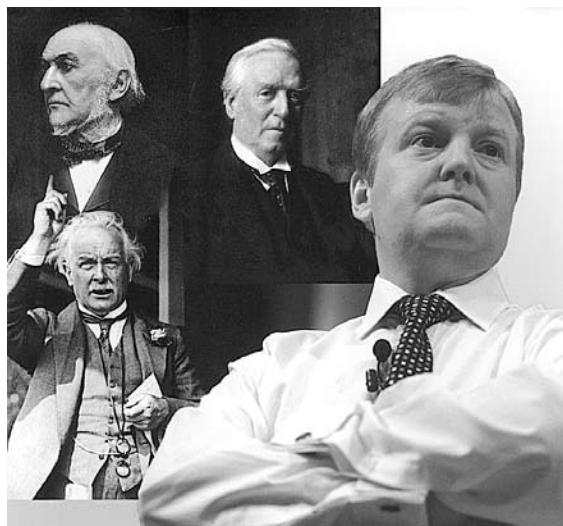


REVIEWS

There have been four distinct Liberal Parties since the organisation first took recognisable shape at the end of the 1850s: Gladstone's party, which he dominated and ultimately nearly destroyed; the 'New Liberals' of the turn of the century, whose ideas and determination sustained the Liberal government of 1906–14; the new Liberal Party that emerged forty years later out of the smouldering ashes of the old, under Grimond's leadership, but failed nevertheless to break through in national representation; and today's Liberal Democrats, rebuilt on the wreckage of the Alliance and on the local government base it had left behind, under Paddy Ashdown. This volume does not link these four movements entirely convincingly into a single tradition or socio-economic base. Its description of the party between 1925 and 1950, with warring Asquithians and Lloyd Georgists, leaves the reader wondering how on earth it managed to linger past the Second World War, and why it did not disappear into the Conservatives under Winston



LIBERALS

The History of the Liberal and Liberal Democrat Parties

Roy Douglas

Churchill. There's no hint of the sheer stubbornness of Liberal nonconformists, tempted by the other parties but recoiling against Labour's collectivism and (after Suez) Conservative imperialism, who rebuilt constituency organisations once Grimond gave the party a sense of direction again. So we must hope that Dr Douglas will now write a more focused history of the Liberal

Party between 1945 and 1975, to tell the story from his own perspective of how close the old Liberal Party came to extinction, and how and why it recovered.

William Wallace (Lord Wallace of Saltaire) is Honorary President of the Liberal Democrat History Group and Deputy Leader of the Liberal Democrats in the House of Lords.

Famous for being famous?

Leo McKinstry: *Rosebery: Statesman in Turmoil* (John Murray, 2005)

Reviewed by **Martin Pugh**

At the height of his fame Lord Rosebery had only to arrive at Waterloo Station to bring the whole place to a halt in the same way that a Madonna or a Beckham would do today. He possessed, as Leo McKinstry shows very effectively in this new biography, what we would today call 'star quality'. Though trapped in the House of Lords throughout his political career, Rosebery somehow contrived to appear more modern and more in touch than most of the lawerly, crotchety figures at the top of the Liberal Party during the late-Victorian era. He lived in a period when the glamour conveyed by wealth, title and land represented an asset with the expanding democracy. Despite being a basically insecure and even neurotic person, Rosebery could deliver inspiring speeches to mass audiences; and his fondness for horse-racing made him appear closer to popular tastes than was really the case. He remains the only prime minister whose horses have won the Derby; even as a student he had opted to leave Oxford without a degree when the authorities insisted that he suspend his racing while he was at the university. Of course, as Robert Spence Watson of the National Liberal

Federation reminded him, in a party dominated by the non-conformist conscience, horses and gambling commanded less than complete approval. But by the same token Rosebery was an asset to Liberalism by virtue of his capacity to appeal beyond the regular Liberal loyalists to an uncommitted electorate. McKinstry rightly emphasises that Rosebery spoke to the two popular themes of late-Victorian Britain: empire and democracy. As President of the Imperial Federation League he articulated the idea of the Commonwealth, admittedly with reference to the white colonies alone, and more generally he tapped into the feeling that the expansion of the empire was both a moral good and a material necessity for Britons; in one of his memorable phrases, he suggested that Britain was engaged in 'pegging out claims for the future' in Africa and elsewhere.

On the domestic front Rosebery espoused a catalogue of progressive and radical causes including agricultural trade unions, the secret ballot, the eight-hour working day and compulsory state education; he criticised parliament for failing to raise working-class living standards and he rejected

the justification for a hereditary House of Lords. By the mid-1880s he was regarded as Gladstone's heir apparent, and succeeded him as prime minister in 1894, the last peer to do so apart from Lord Salisbury.

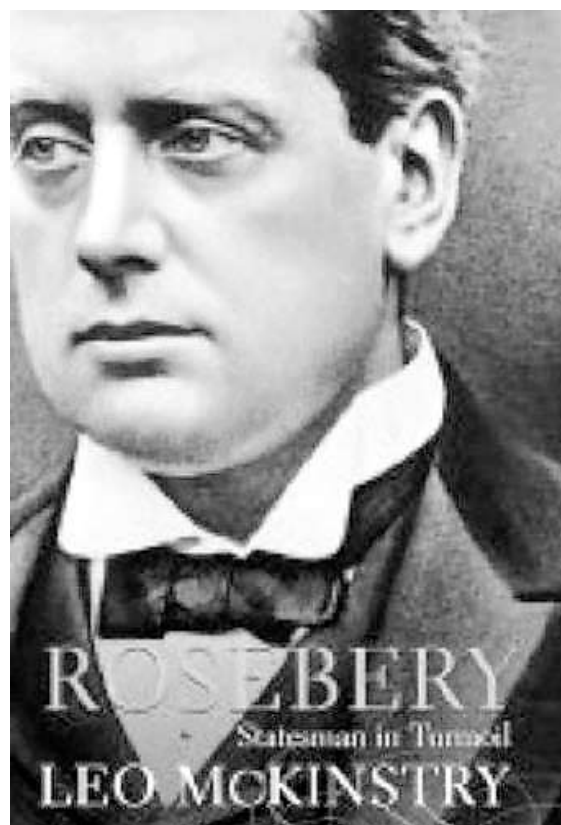
Yet despite all this, Rosebery was highly unsuitable as a party leader and his glittering career can only be regarded as a failure. Hence, perhaps, the neglect of him by historians. The last biography was by Robert Rhodes James in 1962, and before that came Lord Crewe's in 1931. Rosebery's problem lay in his temperament and personality. Ambitious but lacking in self-confidence, lonely and secretive, he was unable to handle other people and notably unwilling to make the sustained effort required to achieve anything in politics. He was also handicapped by his privileged background. Freed from any need to fight his way into politics, Rosebery had no experience of the House of Commons and no idea how to manage a modern political party. Much of McKinstry's book is taken up with tortuous accounts of the attempts made by his colleagues to persuade him to accept government office from 1872 onwards. That he rose to the top at all is a comment on the unsuitability of so many of the leading Liberals of the period rather than on his own talents. In 1892 when Rosebery consented to serve as Foreign Secretary in Gladstone's precarious new ministry, the irrepressible cynic, William Harcourt, told him: 'If you had not joined, the Government would have been ridiculous – now that you have it is only impossible.'

To describe Rosebery as famous for being famous might be a little severe, but it is not wholly unjustified. On searching his career one finds only three achievements, several of which seem less impressive on inspection. The first, which effectively launched him on his political career, was his promotion of Gladstone as Liberal candidate

in the Midlothian campaigns of 1878–80. With his local connections Rosebery acted as Gladstone's impresario in Midlothian and won huge personal popularity in Scotland generally. However, it has never been quite clear whether Rosebery really 'masterminded' the campaign as McKinstry suggests. He was, after all, ignorant of electoral politics, and the Liberals had their professionals in place to practise the vulgar arts of electioneering. The author offers no new evidence here, and his account is actually less full than the one given by Rhodes James.

Rosebery's second achievement was as chairman of the London County Council. However, his term as chairman was very brief. It is not clear how far he simply presided over meetings rather than taking an instrumental role in enacting the progressive programme. The praise heaped upon him by his colleagues signified little except their gratitude to him for conferring status and respectability on the new council; other county councils persuaded aristocrats to act as chairmen for the same reason.

By contrast Rosebery's one acknowledged area of expertise was foreign affairs. As Foreign Secretary from 1892 to 1894 he secured the annexation of Uganda by Britain at a time when there was strong pressure to withdraw. Yet Uganda offered little or no immediate prospect of economic advantage. The British East Africa Company, which failed to pay any dividends to shareholders, was a complete flop. Significantly even Lord Salisbury considered annexation pointless. Rosebery's actions over Uganda certainly offered some evidence of his command of the lower political arts. Scarred by their experience with the Sudan and General Gordon, most of his cabinet colleagues, including Gladstone, opposed annexation. However, Rosebery outmanoeuvred them by delaying the decision and then by appointing



a mission to investigate, which he loaded with a pro-annexationist chairman; he actually instructed the chairman not to consider evacuating the territory! The mission's recommendation, combined with Rosebery's threat to resign if thwarted, led his colleagues to swallow another flawed piece of imperial aggrandisement against their better judgement.

Despite this isolated success Rosebery showed that he had neither the appetite nor the energy for running a government when he succeeded Gladstone as prime minister in 1894. Under his leadership Liberal morale collapsed and he led the party into an unnecessary and disastrous general election in 1895, four years earlier than necessary, in which only 177 Liberal MPs were returned. He himself realised it had been a mistake to become party leader and resigned in 1896.

McKinstry's biography is a readable, sophisticated and well-researched study of this perverse statesman. While he does not significantly modify the traditional view of Rosebery's political

REVIEWS

career, he presents a much fuller picture of his character and private life than previous authors. In particular he offers a detailed and sympathetic discussion of Rosebery's sexuality, with reference to the assumption that he was homosexual. The subject went almost unmentioned by Rhodes James who referred to one of the key figures, Viscount Drumlanrig, in a solitary footnote. There is a great deal of circumstantial evidence for Rosebery's homosexuality, and it was believed that as Foreign Secretary and Prime Minister he had a relationship with his private secretary, Drumlanrig. This was a time when Drumlanrig's father, the obnoxious Marquess of Queensbury, was in full pursuit of Oscar Wilde because of his connection with his younger son, Lord Alfred Douglas. In his book, *The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde* (2003), Neil McKenna argued that the reason the authorities pursued Wilde was to satisfy the increasingly unpredictable Queensbury who was threatening to expose Rosebery himself. McKinstry, however, firmly rejects the idea that Rosebery was homosexual, though his counter-arguments

are by no means convincing. He is justified in claiming that there is no unequivocal evidence in the correspondence and diaries. Rosebery, who notoriously refused to allow anyone to open his mail, presumably destroyed anything incriminating. On the other hand, it is equally impossible to prove that Rosebery was *heterosexual*. No doubt he married and had children, but so did Lewis Harcourt and Lord Beauchamp, other notable homosexual Liberal politicians. In the present state of our knowledge one can only advise readers to compare McKinstry's discussion of the evidence with the diametrically opposed view presented by McKenna and come to their own conclusions.

Martin Pugh was Professor of Modern British History at Newcastle University until 1999, and Research Professor in History at Liverpool John Moores University from 1999 to 2002. He has written ten books on aspects of nineteenth and twentieth century history and is on the board of BBC History magazine. He is currently writing a social history of Britain between the wars.

Hay contends that the changes which occurred within the party from 1808 to 1830 made a significant contribution to the Whig-Liberal ascendancy which was to dominate British politics from 1830 to 1886.

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This is an eloquent and largely persuasive argument. Hay's strongest suit is his attempt to balance the high political strategy of the great aristocratic families of the Whig party with the increasingly vibrant sphere of extra-parliamentary politics. Indeed, his chief justification for basing the narrative around the Scottish Whig MP, barrister and publicist, Henry Brougham, is the fact that Brougham was the figure who most effectively managed to straddle both these worlds. While the Whigs had failed to establish a strong and charismatic leadership in the wake of Charles James Fox's death and the collapse of the Whig-dominated Talents Ministry in 1807, Brougham's national political strategy made him an increasingly influential figure in the gradual revival of the party's fortunes from 1810. Hay's chief contention is that Brougham harnessed the vibrant political energies of various provincial interest groups to the party politics of Westminster. Where the Whig party had become somewhat hamstrung by its failure to appeal beyond its aristocratic and metropolitan core, Brougham endeavoured to reach out across a range of concerns and allegiances – merchants, manufacturers in the growing towns of the north, religious dissenters and anti-slavery campaigners foremost among them. Herein, among these disparate and increasingly influential sections of British society, lay the mainstay of the Liberal Party's support for most of the nineteenth century.

This book expertly manages to fuse most of the recent trends of nineteenth-century British history historiography into a balanced and illuminating study. Hay's mastery of the high political intrigues and tensions among the leading Whigs does not prevent him from elucidating the formation of the loose, but cogent governing strategy which

Transforming the Whigs

William Anthony Hay: *The Whig Revival, 1808–1830* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), in the series *Studies in Modern History* (J. C. D. Clark ed.)

Reviewed by **John Bew**

William Anthony Hay's study of the transformation of the fortunes of the British Whig party in the first three decades of the nineteenth century is a welcome contribution to an area of British history which has long been in need of serious reappraisal. In recent years, the work of Boyd Hilton and others has thrown much light on the economic, religious and political dimensions of the

dominant Tory governments of the period. But much less is known about the Whig opposition in these inglorious years in which it was almost continually out of office for nearly five decades. By retracing the workings and strategy of the Whig party at the height of the wilderness years, Hay contends that the changes which occurred within the party from 1808 to 1830 made a significant contribution