

Reviews

prevailed. War might prove disastrous for Britain, but Grey also believed that Britain would face enormous dangers by remaining on the side-lines, either in terms of a German-dominated continent or, if France and Russia were victorious, the loss of British influence over their future conduct.

The outbreak of war provided an obvious opportunity for Grey to retire, not least because of his mounting concern over failing eyesight. But he could not. Not only would this have been a public admission of failure, but resignation would have significantly weakened Asquith's government, the cohesion of the Liberal Party and national unity itself. Nonetheless, as a wartime foreign secretary Grey presented a diminished figure. He could not, in Otte's words, 'reinvent himself, Churchill-like, into an amateur strategist' (p. 544). Perhaps his greatest remaining achievement was to facilitate the entry of America into the conflict. Though this came after he left office, 'without his patient, conciliatory and yet firm handling of British policy towards the United States, it might well not have taken place' (p. 580).

When retirement did come, at the formation of Lloyd George's government in December 1916, Grey's expression of relief was in no sense feigned. 'I feel like a man who has walked 1000 miles without rest & has at last been told he may lie down.' (p. 622). Still only 54 years of age, he lived on until 1933, but his public life was now confined to the political fringe. His commitment to Liberalism, notwithstanding a growing detestation of Lloyd George's version of it, remained undimmed. Shortly before his death, Grey told the annual meeting of the Liberal Council that 'it is Liberalism which has made England what it is today, and it will endure. As long as people are what they are in this country, they will be liberal, even if they do not belong to the Liberal Party.' (p. 672).

Much of the debate over Grey's conduct of British foreign policy will no doubt continue. The scenarios presented by his critics depend heavily on the possible outcomes that an alternative strategy might have secured and

can, in the nature of things, be neither proved nor disproved. But Otte has given us a superb biography of this important figure. *Statesman of Europe* is sub-titled *A Life of Sir Edward Grey*. For the foreseeable future it is likely to be the life of Sir Edward Grey.

In his retirement from the academic world, David Dutton continues to investigate the recent political history of South-West Scotland.

1 D. Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, vol. 1 (London, 1933), pp. 94, 98.

Rosebery's son

Martin Gibson, *A Primrose Path: The gilded life of Lord Rosebery's favourite son* (Arum Press, 2020)

Review by Paul Holden

THIS IS THE first full-length biography of Neil Primrose (1882–1917), Liberal member of parliament for Wisbech between 1908 and 1917. It is a sequel to a shorter biographical essay published by the same author in 2015.¹ Not surprisingly the five-year wait for a deeper, more exhaustive analysis has been well worth it.

Like all good biographies, this work redefines our understanding of its subject. The book succeeds in assertively portraying an eminently likeable, charmed and charming man whose wealth and influence made him want for nothing. After losing his mother, Hannah de Rothschild, at the impressionable age of 7, he was raised under the steady hand of his father, Archibald Primrose, 5th Earl of Rosebery, whose Liberal clique underwrote the young Primrose's future career in politics. His political successes, however, were very much his own, based on attributes which included his obvious popularity, his clear oratory skills and a sensible diplomatic approach. The real triumph of this biography is the author's approach to Primrose's personal life, in particular his scrutiny of the close relationships he had with his two best friends, namely his father and the Cornishman, Thomas Agar-Robartes (1881–1915).

Much of what we know about Neil Primrose before now has been contextualised by the relationship he had with his father—a relationship described by Lord Birkenhead as a 'singular love and

affection by which these two men were united', adding: 'They were indeed more like brothers in their easy and affectionate intimacy than like father and son.' This closeness and tenderness is well explored throughout the book, so much so that the reader shares his father's sense of loss when Primrose's life and political potential was cut short by the First World War.

Indeed, their lives followed similar patterns. Beyond their often commented upon physical likeness, father and son both managed considerable fortunes (Neil inherited money and property from his maternal great aunt in 1907); both had challenging relationships with education (Rosebery left Christ Church, Oxford, without a degree whilst Neil graduated with a third-class degree in History); together they were united in their passion for the turf and travel (to the detriment of their educations); for different reasons both failed to achieve their political potential; and both suffered reputational damage through gossip that they were homosexuals. The author neatly narrates his way through these facets of Primrose's character and goes on to highlight how Lord Rosebery at times distanced himself from his son's political and military career in order to uphold reputations.

Primrose's initial path to electoral victory was in January 1910 when he secured Wisbech, a seat contested against a backdrop of the Conservatives trying to pit father and son's politics against each other. Although

the victory was marginal, with a 200 majority, at the second general election in 1910 his majority was doubled when he fought off Lord Robert Cecil, the third son of the Marquess of Salisbury. His maiden speech, centred on the relationship between the Commons and the Lords, was topically set around the Lords' rejection of the People's Budget. As his father looked on, Primrose called for the reform of the upper chamber but defended their role and championed their purpose. It was a position that he shared in part with his friend and fellow Liberal Thomas Agar-Robartes.

Agar-Robartes was a similarly popular and compelling character; he was a much-respected speaker yet perceived by some to be more careless in his approach. Both had privileged upbringings; both attended Eton and Oxford; both served as president of the Bullingdon Club; together they shared a hedonistic lifestyle mixing foreign travel and a passion for the turf, lavish parties, London clubs and grand homes in town and country. Moreover, both lived in Great Stanhope Street, Mayfair – Thomas with his siblings at No. 1 and Neil at No. 5 – and, most significantly, both shared similar politics and attitudes on serving the country during times of war.

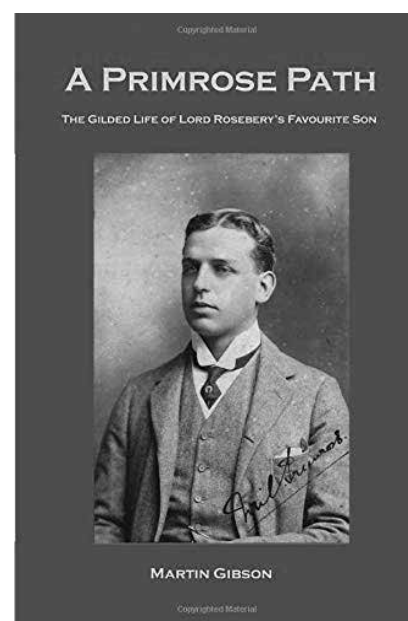
Such was their friendship that it was inconceivable that anyone other than Thomas would be best man at his wedding. Hence, in April 1915, the pair were together for the last time, Thomas returning from active service on the Western Front to oversee Neil's marriage to Lady Victoria Stanley, daughter of the Earl of Derby, in St Margaret's church, Westminster. The poignancy of this event is articulated by both eventually sacrificing their lives to their commitment to soldiery and patriotism – Thomas died at Loos in September 1915 and Neil at Gezer in November 1917. Both, it appears, would have received high award for their heroism had they survived their injuries.

It is this inordinately close relationship that engages and captivates the reader in equal measure. The author rightly treads with some caution around this topic, although he does

mischievously quote contemporary press stories that the pair were 'inseparable companions' and a modern-day Damon and Pythias – 'a comparison', the author notes, 'with strong homoerotic overtones'. For this reviewer there is no reason to believe that the pair were more than good friends – perhaps in the very spirit displayed by Greek mythology's Damon and Pythias, whose story became an idiomatic expression for true friendship. To substantiate this claim, the author alludes to an affair between Gerald, younger brother of Thomas and later 7th Viscount Clifden, and Lord Berners, based on the evidence that they shared rooms in a house. However, any personal relationship is not sustained, as indicated by an extract from Sofka Zinovieff's book which reads, 'In London, Gerald [Berners] shared rooms with other bachelors. There are some who wonder whether he might have been involved with one of his few close friends, Gerald Agar-Robartes (Viscount Clifden from 1930), though there is no solid evidence'.² The roguish Edwardian press further cogitated over Thomas's close friendship with Lord Rosebery, a man who had an almost hypnotic hold over the young Cornishman.

Regardless, this biography is a testament to their friendship. Letters between the two 'inseparables' are almost impossible to find, and references to each other in their correspondences are few and far between. Like his brothers Gerald and Victor, Thomas was also extremely close to Neil's cousin James de Rothschild (1878–1957) and his wife Dorothy (1895–1988). In a letter to Dorothy dated 19 August 1915, Thomas wrote from the Front to say, 'I am so sorry to hear that there is a chance Neil going off to Egypt soon,' adding, 'I am so awfully sorry about Neil it maddens me that the ... Jesuit Cecil should displace him' – a reference to Neil losing out on a foreign office post to Lord Robert Cecil, his sometime political opponent at Wisbech. It was to Dorothy that Thomas wrote his last known letter before his death in Loos.

Much like their political lives, their military careers took a very similar



course. Both joined the Royal Bucks Hussars, Neil in 1909 as a second lieutenant, Thomas in the same capacity in August 1914. Both became frustrated by coastal defence duties in Norfolk so used their connections to seek active service at the Front: Neil embarking for France in September 1914 and Thomas in February 1915. In September 1915, Thomas was killed at the Battle of Loos; Neil was deeply affected by his death.

Because of a lull in hostilities and the birth of his daughter, Neil took leave, arriving back in England in April 1916. He was awarded the Military Cross in June 1916 and saw brief service in the Ministry of Munitions and as Liberal chief whip (about which he declared to Lloyd George that he had 'neither experience or inclination for the office'). He resigned in April 1917 and was awarded with a privy councillorship but returned to Egypt in September. On 15 November, during an assault on the Abu Shushe ridge (site of the Biblical city of Gezer), he was 'shot through the head by machine-gun fire at very close range'. He died of his wounds soon after and was buried at Ramleh cemetery. The poignancy of the best friends' death is not lost on Gibson who ends his biography with:

In the Commons chamber itself Neil's heraldic shield is one of 42 that commemorates each MP

The two Davids: Steel versus Owen

In 1981 the alliance between the Liberal Party and the newly founded SDP was agreed; the two parties would fight elections together on a joint platform with joint candidates. Between 1983 and 1987, however, the working relationship between the Liberal leader, David Steel, and his SDP counterpart, Dr David Owen, became increasingly marked by tension and distrust. Steel became steadily more frustrated at Owen's resistance to joint selection of candidates, and any convergence on policy proposals. The Liberal Party and the SDP clashed over some issues, most notably nuclear weapons. In particular, Owen strongly opposed any long-term moves to merge the two parties.

The clash became painfully obvious during the 1987 general election campaign, when Steel ruled out supporting a minority Thatcher government while Owen was adamant that Labour was unfit to govern. The results of the election were disappointing for both parties. The leadership tensions ultimately wrecked the Alliance.

Discuss what went wrong with **Sir Graham Watson** (Steel's former Head of Office) and **Roger Carroll** (former SDP Communications Director).

17:35 – 18:40 Friday 17 September 2021

This is a fringe meeting at the Liberal Democrats' autumn conference; you must be registered for the conference to be able to participate (you do not need to register separately for the meeting).

killed on active service in two World Wars. The First World War shields are located under the gallery at the opposite end of the Chamber to the Speaker's Chair – Neil's is third of nine to the left of the central doorway and Thomas [Agar-Robartes] is the third of nine to the right of the doorway. So the two 'inseparables' are there still, not far apart, and at the very fulcrum of our parliamentary democracy.

In more ways than one, Neil Primrose was the son of his father. Both were political mavericks – confident speakers and raconteurs yet often outsiders and ambivalent towards their own political careers. Together they shared great intelligence, interests and wealth; they had successes and failures in

business and were passionate towards social change. Paying tribute to Neil in 1917, Lloyd George said that his abilities were 'far above the average' and noted 'in spite of the reserve and shyness which held him back, his future was full of promise'.

This is a meticulously researched and well-written biography. Drawing on extensive archival and newspaper evidence the author (a retired barrister) sharpens his expert focus on all aspects of Neil Primrose's professional and personal life, both aspects portraying a story of unfulfilled promise. It is a biography that was well worth the wait and well deserves a place beside Leo McKinstry's absorbing book on Lord Rosebery.

Paul Holden, FSA, worked for twenty years at Lanhydrock in Cornwall (the ancestral

home of the Robartes family, now a National Trust property) before setting up as a freelance architectural and social historian. He published and lectured widely including 'A Very English Gentleman: The Political Career of the Hon. Thomas Agar-Robartes MP' in the Journal of Liberal History (Spring 2010, pp. 8–18). Paul is president of the James M. MacLaren Society and the Cornwall Family History Society, chairman of the Diocese Advisory Committee and vice-chair of the Truro Cathedral Fabric Advisory Committee.

- 1 M. Gibson, *Captain Neil Primrose MP 1882–1917* (Wisbech Society and Preservation Trust, 2015).
- 2 Sofka Zinovieff, *The Mad Boy, Lord Berners, My Grandmother and Me* (London, 2016), p. 43.