

## Reviews

Johnston (standing for Labour), which resulted in Cunninghame Graham coming a poor third, certainly does seem to be the act of man who lacked conviction. His failure to speak out after the riot in George Square in Glasgow in January 1919 appears to confirm this impression. He appeared to fall into Scottish nationalist politics, prompted by others who saw him as a useful figurehead, at a time when most of his family were dead and he

was in his seventies. Although Cunninghame Graham was the first president of the NPS, he only attended two executive meetings in six years and only played a peripheral role when the NPS amalgamated with the right-wing Scotland's Party to form the Scottish National Party in April 1934. Cunninghame Graham ultimately emerges in Munro's book as a flamboyant, but marginal figure in political history, whose time in both the socialist and

Scottish home rule movements produced little electoral success but who was, almost accidentally, present at the birth of the Scottish Labour and Scottish National Parties, both of which other, less amateur figures would develop to greater significance.

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## Churchill at the Home Office

Duncan Marlor, *Churchill the Liberal Reformer: The struggle for a modern Home Office* (Pen & Sword History, 2024)

Review by Iain Sharpe

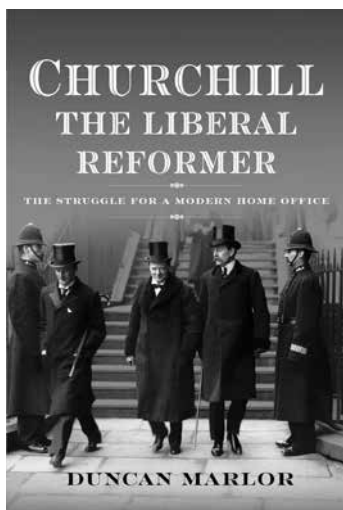
Winston Churchill may have started and finished his political life as a Conservative but his near two decades in Liberal ranks after his defection over free trade in 1904, mark a significant part of his career, including his first experience of ministerial office and his rapid rise to be appointed to the cabinet at the age of just 33. His reputation as a Liberal reformer rather than a mere opportunist rests primarily on his period as a minister covering domestic portfolios, as president of the Board of Trade (1908–10) and home secretary (1910–11) when he played a part in creating the foundations of the welfare state and

was responsible for substantial prison reform.

It is on this latter period that Duncan Marlor focuses in this volume, and he has provided a very readable book, whose thirty chapters are essentially short essays on aspects of Churchill's tenure of the Home Office, each covering a different theme or episode and loosely organised in chronological order. It makes some use of archival material, but is mainly based on secondary and published primary sources. Therefore, it does not break much new ground, but provides an interesting summary of a period in Churchill's career that, while hardly ignored by his many

biographers, should be better known.

Marlor makes a strong case for Churchill as a humanitarian prison reformer, his concern for the wellbeing of prisoners perhaps stemming from his own experience as a prisoner of war in South Africa just a few years earlier. Among the changes he effected were reducing the use of solitary confinement, ensuring that entertainment such as lectures and concerts were provided in prisons, creating a distinction between criminal and political prisoners, ending automatic sentences for non-payment of fines, reducing the use of prisons for young people and



the use of the birch in reform schools. He also drafted and proposed a wider scheme for consistent sentencing and treatment of prisoners based on offences committed, although this was not implemented.

Churchill was admittedly building on the record of his predecessor Herbert Gladstone, who had also implemented significant penal reform measures. Indeed Gladstone, from exile as governor general of South Africa, remonstrated with Churchill for claiming credit for measures that had already been in the pipeline when he arrived at the Home Office. Yet Churchill brought a sense of verve and energy to the role that Gladstone, a poor parliamentary performer, had entirely lacked. He also brought his own ideas to the role and was typically unafraid to challenge the institutional wisdom and the views of his senior officials.

Marlor devotes much space to Churchill's approach to considering appeals for commutation of death sentences. He was not afraid to offer reprieves, even where this went against his officials' advice. His priorities for displays of leniency might not align with progressive sentiments of today: for example, he was inclined to commute sentences of men who had killed their wives or lovers in fits of sudden anger, on the basis that their actions were not premeditated. By contrast, he was adamant in refusing clemency for the notorious Dr Crippen. But it was this aspect of the role that led him to say in later years that 'There is no post that I was more glad to leave.'

The author defends Churchill's reputation on some of the more controversial elements of his career. For example, at the notorious 1910 incident at Tonypandy, Churchill did not, contrary to legend, deploy troops against striking miners, but rather resisted pressure to do so, facing criticism in the Conservative press as a result. His well-known and much-misrepresented enthusiasm for eugenics is put in context – not, as is sometimes claimed, support for compulsory sterilisation of the so-called 'feeble-minded' but rather as a way of offering them freedom in exchange for voluntary sterilisation. Even this, to modern sensibilities, may seem bad enough, of course.

While the book offers a lively and vivid account of key aspects of Churchill's tenure of the Home Office, its title suggests a clear thesis of this period as one of transformation of the department, and I fear it does not quite live up to this. While the case for Churchill as a penal reformer is well made, there is no real sense of him struggling for a 'modern Home Office' and implementing structural reform. Indeed, the author highlights occasions where Churchill was every inch the enforcer of public order, whether at the famous Siege of Sidney Street or in ensuring that food supplies were delivered during the 1911 railway strike. I am sceptical too of Marlor's contention that Churchill instituted a Liberal outlook in the Home Office that lasted until the 1990s. One need only consider the record of, say, Sir William Joynson-Hicks in the 1920s or Sir David Maxwell Fyfe in the 1950s to doubt whether this is quite so.

Despite such grumbles, however, the book provides a readable account of an important episode in Churchill's long career and will be enjoyed by anyone with an interest in Churchill's time as a Liberal.

Dr Iain Sharpe studied history at Leicester and London Universities, completing a doctoral thesis on the Liberal Party in the Edwardian era in 2011. He was a Liberal Democrat councillor in Watford from 1991 to 2021.