

of politics bleeds into the language of home.

This dual lens also helps the book avoid one of the common problems of political memoirs: the temptation to settle scores. There are, inevitably, portraits of colleagues – some generous, some less so – but the narrative mostly resists old grievances. Instead, it helps illuminate a more interesting question: how decent people, operating in good faith, can still end up trapped in spirals of distrust, factionalism, and strategic

misfire. That is an especially pertinent question, given the Liberal Democrats' recurrent challenge of combining moral seriousness with organisational ruthlessness.

Ultimately, *Partnership and Politics in a Divided Decade* works best as a document of Liberal politics under stress: a party asked to govern, punished for governing, then challenged to remain relevant in a landscape reshaped by Brexit and increasing polarisation. It is also a book about political companionship – about the

personal institutions that underpin public ones. For Liberal historians, it offers valuable texture: not just a retrospective narrative of the 2010s, but a record of how those years sounded and felt, day by day, inside one household that sat very close to the centre of events. ■

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## The Simons

John Ayshford, Martin Dodge, H S Jones, Diana Leitch and Janet Wolff (eds.), *The Simons of Manchester: How one family shaped a city and a nation* (Manchester University Press, 2024)

Review by Jaime Reynolds

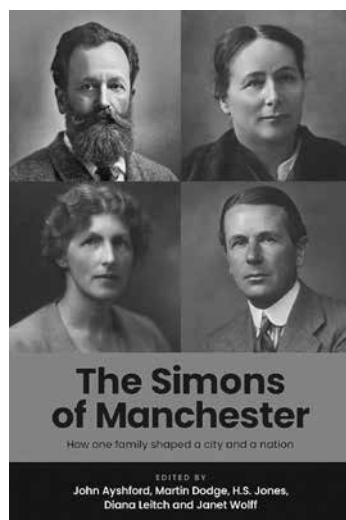
Ernest Simon crops up in Liberal history as a somewhat obscure figure: a progressive who contributed to party ideas and the Liberal Summer Schools in the 1920s, and an MP for a few years before 1931. As the authors acknowledge, he remains relatively unknown and they note the tendency to confuse him with his more prominent contemporary, Sir John Simon. Apart from his short spell in parliament, Ernest was a successful businessman and philanthropist, wrote influential books and campaigned on housing and planning, and was chairman of the BBC for five years. The long public career of his wife Shena

in local government and education is even less well known, as is the record of public work of his parents, Henry and Emily. Largely, this is because they were not national figures; their activity was focused on Manchester where, as this book makes clear, they made a 'formidable impact on the city, its social institutions and its politics'.

Writing on British political history has, until recently, tended to fixate on Westminster, overlooking the importance of politics at the local level, especially in the period before 1945, when it was still a formidable force. The Simons are notable amongst the

victims of this neglect, so this copiously illustrated joint-volume by a group of Manchester-based academics, sponsored by the Simon Fund, is a valuable addition to the growing literature of political biography adopting a local perspective. It breaks new ground by approaching the Simons not just as individuals but as a family, projecting 'a powerful family tradition of public service, deliberately transmitted'.

The first three chapters describe how the Simons emerged as prominent figures in the Manchester German diaspora, like many of them, liberal exiles from the 1848 revolution in Germany.



Henry Simon was an engineer who tapped continental know-how to develop and implement innovative and more efficient industrial processes: 'the Simon system' in flour milling and coke-processing factories in Britain and abroad. This led to considerable wealth, philanthropic work and civic activity in the city. His second wife, Emily, also of German émigré extraction, was likewise heavily involved in philanthropy, poverty-relief and education, and was especially prominent in the foundation and management of Withington Girls' School. Despite her commitment to female education, she was an active opponent of women's suffrage, leading to conflict with several of the other women in the family.

Ernest overcame chronic shyness as a young man to qualify as an engineer and take over control of the firm by 1910, by which time he had 'gained a sense of self-exceptionalism arising from a perception of intellectual superiority

which cast off much of his sensitiveness' as John Ayshford and Brendon Jones put it. His political and social ideas were heavily influenced by H. G. Wells, the Webbs, R. H. Tawney and Fabianism, and he developed a driving belief in promoting the happiness of his local community and educating its citizens for democracy. He was a technocrat, one might say a social engineer, fascinated by the implementation of ambitious schemes to overcome disadvantage and urban problems. He was convinced of the need for comprehensive planning, the mobilisation of expertise and the encouragement of the 'practical' social sciences to supply the experts. Yet, for a long time, sceptical of Labour's nationalisation plans, he stuck with the Liberal Party and it was not until 1947 that he finally joined Labour, became a peer and soon after was appointed chairman of the BBC.

He married Shena Potter in 1912. Initially he wrote that 'it was a purely mental attraction' and of being attracted by the opportunity to 'pursue their many shared political causes'. It developed into a long and successful marriage and political partnership. The biographical chapter on her by Ayshford and Jones and the one by Charlotte Wildman on her feminism and civic work are especially valuable in shining light on this forgotten figure, and indeed the authors are persuasive in arguing that Shena

was 'perhaps the most vivid and remarkable of the four [Simons]'. From a wealthy shipping family, she studied at Newnham and LSE and was a friend of Beatrice Webb and of the same intellectual mould. She was a Manchester councillor from 1924 to 1933 and was particularly associated with the development of the huge and innovative Wythenshaw housing estate, built on land donated by the Simons. She was also a leading progressive education campaigner, pressing for better access of working-class entry to Grammar Schools and later supporting comprehensive education. She remained a coopted member of Manchester Education Committee for decades after she lost her council seat, thanks partly to her adherence to the Labour Party in 1934, and she also served on government committees. As Wildman reveals, she was also an expert on local government finance.

Further chapters examine the Simon engineering business, their contribution to housing reform and town planning, and their close engagement with Manchester University.

As the authors emphasise, the focus is on Manchester and the book 'gives short shrift' to the Simons's other enthusiasms. Thus, detailed attention is given, for instance, to Henry's involvement with the personnel matters of the Hallé Orchestra or to Ernest's part in the establishment of the department of

American studies at the university. Non-Manchester topics are largely left unexplored or dealt with briefly. This includes Ernest's national political career, his chairmanship of the BBC and his commitment to such causes as population control, leaving a lot of questions for further research. One wonders, for example, how his belief in curbing population related to the eugenicist ideas that were not unusual in Fabian and progressive liberal circles before the Second World War. Similarly, Shena's suffragism and feminism are dealt with in a broad-brush way. Charlotte Wildman writes that Shena was deeply sympathetic with the suffragette movement but, financially dependent on her parents, 'she could not join in suffragette militancy, as they were opposed to it.' It might be added that, from 1912 (during the peak of militant suffragette activity), she had to contend with

a mother-in-law who was an active anti-suffragist. This leaves many questions unanswered. Like many women of her class and political orientation, Shena's engagement with the suffrage question and militancy – and indeed Emily's with the opposing camp – may well have been complex and nuanced and would benefit from further dissection. More detail about Shena's activity in the women's movement, both in Manchester and nationally, would also be welcome. It is emphasised that she was a close friend of Virginia Woolf and other leading feminists, but it is unclear from the book whether and how far she participated in the lively interwar feminist organisations and debates. One puzzle that is not mentioned at all is what motivated Ernest to stand in the parliamentary by-election held in 1946 on the death of Eleanor Rathbone, the celebrated feminist MP, thereby splitting the

progressive vote and frustrating the election of Mary Stocks, Rathbone's political heir, who incidentally was also a close friend of the Simons and indeed, later, Ernest's first biographer.

It is no surprise or criticism that both the fresh subject-matter and original perspective of *The Simons of Manchester* throw up many further questions and lines of research to be explored. The book also provides a model that could be usefully followed to examine the traditions and contribution of other notable local Liberal dynasties: the Colmans of Norwich, the Markhams of Chesterfield, the Hartleys of Southport and the Browns of Chester, to name but a few. ■

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## Reclaiming Liberalism

Alexandre Lefebvre, *Liberalism as a Way of Life* (Princeton University Press, 2025)

Review by David Howarth

John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (1971) is a landmark in liberal political philosophy. It attempted something many believed no longer possible: to give liberalism a basis that was both normative and rational. Its methods, asking what political principles and institutions

reasonable people would choose if they had no idea of their own individual commitments, advantages or disadvantages ('the original position behind a veil of ignorance') and then asking how those judgments could be made maximally consistent with one another ('reflective equilibrium')

provided Rawls with a way to argue that a just state would be a liberal state. Using only arguments that appeal to universal human capacities and not to particular ethical or spiritual traditions ('public reason'), Rawls claims that we would establish a basic political structure that