

Reviews

Lloyd George as Prime Minister

Damian Collins, *Rivals in the Storm: How Lloyd George Seized Power, Won the War and Lost His Government* (Bloomsbury, 2024)

Review by Nicholas Alderton

The subject of Damian Collins' previous book was the Unionist MP and Lloyd George's parliamentary private secretary, Philip Sassoon. It was on the back of the Sassoon book, as well as a chapter on Lloyd George in Iain Dale's *The Prime Ministers*, that Collins decided to write a book on Lloyd George. The result is *Rivals in the Storm*.

As its subtitle suggests, the book is concerned with Lloyd George's political rise to prime minister, as head of a coalition government during the First World War, steering the country through to victory and finally losing it all in 1922. This is a history that has been written many times, from many different angles, some of which have focused on the First World War, whilst others have concentrated on the personality of Lloyd George and, perhaps just as abundantly, the decline of the Liberal Party in the context of all-out war. So, it begs the question, does the world need another book on Lloyd George, his stewardship of the war and the immediate aftermath?

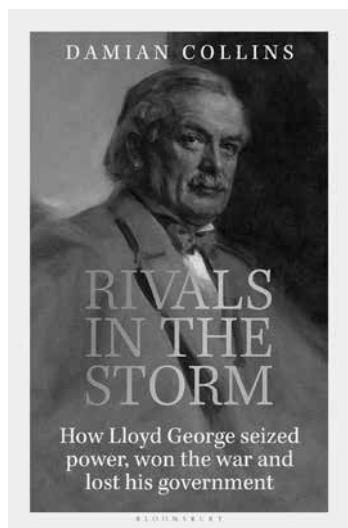
The strength of the book is that it is immensely readable and, once

Lloyd George takes over as prime minister, you are treated to a first-class retelling of the manoeuvres that took place between Lloyd George and everyone else. As a former MP, Collins understands this world and can breathe life into an interplay that could quickly become very confusing. However, Collins could have shortened the section that deals with Lloyd George's rise, as five chapters is a hefty chunk to dedicate to this. I was willing Collins to get to the action and show how Lloyd George acted when he eventually got the top job. This is a slight niggle, as even the drawn-out nature of those chapters show that Collins is able to weave together the competing priorities, egos and personalities of the various actors.

Collins has undertaken an extensive research process and has consulted the published diaries, letters, newspapers and memoirs that you would expect in such a book. However, the book relies heavily on secondary sources, and one would have expected more primary archival material, especially in a work that treads over familiar

territory. A case in point is the extensive use of Lloyd George's *War Memoirs*, which were published around fifteen years after the events depicted and were largely self-serving. I understand that he is trying to give a voice to Lloyd George, who anticipated the criticism he would receive when he wrote his memoirs, but Collins would have benefitted from a little less reliance on this source. (Having since spoken to Collins, he explained that his use of the *War Memoirs* should not be dismissed, as they were often backed up by the historical record.) It is good to see the royal family's archive being consulted and used.

This point about giving a voice to Lloyd George leads to another observation, which is Collins' obvious regard for his subject. At best, Collins is only mildly critical and prefers to leave any criticism via quotes from Lloyd George's enemies and, sometimes, his friends and family. Someone with a passing knowledge of Lloyd George understands that he was a complicated character, and it would have been good for Collins to provide more of his own analysis



of Lloyd George's motivations. A case in point would be the sale of honours scandal, where Collins shows the criticism from not only parliamentarians but also his son, Richard. Yet, there is no real comment from Collins, and this is typical of issues such as this. It would have been ripe for a comment or comparison to be made on the current state of the House of Lords but, considering the scandals that were rife when the book was being written, one can understand why the comparison was not made. In some ways, whilst reading the book, I was thinking that Collins wanted to keep an arms distance from his subject and allowed for any criticism to come from contemporaneous sources. However, by the end of the book, I felt there was a reluctance on Collins' part to criticise a man that he obviously admired.

Collins' admiration for Lloyd George may also have been the reason for leaving out large areas

of his later life that were troubling – preferring to show him in a better light. For example, Lloyd George's meeting with and brief support of Hitler is not mentioned or explored at the end of the book. Instead, Collins concentrates on the famous Norway speech, given on the 8 May 1940, which has been credited with bringing an end to Chamberlain's prime ministership.

Equally baffling is the issue of Keynes. He is mentioned as regards his attendance at the peace conferences, but his influence on Lloyd George's policy documents during the 1920's, most notably the famous 'Yellow Book', is not mentioned. In fact, there is no real mention of Lloyd George's policy onslaught prior to the 1929 general election.

Despite this, Collins is very good at getting to the detail of the politics, whether that is between Lloyd George and Asquith or his Conservative colleagues or with the generals. Collins conveys the drama, getting into the detail around the numerous crises that occurred. Collins does demonstrate that Lloyd George was felt by his peers to be the only one who could successfully prosecute the war and had the drive to do so. We also get a good sense as to why the public were on his side: his oratorical skills jump out of the page. I was quite moved by the Hedd Wyn tribute he gave at the Eisteddfod. Having said this, what is missing is more of an

analysis of Lloyd George and a greater sense of what was driving him. He was a mass of contradictions, and it would have benefited the reader to understand him better.

Undoubtedly, this book is well researched, engagingly written and never loses sight of its main thread, namely showing how Lloyd George wrested power, executed a successful conclusion to the war and lost his government. Damian Collins has written a book that will have mass appeal.

So, my answer to whether we need another book on Lloyd George, his stewardship of the war and the immediate aftermath is yes. Collins is a fine historian, and this book does add to our understanding of the politics of the war. Periodically, we need a book such as this, one that can appeal to those interested in the history of the war but not, necessarily, the fate of the Liberal Party. I enjoyed the book, and it deserves its audience. ■

Dr Nicholas Alderton is a deputy editor of the *Journal of Liberal History* and the social media secretary for the Lloyd George Society. His first book, *Emlyn Hooson and the Welsh Liberal Party, 1962–1979* (University of Wales Press), was published in 2025.

Readers of the *Journal of Liberal History* can benefit from a 20 per cent discount on copies of *Rivals in the Storm* – see page 2.