

... 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?

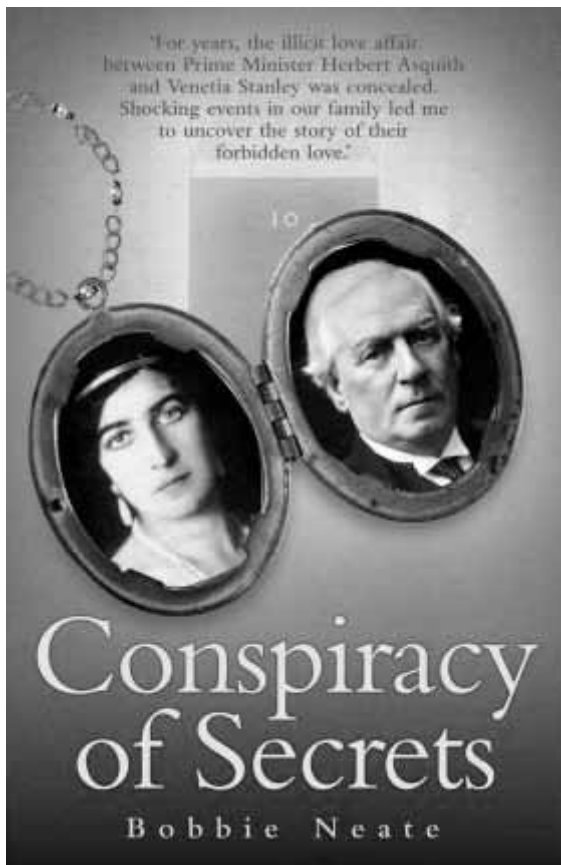
Bobbie Neate, *Conspiracy of Secrets* (John Blake, 2012)

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



example, in an otherwise good biography, *Rosebery: Statesman in Turmoil* (2005), Leo McKinstry rejects suggestions that Rosebery enjoyed a gay relationship with his private secretary Viscount Drumlanrig (heir to the notorious Marquis of Queensbury), setting aside a great deal of circumstantial evidence that points the other way. My feeling is that academics are often rather naïve about these things and all too anxious to demonstrate their authority by repudiating vulgar speculation about the private lives of

their subjects. As a student I remember one lecturer dismissing Jenkins's book as a 'popular' biography – which is daft because it is as well-researched as any academic volume and more perceptive than most.

Common sense, and a mass of contemporary comment, suggests that if Asquith wrote in passionate terms to Venetia it was because he *was* passionate – and quite ruthless in his pursuit of women generally. Climbing the ladder from his modest, Nonconformist, West Riding background via the fleshpots of Oxford and the Bar, Asquith embraced the values and lifestyle of smart, upper-class, metropolitan society with no difficulty; his second wife, Margot, is often blamed for this but she only accelerated the process at most. Asquith differed from other well-connected late-Victorian men only in the sense that he cultivated young women while it was normal to pursue affairs with older, married women, a tradition charmingly described by Oswald Mosley (an acknowledged expert) as 'flushing the covers'. But despite many references to Asquith's lechery, we have few indications of his bedroom technique. Margot, who was nothing if not frank, once explained to Cynthia Mosley that pregnancy was avoidable if one's partner took care: 'Henry always withdrew in time. Such a noble man!' Well, he was officially the father of seven live children plus three other babies that Margot lost. Perhaps not as noble, or skilful, as Margot claimed.

Fascinating as all this is, one wonders – does it really matter? To this the conventional answer,

endorsed by Bobbie Neate, would be that when Venetia Stanley announced her marriage to a Cabinet colleague, Edwin Montagu, the news had a devastating effect on the Prime Minister and affected his judgement to such an extent that when the Tory leader, Andrew Bonar Law, proposed forming a coalition government in May 1915 he had lost his grip and agreed without thinking properly.

It must be emphasised that this account is largely nonsense. At the very least it is surely an exaggeration. The decision to form a coalition was made by the two leaders on 17 May 1915 and Asquith had been aware since late April that his relationship with Venetia was breaking up. Although obviously upset and distracted at being dumped, he lost little time in proposing sex with her sister, Sylvia. No doubt Asquith gave credibility to the myth by telling Venetia that he had made decisions regarding the coalition 'such as I would never have taken without your counsel'. But, in effect, Asquith used these arguments in the hope of flattering her and winning her back: Venetia, an intelligent, politically aware woman from a strong Liberal family, had always found it appealing to think that she could manipulate a powerful man.

The more important reason for rejecting the claim is that Neate's assumptions about the coalition are simply incorrect. Far from forcing a coalition on Asquith the leading Conservatives were very reluctant to join one, as their private correspondence makes abundantly clear; in fact they saw it as a typical Asquithian tactic to muzzle them. And they were not entirely wrong about that. It was Asquith who took the initiative in proposing coalition. The obvious explanation is that it offered a neat way out of the immediate threats to his government and its failing war record engendered by a new controversy over the production of shells for the Western Front and the resignation of Admiral Fisher as First Lord of the Admiralty in protest against the Dardanelles Campaign. However, the underlying explanation is that as a result of the 1911 Parliament Act, which had shortened the life of parliament to five years, a general election was due by the end of 1915. Although wartime elections had

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## REVIEWS

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.

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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

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## 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**

**W**HILE 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

