joining the ILP more fully than his subsequent retreat back to Liberalism but hints that again the politics are entangled with the religion.

Leach participated with other Nonconformists in the campaign against the Tory 1902 Education Act and his political career reached an apex when, in the first general election of 1910, he defeated the charismatic but mysterious socialist Victor Grayson who had captured Colne Valley in a 1907 by-election. Still energetic but in his sixties, it would have been no surprise that Leach served as a chaplain during the First World War and, given what we know of war time hospital conditions even in England, still less a surprise that for a caring man the mental strain proved too much. He died in 1917.

Inevitably, most MPs become no more than backbenchers but the career path that took them to Westminster can itself throw a spotlight on the nature of the political culture that sustained them. We tend to know far more about the very untypical leadership of the Liberal Party when it was the natural party of government than we do about the rank and file. J. B. Williams' book is therefore much to be welcomed.

Williams is the great grandson of the Rev. Charles Leach and his book shows both the possibilities and limitations of a family history approach to biography. From the notes, he does not appear to have had access to any great wealth of family papers or letters but instead has mined the public records – in particular the provincial press, church records, Leach's own writings and Hansard. As more of this documentation becomes available online, the scope for investigating the lives of other backbench Liberals is opened wider. For the nineteenth century this could supplement the work of the History of Parliament Trust which, I believe, is now working on the period 1832–68.

Williams seems more comfortable with the church history than with the politics of the late Victorian period, I suspect that more could be made of Leach's part in Birmingham politics but this should not deter the sampling of this work if only to gain the inspiration to bring other historic Liberals back to notice. The book is available very cheaply as an e-book and in physical format as a reasonably priced, good-quality, illustrated, print-on-demand paperback.

If Leach is remembered at all, it is – as this book's cover proclaims – because he was the only MP to lose his seat for being of unsound mind, a distinction one instinctively feels should have been much more common.

Tony Little is Chair of the Liberal Democrat History Group.

Liberal defectors identified and explored

Alun Wyburn-Powell, *Defectors and the Liberal Party, 1910–2010: A Study of Inter-Party Relations* (Manchester University Press, 2012)

Review by **Dr J. Graham Jones**

The author earned his spurs as the author of a competent, generally well-received biography of Liberal leader Clement Davies published in 2003 (reviewed in Journal of Liberal History, no. 43 (Summer 2004), pp. 39–41). The present volume is based on his doctoral thesis presented in the University of Leicester and supervised by Dr Stuart Ball. The author's original plan was to undertake doctoral research on Gwilym Lloyd-George, a project soon sadly jettisoned in the light of the inadequacy of the surviving source materials, and replaced by an ambitious strategy to examine all those MPs who defected from, or into, the Liberal Party (later the Liberal Democrats) between 1910 and 2010.

Dr Wyburn-Powell travelled far and laboured hard in the various archives to gather his fascinating material. His numerous research trips have certainly yielded fruit to enrich his truly pioneering, groundbreaking study. His main theme is that there was 'an enduring cultural compatibility between the Conservatives and the Liberals/Liberal Democrats' which finally led to the formation of a coalition government following the 2010 general election. Such a rapport, he insists, 'had not been the case with the relationship between the Liberals/Liberal Democrats and Labour' (back cover). During the century covered by this study, a total of 116 Liberal MPs defected; there is a helpful listing of them in a table on pp. 8–10.

All of these politicians are considered in varying detail in the main text where the author carefully examines the many disparate reasons and motives behind the various changes of political allegiance. The time-scale of the volume is long, ranging from politicians like Charles Trevelyan and Arthur Ponsonby (and political maverick E. T. John in Wales) who defected from their party at the end of the First World War, to Emma Nicholson who joined it from the Conservatives in 1995 and Sir Anthony Meyer who emulated her example in 2001. Many names familiar to students of the party are considered here – Freddie Guest and Reginald McKenna, Sir Alfred Mond and E. Hilton Young, Edgar Granville and Wilfrid Roberts. Many fascinating sidelights are presented on these famous names, and the author clearly has an eagle eye for the telling quotation to enliven and illustrate his captivating analysis. One senses at times that the necessity to limit the size of the book no doubt precluded him from including further gems.

The present reviewer savoured the accounts of the Welsh Liberal politicians including those on Clement Davies (masterly, as might be expected from this author), Gwilym and Megan Lloyd George, David Davies, Llandinam, and Sir Rhys Hopkin Morris. Megan's slow gravitation towards the Labour Party, a long, tortuous process, might perhaps have been traced in a little more detail. More attention might have been given to more minor, though still significant, Welsh Liberal figures like W. Llewelyn Williams, who fell out big-time with Lloyd George over the necessity to introduce