

archivist Christine Woodland is consistently styled 'Woodward'; the distinguished newspaper editor was J. L. Garvin not 'Garvie' (p. 68); and Disraeli was still alive in 1879 (p. 67). Yet, providing the reader can navigate these lapses, there is much of value in this book. ■

After over forty years writing books and articles on twentieth-century British politics, David Dutton has more time in retirement to pursue other interests. His latest book, *Game, Set and Championship: A History of the South of Scotland Tennis Championships* was published in 2023.

from infection, whilst applying no equivalent restriction on the activities of the latter. Butler objected to the double standards implicit in the treatment of men and women by the Acts and argued that, unless that was addressed, improving the position of women as a whole in society was impossible. In retrospect, Butler herself argued that the Contagious Diseases Acts were driven from the statute book by concerted prayer. Williams acknowledges that it is virtually impossible to review prayer life as a historian, especially as Butler does not provide details of her own as a model to emulate. However, Butler does write memoirs and biographies of family and historical figures such as the medieval Italian mystic and political campaigner Catherine of Siena, and through these Williams finds insights into Butler's attitudes, spirituality and prayer life.

Josephine Butler was born in 1828 and died in 1906, so her life straddled the Victorian period. However, in her refusal to conform to Victorian gendered and religious categories she stands out. Butler exposes the prevailing power structures, hypocrisy, consumerism and sexual exploitation of Victorian Britain which combined a self-image as a Christian country with the creation of the greatest empire the world has ever known. However, Sarah Williams writes a spiritual history of her subject, narrating

Campaigner for women

Sarah C. Williams, *When Courage Calls: Josephine Butler and the Radical Pursuit of Justice for Women* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2025)

Review by Malcolm Baines

In some ways this is a strange book to be reviewed in the *Journal of Liberal History*. Josephine Butler has a substantial Liberal pedigree – great niece (born a Grey) of the renowned Whig prime minister Earl Grey whose achievements included the Great Reform Act in 1832 and the Abolition of Slavery Act the following year – and someone who lived and worked within the ambit of Victorian Liberalism. Moreover, she was clearly revered by the well-known suffragist, Millicent Fawcett, whose statue adorns Parliament Square, and who was a strong Liberal and later Liberal Unionist supporter. However, as Williams highlights in her introduction, and as is the main theme throughout her book, it is Butler's Christian faith – expressed especially through her prayer life rather than her

political views – that is the mainspring of her social activism. This makes the book rather a strange read for anyone who doesn't share that faith, even though every reader must come away full of admiration for Butler's commitment to the cause that she espoused and her skill and ability as a campaigner.

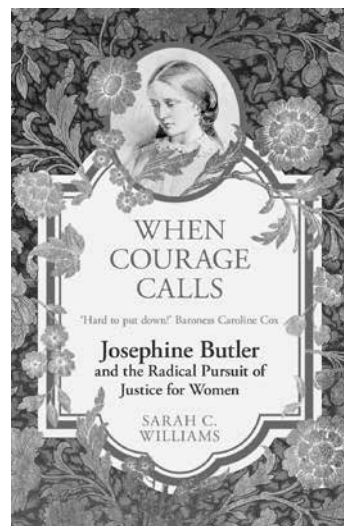
The partisan reading of Williams's book is also challenged by the fact that the Contagious Diseases Acts which were the main focus of her campaigning zeal were themselves a piece of largely bipartisan legislation. The Acts were introduced from 1864 onwards to try and tackle the impact of diseases sexually transmitted through prostitutes on Britain's armed forces. They used medical checks, combined with restraint of sick women, to protect soldiers and sailors

her life within the context of her growing faith, her personal relationships with her family and husband, and how these developed. The early part of the biography tracks her husband George Butler's unsuccessful attempt to develop an academic career, firstly in Oxford and latterly in Cheltenham. Throughout this, children are born (and die) and Josephine gradually becomes more aware of the challenges facing poorer women. There is the common mid-nineteenth-century Liberal theme of support firstly for the Risorgimento and Garibaldi and then for the Union cause in the American Civil War. In 1866, George became principal of Liverpool College and the family moved to Liverpool.

For Liberal readers the most interesting part of the book is that dealing with Butler's leadership of the Ladies' Campaign for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts during Gladstone's first and second governments. The Acts were first implemented by the first government, much to the shame of Butler, who was proud of her Liberal heritage. Butler had also signed the well-known petition to parliament calling for votes for women that was presented by John Stuart Mill. Williams places the campaign in its political context, which she sees as a Liberal one, holding the Liberal Party to account. There could be parallels with later campaigns

against Labour government policies in the 2000s, such as support for the Iraq War, which many saw as being antithetical to the values that that government should espouse. In May 1870, Liberal MP, William Fowler, brought a private member's bill to the Commons, to which the government's response was to prevent public debate or press coverage of the proceedings but instead set up a royal commission. The story of the continued campaign is well told, skilfully interweaving private prayer and spiritual growth with the public debate. The royal commission's conclusions were inconsistent and Liberal home secretary, Henry Bruce, proposed his own bill which, whilst containing some positive features – for example raising the age of consent from 12 to 14 – also extended the monitoring of prostitutes from the naval ports and the garrison towns to the whole country. With no real support for this incoherent compromise, Gladstone withdrew the bill. By summer 1874, the Liberal government had fallen, the support amongst backbenchers for repeal had evaporated and Williams acknowledges that despite Gladstone's lukewarm support the possibility of removing the Acts had gone.

Williams continues the story of Butler's campaign, looking at her success in extending it to continental Europe. Her lack of denominational exclusivity



was also crucial in rebuilding parliamentary Liberal support for repeal, as James Stansfield, Unitarian Liberal MP for Halifax, became the cause's standard bearer in the Commons. In June 1875, another Liberal MP, Sir Harcourt Johnstone, tabled a motion in favour of the Acts repeal, focusing on their ineffectiveness at promoting the sexual hygiene their supporters had argued would follow from their introduction.

The book also highlights how, as the impact of the evangelical revival of the early nineteenth century ebbed, its values were replaced by more exclusively masculine values associated with the British empire and displayed in a variety of all-male environments. The muscular Christian was set against the feminised Church. Williams looks at how Butler changed her approach to deal with these evolving characteristics of the social and political elite.

In 1880 Gladstone returned to office. In the meantime, Butler had become focused on the sex trafficking of young English girls to continental Europe, and she used her Liberal contacts to publicise their plight. This led directly to a campaign to raise the age of consent to 18. However, this, and a revival of the campaign for the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts, were all talked out in the Commons or parked in parliamentary committees, often staffed with unsympathetic Liberal cabinet members. Butler's use of organised prayer to push her agenda to overcome these obstacles is well described by Williams and makes for a riveting read as her prayer campaign accompanies a parliamentary motion condemning the compulsory examination of women. The motion failed, but Williams considers that its discussion was a key stage in the change of public and political opinion on the topic of the Contagious Diseases Acts. This change was confirmed in 1883 when Stansfield re-presented the motion of condemnation and this time it passed. The effectiveness of the Acts was nullified immediately, and they were finally repealed three years later.

The target now turned to the age of consent and in 1885, in the dying days of the second Gladstone government, it was raised to 16 following further campaigning by Butler joined by the sensationalist journalist,

W. T. Stead. Stead's involvement showed that campaigning techniques were changing, and Butler knew that she now needed his support to reach the new English middle classes and persuade them to support the campaign.

For Williams, the last twenty years of Butler's life seems to be something of anti-climax. Initial caring for her terminally ill husband, George Butler, leads to a slow and gradual decline in involvement in public life concluding with a final few years back in rural Northumberland. However Williams also highlights the new challenges that Butler found in relating to a women's movement that, by the last decade of the nineteenth century, was turning from being the prayer-fuelled spearhead that would transform society into one where men and women were treated equally to a more generalised attack on an intrinsic oppressive male system controlling that society. Legislation and its subsequent implementation by government was increasingly seen by feminist

campaigners as necessary both to arbitrate between male and female interests and to defend and extend women's involvement in society as a whole.

Williams's biography gives a compelling picture of Butler as a campaigner deeply rooted in faith and with a living relationship with God. On the fringes of Liberal political society, it is ironic that her campaigning was primarily directed against the Gladstone governments in order to obtain the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts and to increase the age of consent; yet that throws into relief that it was only by pushing a potentially sympathetic government in a more moral direction that reform could be achieved. As such there may be lessons for campaigners as to how to work both inside and outside government to achieve reform. ■

Malcolm Baines read history at Cambridge, Lancaster and Oxford, where he completed a D.Phil. thesis entitled 'The Survival of the British Liberal Party, 1932–59' in 1989. He is a member of the Editorial Board of the *Journal of Liberal History*.

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