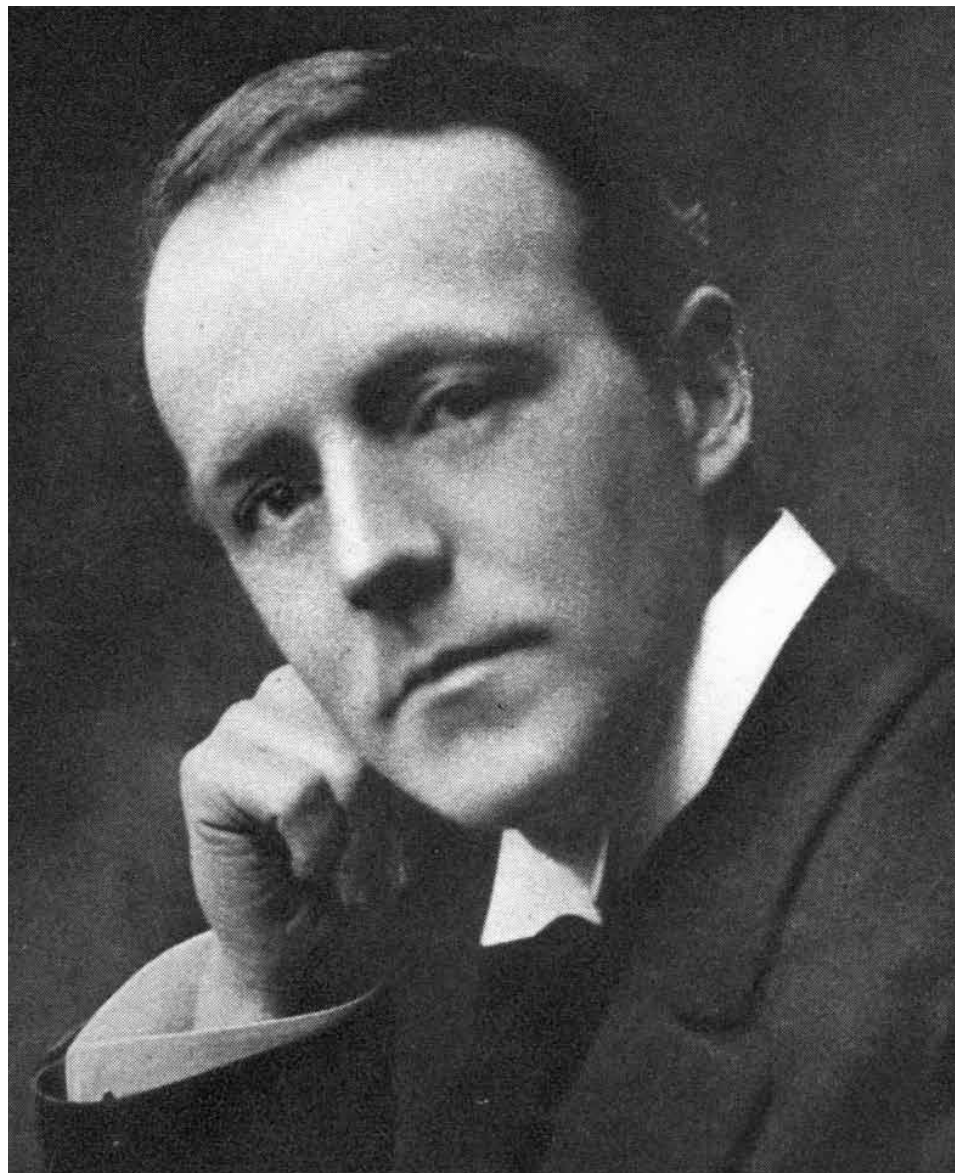


WALTER RUNCH DECLINE OF THE

Historians remain divided about the contribution that biography can make to their craft. Those who believe that the study of individuals is important because the decisions of those individuals affect the course of events and that the replacement of one key player in the historical mosaic can significantly change the way in which history evolves are matched by others who argue that biography inevitably exaggerates the role and significance of the individual and distorts the reality of the historical narrative. By **David Dutton.**¹



WALTER RUNCIMAN AND THE LIBERAL PARTY

BETWEEN SOMEONE LIKE Thomas Carlyle, who wrote that ‘history is the essence of innumerable biographies’, and the committed Marxist who views the individual as a helpless cork bobbing up and down on the remorseless tides of economic determinism, there can be no meeting of minds.² But somewhere between these competing views there may perhaps be an acceptance that the career of an individual can offer a revealing prism through which to study important historical themes and problems.

The political biography of Walter Runciman, first Viscount Runciman of Doxford, offers such an opportunity. Runciman’s career was certainly a long one. First elected to the House of Commons in 1899 as Britain became involved in the Boer War, he finally retired from his last Cabinet post at the outbreak of the Second World War 40 years later. But political longevity does not in itself confer significance, and it has to be conceded that Runciman was never a politician of the absolutely first rank. ‘Who were the first married couple to sit together in the House of Commons?’ may be a good pub quiz question, but the answer – Walter and Hilda Runciman – does not necessarily endow those concerned with overwhelming historical importance, even if Walter can also claim the unusual distinction of having sat in

parliament alongside his own father and even of having preceded him there. A governmental colleague offered a very fair assessment of him in 1912. ‘Runciman,’ he wrote, ‘is able, honest, hard-working, courageous, but while a good speaker, just lacks that touch of genius which Churchill has got, and that charm which Lloyd George abounds in. He will enjoy and deserve high office, but never I think the highest.’³ So it turned out. Runciman never held one of the great offices of state; his most senior appointment was as President of the Board of Trade, where he played an important role in shifting British policy away from free trade in the early 1930s. History best remembers him for a job he performed when not holding government office, travelling to Czechoslovakia in the summer of 1938 in an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to broker a peaceful settlement of the crisis between the Czechoslovak government and the Sudeten Germans, before Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain took the problem into his own hands in direct negotiations with Adolf Hitler. Briefly, at least in the opinion of Chamberlain’s Minister of Health, Walter Elliot, Runciman became the second most powerful man in the world. Unfortunately, Elliot had to add that the *most* powerful was Adolf Hitler.⁴

Runciman’s background helped determine his politics. His was a

seafaring family. Two of his great-grandfathers fought as midshipmen at Trafalgar, while his father, also called Walter, rose from humble beginnings to own a major shipping company in the north-east. The traditional Liberal commitment to free trade was part of the young Walter’s thinking as a prosperous businessman. So too was his support for temperance as a lifelong Wesleyan Methodist. Throughout his political career, contemporaries pointed to the continuing importance of Runciman’s background in the world of business and commerce. A Cabinet colleague during the First World War found him ‘lucid, concise and courageous ... ambitious and a little cocksure. A hardworking, very capable man of business...’⁵ Many years later, the journalist Colin Coote wrote approvingly of a ‘shrewdly practical business man ... whose politics were more pragmatic than dogmatic’.⁶ Even Neville Chamberlain, in announcing to the House of Commons Runciman’s appointment as ‘independent mediator’ in the Czechoslovakian crisis of 1938, suggested he would be playing the part ‘of a man who goes down to assist in settling a strike’.⁷ But this practical man of business struck many as stiff and cold in personality. The Tory MP, Cuthbert Headlam, always found him ‘friendly and pleasant’ but never ‘a popular character – clever, etc., but

Walter Runciman, 1st Viscount Runciman of Doxford (1870–1949)

lacking the human touch'. He had heard that Herbert Asquith, who enjoyed inventing pseudonyms for his political colleagues, preferred 'the old Pirate' [Runciman's father] to the 'Alabaster Statesman'.⁸ Similarly, Lloyd George is said to have remarked that Runciman 'would make a thermometer drop, even at a distance'.⁹ This sense of separation from his fellow men was underlined by Runciman's somewhat dated style of dress. Like Chamberlain, he favoured the winged collar long after it had gone out of fashion.

For all that, Runciman's career does offer an excellent opportunity to investigate one of the most contentious historical controversies of the first half of the twentieth century, the decline of the British Liberal Party. Ever since 1936, when the Cambridge historian George Dangerfield published his celebrated, seductive, persuasive, but sadly very wrong study, *The Strange Death of Liberal England*, this issue has fascinated students of British politics. Runciman's political life encapsulated the Liberal Party's disastrous evolution. At the time of his first appointment to government office, as Parliamentary Secretary to the Local Government Board in December 1905, the Liberal Party which Runciman represented stood on the verge of the greatest triumph of its entire history. The following month the party secured a landslide general election victory. The Liberals won 400 seats in the new House of Commons. Their major opponents, the Conservative/Unionist Party, secured just 157. As the two minor parties, Labour and the Irish Nationalists, were unlikely to support the Unionists on any significant vote, the Liberal government enjoyed an effective parliamentary majority of 356. Yet, by the time of Runciman's death in 1949, the Liberal Party seemed to be on a remorseless road to political extinction. Two years later, in the disastrous general election of 1951, it was reduced to just six MPs, an apparently irrelevant appendage to the political system.

This article will consider a number of issues that have been key to the debate on Liberal decline, through the prism of Runciman's career. The first is the health of the Edwardian Liberal Party. Characteristically, the debate has been polarised. At one end of the scale there is Dangerfield, in one of his

more plausible propositions, claiming that at the very moment of the Liberal Party's greatest electoral success, its overwhelming victory of 1906, the die was already cast. 'The Liberal Party which came back to Westminster with an overwhelming majority was', he claimed, 'already doomed. It was like an army protected at all points except for one vital position on its flank. With the election of fifty-three Labour representatives, the death of Liberalism was pronounced; it was no longer the Left.'¹⁰ In other words, in an electoral structure in which the logical state of affairs was a struggle between a party of the right and a party of the left, the Liberals were about to forfeit their claim to be that of the left. The beginnings of the Labour Party with its claim to be *the* party of the British working class was bound in time to lead to the eclipse of Liberalism. Similarly, Henry Pelling has written of the growth of a sort of undogmatic 'Labourism' in the period before 1914, a feeling that 'the Labour Party and not the Liberal, was the party for working men to belong to'.¹¹ Another way of looking at the problem is to suggest that Liberals would struggle to survive in a situation where voting was going to be increasingly determined by the question of class.

But against this pessimistic view later historians saw in Edwardian Britain a very much brighter political outlook for the Liberals. Their most distinguished spokesman is probably Peter Clarke. Basing his analysis on a detailed study of the politics of Lancashire, Clarke argued that voting behaviour had indeed come to be largely determined by the question of class by 1914. He believes, however, that the Liberal Party had adapted perfectly well to this development. Indeed, by taking on board the ideas of the so-called 'New Liberalism' – that government would have to intervene far more actively in the society and economy of the twentieth century than had been the norm in the Victorian era – the Liberal Party had entrenched itself as *the* party of social reform and of the British working class. Clarke suggests, in fact, that there was enough common ground between Edwardian Liberalism and the social democratic wing of the newly emerging

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Labour Party for eventual fusion to have taken place – if it hadn't been for the intervention of the First World War. In practical terms, this community of purpose manifested itself in an electoral pact whereby in many constituencies Liberal and Labour candidates gave way to one another in order to avoid splitting the 'progressive' vote. Far from being replaced by Labour, the Liberals were well positioned to contain the Labour threat and ultimately swallow it up.¹²

How then does the career of Walter Runciman throw light on this highly polarised debate? A consensus has grown up among historians in recent years that the picture of Liberal–Labour relations varied enormously in different parts of the country. Dangerfield's blanket gloom is unjustified; but so too is the view of Clarke, derived from the rather atypical circumstances of Lancashire, that all was well in a revitalised and progressive Liberal Party. Certainly, Runciman's experience fits neither of these extreme interpretations. It was not easy for a young MP, even one seen as 'unquestionably the best speaker among young Liberals',¹³ to stand out after 1906 in the array of talent making up what has been described as 'the most able and brilliant [government] in British history'.¹⁴ Nonetheless, Runciman made steady progress. Promoted to the position of Financial Secretary to the Treasury in January 1907, he entered the Cabinet as President of the Board of Education in April 1908, moved to the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries in October 1911 and became President of the Board of Trade at the outbreak of war in August 1914. But it is Runciman's career as a constituency MP which is particularly revealing of the condition of the Edwardian Liberal Party. After losing his seat at Oldham to the Conservative, Winston Churchill, in the general election of 1900, Runciman secured his return to the Commons in a by-election in Dewsbury, West Yorkshire, in 1902 and he retained this seat until the general election of 1918. Dewsbury was a predominantly working-class constituency which numbered around 3,000 miners and 6,000 woollen textile workers in its electorate. Runciman fought a total of six contests in Dewsbury. If we take the first five

of these contests fought before the outbreak of the First World War – Runciman's initial victory in 1902, the general election of 1906, the by-election necessitated by his elevation to the Cabinet in 1908, and the two general elections of 1910 – it emerges that only in 1910 did Runciman not face a Labour opponent. Little evidence is thus offered of the two parties coming together in a process of gradual fusion. The local picture was one of conflict rather than cooperation. Local Liberal activists felt so well established that they saw no need to seek an electoral pact or make way for a Labour candidate and had resisted pressure to do so prior to selecting Runciman. Furthermore, faced in 1910 with straight fights against Conservative opponents, Runciman adopted the traditional stance of a nineteenth-century Liberal, attacking his opponents as representatives of the privileged landowning classes and equating the interests of wealthy businessmen such as himself with those of ordinary working-class voters against the landed classes who, in Joseph Chamberlain's famous words, 'toil not, neither do they spin'. Liberal meetings in Dewsbury were dominated by discussion of traditional Liberal issues – free trade, the powers of the House of Lords, licensing and temperance. 'Liberal gatherings', writes Martin Pugh, 'usually had a distinctly old-fashioned ring'.¹⁵ The socio-economic issues which are said to have dominated the politics of the New Liberalism are notable largely for their absence. But the most striking feature must be Runciman's electoral success. In Dewsbury, what was still largely a middle-class party proved remarkably effective in attracting the working-class vote. 'Runciman's victories', concludes Pugh, 'sprang from the unexhausted seam of nineteenth-century Liberalism'.¹⁶

The conclusion that Liberalism was not confronted by an existential crisis in the years before 1914 has propelled many historians to the period of the First World War itself in the quest for explanations of the party's decline. The evidence for such an approach seems compelling. The party which entered the war as the party of government, with nearly nine years of continuous and often distinguished administration behind it, was by the close

of hostilities badly divided, with the mainstream party led by H. H. Asquith reduced to a parliamentary rump of under thirty MPs by the 'coupon' general election of 1918. As Trevor Wilson memorably put it, the war was like a 'rampant omnibus' which, out of control, mounted the pavement and ran over an unsuspecting pedestrian.¹⁷ The pedestrian, of course, was the British Liberal Party. It may have had its problems before 1914, but it did not face mortal danger. But the war was different. It was an unequal contest which the party had no chance of winning. But defining the nature of the challenge posed by the war has proved altogether more difficult. The most seductive definition relates to the realm of ideology. According to Kenneth Morgan, it was the Liberals' principles 'which the very fact of total war with the unbridled collectivism and the "jingo" passions which it unleashed, appeared to undermine'.¹⁸ Modern warfare, it has been argued, destroyed liberalism's faith in man's essential rationality. Its waging demanded a degree of government intervention in and control over the life and liberties of the individual citizen which many Liberals could not contemplate. The party's problems are said to have come to a head over the issue of conscription. Could true Liberals ride roughshod over the fundamental human liberty of leaving it to the individual to decide for himself whether he fought – and quite possibly died – for his country? Conscription thus posed, in Morgan's words, 'a symbolic divide between a whole-hearted commitment to all-out war, whatever the sacrifice, and a respect for the historic cause of individual liberty'.¹⁹

But does this analysis reflect what actually happened to the Liberal Party between 1914 and 1918? That the Liberals were badly – perhaps fatally – divided during the war is beyond question. But whether these divisions took place along clearly defined ideological lines is altogether more problematic. For one thing, the lines of division were markedly inconsistent. Leading individual Liberals found themselves united with one another on one issue, but irrevocably separated on the next. This was certainly the case with Runciman. He has been listed as a

member of an embryonic anti-war group within the Cabinet in the summer of 1914, but any doubts he may have felt were quickly overcome, perhaps as a result of a lunch with his mentor and friend, the Foreign Secretary Edward Grey, on 1 August. For him, the need to maintain the free movement of British ships in the Channel may have been enough to convert him to the necessity of the government's stance. Thereafter Runciman was clear that the war had to be fought, though he was evidently shaken by the mounting casualty lists and was never fully persuaded by the doctrine of 'the knock-out blow' associated with Lloyd George. Runciman did have one consistent ally in the trials and tribulations besetting the wartime party. This was Reginald McKenna, who became Chancellor of the Exchequer in succession to Lloyd George when the latter moved to the newly created Ministry of Munitions in May 1915. Runciman and McKenna, suggests one historian, 'became a pairing referred to historically almost to the point of hyphenation'.²⁰ Even so, it would be wrong to present the two men as the champions of an outdated political creed which had no place in the context of the world's first total war. Indeed, Runciman had already shown his willingness to intervene and employ the powers of the state during his spell at the Ministry of Agriculture. Furthermore, he heaped praise on his colleague's budget of September 1915, even though that budget has often been presented as marking the deathknell of the Liberal Party's once unshakeable commitment to the sacred principle of free trade.²¹

Runciman and McKenna divided from their colleagues, not on ideological grounds, but over the very practical issue of how best to win the war. They became associated with the idea of 'business as usual', not because they opposed greater governmental intervention in the running of the national economy per se, but because they believed that excessive intervention could only damage the prospects of ultimate victory. They argued that Britain had to be able to pay its way through the war, not just because national bankruptcy would undermine any concept of military victory, but because the maintenance

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of the country's industrial strength would enable Britain to supply money and war materials to its continental allies. If everything was thrown into the war effort – including all available manpower, as most Conservatives and an increasing number of Liberals demanded – disaster was almost bound to ensue.²² Runciman's position was easy to vilify. H. A. Gwynne of the *Morning Post* variously described him as one of 'the Pacifist Group of the Cabinet' and, with echoes of the Boer War, as one of the 'pro-Germans in the Cabinet'.²³ Neither indictment was fair. Runciman's ideas might or might not have made military victory more likely. But his thinking was rational and intellectually defensible. Runciman and those who thought like him took their inspiration from the way in which Britain had waged successful wars in earlier centuries. The 'British Way in Warfare' was based on an all-powerful navy and strictly limited intervention in continental land wars. It was an argument Runciman had put forward in 1911 at the time of an earlier war scare. 'What I have been most anxious about,' he then wrote to a Cabinet colleague,

has been that this week which is critical should not pass without the French knowing that whatever support we may have to give her, it cannot be by six divisions, or four, or one on the Continent. The sea is our natural element and the sooner they realise that we are not going to land troops the better will be the chances of preserving Europe's peace.²⁴

From the outbreak of war in August 1914, therefore, Runciman's management of the Board of Trade was designed to ensure that the country's 'wealth production could continue with minimal disruption'.²⁵ When he and McKenna insisted that British merchant ships should continue to be allowed to carry trade between neutral countries rather than be restricted to carrying goods to and from Britain, this represented no abstract defence of the principle of free trade, but rather a desire to maximise the country's foreign currency earnings in order to support the balance of payments.²⁶ Similarly, Runciman's opposition to proposals that the government should seek

to control inflation in food prices by artificially fixing the price of basic foodstuffs was not the response of a laissez-faire zealot, but the reasoned calculation of a minister who understood the problems that would arise for a country as dependent as Britain was on imported food. If suppliers reacted to capped prices by seeking a better return for their goods in other markets around the world, Britain might starve.²⁷

Even the debate over conscription needs to be seen in the same practical terms. Runciman did not base his opposition on any fundamental rejection of the state's right to compel a man to fight for his country. It is true that, after extensive Cabinet debates at the end of 1915, Runciman, McKenna and the Home Secretary, John Simon, reached a decision to resign. The three men went to see Prime Minister Asquith on 28 December and tendered their resignations. It was, Runciman admitted to his wife, 'a most unpleasant interview, ending with not even a handshake'.²⁸ But in an important diary entry, Asquith's daughter-in-law discussed the men's motivation:

McKenna – not on principle, but because as Chancellor he says he cannot possibly undertake to finance it – Runciman for the same motives.²⁹

A well-placed Cabinet colleague confirmed this analysis:

His great argument with [Runciman and McKenna] was that they could not resign for a reason that they could not name, for the real reason of their resignations is not any question of principle or even the fact of compulsion but simply on the number of men who are taken, i.e. the size of the Army.³⁰

Runciman himself offered yet further corroboration in a letter to his wife:

McKenna and I declared that the latest proposals were mixed up with the questions of unlimited recruiting ... and we regarded the avoidance of industrial and financial collapse as so important that we could not consent to giving the military the compulsory powers for which they asked.³¹

Runciman was put under tremendous pressure to reconsider his resignation. Asquith's wife Margot wrote in characteristically silly terms: 'How can you find it in your heart to desert Henry when Puffin has been such a friend of your little boy's!'³² Runciman was never likely to be swayed by being reminded that his son and Asquith's youngest had been childhood playmates. But when it was agreed that discussions could take place as to the size which it was desirable for the army to attain, he and McKenna had little choice but to withdraw their resignations. Their argument was not about the rights and wrongs of forcing men to fight, but about the tipping point after which it would be counter-productive to put more men into uniform if this led to a shortage of labour for the domestic economy and a consequent loss of industrial production. In the event, therefore, only John Simon went ahead and resigned on the point of principle that military compulsion was wrong. Runciman and McKenna stayed at their posts.

Over the following year debate continued to rage inside the government over the best way to fight the war and Lloyd George emerged as the champion of those who were committed to doing everything they could to secure outright victory, at whatever the cost. To the Conservative, Austen Chamberlain, Lloyd George wrote in January 1916:

We must win through even though we win in rags. The notion of keeping up our trade as if there were no war is fatal. The single eye always triumphs in the end. Thus Germany fights – her trade gone and her people rationed on potatoes. I implore you not to give assent to the McKenna–Runciman position. If you desert us on this point ... Britain will be beaten.³³

Lloyd George's position, like Runciman's, was entirely plausible. But it is important not to misrepresent the nature of the division between them.

By the end of 1916 another crisis had arisen. In what approximated to a palace coup, Lloyd George replaced Asquith as prime minister, and Runciman, a committed member of the Asquith camp and advising Asquith to stand firm against

'McKenna and I declared that the latest proposals were mixed up with the questions of unlimited recruiting ... and we regarded the avoidance of industrial and financial collapse as so important that we could not consent to giving the military the compulsory powers for which they asked.'

Lloyd George's demand for a radical restructuring of the machinery of wartime government, found himself out of office. In a reshaped Asquith administration he might have been promoted to the Admiralty. As it was, his exclusion would last almost fifteen years. Just as importantly, this episode left many Liberals – Runciman included – with a lasting detestation of Lloyd George for the way he was perceived to have behaved. The reaction of Runciman's father was no doubt shared by the son: 'No coup could be brought about in the way it has without sowing seeds of bitter feeling. It could have been avoided but for the attitude of one man and his co-operators.' Asquith's political demise had been 'brought about mainly by the man he had been a benefactor to'.³⁴

The crisis of 1916 leads to a third theme upon which historians have focused in their quest for explanations of the Liberal Party's decline, where Runciman's experience is again instructive. This relates to individuals, personal animosities, chance, bad luck, miscalculations and misjudgements – in other words contingencies which need not have happened and which do not reflect the sort of deep and longstanding problems said to be contained in the challenge of the Labour Party and the supposed crisis of identity and doctrine occasioned by the First World War. The classic exposition of this approach was perhaps offered by Lloyd George himself. Looking back from the vantage point of the mid-1930s, by which time he was increasingly prone to reminisce about the past, the great Welshman attributed the downfall of the Liberal Party to an oyster. As his secretary and mistress, Frances Stevenson, recorded:

He went on to explain that Percy Illingworth [the party's chief whip] died of typhoid caused by a bad oyster [in 1915]. Had he lived, he would never have allowed the rift between D[avid] & Asquith to take place. He would have brought them together, patched the quarrel up, cursed them and saved the Liberal Party. He would have held up to the light the intrigue of McKenna and Runciman, whom he knew well. After his

death, there was no one who could take his place, and could put the party before persons and personalities. Gulland, the Chief Whip in 1916 did nothing.³⁵

More generally, this approach accepts that the Liberal Party was badly damaged by the war, but argues that the fissures did not have to be either permanent or catastrophic for the party. After all, the Labour Party also split over the conduct of the war, but it came back together again and advanced rapidly within the political system in the immediate post-war years. The Asquith–Lloyd George rupture, by contrast, was not temporary. Two separate Liberal parties existed until 1923 when they nominally came together again in defence of free trade. Even after 1923, though, reunion was paper-thin, deep-rooted animosities remained, and the party's decline continued apace. During those seven years between 1916 and 1923 the Labour Party advanced dramatically, moving from the periphery of the political stage to its very centre, and forming its first government in January 1924. This was no coincidence. Labour willingly filled a void opened up by the Liberal Party. And, once the Liberals had fallen into the third-party trap, they would find it very difficult to escape from it. How, then, does Runciman's career after 1916 illuminate this issue?

His commitment to Asquith was soon shaken. It is clear that Runciman hoped to be part of a more vigorous opposition to the Lloyd George government, which he described as 'a directorate of the French revolution type', than Asquith was prepared to provide.³⁶ Just weeks after the change of government, Runciman was clear about what should now happen:

I am much impressed with the anxiety of the country to have some responsible men acting as their watch-dogs, for, when we went out there was some rejoicing over the prospect of the opposition becoming once more efficient as well as responsible. We must not fail in this duty and we should be failing if we cease to be vigilant, and equally failing if we did not give the country the impression that they can rely on us.³⁷

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But Asquith would not play the part that Asquithians, Runciman included, had mapped out for him. In March 1917, Runciman recorded that McKenna 'says that we *must* go on propping up our distinguished jelly – the late PM to wit! – We must do our best to screw him up to an emphatic speech on Ireland'.³⁸ Asquith was constrained by the belief, probably correct, that overt opposition to the new government would be castigated as a failure to support the war effort. In fact, the celebrated Maurice Debate of 9 May 1918 was the only occasion when Asquith and the Asquithian whips gave their backing to a division against the government. By this time Runciman seems to have become completely disillusioned with both of the potential Liberal leaders. Convinced that Lloyd George would escape from what could have been a damaging parliamentary debate – 'there were so many ways in which inaccurate statements could plausibly be explained' – he nonetheless hoped that Asquith would renounce his own claims to the premiership and promise 'general support to an administration with a Conservative at its head while it waged war effectively'.³⁹ In the event Runciman, who should have wound up the debate for the Opposition, 'looked miserable, and never rose'.⁴⁰

The general election of December 1918, held only a month after the armistice, was a disaster for the independent Liberal Party. It served to intensify Liberal divisions and accentuate personal animosities. Victory was secured by a coalition of Conservatives and Lloyd George Liberals in which the former were by far the dominant element. Only 28 independent Liberals of the party still headed by Asquith were returned to parliament. The key factor was the so-called 'coupon', the letter of endorsement signed by Lloyd George and the Tory leader, Bonar Law, which served almost as a passport back to Westminster, and Lloyd George's ready acceptance of a bargain struck with the Conservatives, whereby only 150 Liberal candidates received it. Most of the leading independent Liberals, including Asquith and Runciman, went down to defeat. Indeed, Runciman came bottom of the poll in Dewsbury, despite the efforts of the Asquithian whip, J. W. Gulland, to

WALTER RUNCIMAN AND THE DECLINE OF THE LIBERAL PARTY

secure the withdrawal of his Labour opponent.⁴¹

Runciman's outlook on politics over the following decade was determined by one factor above all others – a deeply personal detestation of Lloyd George. The two men had been developing a dislike for one another before the outbreak of war, with Runciman declaring that the Welshman 'would snatch at any opportunities of stabbing me if he got the chance'.⁴² Their hatred now knew no limits. Arguably, this sort of personal animosity destroyed any hope of a Liberal recovery in these crucial post-war years. While Liberals such as Runciman should have been focusing their attention on the mortal danger which the Labour Party now posed, they seemed more intent on fighting Lloyd George. When the need was to devise policies to appeal to the newly expanded electorate, they turned in on themselves in order, it seemed, to engage in a mutually destructive civil war to the death. In the words of Jonathan Wallace, Runciman's only biographer, by 1930 'Runciman had become an embittered malcontent who could never be reconciled to Lloyd George, no matter what the latter did'.⁴³

In the wake of the disastrous 1918 general election defeat, *The Times* declared that Runciman was, even out of parliament, 'without doubt, the rising hope of the Radicals'.⁴⁴ Though it is not clear from the context precisely what meaning the newspaper intended to convey by the word 'radical', Runciman had, in practice, forfeited any claims to radicalism in the sense of a progressive, root-and-branch approach to current politics. The image he cultivated now was that of a traditional Gladstonian Liberal of the nineteenth century. His speeches in 1919 concentrated on the need for sound finance and the abolition of government controls. Runciman was far from being the first – or indeed the last – politician to drift to the right as his career progressed. But there was another factor at work. His aim was to project himself as a pillar of orthodoxy and rectitude in contrast to the dangerous ambition and innate corruption of Lloyd George. Many Liberals, particularly among the rank and file at constituency level, recognised the need for reunion if the party was to have any chance of

bouncing back, but Runciman and those who thought like him stood very self-consciously in the way of reconciliation, as long as Lloyd George remained in front-line politics. At the meeting of the National Liberal Federation General Committee in Leamington in 1920, for example, it was noted that leading Asquithians, including Runciman, deliberately avoided giving Lloyd George a hearing.⁴⁵ Yet the Liberals needed Lloyd George, not least because Asquith, as Runciman himself recognised, was no longer an effective leader. Rather than face the inevitable, however, Runciman strove to persuade the former Foreign Secretary, Edward Grey, to fill the leadership vacuum, even though the latter was now almost blind and most reluctant to re-enter the political arena. 'He shudders at continuous responsibility', admitted Runciman, 'but we must go on impressing him with what the Methodists describe as the "Call" – which he dare not shrink'.⁴⁶

When Asquith and Lloyd George did put past differences behind them, at least to the extent of combining to oppose the tariff proposals of the new Conservative prime minister, Stanley Baldwin, in 1923, Runciman remained unreconciled and probably irreconcilable. Though he wrote to Lloyd George of his 'great joy ... to become united with you and those Liberals who have stood loyally by you,' it seems unlikely that these words reflected his true sentiments.⁴⁷ If they did, his mood soon changed. Less than a year later, he suggested that 'the personal difficulties are acuter than ever and can never be solved so long as LG insists on pushing himself as leader or deputy leader'.⁴⁸

Like many Liberals of this era, Runciman struggled to secure his own return to parliament. Defeated in Edinburgh South (1920), Berwick-upon-Tweed (1922) and Brighton (1923), he finally returned to the Commons at the general election of 1924 as MP for Swansea West. Asquith had secured his own return for Paisley at a by-election in February 1920, but was defeated again in 1924. He now went to the Lords as the Earl of Oxford and Asquith, while retaining the party leadership. But Runciman tried to resist the election of Lloyd George as sessional chairman in the

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Commons. When this move failed, eleven Liberal MPs, with Runciman as their chairman, formed the so-called 'Radical Group', effectively disowning Lloyd George's authority. The group announced that it stood for 'free land, free trade and free people' and that it proposed to 'carry out the policy foreshadowed by Cobden'.⁴⁹ It amounted to a party within the party, but any ties of doctrine seemed less important than personal animosities. Hatred of Lloyd George appeared to be the new group's primary motivation.

Illness finally forced Asquith's resignation in 1926 and the party as a whole turned to Lloyd George as his successor, not least because it was now desperately short of money, something which only Lloyd George could supply via his ill-gained 'Political Fund'. Once again, the malcontents responded by setting up a new organisation. Runciman now emerged as chairman of the 'Liberal Council' and effectively its parliamentary leader. The new body stood for a pure and uncorrupted form of Liberalism. Its aim was to shift the balance within the parliamentary Liberal Party and it hoped to field candidates in opposition to Lloyd George at the next general election. When Lloyd George turned up at the meeting of the National Liberal Federation in June 1926, Runciman, 'there at the beginning, sulked and went away – a foolish exhibition'.⁵⁰

But Lloyd George now gave fresh life to the party, helping to devise a range of new policies designed above all else to counter the mounting scourge of unemployment. The last years of the decade witnessed a mini-Liberal renaissance, with a number of by-election gains. Few could have anticipated that these would be the party's last such gains until the famous Torrington contest of 1958. Still, however, Runciman held aloof – ostentatiously so. Quite simply, if Lloyd George visited a by-election constituency, Runciman stayed away. The latter set out his reasoning:

So far as the methods of these elections are concerned, I thoroughly detest them. Their lavish expenditure, their loudspeakers and the deplorable bad taste and gross inaccuracies of their land,

industrial and mining news disgust me ... The country wants Liberalism, not LG, and I am distressed when I see Liberalism suffer because he is allowed to dominate it.⁵¹

By this stage Runciman had published a short book, which amounted to a personal manifesto, setting out a political creed which was in sharp contrast to the radical interventionism being offered by Lloyd George. In *Liberalism As I See It* Runciman wrote, 'the average non-political citizen wants what is in fact a Gladstonian policy. But at present he does not feel that he can get it from the Liberal Party.'⁵² This made it very difficult to see how he could ever be reconciled to the party while it remained led by Lloyd George. 'No-one is likely to misunderstand my position,' he insisted, 'for they know that I opposed his Chairmanship of the Parliamentary Party and oppose it still; that I decline to go to bye-elections which are dominated by him, and that I have stated plainly that I could not undertake to enter a Cabinet with him as Prime Minister.'⁵³

Such, however, was Lloyd George's momentum that, as the general election of 1929 approached, almost all Liberals saw the need to line up behind him, at least for the sake of public appearance. Even Runciman gave the leader's ambitious plans to reduce unemployment to normal proportions within a single year his public endorsement. Election posters appeared in the press, carrying pictures of the party's united leadership, including Lloyd George, Herbert Samuel, Viscount Grey, Lord Reading, Sir John Simon, Lord Beauchamp and Runciman. But the latter's real intentions were probably contained in a letter sent to him by the like-minded Harcourt Johnstone who wrote: 'Our real business over the next three months is to get ourselves returned to Parliament and specifically to get a majority – or strong minority – returned which will be hostile to LG. To do this we may have to improvise a little our natural inclinations.'⁵⁴

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Runciman's attitude towards Wales's most famous son may have been a factor in his decision to leave Swansea and secure election instead in the St Ives division of Cornwall, a seat conveniently kept warm for him by his wife, Hilda, who had captured it in a by-election in March 1928.

warm for him by his wife, Hilda, who had captured it in a by-election in March 1928. The 1929 general election did see a partial Liberal recovery, enough to leave the party holding the balance in the new parliament. But underlying divisions remained and, over the next two years, the Liberals were reduced to a parliamentary rabble, unable to unite behind Lloyd George and seldom capable of even sending all their MPs into the same division lobby of the House of Commons. The veneer of unity displayed by the party during the election campaign soon disappeared. It was not long before Runciman and his colleagues in the Liberal Council reverted to a policy of independence from the party leadership. 'I can no longer be comfortable in the Liberal Party,' he admitted in November, but it was not immediately clear where else he could turn. If, as seemed likely, the Conservatives moved towards protection, 'a Free Trader like me can see nothing but disaster'⁵⁵ But, while he remained determined not to follow Lloyd George, Runciman soon recognised that there was much to support in the new Labour government, not least the presence at the Exchequer of Philip Snowden, a committed exponent of free trade and sound Gladstonian finance. This dual motivation carried its own complications, for Lloyd George too, if not as consistently as Runciman, understood the need to keep the Labour government in office. The next few months saw Runciman abstain on the government's Coal Bill in December 1929, when the official Liberal stance was one of opposition, and abstain again the following February on a Liberal amendment which tried to delete protection quota arrangements. Negotiations seem to have taken place between Alec Beechman (who eventually succeeded Runciman as MP for St Ives in 1937) and Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald about the possibility of a formal breach with Lloyd George. MacDonald, 'very appreciative of the line ... you [Runciman] and Donald [Maclean] took over the Coal Bill ... would, of course, like us to follow up the break with some pronouncement about supporting him'⁵⁶ The moment, however, passed and Runciman turned his attention increasingly towards

his business interests, becoming a director of the London, Midland and Scottish Railway in December 1929 and Deputy Chairman of the Royal Mail Group the following November. Indeed, in February 1931 he announced his intention to step down from the Commons at the next general election. Archibald Sinclair noted that he was now 'wholly occupied with his business interests and only appears in the House of Commons very occasionally to emphasise by vote or speech some difference with his Liberal colleagues'.⁵⁷

Yet Runciman still had an important role to play in the Liberal Party's fortunes during the 1930s. The collapse of the Labour government, its replacement by an all-party 'National' administration and the prospect that he might yet return to high office caused him to reverse his earlier inclination to retire from political life. This is a period that many historians of the party's decline once neglected, largely out of the belief that there was nothing more to say. They considered that the Liberal Party was doomed by 1930 and that little was to be gained by poring over its death throes. So, for example, Trevor Wilson's classic study, *The Downfall of the Liberal Party*, treated the party's travails after the 1931 general election as little more than a postscript to the main story. More recently, however, it has been argued that there was still a chance of a Liberal revival, perhaps not to the glory days of earlier years, but at least sufficient to restore its credentials as a significant parliamentary force. The Labour Party was badly damaged by the 1931 general election, reduced to just fifty-two MPs. Surely the Liberals could have taken advantage of this situation. To do so, however, they needed one thing above all else – unity. This was conspicuous only by its absence, and Runciman was at the heart of a new and, as it turned out, permanent party division.⁵⁸ Though the entire Liberal Party began by supporting the all-party National Government set up in August 1931 to deal with the country's economic crisis, two Liberal groupings soon emerged – the mainstream party now headed by Herbert Samuel and a group of so-called Liberal Nationals led by John Simon. The key difference between

them was the readiness of the Liberal Nationals to abandon the once sacred principle of free trade in the fight to save the national economy. In practice, this involved becoming electoral and parliamentary allies of the Tories.

To begin with, Runciman's position was unclear. Though it was hard to regard him any longer as a loyal member of the mainstream party, he had not been acting in association with Simon. In particular, he had not followed suit when, on 26 June, Simon, Robert Hutchison and Ernest Brown had formally resigned the Liberal whip. A statement issued to the press on 25 October 1931 read: 'Mr Runciman is not to be included in any group. He is a Liberal supporting the National Government.'⁵⁹ This, of course, was a description that fitted almost all Liberal candidates at the election held a few days later. He had not been included in the emergency Cabinet of ten set up in August, in which the Liberal representatives were Samuel and the Marquess of Reading, when this Nonconformist Wesleyan had commented rather unpleasantly, 'So far as I am concerned, it is clear that the Jews had no place in the Cabinet for a Gentile.'⁶⁰ Samuel tried to convince Runciman that he had in fact secured the agreement of MacDonald and Baldwin to the offer of the non-Cabinet post of War Secretary, 'should you be prepared to take it'. But Samuel's suggestion that this plan had been thwarted by difficulty in contacting Runciman did not help matters, especially when the post was finally offered to the almost forgotten figure of Lord Crewe.⁶¹ At the same time, Runciman was wary of finding himself part of a small opposition Liberal grouping which included Lloyd George, telling Samuel, 'my opinion is no less strongly against LG & his machinations than it has ever been'.⁶² When the Cabinet was enlarged to normal proportions after the general election in October, he had the chance to return to government after an absence of fifteen years. The Labour prime minister of the National Government, Ramsay MacDonald, was obliged to accept the Conservative, Neville Chamberlain, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, but he sought to balance the appointment of this committed tariff reformer by giving the

Once in government, Runciman was quickly won over to the argument in favour of tariffs, though he was successful in persuading Chamberlain to accept a more moderate scheme than the latter would ideally have liked – an achievement for which he incurred the lasting animosity of all-out imperial preferentialists such as Leo Amery

Board of Trade to the impeccably free-trade Runciman. But Runciman's thinking on this matter was evolving and he had already told his constituents that he was ready to back any moves necessary to restore the trade balance.⁶³ Once in government, Runciman was quickly won over to the argument in favour of tariffs, though he was successful in persuading Chamberlain to accept a more moderate scheme than the latter would ideally have liked – an achievement for which he incurred the lasting animosity of all-out imperial preferentialists such as Leo Amery.⁶⁴ According to David Wrench, the Runciman–Chamberlain agreement created the essential 'compromise that enabled the National Government to dominate British politics for the rest of the decade'.⁶⁵ Runciman hoped to use British tariffs as a bargaining counter in negotiations with other countries that had also introduced tariffs, in order to move towards all-round reductions and, ultimately, the restoration of a free-trade system. As late as 1937, the Tory backbencher, Brendan Bracken, was still describing him, along with the American Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, as 'the only true begotten Cobdenites left on earth'.⁶⁶

As the mainstream Liberals under Samuel resigned from the government in September 1932 in opposition to the tariff arrangements reached at the Ottawa Imperial Conference, while Runciman remained in office, he had little alternative but to associate himself with the Liberal National group, though anomalously he retained offices within the Samuelite party for some years and was re-elected vice-president of the Liberal Council in June 1934. Indeed, he was one of two Liberal Nationals (the other being Simon) on an informal six-man steering group, which eventually became a General Purposes Committee of the Cabinet, and which confirmed the reality of 'National Government'.⁶⁷ But Runciman was no friend of the Liberal National leader, John Simon, and, by the end of 1934, was telling the prime minister that Simon was the government's 'weakest link'.⁶⁸ Indeed, when Runciman became president of the Liberal National Council in 1937, his wife noted how 'distasteful' it was to be

associated with an organisation of which Simon 'calls himself leader'.⁶⁹ As a Liberal National, Runciman insisted that he remained as true a Liberal as he had ever been. As late as March 1938 he was still calling for 'pure, simple, strong Liberalism in order to save [the] country from disaster'.⁷⁰ But, if Runciman remained more of a 'Liberal' than did most Liberal Nationals, this did not prevent him becoming an object of Liberal hostility in the south-west, where his intervention in the general election of 1935 was widely held responsible for the defeat of Isaac Foot in Bodmin. Over time, the Liberal Nationals as a whole became indistinguishable from Conservatives and they were in the latter's pockets long before they finally amalgamated with them in 1968. Moreover, the Liberal–Liberal National split proved catastrophic for the Liberal Party, destroying any possibility of a Liberal revival for at least a generation. At a stroke, half the Liberal Party's remaining parliamentary strength had been lost and, in most cases, the sitting Liberal MP (now a Liberal National) succeeded in taking his local party organisation with him into the new group. In many constituencies where Liberalism had managed to survive through all the challenges and crises of the second and third decades of the century, it now all but disappeared, while Liberal voters were often left confused as to which side of the divide represented the authentic Liberal creed.

Notwithstanding unrealistic hopes that he might yet be elevated to the Treasury, Runciman retained the office of President of the Board of Trade until the reshuffle occasioned by Neville Chamberlain's accession to the premiership in May 1937. Arguing that he was busily engaged in ongoing matters at the Board of Trade, he angrily rejected the prime minister's offer of the non-departmental post of Lord Privy Seal.⁷¹ Somewhat surprisingly, he was brought back into the government in October 1938 in the wake of the Munich crisis as Lord President of the Council. The outgoing minister, Lord Hailsham, sixty-six years old and in poor health, must have been somewhat surprised to have been asked by Chamberlain to make way for a successor who was sixty-eight and also now ailing.⁷² At all events, the

appointment was not a success. An extended leave of absence to restore his health proved unavailing. Runciman resigned at the outbreak of war in September 1939, admitting that 'my nerves are all to pieces'.⁷³

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What then does the career of Walter Runciman reveal about the destruction of the British Liberal Party? Conclusions based on the experience of one man must necessarily be tentative and qualified. But the evidence of Runciman as a Dewsbury MP does not suggest that Liberalism faced a mortal threat from the rising Labour Party in the years before the First World War. But neither was it transmogrifying into a social democratic progressivism. Traditional nineteenth-century Liberalism was still thriving in this constituency. His experience as a government minister in the first half of the First World War argues against the idea that this conflict posed an insuperable ideological challenge to the party's very existence. On the other hand, both in the ongoing disputes of the 1920s around the personality of David Lloyd George and in the final split between Liberals and Liberal Nationals a decade later, Runciman's career suggests that the Liberal Party indulged in a case of political suicide – a party so engrossed by its own internal quarrels that it failed to focus on the bigger question of its very survival. Liberalism as a political philosophy is all about the rights of the individual. But there perhaps existed a fundamental conflict between this and the need for a political party to seek out those common beliefs that bind individuals together, submerging points of difference in the interests of the wider organisation. The evidence suggests that Runciman was no team player. He had no confidence in Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, the first party leader he nominally served on entering parliament in 1899.⁷⁴ He supported the Boer War, which Campbell-Bannerman opposed, and, only a year after entering the Commons, was describing his leader as 'insufferable'.⁷⁵ Campbell-Bannerman's own description of Runciman, written in 1901, was prophetic. He was, he suggested, 'a pugnacious, sectional partisan who will be, as in the past,

a mutineer whenever mutiny is possible'.⁷⁶ Runciman emerged as a committed Asquithian, especially during the internecine struggles of the First World War, but became disillusioned with Asquith several years before the latter's retirement. He clearly despised Lloyd George and did everything he could to destroy him, and he ended his political career in a new party headed by John Simon, whom he also disliked and sought to undermine. No one, of course, could argue that Walter Runciman caused the decline of the Liberal Party. But internal divisions and disputes surely did play an important part; and to this problem Runciman made a significant contribution.

After thirty-five years teaching in Liverpool, David Dutton punctuates his retirement in South-West Scotland with submissions to the Journal of Liberal History.

- 1 Earlier versions of this paper were presented at Elshieshields Tower, home of the Revd Dr Ann Shukman, grand-daughter of Walter Runciman, and at Manchester Metropolitan University.
- 2 A. Partington (ed.), *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* (Oxford, 1996), p. 180.
- 3 E. David (ed.), *Inside Asquith's Cabinet* (London, 1977), p. 122.
- 4 N. Rose (ed.), *Baffy: The Diaries of Blanche Dugdale 1936–1947* (London, 1973), p. 93.
- 5 David (ed.), *Asquith's Cabinet*, p. 230.
- 6 C. Coote, *Editorial* (London, 1965), p. 159.
- 7 House of Commons Debates, 5th Series, vol. 338, cols. 2956–8.
- 8 S. Ball (ed.), *Parliament and Politics in the Age of Churchill and Attlee: The Headlam Diaries 1935–1951* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 607–8. See also M. and E. Brock (eds.), *H. H. Asquith: Letters to Venetia Stanley* (pb. edn, Oxford, 1985), p. 409.
- 9 H. Noguères, *Munich: The Phoney Peace* (London, 1965), p. 77.
- 10 G. Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (London, 1936), p. 10. It needs to be noted that Dangerfield can only reach the figure of fifty-three by including the batch of so-called Lib-Lab MPs who continued to take the Liberal whip. LRC (soon to be Labour Party) strength is usually recorded as thirty MPs.
- 11 H. Pelling, *Popular Politics and Society in Late Victorian Britain* (London, 1968), p. 118.

Campbell-Bannerman's own description of Runciman, written in 1901, was prophetic. He was, he suggested, 'a pugnacious, sectional partisan who will be, as in the past, a mutineer whenever mutiny is possible'.

- 12 P. F. Clarke, *Lancashire and the New Liberalism* (Cambridge, 1971), passim. For an important recent contribution to this debate, see I. Packer, 'Contested Ground: Trends in British By-Elections, 1911–1914', *Contemporary British History*, 25, 1 (2011), pp. 157–73.
- 13 *Manchester Guardian*, 15 Nov. 1949.
- 14 A. Salter, *Personality in Politics* (London, 1948), p. 113.
- 15 M. Pugh, 'Yorkshire and the New Liberalism', *Journal of Modern History*, 50, 3 (1978), p. D1153. This section draws heavily from Professor Pugh's important article.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. D1155.
- 17 T. Wilson, *The Downfall of the Liberal Party 1914–1935* (London, 1966), p. 18.
- 18 K. O. Morgan, *The Age of Lloyd George: The Liberal Party and British Politics, 1890–1929* (London, 1978), p. 58.
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 M. Farr, *Reginald McKenna: Financier Among Statesmen, 1863–1916* (Abingdon, 2008), p. 76.
- 21 Runciman to McKenna, c. 23 Sept. 1915, cited D. French, *British Strategy and War Aims 1914–1916* (London, 1986), p. 124.
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- 25 J. Wallace, 'The Political Career of Walter Runciman', Ph.D. thesis (University of Newcastle, 1995), p. 184.
- 26 French, *British Economic Planning*, p. 104.
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- 28 University of Newcastle, Runciman MSS 303, Runciman to H. Runciman 28 Dec. 1915. Extracts from the papers of Walter Runciman are cited by kind permission of the Viscount Runciman of Doxford.
- 29 Lady Cynthia Asquith, *Diaries 1915–1918* (London, 1968), p. 117.
- 30 J. J. Norwich (ed.), *The Duff Cooper Diaries 1915–1951* (London, 2005), p. 23, reporting the opinion of Edwin Montagu.
- 31 Runciman to H. Runciman, 28 Dec. 1915, cited Wallace, 'Runciman', p. 229.
- 32 C. Asquith, *Diaries*, p. 123. Anthony Asquith, son of H. H. Asquith by his second wife Margot, was invariably called 'Puffin' because of the shape of his nose.
- 33 Parliamentary Archives, Lloyd George MSS, D/16/7/4, Lloyd George to Chamberlain, 8 Jan. 1916.
- 34 Elshieshields Tower, papers of Walter

- Runciman, sr, Sir W. Runciman to wife, 9 Dec. 1916. Extracts from the papers of Walter Runciman, sr, are cited by kind permission of the Revd Dr Ann Shukman.
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- 37 Runciman to Asquith, 29 Jan. 1917, cited Wallace, 'Runciman', p. 243.
- 38 Runciman to H. Runciman, 3 Mar. 1917, cited Turner, *British Politics*, p. 188.
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