

knowing as we do that Russia *instigated* this insurrection, which *caused* the cruelty of the Turks, it *ought* to be brought home to Russia, and the world *ought* to know that on *their* shoulders and *not* on *ours* rests the *blood* of the murdered Bulgarians.’ (The italics here were underlinings in the original. She used underlinings, exclamation marks and capital letters with gay abandon, rather like a modern tabloid editorial.)

How she had reached her conclusion about Russian responsibility is unclear. What is clear is that Gladstone’s publication of his pamphlet *Bulgarian Horrors and the Question of the East* entrenched her partisanship. As for his campaigning on the matter: ‘... the disgraceful conduct of that mischief maker and fire-brand ... is very, very wrong.’

Good governance broke down. She sent papers to be read to cabinet. Disraeli leaked to her who had said what in cabinet meetings. She threatened abdication. He was obliged to threaten resignation in return. Shuvalov, the Russian ambassador, reported to Saint Petersburg

that cabinet members feared war being imposed upon them as an ‘expression of sovereign will’ and that they were outraged by this ‘conspiracy of a half-mad woman with a minister who once had genius but has degenerated into a political clown’. The minister was to prove he was not a clown by securing a diplomatic triumph in Berlin. Half-mad may be an over generous judgement.

She ended as partisan as she had begun, though now a partisan on the right. In life, some people are fated never to get on with each other. It is the fault of neither. The chemistry is just not right. Victoria and William Ewart Gladstone were such a pair. By the time of his third and fourth ministries, Gladstone was aware but perplexed by his failure to maintain effective relations with the Queen.

Victoria was outright hostile. She jubilantly undermined him. Ironically, one of the particular grievances she harboured against him was his inability to find a duchess to be Mistress of the Robes. None would serve as they were all Unionists. Victoria fumed: ‘It is

atrocious of Mr Gladstone ... to expose *me* to having only half a household.’

She leaked to Salisbury on an industrial scale. This included papers and letters sent by Gladstone for her eyes alone. Clandestine arrangements were put in place to keep her in touch with Salisbury. She communicated with anti-home-rule Liberal dissidents Goschen and Hartington. The correspondence was not all one way. Salisbury at her request produced advice on what she should do in the event Gladstone asked for a dissolution. What an odious and dishonourable man Salisbury was!

The book is a delight: well researched, well structured, beautifully written. Taken overall, it is written as a plea in mitigation on Victoria’s behalf. This reader at least was left unmoved by the plea. Go by the evidence. The evidence is clear. She was ghastly from start to finish. Case closed. ■

Peter Truesdale was a councillor and the Leader of the Council in Lambeth. He has also been chair of the local party.

Club life

Seth Thevoz, *Behind Closed Doors: The Secret Life of London Private Members’ Clubs* (Robinson, 2022)
Review by Michael Meadowcroft

Dr Thevoz has followed his previous book on early Victorian London clubs,

largely based on his PhD thesis, by this hugely entertaining account of the life and mainly

later times of the leading London clubs. The author sets it in a series of themes: women,

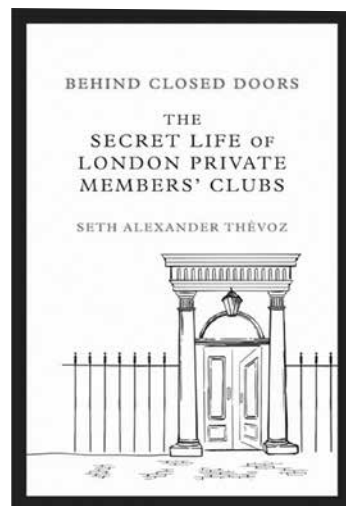
working men's clubs, colonial emphasis, race, sexual connotations, military and – of most interest to Liberal historians – confidence tricksters. One of most remarkable images is the frontispiece showing a map, produced by the London Underground, of the square mile or so around Pall Mall with the locations of sixty-four clubs all marked!

Assuming that the formidable amount of research for each club had the pleasant requirement of food and wine at each visit, the book required a strong constitution – and a replete wallet. Most of us rarely have the opportunity to visit clubs other than our own – my tally is a mere six – and Dr Thevoz's book provides valuable insights into the life and style of virtually the whole panoply.

Knowing that the incentive for establishing the National Liberal Club in 1882 was partly the long waiting list for the Reform and for the Devonshire, it is salutary to read that the Reform has lost its radical ethos and that the Devonshire had ceased to espouse an Liberal heritage by the time it closed in 1976. The NLC finally admitted women as members in 1976. In the early 1960s, in one of its worthy attempts to show its progressive nature, it recruited me on to the general committee. At a number of its meetings thereafter, I proposed that the club admit women as members. It always failed, with the usual excuse that

the plumbing wasn't up to it! On one occasion, an elderly member awoke from slumber with a start: 'Does this mean that we will have women members in the club (pause) at breakfast?' The significance of this was lost on me until Coss Billson, the then club secretary, later explained to me that the said member lived in a club bedroom and, in common with other residents, often came down to breakfast in his pyjamas! I recall also that when the women-members issue was finally resolved, Laura Grimond, the wife of Jo Grimond, the former Liberal leader, signed wearily and said, 'Oh dear, I've always been happy to have one Liberal organisation I didn't have to join.'

Dr Thevoz sets out the gory details of the 1976 manipulation of the NLC by an erstwhile rich Canadian businessman styling himself George de Chabris. Inevitably, Jeremy Thorpe was taken in by de Chabris and recommended him to the club as the man who was going to rescue the club from its dire financial situation. The club's general committee gave him plenipotentiary powers and he proceeded to rip the club off for his personal coffers. I was around at the time and I recall him sitting in the grill room with his cronies, happily ordering bottles of excellent Bordeaux from the club's excellent cellar and just knocking back glass after glass. When he was eventually rumbled, under his real name of George Marks, and



despatched from the building, he apparently emptied the tills on his way out. Interestingly, Philip Watkins, the then club treasurer, said to me that it was certainly a dark period, but Marks's asset stripping possibly kept the club going financially for a short time.

The book is not confined to the posh London gentleman's clubs – it also has a chapter on the working men's clubs which flourished from around the beginning of the twentieth century, particularly in the North of England. One background reason for Liberal successes locally and, in 1983, in the parliamentary election, was the existence of six Liberal clubs amongst the thirty working men's clubs in the Leeds West constituency. These clubs were not packed with serious philosophical Liberals, but they were a visible presence and its members had at least had to sign that they were Liberals in order to join. They also gave me donations and a platform in a full concert hall.