

British withdrawal from Palestine as akin to Pontius Pilate washing his hands.

In conclusion, Shambrook was damning of Britain's historical role. There had been no acknowledgement, by successive governments, of the role that Britain had played in its 'one-sided, often deceitful Mandate policies, which led inevitably to the destruction of Palestinian society in 1948'. Since 1967, British governments had been focused on the special relationship with the USA, arms sales, intelligence-sharing and oil security. At the date of the talk in July 2024, there had been very little criticism of Israel. Shambrook believed ultimately that there would be meaningful negotiations to end the conflict.

Responding to a question on why Britain did not recognise

the rights of the Arab Christians, Shambrook argued that the British did not see Palestine as being made up of one people but of different sects and religions. Layla Moran disagreed with the British attitude, pointing out that in Palestine, you are Palestinian first and your religion is secondary. This is why the dismissal of the Palestinian delegation was so egregious – they were Palestinians and did not differentiate between themselves.

Moran was encouraged by the fact that the 2024 Liberal Democrat position on Palestine had been carefully developed over many years, had not split the party and had not been watered down in the election manifesto. She was heartened by Foreign Secretary David Lammy's change of tone, compared to the previous government.

Shambrook's talk was an eye-opener and well worth listening to in full. As both he and Moran argued, history viewed in the region is very different from the history we are taught in Britain. Shambrook was adamant that Britain needs to face up to its historical role and its part in the continued history of Palestine and Israel. Like so many aspects of British Imperialism, an honest conversation needs to happen.

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The recording of the meeting is available at <https://liberalhistory.org.uk/events/lloyd-george-herbert-samuel-and-palestine-background-and-legacy/>

# Reviews

## A Prime Minister's Love Affair

Robert Harris, *Precipice* (Hutchinson Heinemann, 2024)

Review by Alan Mumford

This journal would not usually review a novel, but this book is accompanied by assertions about Venetia Stanley which may be taken as fact by some readers of the book and accompanying interviews.

Robert Harris has received justified praise for his historical novels on political personalities – Cicero, Dreyfus, the Cromwellian regicides and an anonymised version of Tony Blair. *Precipice* is based primarily

on more than 600 letters H.H. Asquith, Liberal Prime Minister 1908–16, wrote to Venetia Stanley, a young woman of the landed upper class. These are supplemented by letters she exchanged with Edwin

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Montagu, a protégé of Asquith, who had placed him in the cabinet. His letters to her repeat his desire to marry her. The factual content includes material from government files.

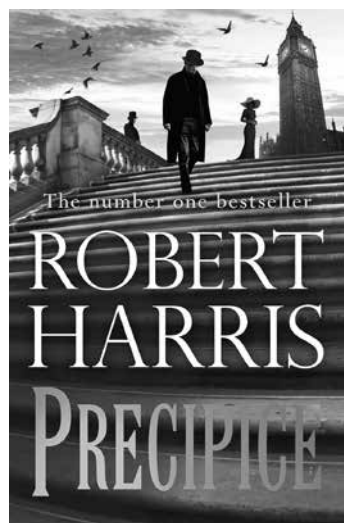
The letters from Venetia to Asquith were probably destroyed by Asquith, so Harris has created his version of what she might have written, together with oral dialogue between them. He also brings in a fictional police officer to investigate the source of screwed-up government papers found in different parts of London (in fact, discarded by Asquith while in his car with Venetia). This provides a dramatic element to the story: will Asquith as the source be discovered, and will his affair be revealed? An extramarital affair would be scandalous; for it to be with a woman thirty-five years younger than him would bring further opprobrium. The policeman discovers the fictional letters from Venetia, filling in a large hole in the account.

Asquith fell desperately in love with Venetia in 1912, but the book starts in June 1914. Asquith's concern then was primarily with home rule for Ireland, but this quickly changed to the prospect and actuality of war with Germany. The number of his letters to her increases as does his pressure for meetings and the fervour of his declarations of love. He also reveals cabinet secrets through letters and telegrams. The insouciance with which he betrays secrets to her is evident, but

Harris does not invent a revelation of the material to Germany.

Asquith by 1914 was increasingly desperate to maintain their relationship, as he began to suspect that she was thinking about marriage. He had no idea that this would culminate in her finally accepting a proposal from Edwin Montagu, a rich Jew for whom she had a physical distaste. Harris includes the real letters between Venetia and Montagu which reveal her indecision and his agony. Asquith received her letter revealing their engagement on 12 May 1914. Harris does not quote his response on the same day: 'Most loved, as you know well this breaks my heart. I couldn't bear to come and see you. I can only pray God to bless you – and help me.' He quotes instead an undated unpublished longer letter essentially conveying the same feelings. The subplot of Montagu's wish to marry Venetia is well presented, although the author does not quote N. Levine, *Politics Religion and Love*, as a source.

Is this a balanced and fair portrait of Asquith? No – it is a novel, not a biography, with invented dialogue and elements of introspection (the latter, in fact, not Asquith's style). It is a narrative of a relationship, with no substantial explanation of it. Harris gives his views on some of the real history at the end of the book which need to be examined, and in some cases contradicted. Reviewers and interviewers have



concentrated on the novel and Harris' assertions on the facts. Neither Harris nor the Brocks (M & E Brock (editors) *H.H. Asquith Letters to Venetia Stanley*) suggest that she gave advice on Ireland or the Great War. In an interview with the *New Statesman* (30 August 2024) Harris speculates that if she had not announced her engagement to Edwin Montagu, she would have advised him against the formation of the Coalition in 1915; but there is no evidence on what her views might have been, or how important to him that advice might have been.

In terms of influencing high politics, this is nonsense. Venetia's involvement mostly consisted of reading and listening to Asquith's accounts of decisions, with occasional specifics such as advising him to arrange for a minister to meet Redmond, the Irish leader. She advised on a new Chief Whip, but his secretary, 'Bongie', and daughter Violet agreed with her

– which was the more influential? Neither reviewers nor interviewers have challenged Harris' assertion about her influences.

Harris claims in 'acknowledgements' to have used material from Asquith's unpublished letters. I was excited by the possibilities implied. There are of course no footnotes to identify the material, nor does he always give dates, so I compared all his entries with the Brocks' version. I have found eleven – none of any personal or political significance. I found sixteen similarly unimportant by S. Buczaki in *My Darling Mr Asquith* (2016). One possible exception is an unpublished paragraph from an undated letter in which Asquith writes 'I am on the eve of the most astounding and world-shaking decisions – such as I wd never have taken without your counsel and consent'. Without a date it is impossible to be sure this was written during Coalition negotiations. This is consonant with frequent references by Asquith to her helpful advice. The question is how influential that advice was, as distinct from his wish to make her advice sound important.

In an interview in *The Sunday Times* (25 August 2024) Harris claims that Asquith was incapable of taking many major decisions without involving Venetia. In his historical note Harris describes her as 'one of the most consequential influential women in British political history', a risible claim not supported by any

evidence. On the question of whether Asquith was seriously affected in discussions over Coalition government I am on Harris' side in believing that Venetia's decision to marry Montagu did have an impact on Asquith's decision-making at that time. His mind had previously been significantly occupied by his love for her and this came as a total surprise. As he told his new confidante, Sylvia Henley (Venetia's sister), Venetia and Montagu were devoted to him so 'it is the irony of fortune that they should combine to deal a deathblow to me'. So far from being the helpful distraction that some have argued, Venetia gave pain as well as pleasure. In the novel Harris encourages the canard that Asquith frequently wrote to her during cabinet meetings. In fact, there were only four such letters.

Historians and biographers, from Roy Jenkins, in his unsurpassed biography *Asquith* (he thought it 'an epistolary romance') to Judge Oliver Popplewell, who believes sexual activity took place, have debated whether the affair involved full sexual congress. Harris writes that 'it strains credibility ... that the affair was not at least in some sense physical'. In the novel he inserts a description of alternative sexual activity, including frottage, with suggestive phrases: 'she adjusted her dress', 'the curtains were closed', 'he laid his coat on the ground' to support his case – but this is not evidence.

Harris does not comment on whether such a relationship was unusual for Prime Ministers. Asquith will have known of three previous men who had sexual affairs, some as Prime Minister – Melbourne, Wellington and Palmerston. At this time, he probably did not know about Lloyd George and Frances Stevenson, who celebrated their 'marriage' in 1913 when Lloyd George was 51 and Frances 26. (Nor have later Prime Ministers always adhered to marriage vows – Harold Wilson, John Major and Boris Johnson.) Asquith did not reveal any worries about this relationship being revealed, even after the discovery of the material he had thrown away while with her in the car.

There is no comment on the moral turpitude involved in Asquith's betrayal of his wife Margot. Reviewers have commented on the thirty-five-year gap between Asquith and Venetia, rather than on the wider issue of a Prime Minister with a love affair. Neither in the novel nor in real life did he or Venetia express any doubts about the morality. Asquith was positively opposed to introspection. Readers may feel some sympathy towards this besotted and distraught man (also directing a war), but this will be diminished by reading the pitiful letter from Margot, published by the Brocks, 'I fear she has entirely ousted me in your affections'. She is certainly ousted in the novel, since

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there is very little of significance reported, an omission which reduces the impact of the novel. Venetia's escape from an increasingly needy man is similarly not preceded in her fictional letters

by any doubts about the morality of her friendship, with or without any sexual activity.

This reviewer's conclusion – read the novel and ignore the history.

Alan Mumford is the author of several articles in the *Journal of Liberal History*, including 'Asquith: Friendship, Love and Betrayal' and 'Five Liberal Women' and a review of S. Buzacki, *My Darling Mr Asquith*.

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## Biography of an extraordinary woman

Jane Robinson, *Trailblazer: Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, the first feminist to change our world* (Doubleday, 2024)

Review by Sarah Richardson

**B**arbara Leigh Smith Bodichon had an impeccable political pedigree. She was the granddaughter of the abolitionist MP and member of the Clapham Sect, William Smith. Her father, Benjamin, followed William into Parliament and represented the same two constituencies: Sudbury and Norwich. Both were Unitarians, active in leading Dissenting circles, promoting the radical causes of the day. In her new biography of Barbara, Jane Robinson sketches out her illustrious connections in the form of a sunflower, with Barbara at the centre, radiating links with significant political, literary and cultural contemporaries. Her cousin was Florence Nightingale, she was friends with Dante and Christina Rossetti, George Eliot, Bessie Rayner Parkes and Emily Davies (to name but a few).

Benjamin Leigh Smith was a wealthy businessman, making his fortune in the distillery trade. He had even bailed out his father

who had been on the brink of bankruptcy. When Barbara reached the age of 21, Benjamin gave her a portfolio of shares which yielded around £250–350 per year, making her an independently wealthy woman, free to pursue her own philanthropic and political projects. Although she married in 1857, her relationship with her eccentric husband, Eugène Bodichon, was unconventional. They often lived separately, even in different countries, and she continued to pursue her own separate projects.

Yet, in spite of this seemingly gilded life, Barbara was tainted by the stigma of illegitimacy. Her father embarked on a relationship with her mother, Anne Longden of Alfreton in Derbyshire. She bore him five children before her untimely death at the age of 32, but the couple were never married, meaning that Barbara and her siblings were shunned by many in the family (including Florence Nightingale and her mother Fanny) and in society.

Robinson's lively prose teases out the paradoxes of Barbara's life breathlessly. The book is meticulously researched, using private and public archives in the UK and abroad. However, historians may hesitate at her use of her imagination when factual sources are scarce. In her discussion of Ben and Anne's relationship for example, Robinson rejects the view of historians that he was acting in concordance with his radical ideology, which eschewed the inequalities in marriage. Instead, she alludes to her favourite Shakespeare play, *The Taming of the Shrew*, imagining a different ending where Kate stands up to Petruchio who falls in love with her feistiness. Thus, she envisages Anne as a high-spirited woman who refused to marry Ben, rather than the other way around.

Later, Robinson acknowledges that she 'can't avoid speculation. And I can't resist anecdote, rumour and trivia: they all play