

REVIEWS

outside politics as directors of manpower, shipping, food distribution, agriculture and other areas of the war effort. This was almost unheard of at the time but usually proved to be highly successful. The personal relationship that Lloyd George forged with leading Conservatives such as Bonar Law and Lord Derby partly compensated for his political weaknesses. It enabled him to dismiss Sir John Jellicoe from the Admiralty on Christmas Eve 1917 and to force the adoption of the convoy system on the Navy – a key factor in the defeat of the growing German submarine menace, which threatened to starve Britain into submission. His hold on the Tory high command psyche also helped him to restore Churchill from his Dardanelles-induced banishment to

office at the Ministry of Munitions in spite of Tory front- and back-bench opposition.

Grigg's final volume provides a fresh store of ammunition for anyone energised to argue that Lloyd George was one of the twentieth century's most remarkable British prime ministers, along with Winston Churchill, H. H. Asquith and, possibly, Margaret Thatcher. All were exceptional in that they had the capacity to make things happen that would not have happened otherwise. Grigg's work provides the case material for the advocate who would argue that Lloyd George was the greatest prime minister of his century.

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early as 1954' in Liberal fortunes. The revival was more than that. By the local elections of May 1956, many more Liberal candidates were standing and the party's vote was moving sharply upwards. In the four by-elections during the twelve months before Grimond became leader in November 1956, Liberal candidates took nearly a quarter of the vote and even in the non-hoper of West Walthamstow they took 14.7%. What legacy did he leave that was so different? In the nine by-elections in the year following his resignation in January 1967, the Liberal vote averaged just 13.6%.

His impact on Liberal parliamentary success was just as limited. In 1955 there were six Liberal MPs, three of them dependent on local Conservative support, and an average general election vote of 15%. In 1970, the election following his departure, again just six Liberal MPs were elected (three with tiny majorities, all fewer than 700) and the average vote was 13.5%.

Obviously this reflected both the increasing number of candidates in weaker areas and three years of Jeremy Thorpe's leadership. Yet it is difficult to conclude that Jo's leadership itself produced an electoral revival or left the party stronger in popular support. The interesting pattern of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s is that there were three distinct revivals, one starting under Clement Davies (continuing under early Grimond), one under Jo Grimond, and one under Jeremy Thorpe. But as each revival ebbed it left the party a little stronger than before. Leadership seems almost irrelevant.

And if the party was certainly stronger organisationally when Jo Grimond left than when he took over, this could only be indirectly due to his leadership. The great gadfly was not an organisation man. The improvement in party organisation in fact owed most to a man who could have so

What difference did he make?

Michael McManus: *Jo Grimond: Towards the Sound of Gunfire* (Edinburgh: Birlinn Ltd., 2001)

Reviewed by **Michael Steed**

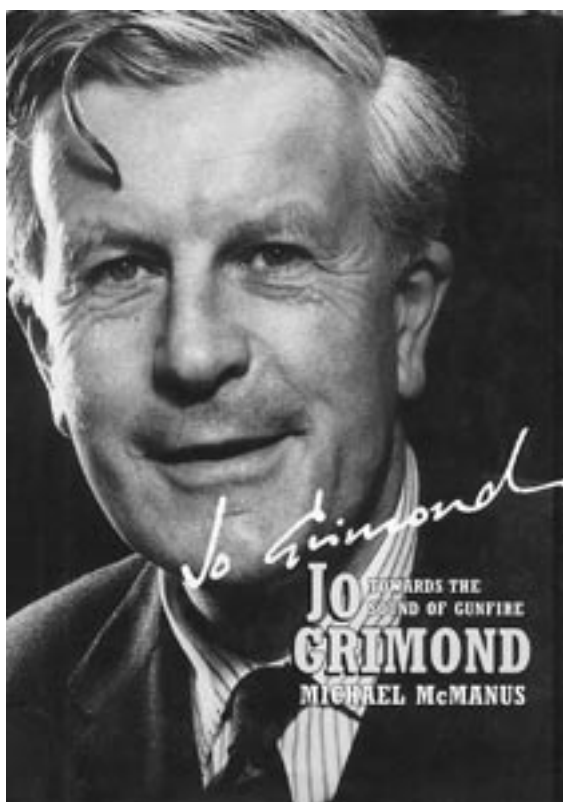
This is an overdue and comprehensive biography, but one that I found rather oddly focused. I had enjoyed reading the book, been impressed by the research behind it, irritated by the easily avoidable errors (as was David Steel in his laudatory review *Grimond: The Great Gadfly*),¹ but had wondered why it failed to tackle some obvious historical questions, all before I was asked to review it for this *Journal*. So I read several other reviews before composing this one.

Generally Michael McManus is seen to have served a useful purpose. Reviewers of my generation have welcomed the much-needed, thorough account of Jo Grimond's life, and have remembered how inspired they were by him – recalling a radical iconoclast and a man of

ideas. Generally, too, they have echoed McManus's view that the Liberal Party which Jo took over was a party nearly defunct, desperately close to annihilation in the House of Commons, and one which he duly rescued from oblivion. A similar consensus about Jo Grimond was evident at the Liberal Democrat History Group meeting in Brighton in September 2002.²

But let us apply the sharp edge of Grimond's own renowned iconoclasm to the significance of Grimond's career. Do the facts and figures support the view that Grimond averted what Steel called the 'near complete extinction' of the Liberal Party? They certainly do not. McManus himself acknowledges – but only briefly towards the end of the book (p. 375) – a 'modest recovery as

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easily have become leader. If, in the February 1950 election, just 0.2% of voters nationwide had voted against the Conservatives instead of for them, the Liberals would have won the North Dorset seat where Frank Byers lost by a mere 97 votes, creating the Chief Whip vacancy that Grimond stepped into. And Atlee would have won a comfortable working majority – larger than the actual majority Churchill was to win in 1951. Byers, the obvious successor to Clement Davies, would probably then have taken over as leader during this likely full-term Parliament.

One way of posing the question of what difference Grimond's leadership made to the Liberal Party is to ask what would have happened if the 1950 election outcome had been only slightly different and Frank Byers had led the party into a 1954/55 general election. When I started canvassing in the early Grimond years, I found Byers still better known among Liberal-inclined voters than Grimond. He was a star on the (then) BBC Home Service, especially *Any Questions* in the days when that mattered.

Grimond was never as good either in the House of Commons or on radio.³

But I cannot conceive that Colonel Byers, as he was then significantly often called, would have matched Grimond on the emerging televisual platform. This is where Grimond's warmth, self-deprecating wit and willingness to engage in real debate came over so well, just as it did in person on a traditional election platform, or – for me as a student – chatting around a dining table. There is no one like that among the trained politicians who appear on television today. McManus is not unaware of Jo's personal qualities but he does not convey his engaging personality and oratorical skills anything like so well as Tony Greaves at Brighton in 2002.⁴ Greaves was right to emphasise Jo's charisma: he was more prophet than politician. But his combination of the skills of a nineteenth-century radical orator with those of a late-twentieth-century television performer made him a remarkable politician nonetheless.

McManus is more interested in Jo Grimond the political thinker and writer. He devotes much more space to Grimond the journalist-MP and roving elder statesman (1967–83) than to his formative years as a rising star of the party (1950–56). He concludes the book with two lengthy appendices on Grimond's attitudes to European and constitutional questions and on his philosophy. He finishes claiming Grimond for 'One Nation' values (p. 422), or – in other words – for McManus's own Disraelian Tory tradition. Hence the focus of this biography is on a writer and his place in the history of political ideas. It is not about a party leader – about the 'Life and Times' of someone who sought to change political history.

Maybe this rescues Jo from the failure of his political strategy. Certainly the strategy of realignment of the left, for all that it appealed to me immensely over

forty years ago, got nowhere. But I still agree with William Wallace in stressing the 'huge difference' that Jo made to the party.⁵ Because he had the ideas, personality and skills that he did, and because the party was reviving electorally, he drew a whole generation of new, young people into Liberal activism. Many of them might well have voted Liberal without him, but on the other hand many of those would never have given so much of their time and energy to politics without him.

Jo Grimond did not save the Liberal Party. It would have survived and probably prospered without him. But I believe that he did have a profound effect on its character. McManus records (p. 373) that, towards the end of his life, Grimond felt that his political career had ended in failure. I think that Jo judged his own achievements harshly. Many of those who rose in the Liberal Party in the decades following his leadership, and who did so much to improve its fortunes, were his bequest to British politics.

Michael Steed now lives in retirement in Canterbury where he is an honorary lecturer in politics and international relations at the University of Kent. He was President of the Liberal Party, 1978–79.

- 1 *The Scotsman* (2 November 2001). McManus's mistakes are typically confusion of names (e.g. Peter Jay for Douglas Jay, p. 257) or electoral details (e.g. p. 86 – the Conservatives did fight Clement Davies in Montgomery in 1950).
- 2 *Journal of Liberal History*, 38, Spring 2003, pp. 32–36.
- 3 Frank Byers, incidentally, makes too few appearances in this book. But there is a poignant photograph, weirdly entitled *Much Ado about Nothing* (the meeting of 3 March 1974) which sums up the party's succession of leadership over time, showing Byers, Grimond, Thorpe and Steel standing together.
- 4 *Journal of Liberal History*, 38, Spring 2003, p. 35.
- 5 *Ibid.*, pp. 33–34.