

## REVIEWS

tragedy that engulfed this generation. He poignantly quotes H. H. Asquith's daughter-in-law Cynthia: 'Oh why was I born at this time: before one is thirty to know more dead than living people?' He also conveys a strong sense of the distance the war put between Asquith and the sons on whom he had always doted. He never wrote to his sons when they were at the Front – perhaps feeling unable to add to his own emotional burden as prime minister by acknowledging the daily danger his children faced. In turn, both Herbert and Raymond Asquith were critical of the lack of dynamism shown by their father's government in trying to win the war.

While Colin Clifford gives a vivid portrayal of the Asquith family, bringing the various characters to life, the book is not without its flaws. He seems blinkered in his condemnation of Lloyd George, refusing to accept that anything the Lloyd George Government did helped to achieve victory. He forgets that

Asquith himself was not above a little political intrigue as we know from his role in the Liberal League in 1902 and the Relugas Compact of 1905 that sought to push Campbell-Bannerman upstairs to the House of Lords. Likewise, he is guilty occasionally of sweeping generalisations such as 'Asquith, like many politicians, was an inveterate "groper"'. Asquith's peccadilloes were well-known, but why tar politicians in general with the same brush?

I was disappointed by the brisk treatment given to the later lives of the Asquith children, since this is the real untrodden ground – much of the rest of the story has been covered in biographies of H. H. and Margot Asquith and in the published letters and diaries of Violet Bonham-Carter. But, nonetheless, this is an enjoyable book which adds detail and colour to the Asquith family history.

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produced a compelling, beautifully crafted narrative. It's a story that is well balanced between anecdote and analysis, and – for someone like me, who lived through much of it – it reads disturbingly like the story of our lives. The disappointments, the apparent triumphs, the infuriating rows that seemed so important at the time: it's all very nostalgic.

There needs to be a larger book that considers the impact of the Liberal Democrats and their predecessor parties on life in Britain since 1970, culminating in the Cook–Maclennan talks and the Joint Consultative Committee, which I believe history will judge to have been vitally important. This book is not that, but then it doesn't claim to be. It is, however, an antidote to those endless loving rehearsals of obscure arguments and characters in long-forgotten Labour administrations, dragged out to be fronted by aging columnists who are completely ignorant about the contemporary Liberal equivalents.

For that reason it is a timely book, and it has some analysis

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## The big grapefruit

David Walters: *The Strange Rebirth of Liberal England* (Politico's, 2003)

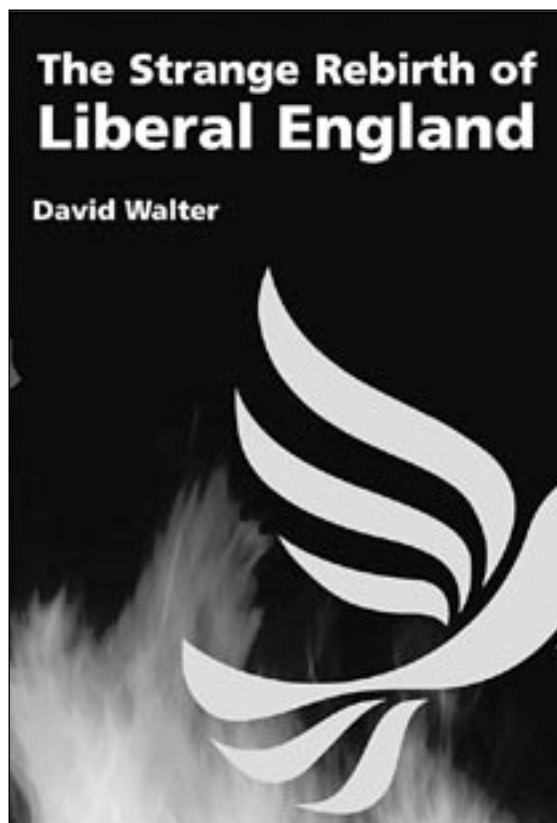
Reviewed by **David Boyle**

**R**oy Jenkins' unusual pronunciation of the phrase 'the Big Breakthrough' in the early days of the Alliance in the early 1980s provides the first of many jokes in David Walter's new recent history of the party. One lady is supposed to have asked him afterwards to say a little more about when he meant by 'the Big Grapefruit'.

Some of the jokes, anecdotes and gossip in *The Strange Rebirth of Liberal England* will be familiar to readers of this journal; some may be new. But their inclusion in the book does give an authentic sense of what it has been like

to be a Liberal Democrat or Liberal over the past three decades – not just the by-election highs and general election lows, but the extraordinary hand-to-mouth, make-do-and-mend business of punching above your political weight.

This is not the first book to adapt the title of Trevor Wilson's famous *Strange Death of Liberal England*, which tracked the party's decline until 1935, but it is one of the best reads. As you would expect from a former ITN broadcaster and the party's director of media communications, David Walter has



at the end in the form of a final chapter comparing the British Conservatives with their Canadian counterparts, who were all but destroyed by the first-past-the-post system in 1993.

If I have a criticism it is that the author may be too close to the subject. There is no doubt that the Liberal rebirth has been an extraordinary achievement for all those described in the book, but the tactfully written sentences that are apparent in the chapters about recent years could perhaps have been written more boldly.

The party's obsessions are also taken at face value: maybe by-elections are important – they certainly seemed so at the time – but there is a case to be made that they have acted as temporary fixes in the absence of some more permanent solu-

tion. Again, some day soon, we need more analysis.

The other criticism might be the cover, and you can't really blame the author for that. Maybe the idea of the Bird of Liberty arising from the flames like a phoenix was irresistible, but the result makes the book look like a particularly comprehensive Liberal Democrat policy paper, and – fond as I am of policy papers – that does it no favours for gathering a wider readership.

Still it is a book that cried out to be written, and it is written supremely well. I just hope those wider readers pick it up as well.

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## Twentieth century politics surveyed

William D. Rubinstein: *Twentieth-Century Britain: a Political History* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003)

Reviewed by **Dr J. Graham Jones**

**D**r William D. Rubinstein, Professor of Modern History at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, is one of our most prolific and versatile modern historians. Among his most substantial, highly acclaimed works are *Capitalism, Culture and Decline in Britain, 1750–1990* (1991) and the authoritative *Britain's Century: a Political and Social History, 1815–1905* (1999).

With the appearance of this present work, Rubinstein has placed us further in his debt. Here he has given us a highly lucid, eminently readable, balanced account of the political development of Britain throughout the whole time span of the twentieth century. (The work is, therefore, fully up to date.) The author is clearly impressively well read, with a

complete mastery of the vast array of secondary literature in this popular field of study, and all the information is neatly crafted into a coherent, compelling narrative account. Within the constraints of space imposed upon him, Rubinstein's approach is scholarly, detailed and penetrating. The volume will undoubtedly draw many general readers and, in addition, bears all the hallmarks of a fine textbook, a great asset to teachers and students alike, appealing especially to history and politics students in the sixth form, at colleges of education and in the first year at university.

Adopting a strictly chronological approach, the author examines each general election campaign and its outcome, the composition of each administration, its policies, goals,

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achievements and failures. Useful tables of election statistics are included at each appropriate point, and statistical and numerical material is judiciously woven into the narrative without impinging upon the flow of the author's writing. Economic, social and cultural themes are generally subordinated to the political analysis.

Especially impressive are the exquisitely penned character sketches of prominent politicians, among them (out of many more) Clement Attlee, Neville Chamberlain, Ted Heath and Harold Wilson. Of Attlee, we read, 'He had an encyclopaedic knowledge of cricket, did *The Times* crossword puzzle daily as a hobby, and remained a sceptical but, in the final analysis, loyal Anglican. In all respects, including appearance, he looked like every upper-middle-class Tory commuter on the 8:07 from Tunbridge Wells ... Practical and competent, but utterly without charisma, he was widely viewed as a man who had risen far above his level of ability and reached a senior position because so few were left in the Parliamentary Labour Party after the slaughter of 1931. Few knew precisely what to make of him.' (pp. 208–09.)

Of Harold Wilson and Ted Heath, Rubinstein is more scathing. Of the former he writes, 'Few people could think of Harold Wilson without smirking, and he appeared to many to be a clever mountebank who could not be taken seriously as a major figure' (p. 294). Of Ted Heath, 'He was utterly self-centred and oblivious to the feelings of others to an extent which many found repellant and abnormal, and always gave the impression of heroic solipsistic stubbornness to his supporters (but to few others)' (p. 295).

There is, however, some imbalance in the structure of the book. The late lamented A. J. P. Taylor once wrote, 'History gets thicker as it approaches recent times: more