

of Grimond's economic policies were support for Common Market membership, increased public investment, improved educational and training facilities, and a more competitive private sector.

A short conclusion gathering together the main themes and findings of the research is appended. Dr Sloman's overarching conclusion is 'that it was ideological and generational changes in the early 1960s that cut the party's links with the New Right, opened up common ground with revisionist social democrats, and re-established its progressive credentials' (back cover). A

full, clearly set out bibliography of the sources used is most helpful and a pleasure to read. It will prove of great value for future research. The book is not always an easy read, but it is unfailingly scholarly, contains a wealth of most valuable and informative material which will repay detailed study and stimulate the interested reader to research further. It is a most valuable contribution to this field of study.

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## Tony Benn's father

Alun Wyburn-Powell, *Political Wings: William Wedgwood Benn, First Viscount Stansgate* (Pen & Sword Aviation, 2015)

Review by **David Dutton**

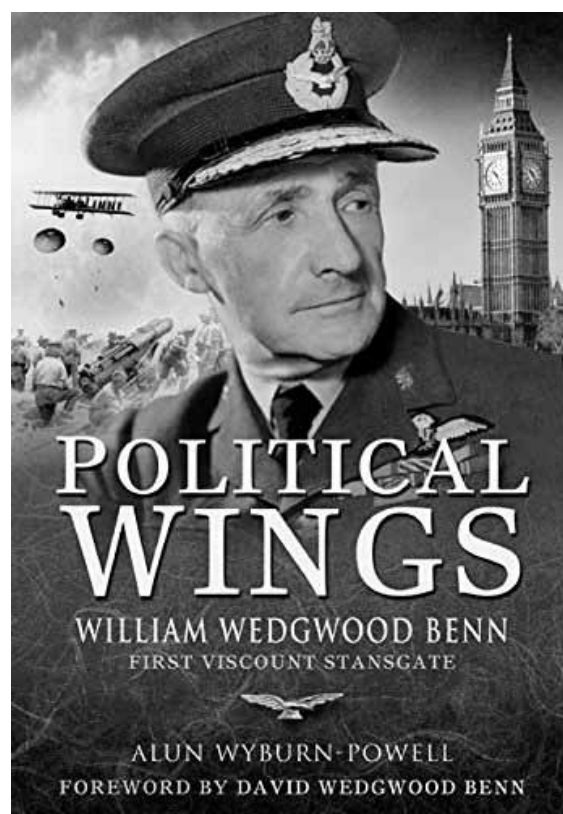
IT IS A curious fact that two of the most prominent post-war figures on the Labour Left – Michael Foot and Tony Benn – had fathers who sat in parliament as Liberal MPs. The two fathers were almost exact contemporaries. Born three years apart, they both died in 1960. But whereas Isaac Foot served out his political career within the Liberal ranks, William Wedgwood Benn, the subject of this very readable biography by Alun Wyburn-Powell, was among the many prominent Liberals of his generation who defected to Labour. Wedgwood Benn, ennobled in 1941 as Viscount Stansgate in order to enhance Labour's ranks in the House of Lords – though he privately likened the debates of the upper chamber to 'old gentlemen's political croquet' – served as Liberal MP for Tower Hamlets, St George's (1906–18) and for Leith (1918–27). Rather than represent his constituency under false political colours, he resigned his parliamentary seat upon his conversion to Labour, but then secured election for Aberdeen North (1928–31) and Manchester, Gorton (1937–41). As a Labour politician, Benn enjoyed two periods of cabinet office, as Secretary of State for India throughout Ramsay MacDonald's second government (1929–31) and as Secretary of

State for Air under Clement Attlee (1945–6).

Benefitting from the reminiscences of members of the Benn family, including the late Tony Benn, Wyburn-Powell draws a convincing picture of this, in some ways, rather eccentric individual. His life followed a repeated pattern of overwork resulting in spells of near-exhaustion. Benn did not marry until he was 43 and must have thrilled his bride by deciding that their honeymoon should be spent attending the first session of the League of Nations in Geneva! His quest for an appropriate work/life balance was much influenced by Arnold Bennett's book *How to Live on 24 Hours a Day*. Benn's time was not to be wasted and, to chart his use of it, he divided his day into half-hour units. For almost half a century, he kept a record of how each day had been spent, drawing up a daily graph of his activities. Born into a family of Congregationalist radicals whose circumstances were comfortable rather than genuinely wealthy, he was constantly, if usually needlessly, worried about his personal finances. When he managed in the summer of 1933 to purchase the house at Stansgate which his father had bought, but soon sold, thirty years earlier, he installed

a payphone in order not to waste money. That home, incidentally, once described by the political journalist Michael Crick as the family's 'ancestral home', was in fact a prefabricated building, chosen from a catalogue and built largely of wood. Benn's parsimony later cost him dear. In October 1940 his London home on Grosvenor Road, later the site of Labour's Millbank Tower, caught fire during an air raid. The blaze seems to have resulted from an electrical fault, the consequence of employing the inadequate DIY skills of his son, Michael, in a further attempt at economy.

Wyburn-Powell is less convincing in his efforts to establish the intrinsic significance of his subject. In his foreword, Benn's surviving son, David, concedes that his father was 'never a key player' (p. ix). Wyburn-Powell agrees. Benn was 'a natural deputy managing director, an adjutant, the second in command' (p. 14). Furthermore, 'he never really developed the intermediate skill of detailed policy-making', though 'he thoroughly enjoyed debating and political intrigue' (p. 33). Not much scope here then for a 'Great Man' approach to history. The conclusion that he was 'a good administrator and a good party manager'



# THE LEGACY OF ROY JENKINS

Roy Jenkins is best remembered in Liberal Democrat circles as one of the 'Gang of Four' who established the Social Democratic Party, as the SDP's first leader, and then as a staunch supporter of merger with the Liberal Party.

But even as a Labour politician he had a liberal record. In his first two years as Home Secretary (which began just over fifty years ago), he abolished theatre censorship, passed the first effective legislation to outlaw racial discrimination and delivered government support for private members' bills on the legalisation of homosexuality and on abortion. In 1972 he led the major Labour rebellion that saved the Conservative government's legislation to take Britain into the European Community.

**John Campbell** (author of *Roy Jenkins: A Well-Rounded Life*) and **Lord David Steel** (Leader of the Liberal Party 1976-88) discuss how much liberalism in Britain owes to Roy Jenkins.

**6.30pm Monday 27 June**

Committee Room 4A, House of Lords, Westminster, SW1 (*please allow 20 minutes to get through security*)

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scarcely makes the reader's pulse race (p. 205). That same reader will sometimes sense that Wyburn-Powell is having to pad out his narrative. This is most obvious in a fifteen-page chapter entitled 'Summer of 1931'. Benn's name is largely absent from the chapter itself and, indeed, from the dramatic events it describes. In reality, he was no more than a bit-player in the fall of MacDonald's government and its replacement by an all-party National administration. Elsewhere, the impression is that Wyburn-Powell strains too hard to establish Benn's impact. The suggestion that his decision to decline the offer of the position of chief whip on the death of Percy Illingworth in January 1915 'changed the course of Liberal Party history' is interesting but ultimately entirely speculative (p. 50). The statement that Benn 'has a significance beyond his own achievements' because of 'the influence he ended up

having on the legislation on peerages' may be technically correct (p. 201). But, almost by definition, that influence could only become apparent with his own death and would have meant nothing without the determined campaign of his son Tony to renounce his inherited title. Even less compelling is the argument that Benn's failure to renegotiate the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty in 1946 led indirectly to the 'festering problems between the two countries which ultimately ended in the Suez Crisis and Eden's downfall' (p. 199). These contrived points aside, Wyburn-Powell generally does as well as he can with the material available. At the end of the day, however, a cabinet career totaling three years, four months and eighteen days (Wyburn-Powell provides this degree of exactitude) offers the author somewhat limited fare.

Perhaps the most interesting section of this book for readers of the *JLH* is the section dealing

with Benn's transition from Liberalism to Labour. Here the author calls upon his earlier research into Liberal defectors to place Benn's move into a wider context. His conclusion is that Benn left the Liberal Party primarily because of 'personality clashes' (p. 95). He was a loyal supporter of Asquith, but his commitment to the party waned once the latter gave up its leadership. By contrast, he declared that Lloyd George did 'not possess the qualifications required as leader of the Liberal Party' (p. 88). Granted the positions occupied by these two Liberal heavyweights in the mid-1920s, most of those Asquithians who chose to leave the party's ranks drifted to the political right. (Wyburn-Powell's statistical analysis should, however, be viewed with caution; only those readers familiar with his earlier work will know that he has taken the illogical methodological decision to exclude from his calculations the majority of defectors

to Liberal Nationalism.) Benn, however, made a relatively painless transition to Labour. It 'did not involve him in a significant abandonment of old policies, nor the adoption of many new ones' (p. 99). He found 'an acceptable home' at the centre of Labour politics, 'or if anything even slightly to the left of centre' (p. 100). These interesting points might have been developed further.

This life of William Wedgwood Benn will be read with pleasure, not least by those interested in the formative influences shaping the more significant figure of Tony Benn. The author's problems derive more from his subject and the loss to fire of much of the Stansgate archive than from any shortcomings in his skills as a biographer.

*David Dutton is co-author of a new A-level textbook, The Making of Modern Britain, 1951-2007 (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).*