

Liberalism under strain

David Dutton continues to chart the political voyage of one MP through the changing currents of Liberalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Part 2: 1914–37. (Part 1, 1861–1914, was published in *Journal of Liberal History* 113, winter 2021–22.)

A Liberal for All Seasons?

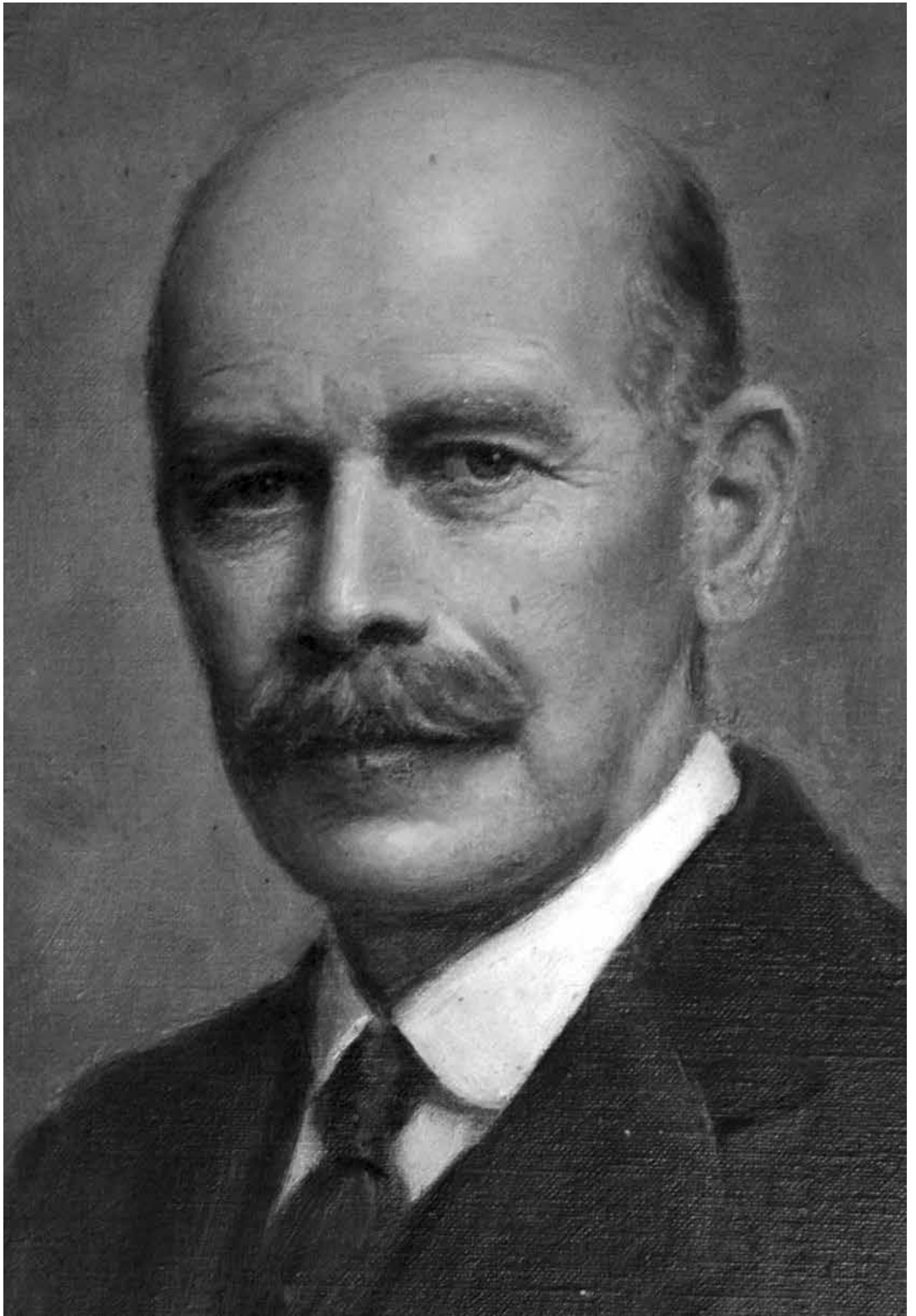
Percy Alport Molteno, 1861–1937

THE GERMAN VIOLATION of Belgian neutrality certainly eased matters for Asquith's government – 'a heaven-sent excuse for supporting a declaration of war'¹ – and for some of the Liberal dissidents. But Molteno knew better. As he told John Merriman, former prime minister of Cape Colony, 'we have been dragged in quite unnecessarily and automatically by arrangements made with France years ago of which the House and the country knew nothing'.² Strikingly, Liberals of Molteno's way of thinking interpreted what had happened in terms of the party divisions of earlier years. Hirst told his sister that war had come because 'the Liberal Imperialist Junta practised a deception on the Cabinet'.³ 'I thought the Liberal League was dead', exclaimed Arthur Ponsonby, but 'it has triumphed after all'.⁴

Away from the febrile atmosphere of Westminster in August 1914 and with time for reflection, Molteno later set down his thoughts on what had happened. He began with a statement of faith: 'I had always felt the greatest objection to War as an outbreak of unbridled violence and the greatest threat to the existence of

our civilisation as we know it'.⁵ Molteno had had no direct experience of war himself. But as a youth he had heard from his elder sisters of the devastation caused by the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71. Later on, his brothers had been closely involved, not only in trying to avert war in South Africa but, when those efforts failed, in seeking to remedy the worst hardships that had been incurred. James Molteno, as a lawyer, had sought justice for those accused under martial law of being rebels and of aiding the Boers. Meanwhile, Betty and Caroline Molteno had worked to get humanitarian aid to Boer women and children detained in Kitchener's concentration camps.⁶ As a result, he developed a detestation of war in all its manifestations. When, at the end of the First World War, his younger brother offered the benign if platitudinous observation that perhaps some good would come of the sacrifices that had been made, Molteno reacted sharply:

Percy Alport Molteno,
12 September 1861 – 19 September 1937
(painting: <https://www.moltenofamily.net>)



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I regret that I cannot in any way share such a feeling. Human nature wants some consolation of this kind and hopes it may be so, but it is only because it seeks to salve its wounds. In my opinion no good worth having can ever be purchased by such awful human sacrifices, and no good subsequently attained can ever sanctify or justify their death.⁷

Even in 1914 Molteno anticipated that this latest conflict would have catastrophic consequences:

It is more dangerous than ever because our material progress and command over Nature has been enormously developed by modern science without a corresponding moral development, so that the most recent achievements of science have created forces which are being used to mould weapons by which our civilisation may be utterly destroyed. We are like children entrusted with dangerous arms.⁸

Only too soon, such fears were confirmed. Casualty lists in the autumn of 1914 were some of the worst of the whole war. ‘Many personal friends have already been killed’, Molteno wrote to his brother, ‘and every day brings fresh lists. It is a terrible spectacle for the twentieth century to see the most civilised nations engaged in this death struggle.’⁹

Molteno then explained that the Gladstonian foreign policy of ‘freedom of entanglements in the quarrels of other powers’ had always appealed to him as the guiding principle of British diplomacy. After entering parliament, he had associated himself with movements designed to reduce armaments and to this end had attended a variety of inter-parliamentary conferences. He had believed the Liberal government endorsed the same policy. Indeed, nothing was said ‘by Grey, Asquith or anyone to warn us of liabilities being incurred, which should have been known to Members of Parliament who were asked each year to vote the strength of our armed forces; otherwise Parliamentary control is a farce’. Consequently, he had been ‘shocked beyond measure’

when Grey, in his 3 August speech, enumerated a list of commitments obliging Britain to support France ‘in a way we could not get out of’. Molteno concluded that parliament had been ‘grossly deceived’ and ‘hopes of peace had been ruined without our knowledge, or consent’.¹⁰

This was a telling indictment, but not for public consumption. Opposing the Boer War had sometimes been difficult; opposition to war in the patriotic climate of 1914 was even more hazardous. Molteno’s private observation that all the ‘so-called statesmen and diplomatists of Europe, with hardly an exception, deserve to be hanged’ was unlikely to evoke widespread approbation.¹¹ As he told his constituents, ‘In the face of . . . the greatest disaster which could befall this country and the world, it would be altogether impossible and wrong to enter upon controversy. We must act as a united people.’¹² In any case, at this stage of the conflict, there was no organised opposition for Molteno to join. The resigning cabinet ministers, Morley and Burns, seemed reluctant to take the lead; the Union of Democratic Control, formed in September, held no appeal granted its strong Labour/socialist component. His closest associate remained Lord Loreburn, with whom he was in regular contact throughout the war. It was a significant friendship. By early 1915 Loreburn was in contact with Colonel Edward House, President Woodrow Wilson’s special envoy.¹³ Through such channels the president was encouraged to think that there was a body of moderate opinion that would welcome American sponsorship of a negotiated peace. For the time being, Loreburn agreed with Molteno that, while men such as Grey, Asquith, Lloyd George and Haldane could never be trusted again and that ‘the moment war was over their action should be exposed’, nothing could be done publicly while the conflict continued which would reveal any divisions to the country.¹⁴

Molteno, a long-term champion of fiscal rectitude, was inevitably worried by the financial strain imposed by Britain’s war effort. ‘You will notice the gigantic figures of our expenditure’, he wrote after Lloyd George delivered his budget statement in May 1915. ‘The burden will

become stupendous if this war goes on much longer.’ The course of the conflict offered no scope for optimism. ‘So far as the military position is concerned, I see nothing to terminate the war at present.’¹⁵ In May, Britain’s last Liberal government came to an end when Asquith formed the first wartime coalition. Molteno was baffled by the course of events, and the prime minister’s attempt to explain his actions to the parliamentary party merely compounded his confusion.¹⁶ Molteno’s biographer sensed the ‘decease of the old Gladstonian Liberal Party along with the political and economic freedom which it had maintained for over half a century’.¹⁷ But the resulting removal of Churchill from the Admiralty was for Molteno certainly ‘an unmixed blessing’.¹⁸ Nonetheless, he was concerned by the new government’s apparent willingness to extend its war aims to include those of Britain’s allies. ‘Are we to be asked to continue the war until all these questions are settled?’¹⁹ Further discussions with Loreburn resulted in agreement on the need for first a Congress of Europe to settle details of European

peace and then a Congress of all the Powers to guarantee the peace of the world.²⁰

Soon Molteno’s attention fixed on the activities of Lloyd George. It was clear, he confided to his diary, that the ex-chancellor and now minister of munitions was ‘going over to the Tories’, including their support for compulsion and conscription. ‘Sir Edward Grey being disabled temporarily,²¹ he sees his chance of getting the Premiership with the aid of the Tories, and he is pushing his chances for all they are worth. He is trying to force the hand of the Coalition on compulsion and conscription.’²² Molteno was somewhat premature in his assessment of Lloyd George’s ambitions – Asquith would retain the premiership until December 1916 – but the mention of conscription was significant. Here was an issue which, if pursued, would require parliamentary sanction and force Molteno into open opposition. His efforts since August 1914 not to appear out of step with the government would not survive this ultimate challenge to his Liberal principles – a man’s right to decide *for himself* whether he would fight, and quite possibly die,

Percy Molteno (left) at his silver wedding with daughter Margaret, Kathleen Murray, the Rev. Athol Gordon, wife Bessie Molteno (two unidentified in back row), Islay Bisset and Jervis Molteno; Glen Lyon, September 1914 (photo: <https://www.moltenofamily.net>)



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for his country. ‘If conscription is proposed’, he wrote, ‘we shall have serious differences both in the country and the House of Commons.’²³ The eponymous McKenna Duties, introduced by the new chancellor in September, signalled a further threat to Molteno’s fundamental beliefs. He found it ‘most disappointing’ that ‘Liberal statesmen should ... do so much to facilitate the conversion of Great Britain into a Protectionist, Conscriptionist, and Militarist Power’.²⁴

It was, then, no surprise to find Molteno in the vanguard of opposition to the Military Service Bill of January 1916. The conscription of single men was, many Liberal MPs concluded, a price that had to be paid, granted the never-ending demand for more troops at the front. Herbert Samuel, MP for Cleveland, explained his decision to support the bill ‘against all my predilections, against my strong bias in favour of voluntary service, by the hard, cold logic of facts’.²⁵

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Not so Molteno, who spoke of the bill striking at ‘fundamental liberties’, bringing in Magna Carta (1215) and the Petition of Right (1628) to support his case.²⁶ He was one of forty-one MPs, including twenty-eight Liberals, who opposed the bill’s second reading.

While the conscription issue helped flush out the extent of Liberal opposition to the government’s conduct of affairs, prompting also the resignation of the home secretary, John Simon, its greatest impact for Molteno was on his constituency base. The staunchly Unionist *Dumfries Courier* did not mince its words:

Of a stiff and perverse habit of mind anyhow, he entrenches himself ... behind the plea that in opposing the Bill he is acting consistently with ‘Liberal principles and traditions’, the supporters of the Bill, on the contrary, acting

inconsistently. Apparently, he has made up his mind to stand by those abstractions regardless equally of circumstances and of consequences. We do not indeed know that he will be prepared to go the length of actually burning at the stake for them, but ... he is quite prepared to risk for them the interests of the nation, to whose cause, as the Government assures us, the Bill is essential.²⁷

The reaction of the *Courier* was perhaps unsurprising. More damaging, and perhaps not fully appreciated by Molteno himself, was a rebuke from the Dumfriesshire Liberal Association and, a few months later, the withdrawal of the usually reliable support of the *Dumfries Standard*, for long the cheerleader for Liberalism in South-West Scotland.²⁸ Two motions were passed unanimously at a meeting of Molteno’s constituency association in January 1916. The first criticised

the sitting member by implication. It expressed ‘unabated confidence’ in Asquith, welcomed the creation of a ministry ‘representing all political parties’ and expressed the hope that the unity of the nation,

which the coalition represented, would be fully maintained and the war ‘vigorously prosecuted to a victorious conclusion’. The second motion was more personal, observing ‘with great regret’ Molteno’s votes against the Military Service Bill, in opposition ‘to the opinion of the vast majority of his supporters’. It trusted that henceforth Molteno would give the government ‘generous support’ in all measures necessary to prosecute the war.²⁹ The MP, however, was undeterred. When in May the government sought to extend conscription to married men, Molteno again voted against the measure at third reading. Now it was the turn of the *Standard* to pounce:

Mr Molteno has chosen to maintain his personal consistency and defy the constituency. In these circumstances it is desirable that a clear understanding should be arrived at

regarding their future relations ... While no one would seek to do violence to [his] conscience ... it would be the height of unreason to expect that 9000 electors would be content to suppress their own opinion in order to return again to Parliament a gentleman, however estimable and able, who deliberately and consistently opposed them.³⁰

Such criticism merely emboldened Molteno on his chosen course. That October, he helped Francis Hirst, previously editor of the *Economist*, to launch a new weekly newspaper, *Common Sense*. Sold for just tuppence, it soon became the leading mouthpiece for those critical of the way the war was being conducted. Conscription's impact on the domestic economy reassured Molteno that he had been right in opposing its introduction:

It has disorganised our whole system. There is a grave shortage of steel, and munitions are beginning to suffer. The railways cannot keep up their services, as locomotives cannot be repaired, much less built. Ships cannot be discharged for want of labour.³¹

Molteno also campaigned against Britain following Germany's example in bombing 'open towns and undefended places', which he viewed as 'murder of the foulest type without even military advantage'.³²

Worse, from Molteno's perspective, followed. In December 1916, as he had predicted, a 'palace coup' resulted in Asquith's replacement as prime minister by Lloyd George. Majority historical opinion has been reasonably indulgent towards this development. The issue was essentially the need to establish a more efficient war directorate than anything of which Asquith appeared capable. But, for Molteno, the change was all about Lloyd George's unbridled ambition, facilitated by the right-wing press:

Now we have had a Press revolution. The Constitution is suspended at the bidding of Lord Northcliffe,³³ with the aid of his henchman Lloyd George, who has been working

with him for nearly two years, sacrificing every Liberal principle, intriguing against Asquith, and finally ousting him to take his place like the cuckoo ... Now we have a Ministry of extremists.³⁴

Though Molteno believed that, under Asquith, 'the British Empire [had] suffered disaster and humiliation unprecedented in all its history', Lloyd George's coalition offered no improvement.³⁵ The new premier's espousal of a 'knock-out blow' made it no more likely than its predecessor to win the war and even less likely to secure peace. Lloyd George's failure to respond positively to Woodrow Wilson's peace-feelers at the end of 1916 was, Molteno believed, a great mistake. The military situation was extremely unpromising, the conflict in danger of degenerating into a war of exhaustion. As European politicians made public the promises made to them in exchange for participating in the war, Molteno was near to despair. 'With such aims', he asked Loreburn, 'can we wonder that the war goes on!' Furthermore, 'if such were the Settlement, what hope is there of a lasting peace, and what cant to talk as if the Entente had no aggressive aims and merely fought for Liberty and Justice!'³⁶ Meanwhile, he continued to worry about the economic predicament, working with Godfrey Collins, Liberal MP for Greenock, and others to secure a parliamentary committee that would scrutinise government spending and the conduct of individual ministers and officials. For once, his efforts were rewarded and in July 1917 the Unionist leader and now Chancellor, Andrew Bonar Law, agreed to create a select committee on national expenditure.

Though Molteno's views on the war never became mainstream, still less was he ever in a majority, 1917 did witness a growing mood, less strong than in France or Russia but perceptible nonetheless, of war-weariness and pessimism about Britain's chances of victory at an acceptable cost. Writing to Gordon Harvey, Liberal MP for Rochdale, in November, Molteno remarked on the number of men who had now lost faith in Lloyd George, suggesting that some

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were ready to take action. The problem, as before, was the lack of a prominent figure to lead such a movement. Asquith was a non-starter. Not only had he seemingly attached himself to Lloyd George's 'knock-out blow' policy; Molteno could not see how he could save the country, granted the failure of his two governments and abandonment of Liberal principles.³⁷

Quite suddenly, however, a possible standard-bearer emerged in the unlikely person of the Marquess of Lansdowne, the former Unionist foreign secretary and, until December 1916, a member of Asquith's coalition. Molteno's close colleague, Loreburn, had been corresponding with Lansdowne since early 1916, impressing upon him the disastrous consequences of a prolonged war. The two men, despite years of opposing one another in the upper house, enjoyed good personal relations. But on this matter Lansdowne seemed unconvinced and, until the end of October 1916, he publicly upheld the government's policy of fighting to the finish. In November, however, he circulated a memorandum to the War Committee, asking it to consider whether Britain would ever be able to dictate to Germany the sort of peace terms that might be theoretically desirable. The government did not respond favourably and, not surprisingly, there was no place for Lansdowne in Lloyd George's re-shaped administration formed in December.³⁸ Thereafter, Lansdowne made no further moves for almost a year, but in mid-November 1917 he explained his thinking to Wilson's envoy, Colonel House, and then went public in an explosive letter to the *Daily Telegraph* which appeared on 29 November.³⁹ Lansdowne argued that the war was destroying British power and that the elusive quest for outright victory would achieve nothing that could compensate for the losses that 'winning' would entail. Indeed, 'its prolongation will spell ruin for the civilised world, and an infinite addition to the load of human suffering which already weighs upon it'. Instead, he called for Germany to be invited to open peace negotiations based on a limited, but realistic, programme of allied war aims.

Molteno immediately sensed the possibilities opened up by Lansdowne's initiative:

Lansdowne's letter is a sign that volcanic forces have been let loose. He has risked his popularity with his Party and all his old connections to say what he considers vital for his countrymen to hear and ponder. Will you consider what we can do under the circumstances ... He has had the courage to break the ice. We should not let him be destroyed in detail.⁴⁰

Richard Holt hoped Lansdowne's letter would 'lead to reason in our Government. It will certainly let loose a lot of tongues.' He had already brought together around a dozen MPs, including Molteno, 'all very dissatisfied, [who] decided to welcome "intelligent, patriotic and active opposition"'.⁴¹ The wider impact of Lansdowne's intervention was evident in Wilson's 'Fourteen Points' issued on 8 January 1918 as the basis of a future peace and even in Lloyd George's relatively moderate pronouncement on war aims to the TUC three days earlier.⁴² The newspaper magnate, Lord Riddell, heard of a dinner at which Lansdowne's letter was discussed, attended by Lansdowne, Loreburn, Morley, Hirst, Colonel House and, somewhat surprisingly, Lord Curzon, a member of the war cabinet.⁴³ Meanwhile, Hirst employed *Common Sense* to promote Lansdowne's 'peace letter' as part of a broader movement for a negotiated settlement: 'Every man whose moral and intellectual equipment is up to the average ... will feel in reading Lansdowne's letter ... that a way has at last been opened towards peace.'⁴⁴

In late January 1918 Molteno was part of a delegation of MPs, peers and others who called at Lansdowne's London home. Loreburn presented an illustrated address in which signatories thanked Lansdowne for putting before the country an alternative to the government's present course. There followed a series of meetings at the Essex Hall on the Strand, bringing together Labour and Liberal politicians who tried desperately to turn Lansdowne's ideas into a mass movement. Meanwhile, in the Commons on 7 March, Molteno came as close as he decently could to calling for a change of government on

the grounds of the manifest incompetence of the present incumbents.⁴⁵ But Lansdowne himself held aloof from the meetings that continued to use his name. At 72 years of age, he was reluctant to head a new political movement and, in any case, felt uneasy about too close an association with some of his putative left-wing colleagues.

Lansdowne's trepidation was compounded by significant developments in the war itself. Very quickly, his moment passed, much to Molteno's dismay. On 21 March the Germans launched their spring offensive, a desperate effort to win the war before ever-increasing American involvement turned the balance decisively in the Allies' favour. This only became possible with the collapse of Russian resistance in the East, and the crushing terms of the resulting Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (3 March 1918) hardly presented Germany as a country with which it would be possible to reach a moderate, negotiated settlement. For the next few weeks, it became more a question of Britain's survival than of attaining the sort of peace for which Molteno longed. Briefly, Germany came closer to outright victory than at any time since the autumn of 1914. For Molteno, then, the agony continued, compounded by the loss in April of his son-in-law, George Murray, killed on the Western Front:

As our mutual friend, Lord Loreburn, often says: 'We are living in a mad house.' Men's judgments are no longer sane on this matter ... The German methods have been horrible in many cases, but are the logical outcome of Militarism.⁴⁶

The enemy advance was not sustained. Turned back at the Marne in mid-June, the increasingly demoralised German armies were thereafter incapable of further offensive action. The Allies now had the initiative. After a rapid series of victories, it finally became possible to think of victory, if not quite in Lloyd George's terms of a 'knock-out blow', certainly of a decisive nature.

Again, this was not conducive to the peace of reasonableness and moderation upon which Molteno had set his sights. Throughout the summer and autumn, he did what he could to support President Wilson who offered, he believed, the best hope of a sensible and durable conclusion to the conflict. As the end came into view, Molteno had, necessarily, to pay more attention to domestic politics. 'Men are drifting away to Labour and to other groups', he complained, 'for want of a Liberal lead.'⁴⁷ To meet this need, he and Gordon Harvey strove to reorganise the National Reform Union, which had remained free from the official Liberal Party's control.

Without total enthusiasm, Molteno prepared to defend his parliamentary seat. But he failed to recognise the difficulties of his position. In the first place, he seems to have given insufficient thought to the uncertainties created by the

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considerable extension of the franchise, including for the first time women voters over the age of 30 who qualified under the local government regulations, brought about by the Representation of the People Act (1918). (As recently as 1917 Molteno had opposed female suffrage in the Commons.) Nor did he appreciate the damage done to his local base by his wartime conduct, especially over conscription. This reduction in support was compounded by the loss, through death, of such important local backers as his election agent, James McGowan, and the *Dumfries Standard's* editor, Thomas Watson. But most importantly, recent boundary changes meant that the seats of Dumfriesshire and Dumfries Burghs would now be combined in a single constituency. Molteno believed that, as the sitting member for the larger seat, he had prior claim to the combined constituency, leaving his position 'impregnable ... as between Liberals'.⁴⁸ Such reasoning was in line with normal practice, but failed to take into account the fact that John

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Gulland, the Burghs MP, had been appointed Liberal chief whip on the sudden death of Percy Illingworth in January 1915.

At a joint meeting of the two Liberal associations on 23 October, called to choose a candidate for the election many now believed to be imminent, the voting was fifty-four for Gulland and thirty-one for Molteno.⁴⁹ The latter complained that wartime transport restrictions had disproportionately limited the county's representation at the meeting, and he determined to stand for election with or without party endorsement. Within days of the Armistice on 11 November, Lloyd George called a general election, Britain's first for eight years. Molteno made plans to open his campaign in Sanquhar on 21 November. Three days earlier, however, he heard that the Unionists had selected Major William Murray who, having previously contested both the county and the Burghs, was 'the strongest candidate they could bring forward'. Furthermore, Murray would be standing not just for the Unionists but for the whole coalition.⁵⁰ In the circumstances and realising that his own candidature would split the Liberal vote and thus hand the seat 'to the corrupt and scandalous Coalition', he quickly withdrew from the contest.⁵¹ In reality, without the 'Coupon' of endorsement issued to favoured candidates by Lloyd George and Bonar Law, it is unlikely that even a united Liberal vote could have saved the seat for the party.

Molteno declined invitations from Liberal associations in three other Scottish seats and took no part in the campaign. He was bitter at the turn of events:

The Liberal Party is suffering now for the betrayal of all its vital principles by its Leaders, who went over bag and baggage to the enemy. The moral basis of Liberalism has fallen out of the bottom of the ship, which is now becoming engulfed.⁵²

When all the votes were counted, it became clear that independent Liberalism had been reduced to around thirty MPs in the new parliament.⁵³ Molteno's Commons career, which began with

the party's greatest ever triumph in 1906, thus ended amidst its most catastrophic defeat to date.

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At the time of losing his seat, Molteno was still under 60 years of age. He lived on for two decades but was now increasingly confined to the periphery of Liberal politics. Nonetheless, his Liberal principles remained remarkably consistent. Despite all that had happened over the previous four and a half years and notwithstanding the parlous state of the party to which he still owed allegiance, Molteno began 1919 on a note of defiance. 'Liberal principles are as necessary as ever and likely to reassert themselves', he wrote to the like-minded Richard Holt who had stood unsuccessfully in Eccles at the recent general election. But where would Molteno turn for salvation? Lloyd George, locked inside a Conservative-dominated coalition, was clearly beyond the political pale. But neither was Asquith, himself defeated at the election, a viable alternative:

There was no moral basis in the Liberal case as put by the Leaders at the last election and I can only think that Asquith had his eye on being at the Peace Conference and was therefore unwilling to fight. But still even if he had, he had given away beforehand the whole Liberal case.⁵⁴

But there was no question of Molteno jumping ship and joining another party, as did some of his close wartime associates. The Conservatives, with the prospect of further moves towards Protection, held no attractions; equally, he was too much of an individualist ever to be drawn to Labour. As he had written before the War:

When the Socialist millennium comes, and the State, in accordance with socialist formula, has all the means of production, distribution and exchange in its own hands, it will settle wages, prices etc. And in my opinion universal poverty, not universal well-being, will be the result, as the most precious of all

man's possessions will be denied to him, viz his own individual liberty and his individual initiative.⁵⁵

Instead, Molteno determined to fight on for his particular brand of Liberalism: 'I think some of us ought to come together and draw up a manifesto.'⁵⁶

The most pressing issue for Molteno in 1919 was the terms of peace to be presented to Germany and its allies. With strikes breaking out at home and famine widespread on the continent, he was not optimistic.⁵⁷ As he explained: 'This is the fruit of the policy of the Knock-Out-Blow, in course of delivering which Europe has been sent crashing over the precipice.' He judged that the only hope 'of getting anything decent out of the Peace Conference is that [Woodrow] Wilson is in charge'.⁵⁸ But Wilson's voice

in the Paris peace negotiations proved less dominant than had once seemed probable and Molteno came, perhaps unfairly, to regard him

as a weak figure.⁵⁹ On 22 March Molteno signed an open letter calling on the allied governments to ensure the restoration of peace and prosperity by supporting free trade. Echoing his earlier efforts in South Africa, he pleaded before a meeting on colonial mandates, convened at Sunderland House to consider the fate of Germany's confiscated colonies, that provision should be made for the education of indigenous populations, who should not be barred from joining their chosen trade or profession. When, however, details emerged of the terms to be presented to Germany, Molteno sadly concluded that 'they are not terms for a durable peace'.⁶⁰ He judged that the settlement satisfied only the wishes of the French premier, Georges Clemenceau, who had declared that he had 'lived for 40 years for this day of vengeance'.⁶¹ As late as January 1922, Molteno was still insisting that the Paris Peace Settlement afforded 'less chance of stability than any of the Treaties which terminated other great periods of warfare'.⁶²

Throughout 1920, Molteno's criticism of the Lloyd George coalition figured prominently in

the pages of *Common Sense*. He was particularly concerned over the possibility of a new Anglo-French alliance which might entangle Britain in another continental war.⁶³ No longer a full-time politician, he devoted more of his time to philanthropic interests. In November 1921 he attended the opening ceremony of the Molteno Institute of Parasitology in Cambridge, generously endowed by Molteno and his wife. Progress in this area was, he understood, vital if Africa was ever to break out of its poverty. But Molteno had not abandoned the British political scene altogether and, in the autumn of 1921, he renewed his efforts to make Gladstonian-style foreign policy an accepted article of Liberal faith in the post-war world. By early 1922, there seemed to be evidence that Asquith's party, no matter its parlous electoral position, was moving in a direction more

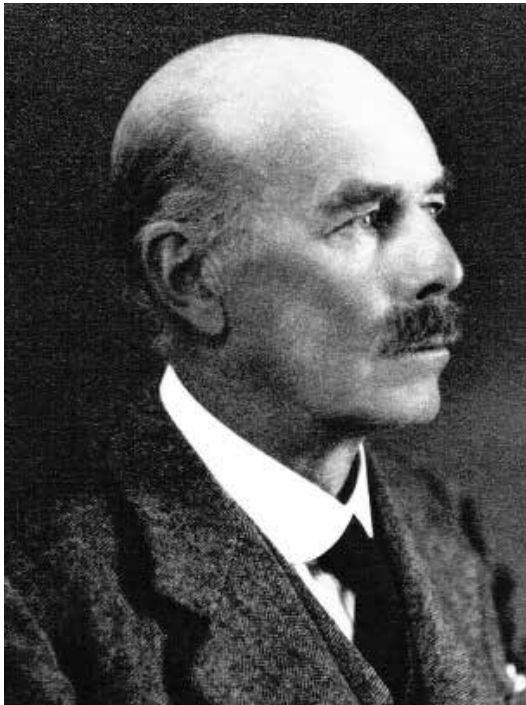
'The Liberal Party is suffering now for the betrayal of all its vital principles by its Leaders, who went over bag and baggage to the enemy.'

congenial to him. The problem was that those developments that enthused Molteno filled other Liberals with dismay. The party was apparently deserting the New Liberalism of earlier years. The academic and Liberal activist, Ramsay Muir, later summed up the party's stance at this time:

What was left of the Liberal party was a merely negative and querulous faction, mumbling the shibboleths of the xix cent. and not even capable of understanding the change of orientation implicit in the pre-war legislation and demanded by the postwar situation. Liberalism stood for nothing but complaints of L.G. and therefore it sank to futility ... It had to be given a 'constructive programme' ... as a means of keeping its soul alive.⁶⁴

As historian Michael Bentley concludes, 'All too plainly Liberalism was out of date.'⁶⁵

Molteno was in frequent correspondence with Viscount (Herbert) Gladstone who, after serving as governor general of South Africa (1910–14),



Molteno in the 1930s (photo: <http://www.moltenofamily.net>)

had resumed his career at Liberal Party headquarters. What, Molteno asked him, 'is to be the foreign policy of the Liberal Party? Is it to revert, after a disastrous period of aberration, to the doctrines laid down by your father, which have always appeared to me to be fundamentally correct?'⁶⁶ Gladstone replied encouragingly: 'I find myself in full agreement with your views ... My father was dead against entangling undertakings with individual Powers and did his best to get movement in right direction out of the Concert of Europe.'⁶⁷ Molteno now gathered twenty-four signatories, including wartime associates such as Richard Holt, Leif Jones⁶⁸ and Lord Beauchamp, to a formal letter demanding a foreign policy based on Gladstonian principles and the League of Nations, rather than alliances and balance of power diplomacy. In his published response, Asquith stated that the party accepted the guiding principles laid down by W. E. Gladstone at West Calder and suggested that the League embodied its practical aims.⁶⁹

Against this background, Viscount Gladstone encouraged Molteno to stand in the election that quickly followed the fall of Lloyd George's government in October 1922. Montrose Burghs, John Morley's old seat, seemed a suitable choice but, on visiting the constituency, Molteno had first-hand evidence of the broader problems facing a party still split between the adherents of Asquith and Lloyd George. The prospective candidate reported: 'there was no organisation, no unity, no enthusiasm, and no means of getting one's views before the electors and the press.'⁷⁰ Molteno quickly withdrew from the contest. His most significant contribution to the ensuing campaign was to write to the *Manchester Guardian* to object to a recent speech in which Edward (now Viscount) Grey had called for the adoption of continuity and a non-party foreign policy. Molteno interpreted this as a thinly veiled attempt to resurrect the approach that had got Britain into war in 1914, by removing the House of Commons and the electorate from any meaningful role.⁷¹

Molteno was pleased to see Bonar Law's Conservative government abandon the idea of an Anglo-French alliance, but he was not entirely enthused when Liberalism's divided factions came together in 1923, because reunion involved the readmission of Lloyd George to the party's upper echelons. But at least it made it possible to present a united front in defence of free trade when Law's successor, Stanley Baldwin, called a surprise general election to secure a mandate for tariffs. Late in the day, Molteno accepted an invitation to contest the constituency of Kinross and West Perthshire. Unsurprisingly, his election address emphasised the virtues of free trade: 'Our efforts should be directed not to the increase of barriers on international trade but to their removal, so as to facilitate the economic recovery of all Europe.'⁷² But he also championed the League and called for further reductions⁷³ in public expenditure and taxation, while reiterating his interest in agriculture and land reform. Molteno campaigned vigorously in appalling weather, addressing sixty meetings in twelve days, but was narrowly beaten by the Unionist candidate, the Duchess of Atholl.⁷⁴

A hung parliament resulted in the formation of Britain's first Labour government. The new administration's decision to remove the McKenna Duties, which had first sullied Liberal free trade purity back in 1915, met with Molteno's approval. But he opposed the draft Pact of Mutual Guarantee because it would operate outside the orbit of the League Covenant.⁷⁵ Ramsay MacDonald's minority government lasted less than a year before being defeated in what Molteno regarded as an 'unnecessary' election.⁷⁶ He turned down an invitation to stand again in West Perthshire and also rebuffed an approach from the Liberal association in Chertsey, partly out of concern over Lloyd George's mounting influence in the Liberal hierarchy. Around this time, Richard Holt noted a dinner attended by Molteno at the home of Sir Herbert Leon, former MP for Buckingham, 'the common bond being detestation of Lloyd George'.⁷⁷

The 1926 general strike precipitated further Liberal tensions with the principals, Asquith (now ennobled as the Earl of Oxford, having lost his seat in 1924) and Lloyd George again finding themselves in opposing camps. 'You will notice the quarrel that has developed between Mr Lloyd George and Lord Oxford', Molteno wrote:

I hope it may mean that the former will be cleared out of the Liberal Party; but it rather looks as if he wants to stick to it, no other Party will have him, and the fund he controls gives him a large amount of power over candidates.⁷⁸

Significantly, writing to another correspondent, Molteno added that, while wanting Lloyd George out of the party, 'this does not mean that I am satisfied with Lord Oxford'.⁷⁹

A serious stroke finally compelled Asquith to step down from the Liberal leadership in October 1926. Francis Hirst, Molteno's biographer, found little to praise in the retiring leader's record. His words, in response to Asquith's farewell message, reflected Molteno's thinking as much as his own:

Lord Oxford did not touch on the real causes of Liberal decay and national disaster – the substitution of imperialism, the Anglo-French-Russian Alliance and his own reversal of Cobdenite and Gladstonian foreign policy which had resulted after four years of ruinous war in the victorious but disastrous Peace of Versailles.⁸⁰

With Asquith gone, little remained to prevent Lloyd George from taking complete control of the party. Molteno and Hirst both joined the Liberal Council, which claimed to represent a pure, uncorrupted form of Liberalism. They did what they could to encourage the candidatures of Liberals who refused to have anything to do with the Lloyd George Fund. Many, both at the time and since, believed that Lloyd George offered Liberals their one chance of political revival and the later 1920s did see a progressive energy and dynamism, largely lacking since before the First World War. But Molteno was having none of it: 'I entirely disapprove of Lloyd George and think nothing of his plan for employment in one year for all the unemployed. It is a physical impossibility, and is only misleading everybody, and will tend to retard the real recovery.'⁸¹ With Lloyd George espousing the collectivist ideology of John Maynard Keynes, Molteno defiantly restated his individualist faith, joining the board of the Individualist Bookshop Limited, of which he remained a director until his death. His belief in the virtues of a free-market economy was confirmed by a six-week tour of the United States which he and Hirst made in the autumn of 1926. Not all aspects of American society impressed him, but he was struck by the effectiveness of the world's largest free-trade area, created within the forty-eight states of the Union. 'New hopes for civilisation and for wider prosperity seemed to open out if only the marvellous expansion of American wealth and the peaceful aspirations of American statesmen could be brought to bear on the world.'⁸²

Molteno took the disappointing outcome for the Liberal Party of the 1929 general election – 23.4 per cent of the vote but only fifty-nine seats in the new parliament – as confirmation of his beliefs:

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To me it seems the Liberal Party has lost its soul; it made no moral appeal to the country; it relied on money, advertisements and arts of that kind; it threw overboard one of its main planks, economy. Lloyd George himself is ... a preferentialist; there is not a word about Free Trade in any of his speeches; he has suddenly adopted a milk and water socialism.

The party's day would come again, but 'it must be a real, honest, genuine Liberal Party, true to its principles through thick and thin, not abandoning them when they seem unpopular at the moment'.⁸³

Molteno continued in this vein for the rest of his life, wary of the minority Labour government of 1929 to 1931 and of the National Government which succeeded it, but still deeply suspicious of the direction in which Lloyd George had sought to steer the Liberals. When, in 1930, George spoke out against 'dumping', many concluded that he would now probably opt for tariffs if the situation demanded it. Molteno certainly smelt a protectionist rat, proposing a resolution at a meeting of the Free Trade Union that his speech was 'destructive of the Free Trade position' and that Liberal MPs should dissociate themselves from it.⁸⁴ He rightly saw that the aim of the Conservatives in the National Government was to force an election to introduce tariffs and wrote to Prime Minister MacDonald begging him not to agree to a dissolution of parliament. When, nonetheless, MacDonald gave way to Tory pressure, Molteno's prediction of future developments was exaggerated, but not entirely mistaken. The Conservatives, he wrote, 'are making use of MacDonald who will come back merely as an individual with no power in the Cabinet of getting his way, and he will then be thrown aside as soon as it suits them'.⁸⁵ When the Conservatives, now the overwhelmingly dominant force within the restructured National Government, duly introduced a system of Imperial Preference, Molteno judged that 'the country has been cheated and turned over to Protection without the subject having been properly accepted and discussed ... so that it is really a fraud on the electorate'.⁸⁶ Yet in reality free trade

had lost much of its moral purchase on both the country and the Liberal Party. While many still regarded it as a potential economic tool, fewer now viewed it as an article of quasi-religious faith.⁸⁷ For Molteno, on the other hand, it retained its fundamental importance, a guarantor of economic prosperity but also a vital underpinning of peace between nations.

As the 1930s progressed, political attention turned increasingly towards the worsening state of international relations. Many viewed a second war against Germany within a single generation as a distinct possibility. Molteno was as determined as before 1914 to avoid such a catastrophe. From 1932 he worked closely with Lord Lothian, who as Philip Kerr had served under Milner in South Africa before acting as Lloyd George's private secretary from 1916 to 1921. Molteno and Lothian strove, largely without success, to moderate Liberal foreign policy as it became, under the leadership of Archibald Sinclair, increasingly proactive and interventionist.⁸⁸ Molteno was entirely against the League assuming the role of international policeman and resorting to force. Not surprisingly, he strongly objected to the publication in 1936 of the party's policy statement 'Peace or War'. Though this called for the removal of trade barriers and a reduction in armaments, it also stated that the League must consider the use of armed force if economic sanctions failed to produce the desired results. Molteno pressed for a new treaty to replace the flawed Versailles settlement and sought to ensure that Britain steered clear of the sort of entanglements which, he continued to believe, had fatally compromised its freedom of action in the crisis of 1914. To Lord Meston he wrote:

I do hope it may be possible to arrange that the Liberal Party should not be committed to intervention in the great struggle which is boiling up between Fascism and Communism on the Continent, nor to pressing for a policy which would entangle us further in the quarrels of the Continent by way of the further use of force, whether by the League of Nations or through alliances.⁸⁹



Percy Molteno with his grandchildren, Iona, Patrick and George Murray, c. 1930 (photo: <http://www.moltenofamily.net>)

A few months before his death, Molteno wrote to *The Times*. His purpose was to list the occasions upon which Hitler had made offers of peace. They represented, he claimed, ‘a number of opportunities ... for forwarding the conclusion of real peace in Europe, and the restriction of the race in armaments’. It was unclear to him why, with the exception of the Anglo-German Naval Agreement of June 1935, ‘no advantage had been taken of these opportunities’.⁹⁰ These were the sort of sentiments Molteno might have expressed, in very similar terms, in the 1890s or in 1912. At one level, the widely shared desire to avoid war – at almost any price – was entirely admirable. But the later 1930s were not simply a rerun of the last days of peace before the outbreak of the First World War, still less of the sorry tale of deteriorating Anglo-Boer relations two decades earlier. Nazi Germany was qualitatively different from the Wilhelmine Reich; appeasement of it was ultimately futile and wrong-headed. In Molteno’s defence,

it should be added that these truths were much more obvious by 1945 than they were in 1937, when Neville Chamberlain’s government made appeasement the cornerstone of its policy. Nonetheless, it was to the benefit of his long-term reputation that Molteno died in Zurich at the age of 76 on 19 September 1937, before it became fully apparent that he was on the wrong side of history.

At his death, Molteno’s views on international affairs were recognisably still those of the young man who had striven in the 1890s to avoid the outbreak of hostilities in South Africa. His attitude towards domestic issues showed a similar consistency. In his biographer’s words:

He was always alive to the dangers of public extravagance and to the encroachments of bureaucracy on the domain of private competitive industry ... He may be classed as a supporter of individualism against socialism, of personal liberty against State control, and

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of free competitive markets against internal and external protection.⁹¹

Yet this virtue of consistency was also Molteno's failing. He had not changed; the world around him and the Liberal Party had. In time, many of his views would enjoy renewed currency. In his own day, however, Molteno's voice in the affairs of Liberalism had come to appear isolated and outdated. For all that, his loyalty to the creed, or at least his understanding of it, was unflinching, and not just in a theoretical sense. When the report of the Meston Committee into party organisation led to the replacement of the National Liberal Federation by the Liberal Party Organisation in 1936, Molteno joined the new body and contributed generously to its funds. And, until his death, he still paid a £600 annual subscription to the Scottish Liberal Federation.⁹²

Since the late 1970s David Dutton has written or edited seventeen books and authored more than a hundred articles and chapters, almost all covering various aspects of British political and diplomatic history in the twentieth century.

Postscript

Francis Hirst completed his biography of Molteno before the outbreak of the Second World War. By the time of its completion, however, the Molteno family decided that publication should be delayed. Once the war began, Molteno's rigid commitment to free trade alongside an individualistic society and his strong support for appeasement were seen as out-of-date and inappropriate. His readiness to place the best possible construction on the pre-war conduct of Hitler and Mussolini, however admirable Molteno's intentions, bordered on the embarrassing. The war also led to a paper shortage, thus affording a practical argument against publication for the foreseeable future. At around 350,000 words, the biography is overlong; its 'life and times' approach and general interpretation dated and in need of significant modification. Furthermore, Hirst's understanding of Liberalism

was too close to Molteno's own to make him an ideal biographer. He it was who advised the then Liberal leader, Archibald Sinclair, in March 1937 to distance himself from Churchill, whose 'exaggerated views on the threat of Hitler and Mussolini were abhorrent to many Liberals'. In addition, wrote Hirst, the government's then level of expenditure on armaments, far less than it later became, was imposing an intolerable burden of taxation on the hard-pressed British taxpayer. [G. De Groot, *Liberal Crusader: The Life of Sir Archibald Sinclair* (London, 1993), pp. 125–6] Nonetheless, Hirst's work has been indispensable in the preparation of this article, giving easy and valuable access to a large number of Molteno's papers, the originals of which are housed in the archives of the University of Cape Town.

- 1 This is the retrospective judgment of Frances Stevenson, Lloyd George's secretary and mistress. F. Lloyd George, *The Years That Are Past* (London, 1967), pp. 73–4.
- 2 Molteno to Merriman 14 Aug. 1914, cited in Newton, *Darkest Days*, p. 11.
- 3 F. Hirst to M. Hirst 1 Nov. 1914, cited in *ibid.*, p. 12.
- 4 Ponsonby to Dolly Ponsonby 5 Aug. 1914, cited in Marlor, *Fatal Fortnight*, p. 154. The Liberal League (founded March 1902) was an organisation of Liberal Imperialists with Rosebery as president and Asquith, Grey and H. H. Fowler as vice-presidents.
- 5 Molteno, 'My Views on the Origin of the War', n.d. but circa 1925, cited in Hirst, *Man of Principle*, pp. 440–41.
- 6 I am grateful to Robert Molteno for these insights into the influence of Molteno's siblings.
- 7 Molteno to Wallace Molteno 1919, cited in Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 540.
- 8 Molteno, 'My Views on the Origin of the War', cited in Hirst, *Man of Principle*, pp. 440–41.
- 9 Molteno to Charlie Molteno 11 Sep. 1914, cited in *ibid.*, p. 445.
- 10 Molteno, 'My Views on the Origins of the War' n.d. but no earlier than 1925, cited in *ibid.*, pp. 440–1.
- 11 Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 446.
- 12 Molteno to editor, *Dumfries and Galloway Standard and Advertiser* [hereafter *Standard*] 8 Aug. 1914.
- 13 P. Devlin, *Too Proud to Fight: Woodrow Wilson's*

- Neutrality* (London, 1974), p. 279.
- 14 Molteno, diary 4 Jan. 1915, cited in Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 448.
- 15 Molteno to Charlie Molteno 5 May 1915, cited in *ibid.*, p. 457.
- 16 Molteno's bafflement was widely shared. See, for example, the diary of Cecil Harmsworth, Liberal MP for Luton. A. Thorpe and R. Toye (eds.), *Parliament and Politics in the Age of Asquith and Lloyd George: The Diaries of Cecil Harmsworth, MP, 1909–1922* (Cambridge, 2016), p. 188.
- 17 Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 460.
- 18 Molteno to Frank Molteno, 21 May 1915, cited in *ibid.*, p. 460.
- 19 Molteno to Gordon Harvey, Jun. 1915, cited in *ibid.*, p. 496.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 497.
- 21 Grey was suffering from deteriorating eyesight. Worried that he might go blind, he was keen to resign, but his withdrawal was resisted by Asquith. Instead, to ease the strain on his sight, he began to absent himself for a week or ten days each month or six weeks, leaving the Foreign Office in the hands of Lord Crewe, the Lord President of the Council.
- 22 Molteno, diary 10 Jun. 1915, cited in Hirst, *Man of Principle*, pp. 464–5. Such rumours about Lloyd George's ambitions were evidently circulating widely at this time. See Cecil Harmsworth diary for 17 Jun. 1915, Thorpe and Toye (eds.), *Parliament and Politics*, p. 190.
- 23 Molteno to Barkly Molteno, 2 Jun. 1915, cited in Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 469.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 478.
- 25 Hansard, HC (series 5) vol. 77, col. 1149.
- 26 *Ibid.*, cols 1540–51.
- 27 *Dumfries and Galloway Courier and Herald* editorial 26 Jan. 1916.
- 28 The newspaper's editor, Thomas Watson, a long-time ally of Molteno, had died in April 1914.
- 29 *Standard*, 26 Jan. 1916.
- 30 *Standard*, editorial 6 May 1916.
- 31 Molteno to Charlie Molteno, Dec. 1916, cited in Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 506.
- 32 Molteno to H. J. Tennant, under-secretary at the War Office, 17 Jun. 1915 and to Asquith 18 Jun. 1915, cited in *ibid.*, p. 491.
- 33 Proprietor at the time of, among other newspapers, *The Times* and the *Daily Mail*.
- 34 Molteno to Merriman, n.d., cited in Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 509.
- 35 *Ibid.*
- 36 Molteno to Loreburn, 4 Sep. 1917, cited in *ibid.*, p. 514.
- 37 Molteno to G. Harvey, 3 Nov. 1917, cited in *ibid.*, p. 514.
- 38 S. Kerry, *Lansdowne: The Last Great Whig* (London, 2017), pp. 262–3.
- 39 C. Seymour (ed.), *The Intimate Papers of Colonel House*, vol. 3 (London, 1926), p. 237. Lansdowne's letter is reproduced in full in Kerry, *Lansdowne*, pp. 284–9.
- 40 Molteno to G. Harvey and R. Holt, 1 Dec. 1917, cited in Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 515.
- 41 Liverpool Record Office, Holt MSS, 920 DUR 1/10, diary 3 Dec. 1917.
- 42 Lloyd George's tone owed something to his desire to persuade the TUC to release more men for the army. A decade later, however, House admitted that Lansdowne's proposals had offered significant inspiration for Wilson's 'Fourteen Points'. Kerry, *Lansdowne*, p. 297.
- 43 Lord Riddell, *War Diary 1914–1918* (London, 1923), p. 298.
- 44 *Common Sense*, 1 Dec. 1917.
- 45 Hansard, HC (series 5) vol. 103, cols 2196–203, especially col. 2201.
- 46 Molteno to Lord Pentland, 26 Jul. 1918, cited in Hirst, *Man of Principle*, pp. 522–3.
- 47 Molteno to G. Harvey, 11 Aug. 1918, cited in *ibid.*, p. 524.
- 48 Molteno to David Paterson, 18 Oct. 1918, cited in *ibid.*, p. 529.
- 49 *Standard*, 26 Oct. 1918.
- 50 Molteno to D. Paterson, 18 Nov. 1918, cited in Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 531.
- 51 Molteno to Archibald Kirkpatrick, 21 Nov. 1918, *Standard*, 23 Nov. 1918.
- 52 Molteno to Lord Morley, Dec. 1918, cited in Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 533.
- 53 Full result in Dumfriesshire: William Murray (Coalition Unionist) 13,345; John Gulland (Liberal) 7,562.
- 54 Holt MSS, 920 DUR 14/27/245, Molteno to Holt, 28 Jan. 1919.

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John Stuart Mill: A Neo-Athenian Republican

- 71 Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, p. 336.
- 72 John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, CW (1860), x, pp. 231–32.
- 73 Letter from John Stuart Mill to George Cornewall Lewis, 20 Mar. 1859, CW, xv, p. 608.
- 74 Biagini, 'Liberalism and Direct Democracy', p. 34.
- 75 Urbinati, *Mill on Democracy*, p. 6.
- 76 Mill, *On Liberty*, pp. 224, 277; Mill, *Grote's History of Greece part [II]*, p. 319.
- 77 Berlin, 'Two Concepts of Liberty', p. 207; Mill, *On Liberty*, pp. 276–7.
- 78 Mill, *On Liberty*, pp. 267–8.
- 79 Mill, *Grote's History of Greece [II]*, p. 316.
- 80 George Grote, *History of Greece*, 12 vols (John Murray, 1846–1856), vi (1851), pp. 200–2, in Mill, *Grote's History of Greece [II]*, pp. 319–320. The quote is abbreviated.
- 81 Mill, *On Liberty*, p. 272.
- 82 Mill, *Grote's History of Greece [II]*, pp. 320–321; Mill, *On Liberty*, p. 267.
- 83 Grote, *History of Greece*, pp. 200–2, in Mill, *Grote's History of Greece [II]*, p. 320.
- 84 Mill, *On Liberty*, pp. 219–220; Mill, *Grote's History of Greece [II]*, p. 319.
- 85 Kierstead, 'Grote's Athens', pp. 162–5; T. H. Irwin, 'Mill and the Classical World', in *The Cambridge Companion to Mill*, pp. 424, 428.
- 86 Irwin, 'Mill and the Classical World', pp. 423–4; Reeves, *John Stuart Mill*, p. 178.
- 87 Mill, *Grote's History of Greece [II]*, pp. 314–315, 321, 324.
- 88 Claeys, *Mill and Paternalism*, p. 217.
- 89 Reeves, *John Stuart Mill*, p. 9.
- 90 Republican ideas also permeate Mill's socialist writings. His vision of a future economy based on democratic cooperatives offer teachings for progressives of all shades to learn from. See in particular: 'On the Probable Futurity of the Labouring Classes', in *Principles of Political Economy* (1848), CW, iii, pp. 758–96.

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- 55 Molteno to Merriman c. 1910, cited in Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 381.
- 56 Holt MSS 920 DUR 14/27/245, Molteno to Holt, 28 Jan. 1919.
- 57 Molteno was kept abreast of the hardships on the continent by Herbert Hoover who, as America's Food Administrator, led relief efforts in Europe. Molteno had befriended Hoover when the latter was living in London during the war. Now, in 1919, Molteno set up and endowed the Vienna Emergency Relief Fund to address the problems of hunger and deprivation at the heart of the old Habsburg Empire.
- 58 Molteno to Frank Molteno, late Jan. 1919, cited in Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 540.
- 59 *Ibid.*, p. 543.
- 60 *Ibid.*
- 61 Molteno to Charlie Molteno, 16 Sep. 1919, cited in *ibid.*, p. 545.
- 62 *Manchester Guardian*, 24 Jan. 1922.
- 63 Hirst, *Man of Principle*, pp. 548–9. The debate over a possible Anglo-French Alliance is discussed in G. Hicks (ed.), *Conservatism and British Foreign Policy, 1820–1920* (Farnham, 2011), pp. 189–213.
- 64 University of Liverpool Library, George Veitch MSS D40/15, Muir to Veitch, 25 Oct. 1928.
- 65 M. Bentley, 'The Liberal Response to Socialism 1918–29', in K. D. Brown (ed.), *Essays in Anti-Labour History: Responses to the Rise of Labour in Britain* (London, 1974), p. 47.
- 66 Molteno to H. Gladstone, Jan. 1922, cited in Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 561.
- 67 Gladstone to Molteno, 11 Jan. 1922, cited in *ibid.*, p. 562.
- 68 Liberal MP for Westmorland North 1905–10, Rushcliffe 1910–18 and Camborne 1923–4 and 1929–31.
- 69 Hirst, *Man of Principle*, pp. 564–5. Speaking at West Calder on 27 Nov. 1879, as part of his famous Midlothian Campaign, Gladstone enumerated six 'right principles of foreign policy'. These are listed in R. Shannon, *Gladstone: Heroic Minister 1865–1898* (London, 1999), pp. 238–9.
- 70 Molteno to Charlie Molteno, 7 Nov. 1922, cited in Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 558.
- 71 *Ibid.*, p. 558.
- 72 *Ibid.*, p. 572.

- 73 A committee on national expenditure was appointed in August 1921 under the chairmanship of Sir Eric Geddes. Its reports (the so-called Geddes Axe) recommended swingeing cuts in government spending.
- 74 Full result: Katharine, Duchess of Atholl (Unionist) 9,235; P. A. Molteno (Liberal) 9,085.
- 75 *Manchester Guardian*, 24 Jul. 1924; Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 574.
- 76 *Ibid.*, p. 577.
- 77 Holt MSS, 920 DUR 1/10, diary 13 Dec. 1924.
- 78 Molteno to James Molteno, 27 May 1926, cited in Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 581.
- 79 *Ibid.*, p. 581.
- 80 *Ibid.*, p. 594.
- 81 Molteno to James Molteno 1929, cited in *ibid.*, p. 599. Speaking in Manchester on 1 Mar. 1929, Lloyd George had declared that a Liberal government could ‘reduce the terrible figures of the workless in the course of a single year to normal proportions’. Shortly afterwards, a party pamphlet entitled ‘We Can Conquer Unemployment’ proposed a massive programme of public works to soak up the unemployed.
- 82 Hirst, *Man of Principle*, pp. 592–3.
- 83 Molteno to G. S. Barbour, 1929, cited in *ibid.*, p. 599.
- 84 *Ibid.*, pp. 602–3; P. Sloman, *The Liberal Party and the Economy, 1929–1964* (Oxford, 2015), p. 63.
- 85 Molteno to James Molteno, 7 Oct. 1931, cited in Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 605.
- 86 Molteno to James Molteno, 16 Mar. 1932, cited in *ibid.*, p. 607.
- 87 F. Trentmann, *Free Trade Nation* (London, 2008), *passim*.
- 88 R. Grayson, *Liberals, International Relations and Appeasement: The Liberal Party, 1919–1939* (London, 2001) provides an authoritative account of the party’s debates on foreign policy in the inter-war era.
- 89 Molteno to Lord Meston, Sep. 1936, cited in Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 627.
- 90 *The Times*, 4 May 1937.
- 91 Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 582.
- 92 Scottish Record Office, Lothian MSS, GD40/17/367, Findlay to Lothian, 4 May 1938; Hirst, *Man of Principle*, pp. 628–9.

Reports

The Two Davids: Owen versus Steel

Fringe meeting, Liberal Democrat autumn conference, 17 September 2021, with Sir Graham Watson and Roger Carroll. Chair: Christine Jardine MP.
Report by **James Moore**

ONE OF THE signs of getting old is when events that seem to be part of recent memory become part of the historical record. 1987 was my first election as a Young Liberal activist and the first of many political

disappointments. The Alliance came third again and won just twenty-two seats. For many, the election was defined by the difficult relationship between David Steel and David Owen – two men who apparently went fishing together and wore

the same ties, but seemingly couldn’t agree on defence policy or who they might work with in a coalition government.

After the 1987 election, the split between the two men became all too obvious. Steel was accused of trying to ‘bounce’ the Alliance into a new merged party. Owen was accused of ignoring the wishes of his own SDP members. Within two years, the merged Democrats (we weren’t allowed to call it a ‘party’ or use the term Liberal) were represented by an asterisk in the opinion polls and were fighting David Owen’s ‘continuing SDP’ in parliamentary by-elections.

Was this all inevitable? A meeting of the Liberal