

person. Indeed, the reader finds this volume a little disjointed because there is no real sense of the progression from a young unmarried woman of twenty-seven in 1914 to a grandmother in 1938. This dysfunction is paralleled by a similarly sharp move from the governing Liberal Party of Asquith and Lloyd George at the opening of the volume to its divided remnants painfully reassembling themselves at the close to fight a post-war election.

However, *Champion Redoubtable* does give an insight into the byways of the Liberal Party's decline through the life of Violet Bonham Carter. In particular, there are some lively accounts of the Paisley campaigns of Asquith in the early 1920s, of the impact of the coalition with the Conservatives in 1915 on Asquith, and of Lady Violet's own campaign in Wells in 1945. Most interesting of all, perhaps, is the intriguing possibility of what might have happened had she entered the Commons in 1941, of which I was certainly not aware before reading this volume. In August that year Hugh Seeley became Lord Sherwood, leaving a vacancy at Berwick-on-Tweed. Violet Bonham Carter was clearly anxious to be selected in his stead. Under the conditions of the wartime truce either Labour or the Conservatives would not have opposed her. In retrospect, this was clearly her only realistic chance of entering the Commons. Given her forceful and campaigning

character it is possible that she might have held the seat in 1945 when Beveridge lost it. One could even speculate that she would then have become leader in succession to Sinclair, as the hapless Clement Davies was no one's first choice. The local Liberals' bias against women candidates which led to George Grey (subsequently killed in Normandy) being selected may have prevented the Liberals from being the first British political party to have had a woman leader.

More interesting, though, are the accounts of Violet Bonham Carter's life in the First and Second World Wars. The reader is made very aware of the constant stream of deaths of friends and acquaintances between 1914 and 1918 by Pottle's skilful editing, including his use of biographical footnotes linking individuals to their appearances in the social whirl of pre-war upper-

class London in the first volume. Between 1939 and 1945 the accounts of the escape of Violet's son Mark from prison camp in Italy and his arrival in England, together with Lady Violet's roles as an air-raid warden and BBC Governor, make a lasting impression. It is these accounts that really bring the book to life, giving a deep insight into her character and confirming her place in the pantheon of Liberal heroes.

Overall, Mark Pottle is to be congratulated on the scholarship that has gone into his edition of the diaries and letters. Even though this volume is the weakest of the three, it deserves a place on the Liberal historian's bookshelf.

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## A life-long espousal of Liberal values

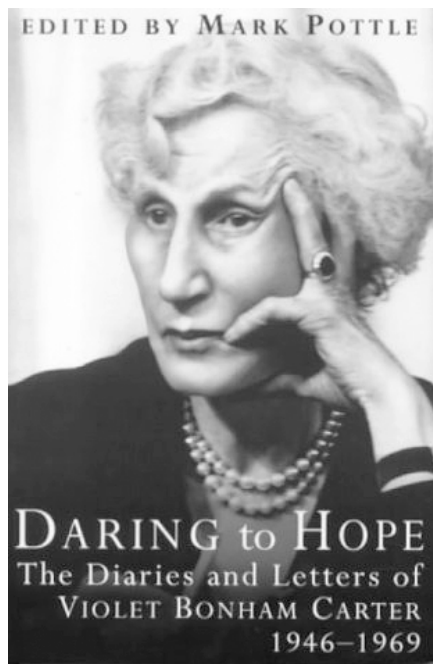
**Mark Pottle (ed): *Daring to Hope: The Diaries and Letters of Violet Bonham Carter 1946 – 1969* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson 2000; 431pp)**

**Reviewed by David Dutton**

Violet Bonham Carter's political career extended from the hey-day of Victorian Liberalism, when her father H.H. Asquith was Prime Minister, to the fag-end of Harold Wilson's Labour government in the 1960s. She made her first reported speech in 1909 at the age of twenty-two. When she died sixty years later she was still espousing Liberal values, protesting against the effects of British policy in the Nigerian civil war which, she argued, was contributing to mass starvation in the province of Biafra. With the volume *Daring to Hope*, Mark Pottle completes the huge enterprise that he began, in partnership with the late Mark Bonham Carter, of editing Lady Violet's voluminous diaries. The

task has been expertly performed. This book, unusually for a published diary, is not just a book to dip into; it offers an often compelling continuous narrative. Pottle's editorial work is first-rate. I found only one footnote to which I felt exception could be taken – the suggestion that Anthony Eden made no recommendation to the Queen as to his successor when he resigned the premiership in 1957. In fact, with all the circumlocution to which his diplomatic training had conditioned him, he gave a firm – if fruitless – nudge in favour of R.A. Butler.

There are several recurring themes in this volume: Lady Violet's consistent support from the late 1940s onwards for the goal of European



unity and for British membership of whatever organisation emerged from this process – an aspiration that was still being thwarted at the time of her death by the apparently immovable presence of General de Gaulle; her deep and abiding friendship with Winston Churchill, from their common espousal of the European ideal through the sad years of his physical and mental decline; the fierce protection of her father's memory, even to the extent of trying to suppress Asquith's letters to his youthful female confidante Venetia Stanley; and her unshakeable commitment to traditional Liberal causes such as racial equality, including an unequivocal detestation of apartheid.

The volume also straddles a transitional period in the history of the Liberal Party. Lady Violet lived with the fear, and perhaps the expectation, that the party would disappear as a national political movement in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Yet she survived long enough to witness the first signs of revival, beginning, appropriately enough, with her son's victory in the Torrington by-election of 1958. But the fact that Mark Bonham Carter lost his seat at the general election eighteen months later, and that other supposed 'breakthroughs', such as Orpington in 1962, proved in fact to be false dawns ensured that Liberalism remained a relatively minor force in British politics at the time of her death. This

situation meant that her own political career had to be pursued largely outside parliament. Her two attempts to enter the Commons in 1945 and 1951 were unsuccessful and she remained, as Colin Coote described her, 'the best politically equipped person who never sat in Parliament' until her belated elevation to the House of Lords in 1964.

The diary offers particularly interesting insights into her thinking on the future of the Liberal Party in the immediate post-war era. Violet Bonham Carter was somewhat equivocal about where Liberalism stood in relation to the other two parties. Her radical roots ought perhaps to have inclined her towards Labour, but the latter's lack of enthusiasm for Europe and her own affection and regard for Churchill certainly complicated matters. 'Until now' noted Harold Nicholson in October 1947, 'she had believed that the Liberal Party were closer to the Socialists than to any other party. Now she doubts it.'<sup>1</sup> By this date, as the diary reveals, she had become convinced that the Liberals could 'do no good at the next election and that our one chance of survival as a party in the immediate future would be a deal [with the Conservatives] over seats and P.R.' [p. 35]. Such thinking culminated in the unusual spectacle of Churchill, as leader of the Conservative opposition, speaking on Lady Violet's behalf at Colne Valley in the 1951 general election. At the 1950 election he had unsuccessfully offered her one of the Conservatives' election broadcasts.

As is well known, Churchill subsequently offered the Liberal leader Clement Davies a seat in his cabinet, even though the Conservatives had managed to secure a narrow overall majority in the new House of Commons. Lady Violet too, it seems, would have been offered ministerial preferment had she secured election to the Commons – and, unlike Davies, would have been inclined to accept. At this moment, perhaps, the historic Liberal Party came nearer than at any other time to disappearing from the political map. Lady Violet's hope, no doubt, was that liberalism could survive even if the

Liberal Party could not. After all, 'the only purpose of politics (or so it seems to me) is the expression of one's own deepest convictions – and their translation into facts' [p.178]. She never had much regard for Davies' powers of political leadership. Only when he was succeeded by Jo Grimond did her faith in the continuing viability of the Liberal Party revive.

Like all good diaries this one contains some marvellously perceptive observations. An evening in the company of George Brown left Lady Violet with the conviction that she had 'never before – in the course of an unsheltered life, spent among all sorts and conditions of men – met anyone so completely un-house-trained' [p.140]. Lord Beaverbrook she found, despite his closeness to Churchill, 'the quintessence of evil' [p.287]. Prince Charles was 'so different from his parents that one wonders where he has come from' [p.342]. And of Robert Boothby, it was 'odd that a man who always does the wrong thing in private life shld. be so invariably right on the political issues' [p.356]. One anecdote in particular sticks in the mind – that of Randolph Churchill, on the day that his father was constructing his last government in 1951, telephoning ministerial hopefuls and leaving a message to say that 'Mr Churchill rang you up!' [p.104].

Violet Bonham Carter once reflected that 'everything – or nearly everything – shld. be written down – because the sub-conscious memory keeps its secrets until they are demanded of it – and then yields them up as fresh as daisies' [p.239]. Her diary vindicates this sentiment. *Daring to Hope* will be read with much pleasure. But it also offers a rewarding insight into post-war British politics.

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1 N. Nicolson (ed.) *Harold Nicolson: Diaries and Letters 1945–62* (London, 1968) p.111