

Reviews

All prime ministers competently surveyed in a single tome

Dick Leonard, *A History of British Prime Ministers (Omnibus Edition): Walpole to Cameron* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015)

Review by **Dr J. Graham Jones**

THIS OMNIBUS EDITION of Dick Leonard's British Premiers trilogy, surveys the lives and careers of all the fifty-three prime ministers between Sir Robert Walpole (1721–42) and David Cameron (2010–16), bringing to life the political achievements and also the personal idiosyncrasies of Britain's rulers over nearly three centuries.

Dick Leonard is well known as a prolific political journalist and sometime Labour MP. He has published more than twenty volumes, some of these in joint authorship. *Journal* readers may well recall his enthralling joint biography, *The Great Rivalry: Gladstone & Disraeli, a Dual Biography* (I. B. Tauris, 2013), reviewed by the present writer in the *Journal of Liberal History* (85). And this latest offering, aptly termed an 'Omnibus Edition', is a composite amalgam of three previous sequential volumes written by Leonard, namely *Eighteenth-Century British Premiers*, *Nineteenth-Century British Premiers*, and *A Century of Premiers*. In addition, the chapters on the last three prime ministers – Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and David Cameron – have been substantially revised and updated for this new edition.

The fifty-two men and (at the time of writing – July 2016) one woman who have held the office of prime minister of the United Kingdom are all given a single chapter in this marvellously authoritative and highly readable manual, clearly the result of wide, thoughtful immersion in so many scholarly volumes and reference works. All the entries are informative, well composed and pithily succinct. The less well-known premiers are not at all neglected by comparison with the leading figures. It deserves to be used widely alongside the entries on the prime ministers in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

In each successive chapter, the author probes the various circumstances which propelled each prime minister to the top

of the 'greasy pole' of British political life. He balances their merits and demerits, looks at their successes and failures during their terms of office, and enquires how long their impact will possibly last. Alongside the official story, interesting snippets of information are recounted on the private and personal lives of the PMs. Although he was briefly a Labour MP himself, Dick Leonard displays no obvious partisanship when dealing with recent premiers. Blair is described as 'a fallen idol', Brown as an uncertain and paranoid premier, and Cameron as 'Blair in a minor key'. *Journal* readers will undoubtedly savour the scholarly, substantial essays on Palmerston, Gladstone, Asquith and Lloyd George.

It is indeed instructive to compare the Grand Old Man, Gladstone, who was almost 59 years of age when he formed his first ministry in 1868 (out of four which ended in 1894 when he was aged 85), and David Lloyd George who was still aged only 59 and still at the height of his political powers, when he was ejected from 10 Downing Street in the autumn of 1922, destined to spend the rest of his days, more than twenty-two long years, generally unrewardingly in the political wilderness.

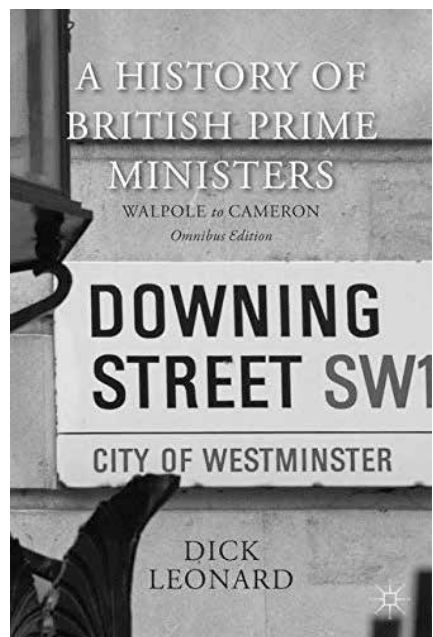
Especially useful are the short bibliographies of the most useful works appended to each article, and the source of some, but by no means all, of the direct quotations are helpfully noted in the main text. This is the kind of book which it is exceptionally useful to have to hand and it will certainly stimulate and expedite further reading and research on these figures.

The author is also to be applauded for his knack of summing up the careers of each successive prime minister in a few words or sentences. W. E. Gladstone, we are told, was 'more than any other British leader, strongly and publicly motivated by his Christian beliefs which were undoubtedly sincere, though he was

not above cutting corners and indulging in sharp practice, from time to time' (p. 476). And due attention is paid here to Gladstone's absorbing passion for rescuing fallen women, a near obsessive proclivity which continued into his advanced old age.

Leonard's assessment of Herbert Asquith is admirably fair-minded and balanced, underlining his undoubted 'mixed legacy' to posterity. On the one hand, he deserves to be remembered 'as a pioneer, whose achievements have reverberated down the years, paving the way for the welfare state legislation of the Attlee government in 1945–51, as well as Blair's constitutional reforms (especially concerning the House of Lords) in 1997'. But he is also described, with exemplary fairness, as 'the last of the nineteenth-century Liberals', and one who must bear 'some responsibility for the eclipse of the once mighty Liberal Party'. As the author, wholly reasonably points out, 'It is arguable, though far from certain, that it would have been replaced, in any event, by the nascent Labour Party' (p. 548).

Dick Leonard is clearly an avid fan of David Lloyd George. Although fully aware of 'the Goat's' weaknesses and excesses, he marks him out as 'probably the most gifted of all the prime ministers of the twentieth century, and he had perhaps a greater influence on people's lives than any other politician'. In support of this, the author refers to his introduction of old age pensions, national insurance and other welfare benefits, 'curbing' the excessive powers of the Upper House, and his role in securing victory in the First World War (p. 567).



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A fascinating 'Appendix' (pp. 852–59) is a notably engrossing read, providing statistics on the age of each prime minister on first attaining the office, the dates of each successive ministry, detailed to the exact day, and the total time which each spent in the prime ministerial office. Details of spouses and offspring are also included in this section.

Sir Robert Walpole's record of 20 years and 314 days in prime ministerial office still, wholly predictably, stands, and is indeed highly likely to do so. Of the twentieth-century premiers, Andrew Bonar Law (209 days in 1922–23) and Sir Alec Douglas Home (362 days in 1963–64) were the only two premiers to serve in office for less than a year in the top job. Lady Thatcher's extremely lengthy 11 years and 209 days in office ('I want to go on and on and on', she once said!) was the lengthiest prime ministerial term of office since Lord Liverpool (14 years, 305 days) in 1812–27, before the passage of the First Reform Act in 1832. Lord Liverpool was aged just 42 years and 1 day when he first took up office, but Tony Blair and David Cameron were only a little older. By far the youngest of the lot, of course was William Pitt the Younger, aged just 24 years, 205 days, in 1783. It would have been interesting and helpful if the author had added the age of each PM at the time of his death. The oldest, in fact, was James Callaghan, 93 years and 10 months at the time of his death in 2005, but he was run close by Harold Macmillan and Sir Alec Douglas Home, both aged 92.

Some minor errors, inevitably, have crept into the text. Jennifer Longford, Frances Stevenson's daughter, was in fact born in October 1929, not 1927 (p. 553). Twice in fact (pp. 553 and 857), she is described as Lloyd George's natural daughter as if this were beyond challenge, but it is highly possible that she was the biological daughter of Colonel T. F. Tweed who had an intimate relationship with her mother at the very time of her conception. And James Callaghan became prime minister in April 1976, not 1978 (p. 858).

Given the format of the volume, and the constant necessity to compress and over-simplify the material, it is inevitable that some possible misjudgements have crept into the book. 'LG', we are told in no uncertain terms, 'took to ministerial life like a duck to water' (p. 555). In fact, he faced serious teething problems at both the Board of Trade and the Exchequer, although he eventually

achieved a great deal at both of course. The infamous Lloyd George Political Fund is described as 'a private fund entirely controlled by himself' (p. 565), but its control was, at least nominally, in fact vested in a group of trustees or scrutineers.

The chapter on Stanley Baldwin, too, contains some overstatements. Baldwin did not singlehandedly 'destroy one coalition government under Lloyd George' in 1922 (p. 592), although he did contribute to its downfall at the Carlton Club meeting. And it seems a gross exaggeration to claim that, had Baldwin not insisted on pursuing his annual vacation at Aix-les-Bains in the high summer of 1931, then the idea of forming a national government would 'probably' 'have been nipped in the bud' (pp. 592–93). And Baldwin's key role in bringing about the enforced abdication of King Edward VII in December 1936 is certainly underplayed at the end of the chapter (p. 594).

Again, Dick Leonard is rather harsh on the deceased Labour Party leader John Smith – 'He lacked Blair's charisma, and would not have gone nearly so far in reforming the Labour Party. ... Had he survived, the Tories might well have done rather better' in the general election of May 1997 (p. 793). But would

John Smith have colluded in rather underhand fashion with George W. Bush to take the country into the Iraqi War and lived to pay the price? Scarcely believable.

Although the reviewer might well cavil at the total lack of illustrative material in the book, it is an engrossing read, and the general standard of accuracy is very high indeed throughout. At £20 for a paperback edition, it is also very reasonably priced for a tome running to 881 pages which must have tested the skill of the bookbinders to its limits. The hardback edition, published in 2014, had a price tag of £140 and included photographs of the premiers. Leonard's survey generally lacks an analytical dimension, but it provides the best general account we have of the fifty-two men and one woman who have held the office of prime minister. As such, it is a considerable achievement, which should appeal to a wide readership. It will serve its purpose well for a long while, although a new Tory prime minister is being selected as I write these very words.

Dr J. Graham Jones was formerly Senior Archivist and Head of the Welsh Political Archive at the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth.

Saint or devil?

Ian Cawood and Chris Upton (eds.), *Joseph Chamberlain International Statesman, National Leader, Local Icon* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016)

Review by **Tony Little**

AT THE LAUNCH of this collection of essays in Portcullis House, Westminster, Ian Cawood arranged for spokesmen from the three major political parties to comment on the legacy of Joseph Chamberlain. Gisella Stuart, the Labour MP for Chamberlain's old Birmingham seat, spoke of the tradition by which she received orchids on her election in his memory. For the Conservatives, Lord Carrington spoke of Chamberlain's continuing influence on the organisation and philosophy of his party. But for the Liberal Democrats, Lord Beith drew a sharp distinction between Chamberlain's legacy of municipal reform in Birmingham, still an inspiration to many Liberals, and the destructive impact on both the Liberal and Conservative parties of

Chamberlain's ruthless crusading for his policies. No one else can equal his record of splitting two opposing major parties. Though he never led one of the great parties and never held a more important office than Colonial Secretary, it would be hard to find more than a handful of Victorian politicians better remembered.

Remembered but not necessarily revered. Ian Cawood quotes from Chamberlain's first biographer Alexander Macintosh that contemporaries were divided as to whether Joe was 'a saint or a devil' (p. 229). Even within this collection, Thomas Otte draws attention to his record of 'division and destruction' (p. 20), and the editors quote approvingly from Beatrice Potter (later Webb): 'no one trusts him, no one likes him, no one believes in him' (p. 205). Why?