

who finds them guilty.² In one of the few areas in which Buczacki offers something entirely new, he criticises Asquith as unfaithful in a wider sense to Margot. Asquith liked young women and we are given much more detail on Asquith as a 'groper'. Buczacki does not comment on the difference in power and status between them.

He does not criticise Venetia for her contribution to Asquith's unfaithfulness as she allowed Asquith to make fervent assertions of love towards her. Buczacki does not quote Asquith's letter to her after she assured him that she did not want him ever to stop loving her and wanting her.

No new insights are offered on the reasons why she decided to marry Edwin Montagu despite her physical repulsion towards him. Extraordinarily, Buczacki omits her statement to Montagu that she 'agreed to have some relationship with him whenever she chose, while retaining her right to have sex outside the marriage'.³

The letter Asquith received on 12 May was a hammer blow. Buczacki strangely does not comment on the extent to which Asquith's decision, on 17 May, to form a coalition was significantly influenced by his emotional turmoil.

There is nothing of political significance in Venetia's remaining thirty-three years. She continued to have distaste for physical relations with Montagu, but had affairs including at least two before Montagu died in 1924. She was uncaring in bringing up her (probably not their) daughter Judith. The book shows Venetia was entirely self-centred and self-satisfying as she pursued the 'fun' which she had set as her mantra for life as a young woman. Buczacki's aim, to contradict what he claims to have been the poor press about her, has not been achieved.

Alan Mumford's most recent article for the Journal was 'Churchill and Lloyd George: Liberal Authors on the Great War?' His forthcoming article for the Journal is 'Asquith: Friendship, Love and Betrayal'. He is the author of a number of books on political cartoons, most recently a cartoon biography of Lloyd George.

1 M. and E. Brock (eds.), *H. H. Asquith Letters to Venetia Stanley* (Oxford University Press, 1982).

2 O. Poplewell, *The Prime Minister and his Mistress* (Lulu Publishing Services, 2014).

3 N. B. Levine, *Politics Religion and Love* (New York University Press, 1991).

Jeremy Thorpe and Norman Scott

John Preston, *A Very English Scandal: Sex, Lies and a Murder Plot at the Heart of the Establishment* (Viking, 2016)

Review by Michael Steed

EVEN IF HE had never met Norman Scott, Jeremy Thorpe would be a controversial figure in Liberal Party history. His firmly upper-class style was strikingly at odds with the zeitgeist of the 1960s, and so with the ethos of young recruits to the Liberal cause who were flocking into the party at that time. Yet his principled stances on Europe, on apartheid and on human rights generally not only proclaimed a continuity with classic Gladstonian Liberalism, they were highly relevant to this period's political agenda. His personal impact on the peak electoral performance of the party in February 1974 is undeniable; yet when he resigned as leader in 1976, it still had only thirteen MPs compared to the dozen that Jo Grimond had bequeathed him in 1967. The thirteen did represent a much higher Liberal vote in the October 1974 election than the dozen had after 1966; yet in two out of the three election campaigns where Thorpe led the party, it lost ground in votes badly.

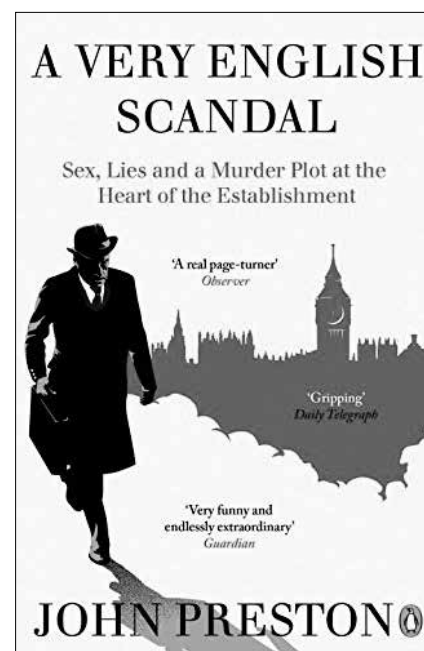
John Preston's study of Jeremy Thorpe's role in wider social history, the events which lead to his 1979 trial for a murder plot, has only a little direct relevance to his role as Liberal leader. Preston, a fiction writer and journalist rather than historian, tells it as a racy thriller, starting with a conspiratorial dinner conversation between Jeremy and a fellow Liberal MP Peter Bessell in February 1965. Bessell, it turns out, is almost as much the central character of Preston's tale as Thorpe. But not quite; the plot weaves around Thorpe's use of Bessell, and the latter's adulation of Thorpe. Bessell's own career was a distorted reflection of his hero's. His finale – his pitiful performance at Thorpe's trial – was of the worm that turned.

Herein lies some value for the political historian in Preston's study. Jeremy Thorpe had an extraordinary magnetism, which led to widespread adoration, from North Devon constituents to leading Liberal activists. His transgressions were not to be believed. He was able to sell meagre political achievements as triumphs; he has even cast a spell over some political historians, as evidenced in the issues of this journal immediately

following his death.¹ So when he needed help with his personal problems, Thorpe was able to call on the devotion of both Bessell and a lifelong personal friend, David Holmes, to put their energies and dubious skills at the service of their idol. The series of unlikely subterfuges and ultimate (maybe murder) plot may sound more like fiction; but I, and others, can attest that such high-risk, half-serious and half-baked conspiratorial behaviour was very much in character for the Jeremy Thorpe we knew. Preston's is an interesting, and legitimate, take on Thorpe.

That take relies overmuch on Bessell and Holmes, both of whom Preston considers as reliable sources. So he concludes that murder was the unquestionable intention of the conspiracy (which was undoubtedly Thorpe-inspired) that led to the shooting of Scott's dog and thence to the Old Bailey trial. In thriller style, Preston makes that the clear destination.

This contrasts with the sceptical stance of Michael Bloch² who, in my judgement, understood the complex psychology of Jeremy, the adored only son of Ursula, very much better. Bloch's biography, published in December 2014, immediately after Thorpe's death, examines the evidence forensically; Preston is not a detective. Bloch also researched the subject more thoroughly. There are several,



Liberals in local government 1967 – 2017

The Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors (ALDC) was founded, as the Association of Liberal Councillors, fifty years ago. At this meeting, organised in conjunction with ALDC, we celebrate its 50th anniversary and discuss the role of Liberals and Liberal Democrats in local government. What has the party achieved in local government? To what extent has it taken a distinctively liberal approach?

Speakers: **Cllr Sara Bedford** (Leader, Three Valleys District Council), **Cllr Ruth Dombey** (Leader, Sutton Council), **Lord Tony Greaves** (long-serving councillor, Pendle Borough Council), **Cllr Richard Kemp** (Leader, Liberal Democrats on Liverpool City Council), **Baroness Kath Pinnock** (Shadow Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, former Leader of Kirklees Council) and **Matt Cole** (University of Birmingham). Chair: **Lord Andrew Stunell** (Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department of Communities and Local Government, 2010–12).

7.45pm, Sunday 17 September

Bayview 2, Bournemouth International Centre (conference pass required)

mostly small, discrepancies between the two authors; where I am aware of which is correct, it is usually Bloch.

Preston is looking for colour in his tale, and finds it in Bessell's private life, thereby adding (heterosexual) spice to the story. It is also some contribution to Liberal history, since Peter Bessell, Liberal MP for Bodmin 1964–70, is an understandably neglected figure. Bodmin was the only English seat gained from the Conservatives at the 1964 election and Bessell therefore a Liberal star in the mid-sixties.³ He was also a good example of what was once typical of mid-twentieth-century Liberal candidates – the mixture of passionate Nonconformist and small business entrepreneur. Preston's fairly full account of Bessell's political career brings back my own direct memories of Peter's energy, style, quirky views and problematic temperament. It also says something of the sort of commitment required to win a Liberal seat in those days.

However, this book's main claim to a serious contribution to political history is surely contained in its sub-title,

the role of 'The Establishment'. Jeremy was certainly born and bred in the heart of the establishment, and frequently used his connections to deflect Norman Scott's accusations. He was immensely aided by Scott's inadequate grip on the truth – he had indeed fantasised about having a gay affair with Jeremy before it actually happened. But was there an establishment cover-up to protect the old Etonian culminating, as Bessell himself thought, in the acquittal?

Preston thinks so, telling the story from that angle. Curiously, then, he does not raise the question of why Thorpe and his co-conspirators were subject only to the most serious charge, involving intent to murder, which was never going to be easy to prove. The *New Statesman* interview with one of the jurors leaves no doubt that the four defendants would have been found guilty, 'If the charge had been conspiracy to intimidate, or something like that'.⁴ As their agent, Newton, had been sentenced to two years for carrying out the intimidation, Thorpe would surely have gone to prison too.

So there remains scope for research into how the authorities decided what charge Jeremy Thorpe was to face, and whether at that stage he was protected by his social circle. If it was an establishment stitch-up, Preston illustrates the affair rather than examining and proving it.

Michael Steed fought four parliamentary elections (including two high-profile by-elections) during the leadership of Jeremy Thorpe, and was President of the Liberal Party in 1978–79, the year of Thorpe's defeat and trial.

¹ *Journal of Liberal History*, nos. 85 and 86.

² Michael Bloch, *Jeremy Thorpe* (Little Brown, 2014), reviewed by David Steel in the *Journal of Liberal History*, no. 90.

³ Garry Tregidga, in his entry on Peter Bessell in the *Dictionary of Liberal Biography*, argues strongly for Bessell's role in developing campaign strategy and techniques in Devon and Cornwall, so contributing (along with Thorpe) to later election success in the region.

⁴ Peter Chippindale and David Leigh in the *New Statesman*, 1979, pp. 120–1 and p. 367.