

## Opposing appeasement

Chris Bryant, *The Glamour Boys: The Secret Story of the Rebels who Fought for Britain to Defeat Hitler* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020)

Review by Malcolm Baines

**T**he *Glamour Boys* is a fascinating overview of the lives and political careers of ten queer MPs, all broadly aligned with the National Government during the period from 1931 to 1945, paradoxically written by a well-known gay Labour MP. That is itself somewhat striking, as the research for this book must have required Bryant to dive deep into the intricacies of Conservative political and social culture; and, whilst this did overlap to an extent with the residual (by the 1930s) Liberal political and social culture, the subjects of the book had hardly any contact with Labour political and social culture. The thrust of the book's argument is that these queer MPs played a key role in helping Britain decide to stand up to Hitler's Germany and ultimately go to war with it in September 1939. Bryant's portrayal is a very sympathetic and empathetic one, and the story (despite flitting between several main characters) is told in an engaging and fascinating way. In particular, he captures the excitement of the parliamentary debates and the interface between cabinet, parliamentary and wider political discussion that was so typical of the period. It is therefore an excellent and entertaining read reflecting substantial historical

research and a good understanding of the challenges of the social and sexual challenges that confronted queer men in the 1930s.

Ironically, one of the best-known queer MPs of the period – especially recently, following Simon Heffer's new edition of his diaries – is Chips Channon. He is very much a voice from the wings in Bryant's book, making astringent comments on the lives and political careers of the protagonists, in his role as one of Neville Chamberlain's leading cheerleaders and supporters, and doing his best to stymie the actions of Bryant's political heroes.

All this, though, still leaves the question of why this book should be reviewed in a journal dedicated to Liberal history. The answer is that one of the main characters is Rob Bernays, Liberal MP for Bristol North from 1931 to 1945. Bernays came from a clergyman's family with some Jewish background, was educated at Oxford, and then pursued a career as a journalist. He contested Rugby in 1929 before being selected for the Bristol seat in 1931. Bernays has traditionally been seen by Liberal Party historians as one of those MPs who sat on the fence between the Samuelite and Simonite groups in the early

1930s, before ultimately remaining a supporter of and then a junior minister in the National Government. He was someone who received plenty of negative commentary from contemporary Liberals – Roger Fulford is widely believed to have used him as the model for Augustus Stryver, the ambitious, social climbing Liberal MP in his 1946 political novel, *The Right Honourable Gentleman*. Bryant certainly identifies his ambition, but puts him a much more positive light, in particular as one of the first of the Glamour Boys to be convinced of the threat from Nazi Germany, in part due to his sensitivity to their inherent antisemitism. Indeed, the story is told that he nearly obtained an interview with Adolf Hitler – until he was forced



to reveal to the Foreign Press Bureau chief not only his own Jewish heritage, but also that the party was led by the UK's first Jewish political leader, Sir Herbert Samuel.

Bryant takes the reader very well through the careers of the Glamour Boys, including the fate of those such as Bernays who died in the Second World War. What Bryant also shows, perhaps unwittingly, is the extent to which a recognisable Liberal social and political culture persisted until at least 1945, even

among the Liberal Nationals. When Bernays finally did marry, in 1942, it was to the daughter of a former Coalition Liberal MP, George Britton, who sat for Bristol East from 1918 to 1922; whilst his big political break was joining Lord Beauchamp, one-time member of Campbell-Bannerman and Asquith's administrations, as his speechwriter and PA for his 1930 empire tour.

From a wider Liberal historical perspective, other Liberal figures, such as Lothian, Beauchamp, Mabane, Mander,

Reading, Wilfrid Roberts and Leslie Hore-Belisha, flit in and out of the stories of the Glamour Boys, which makes it an interesting read and reminds us of the roles that Liberals played both in support for and opposition to appeasement in the years before the outbreak of war. ■

Malcolm Baines read history at Cambridge, Lancaster and Oxford. He is a member of the Editorial Board of the *Journal of Liberal History*, and edited the recent special issue on 'The Survival of the Liberal Party 1931–1960' (issue 127, summer 2025).

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## Politicians who mattered

Vernon Bogdanor, *Making the Weather: Six Politicians who Changed Modern Britain* (Haus Publishing, 2024)

Review by David Dutton

Vernon Bogdanor enjoys a well-merited reputation as the foremost historian of the modern British constitution. In recent years he has moved his focus into more specifically party politics. His magisterial work *The Strange Survival of Liberal Britain*, offering a compelling overview of the political scene of the late Victorian and Edwardian era, was published in 2022. It forced all who read it to reconsider many of the orthodoxies relating to this turbulent period. He now offers *Making the Weather*, a series of essays based on lectures originally given at Gresham College, in which he considers the careers

and, more importantly, the impact of six postwar politicians – three from the left and three from the right – who 'changed modern Britain'. These short essays are obviously not the vehicle for startlingly new biographical details about the individuals considered. Their value lies in Bogdanor's nuanced and carefully crafted insights into the strengths – and weaknesses and sometimes even the internal contradictions – of their thinking.

A word of explanation of the book's title is perhaps in order. In his classic *Great Contemporaries*, first published in 1937, Winston

Churchill described Joseph Chamberlain at the height of his powers – a member of a Unionist cabinet, with the 'august Lord Salisbury, Prime Minister since God knew when' and 'wise, cautious, polished, comprehending, airily fearless, Arthur Balfour' as Leader of the House of Commons. But, stressed Churchill, it was Chamberlain 'who made the weather'.<sup>1</sup> In similar terms, Bogdanor has not written a study of the 'nearly men' of recent decades, the prime ministers we might have had if only circumstances had worked out a little differently. His focus is on the influence exerted by his six case