

LIBERAL HISTORY NEWS

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Obituary: Lord Mackie of Benshie

The following eulogy was delivered by David Steel at Lord Mackie's funeral in Kirriemuir Old Parish Church on Thursday 26 February 2015.

One of the noticeable traits of George Mackie was his reluctance to talk about his wartime exploits in Bomber Command. We of a younger generation wanted to hear more of the events which led to his remarkable survival and the awards of the DSO and DFC, but the tales had to be coaxed out of him. He was never boastful.

It is a huge privilege to be asked to speak here about his role in politics – for me it is a small labour of love, because I owe my entire political career to him. In 1962, when I had just graduated in law but had no intention of becoming a lawyer, he offered me a one-year post as assistant secretary of the Scottish Liberal Party at the princely salary of £895. Because Alec Douglas-Home, the new Prime Minister, delayed the election it turned out to be two years during which I was heavily involved in several by-election campaigns and in fund-raising.

I had already been adopted as prospective candidate for Edinburgh Pentlands, where our only realistic prospect was to save my deposit. But the candidate in the Borders had resigned and this was a seat where Liberals had never been lower than second place and had indeed won the somewhat changed seat in 1950. George himself had secured a notable second place in South Angus at the previous election, and Squadron Leader Arthur Purdom, whom he had appointed as secretary of the party, famously observed that 'what this party needs is a few less brilliant seconds and a few more mediocre firsts'.

George later wrote as follows in an article for *Liberal News*:

A large crop of university students, inspired by Jo Grimond, had joined the party and my job

was to make proper use of them. One of the young striplings was David Steel and another slightly older Russell Johnston. Needless to say they were a damned nuisance at conferences, producing masses of resolutions of doubtful value ...

I had frightful trouble with the Borders – they were extremely arrogant about candidates. Their specifications fitted only God or Jo Grimond. After turning good people down they were determined to have David Steel who was already in Pentlands, so I entered into negotiations with that constituency association and they eventually said no. So we simply removed David to the Borders and pacified Pentlands by having the Party Executive pass a vote of censure on Mackie for his authoritarian conduct.

George was, as vice-chairman in charge of organisation and later chairman of the party, the organising genius behind the Scottish party's revival, working closely with Jo Grimond and John Bannerman, both charismatic figures but with limited interest in the mechanics of building the party. He organised a research post in the party for Russell Johnston, enabling him also to be a full-time candidate in Inverness, and so in 1964 we swept to victory in the three Highland seats, to be followed six months later by my by-election in the Borders. George led from the front by winning Caithness & Sutherland.

He was already an acknowledged authority on agriculture, not just in practice but on which he had published a policy pamphlet. Members enjoyed his gentle sparring with his brother John who was one of Prime Minister Wilson's agriculture ministers. George was also later in the Lords deeply involved in the details of the Scottish devolution proposals during the Callaghan government which

he nevertheless described rightly as wholly inadequate.

He was not always gently tolerant. I was with him at a by-election when he took our rather shy and diffident candidate round the farmers' mart, after which, as we were walking back to the by-election office, the candidate was unwise enough to ask: 'Mr Mackie, was the speech I gave last night all right?' A by now quite exasperated George turned to him and said 'the content was fine but when you are speaking I do wish you would not hop from one foot to the other as though you had just shat your breeks'. The man's confidence was not enhanced and he went on to lose his deposit.

On another occasion he thought that three young candidates, Steel, Johnston and, in Argyll, John Mackay needed tuition in agriculture and he invited us to spend a day on his farm at Benshie, after which he reported to the Executive: 'Steel and Johnston were hopeless. Mackay was quite good.' John Mackay went on to become an able Conservative minister in the Scottish Office.

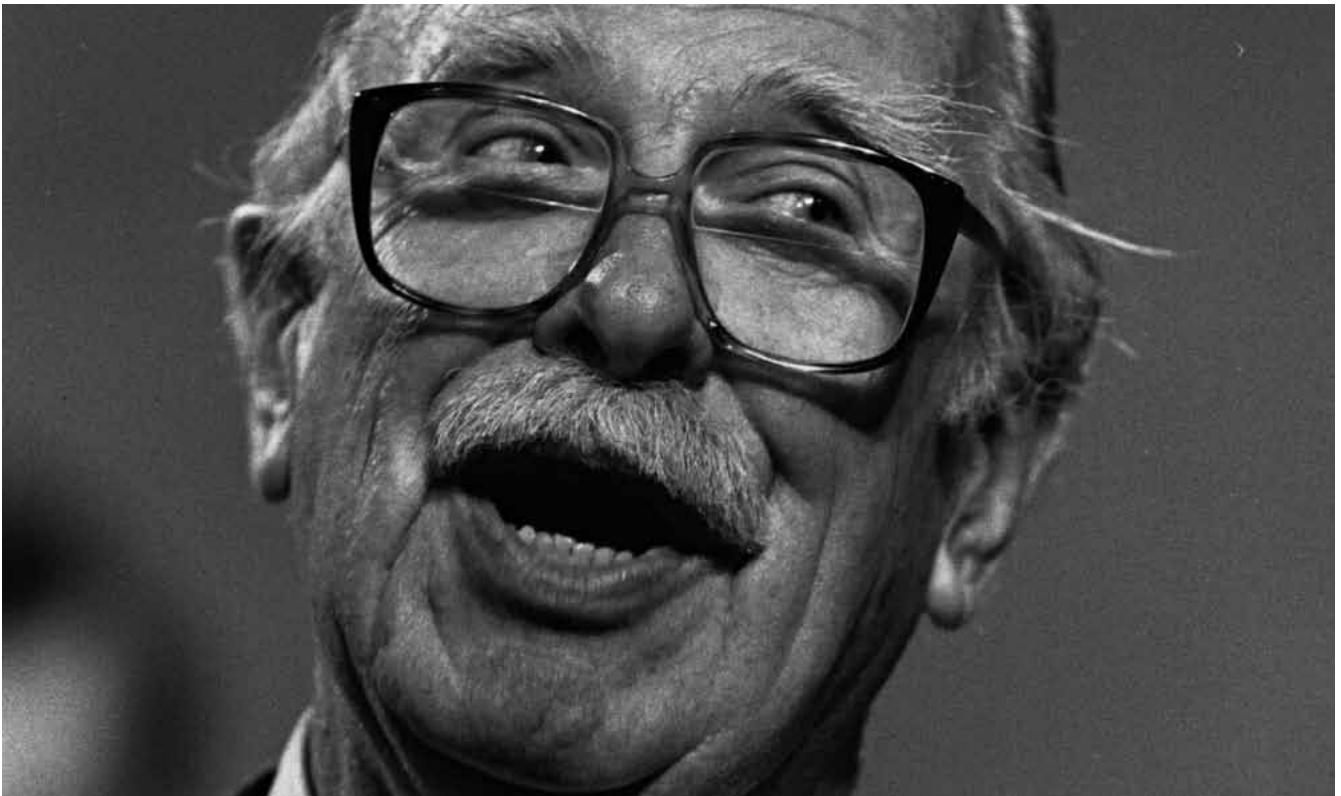
Despite that justified adverse opinion he remained a most loyal personal supporter, and when I was fighting John Pardoe in the first ever democratic contest for political party leadership in Britain he wrote in his memoirs:

John Pardoe made the mistake of alleging that because he was a bit of a bastard that made him suitable for taking the party through the difficult period ahead. We had lots of fun and I wrote a ditty about it:

Pardoe's crude – but he will fight
Scattering shot to left and right.
Must we – to gather votes in
season

Abandon now the use of reason?
Perhaps young Steel can break
the deadlock

Although, alas, he's born in
wedlock!



That was typical of the many entertaining ditties he wrote, and an example of the wit with which he always laced his speeches, which made him such a popular member of both the Commons and the Lords. Indeed, one story which he told about failing to get off the night sleeper at Carlisle was so funny that his colleagues always insisted that he repeated it at every dinner at which he was speaking.

George was also fortunate in the wholehearted support of his two successful marriages, first of Lindsay in fundraising and campaigning in the north, and then of Jacqui in his role in the Assembly of the Council of Europe and the Inter-Parliamentary Union. Judy and I will always be grateful for the help he gave her campaigning during general elections in my constituency when I was busy touring the country as party leader.

Last year, on my way back from speaking at a dinner for Malcolm Bruce in Aberdeenshire I called in to visit George. On leaving he came out of the cottage on two sticks to see me into my car, and I think we both knew that would be our last farewell. A colleague has written to me saying it is the end of an era: 'I shall miss his wise counsel and enthusiasm for life'.

To conclude, I can do no better than quote two sentences from the

George Yull Mackie, Baron Mackie of Benshie (10 July 1919 – 17 February 2015), in 1987

many extensive newspaper obituaries last week:

George Mackie was a Liberal of the old school, whose values of public service and fairness stemmed from his family's sense of responsibility towards the land they farmed and the people who worked for them. He was a big man who exuded geniality, good humour and a sense of duty which he retained to the end.

David Steel (Lord Steel of Aikwood) was MP for Roxburgh, Selkirk & Peebles, later Tweeddale, Ettrick & Lauderdale, 1965–97, and Leader of the Liberal Party 1976–88.

Obituary: Patrick Jackson

It is with regret that I notice the death of Mr Patrick Jackson CB, on 7 November 2014. It is with pleasure that I notice his life.

Jackson will be familiar to readers of this journal as the author of five well-received political studies of significant but secondary figures in the history of the Victorian Liberal Party.¹ The fact that he served for many years in the civil service was much remarked upon in reviews of his first two books. It was apparently noteworthy that a

man had managed to get himself to retirement, then voluntarily committed himself to twenty years hard labour in the recesses of the Bodleian, the Public Record Office, and the British Library. Despite the fact that most scholars and students of Victorian politics had occasion to read and benefit from his work, few actually knew him.

Jackson was born on 10 February 1929. He was raised in Huddersfield, won a scholarship to University College Oxford, and in 1949 took a degree in modern history. In 1952 he married his sixth-form sweetheart, Kathleen Roper, a sharp young teacher who had studied English literature at the University of Hull, and who shared his love of books and opera. For anyone else I might say it was a match made in heaven. In any case, Patrick and Kate were loving companions through sixty-two years of marriage, and were justly proud of their children Katharine and Robert, and the grandchildren and great-grandchildren that followed.

I know nothing of Jackson's government work, except that he rose to the position of under-secretary in the Department of Transport, and that his profession enabled him to raise a family in the comfort of suburban Bromley. When I remember him, however, I think first of Yorkshire and the

Victorian facades of Huddersfield. Neither Patrick nor Kate were believers, but they were certainly products of the Nonconformist culture into which they were born as England entered into the Great Depression. I recall Kate once expounding on the iron truth of the childhood mantra, 'cleanliness is next to godliness'. The phrase undoubtedly bore some Wesleyan religious overtones, but to the Huddersfield young it admonished discipline in the face of the relentless, penetrating dust from the textile mills that dominated the city. Cleanliness was the necessary first step in respectable sanctification.

There must have been days when Jackson grew impatient with bureaucracy, but he was committed to the work of government. Politically nurtured during the Attlee years, he remained passionately committed to the ideals of the welfare state. When I met Jackson in the late 1990s, ten years after his retirement, he was happily immersed in Victorian Liberal politics. We sat at an outdoor table at the King's Arms in Oxford, exchanged copies of our latest books, and unabashedly talked of archival discoveries and telling political phrases as if they were lays in a heroic tale. I looked forward to my (almost) annual visits with Patrick, for though he was in his late seventies and I in my forties, he was as vivacious as a debutante. I learned a lot from him, and often as not I was doubly rewarded, for in addition to the pleasure of his company he would treat me to a meal at his beloved Le Deuxieme.

The Liberal Democrat History Group was present, as usual, at the Liberal Democrats' spring conference in Liverpool in March. Below, Liberal Democrat cabinet ministers Ed Davey and Nick Clegg chat to History Group chair Tony Little.

Jackson employed a simple and consistent method: to read all the letters and manuscripts of his subject, and every line of speech recorded in *Hansard*. He seldom wrote to great themes or inferred from slight premises. As he observed at the beginning of his work on Hartington, 'This is essentially a political biography, and it will not often be necessary to interrupt the political narrative in order to consider Hartington as a private man.' Recognising the impossibility of an absolute proscription, Jackson devoted the introductory chapter to Hartington's private life. 'Having thus intruded initially upon his privacy', Jackson wrote, 'we can tell most of the rest of the story in what he would have regarded as a decently impersonal way' (p. 15). In this most unassuming manner, Jackson rendered, in the words of Professor Jonathan Parry, 'an impressive psychological portrait', capturing 'a great deal of Hartington's personality and ambiguity'.²

As someone who came late to the profession, Jackson was reticent about numbering himself among the professional historians of Victorian high politics, and it was in part for this reason that he refrained from studies of the upper echelons of the Liberal Party. If he never produced a seminal work, however, he was there in company with the vast majority of professional historians. In terms of scholarship, he produced more academic work than most and did it in half the time. His books were uniformly praised for generosity, balance,

clarity, and thoroughness. Professor Bruce Kinzer's assessment of Jackson's achievement in *Morley of Blackburn* may stand as a fair representation of the 'professional' view his career:

While no one can (or should) do for Morley what Morley did for Gladstone, neither should anyone feel the need to do for Morley more than Jackson has now done for him. Not art, perhaps, but the well-wrought work of a proficient practitioner of political biography.³

Jackson gladly accepted this as a laurel. During the last twenty-five years of his life, he worked for the pleasure of the task, and for the memories of men who had devoted themselves to the liberal cause which had made such a difference in his life.

John Powell is a member of the Editorial Board of the Journal of Liberal History and Professor of History at Oklahoma Baptist University.

- 1 *The Last of the Whigs: A Political Biography of Lord Hartington, later Eighth Duke of Devonshire* (1994); *Education Act Forster: A Political Biography of W. E. Forster* (1997); *Harcourt and Son: A Political Biography of Sir William Harcourt* (2004); *Loulou: Selected Extracts from the Journals of Lewis Harcourt* (2006); *Morley of Blackburn: A Literary and Political Biography of John Morley* (2012), all published by Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.
- 2 *Nineteenth-Century Prose* 22 (Fall 1995): 200.



3 *Canadian Journal of History* XLVIII
(Spring/Summer 2013): 146.

Taped interviews

Between 1994 and 1997 I conducted over 140 interviews with Liberals active between 1945 and 1964 as part of my DPhil research (the results of which were later published as *Coming into Focus: the transformation of the Liberal Party 1945–64*, available for rather a lot of money on Amazon). I spoke to some of the party's leading lights, including Jeremy Thorpe, Arthur Holt, Nancy Seear, George Mackie and John Foot, but also many local councillors and activists from across the UK. Some were active Liberals before the war, with one old-timer recalling electioneering in 1910. Many were inspired by Jo Grimond to join the party.

Around 100 interviews were recorded on tiny cassettes using a Dictaphone which no longer works. I transcribed a few but for most I simply transcribed notes, using my own shorthand (LA for Liberal Association, for example). The tapes now sit in a carrier bag in my office and I would like to donate them to a library or record office which could digitise them and make them more widely available. Many of the people I interviewed are now dead and most probably did not record their memories of the Liberal Party in any other form.

The tapes are an invaluable source of Liberal history.

The British Library were interested in taking the tapes but have decided against on financial grounds. I wondered if any members could suggest how I might be able to ensue these recordings are digitised for other researchers to use – perhaps sources of funding I could gain access to or institutions who may be interested in taking the tapes.

Mark Egan

Biography of Rufus Isaacs

My interest in Rufus Isaacs began after finding that he rose to dizzy heights from relatively humble beginnings. He became first Marquess of Reading, having started as the son of a Spitalfields fruiterer. Along the way he was Lord Chief Justice, Special Ambassador to the United States of America, Viceroy of India, and Foreign Secretary. This inspired me to nominate him for the blue plaque which went up in Curzon Street, Mayfair, in 1971, and to have a road named after him in Caversham, Reading, in 1994. (He was MP for Reading from 1904 to 1912 and is still remembered in the town.)

I believe that there has been no biography on him since Denis Judd's in 1985 and I know that the present marquess would be pleased to see another book and would make family papers available.

Any prospective biographer should contact me at kettner_soc@yahoo.co.uk to progress this matter.

Peter Whyte

Scottish Liberal Party's evidence to the Royal Commission on the Constitution

I am anxious to obtain or borrow a copy of the Scottish Liberal Party's written evidence to the Royal Commission on the Constitution (aka the Crowther–Kilbrandon Commission) of 1969–1973.

It was published as a SLP booklet in 1970 (?) and included input from our Structure of Government Committee, of which I was Convener.

Anyone who can help please contact me at s.waugh.bnchry@btinternet.com.

Sandy Waugh

Sir Edward Grey

I am currently writing a biography of Sir Edward Grey, and I am always keen to discover any letters or other documents relating to him that may be in private hands. Alan Beith very kindly made two letters available to me, which somehow had come his way. Who knows what is out there?

Anyone who can help please contact me at T.Otte@uea.ac.uk.

Thomas Otte

On This Day ...

Every day the History Group's website, Facebook page and Twitter feed carry an item of Liberal history news from the past. Below we reprint three. To see them regularly, look at www.liberalhistory.org.uk or www.facebook.com/LibDemHistoryGroup or follow us at: [LibHistoryToday](https://www.instagram.com/LibHistoryToday).

March

21 March 1910: The Parliament Bill is introduced in the House of Commons, ultimately establishing the primacy of the Commons over the House of Lords. The bill was a response to the constitutional crisis following the introduction of Lloyd George's radical 1909 budget, which was rejected by the Conservative-dominated Lords, overturning the convention that the Lords did not interfere with money bills. The crisis was finally resolved when the Parliament Act received Royal Assent in August 1911.

April

3 April 1846: Birth of Robert Threshie Reid, 1st Earl Loreburn, Liberal MP for Hereford 1880–85 and Dumfries Burghs 1886–1905. In the Liberal governments of the 1890s Reid served as Attorney General 1894 and Solicitor General 1894–95. Firmly on the radical wing of the party, Reid supported Campbell-Bannerman in his difficulties with Lord Rosebery and the Liberal Imperialists. When Campbell-Bannerman became Prime Minister he appointed Reid as Lord Chancellor and he continued to serve in that post under Asquith until ill-health forced his resignation in 1912.

May

9 May 1976: Jeremy Thorpe resigns as Liberal leader. Thorpe's career had been damaged by claims that he had had a love affair with Norman Scott, an acquaintance, in the early 1960s. At that time homosexuality was illegal. Thorpe was charged with conspiracy to murder Scott; he was acquitted in 1979 but not before losing his seat in the general election of that year. Following the hung parliament in the February 1974 election Thorpe declined to enter a coalition with the Conservatives, led by Edward Heath, as he felt Heath would not be able to deliver progress on electoral reform and failing to do so would split the Liberal Party, which had approached 30 per cent in the polls in the lead-up to the election..