

Reviews

Who Did It?

George Dangerfield:

The Strange Death of Liberal England

(Serif, 1997)

Reviewed by *Graham Lippiatt*

*'Stands the Church clock at ten to three?
And is there honey still for tea?'*

These are the famous concluding lines of Rupert Brooke's nostalgia-fest, the poem *The Old Vicarage, Grantchester*. Every generation believes the world was once a better, gentler place. We search for the lost golden age of long warm summers like those Brooke remembered in the same poem:

*'... when the day is young and sweet,
Gild gloriously the bare feet,
That run to bathe ...'*

George Dangerfield's masterpiece *The Strange Death of Liberal England*, first published in 1935 in New York and now reissued in paperback by Serif, is one of the reasons why so many English people have located our mythical golden age in Edwardian times. This is a truly classic book. How many other commentaries or academic treatises on politics and society written 60 years ago would bear republishing today, or find their way on to undergraduate reading lists?

Dangerfield's primary interest was literature. He read English at Hertford College, Oxford, then went to the USA where he worked as a critic and became the literary editor of *Vanity Fair*. *The Strange Death of Liberal England* has an epilogue entitled 'The Lofty Shade', inspired by a quotation from A. E. Housman, dealing with the work of the so-called Georgian Poets who first met in 1912 and whose leading light was Rupert Brooke. Brooke's death seemed to Dangerfield a metaphor for the England he rep-

resented – that idealised golden age, its life so mysteriously cut short at the height of its powers.

When Dangerfield wrote, however, he wrote not poetry or novels but history. In 1953 he won the Pulitzer Prize for American History and published works on American nationalism and the Anglo-Irish question. His literary background and the era in which he studied gave him an approach to the writing of history which drew on the tradition of history as a branch of literature, in the footsteps of writers such as G. M. Trevelyan. As A. J. P. Taylor was fond of pointing out, the words for story and history are the same in a number of languages. Perhaps this is why *The Strange Death of Liberal England* has the feel of a political thriller – a kind of historical Agatha Christie. Just who did leave those stab wounds in the body of the Liberal Party found bleeding to death in 1915? Dangerfield lines up the leading suspects and invites us to a *Murder on*

the Orient Express-like conclusion, that it was the work, not of a single perpetrator, but of four groups of conspirators.

Dangerfield's analysis is that Liberal England's consensus politics, a consensus based upon the Liberal virtues of rationality and tolerance, was cut down by the rise of political violence and protest against the state. He identified the main actors in this rebellion as the Tory peers, the suffragettes, the trade unions and the Ulster Unionists. He explores this thesis with great style and an immense readability. He sets out how the great election landslide of 1906 was something of an anomaly, 'built of showy but not very durable stuff'. Liberal England was doomed by an inherent inability to deal with – perhaps even to understand – the growth in the violence and disorder of industrial unrest, the methods and resistance of the women's movement and the threat of civil conflict in Protestant Ireland over Home Rule.

I found Dangerfield at his most readable in dealing with the Tory rebellion, the House of Lords' opposition to the Parliament Bill and Conservative support of Sir Edward Carson's organisation of volunteers to fight Home Rule. Here is a story within a story, with a beginning, a middle and an end – and fortunately all in that order. The starting points are Lloyd George's People's Budget of 1909 and the Home Rule Bill of 1912. The first, rejected by the Tory majority in the Lords, led to the proposal to take away the Lords' right to amend money bills and ended when the threat to flood the Upper House with Liberal Peers was accepted by the King. The second, the fruition of a long-held Liberal cause and a consequence of the dependence of the Liberals in Parliament on the votes of the Irish Nationalists after the two inconclusive general elections of 1910, ended when the outbreak of the First World War meant the Bill had to be put to one side. Subsequent events made sure that other routes to Irish independence and Ulster Protestant autonomy were taken. Dangerfield seems less assured on his

other areas of suffragette violence and industrial unrest, as though he knows there is a good tale to tell but gets a bit confused in the telling.

Dangerfield's analysis has of course been discredited by more recent historians. The period from 1906–14 has been recognised as a time of fundamental strength for the Liberal Party, with the emergence of the New Liberalism and the implementation of a reforming legislative programme after 1908. The Liberal vote remained strong in areas of traditional support, despite the growth of the Labour Party. Focus has shifted away from analysis of the prewar era to explain Liberal decline. The effects of the war itself, the internal Asquith/Lloyd George split and the emergence of mass democracy after 1918 have come to be seen as the competing elements in the demise of the Liberal Party.

And therein also lies one of the problems with Dangerfield's book. Is he just dealing with the electoral eclipse of the Liberal Party? Or, perhaps, just the failure of the Liberal government? He seems to be searching for something more, trying to chart a fundamental change in British politics and society, from a liberal society based upon reason, toleration and the primacy of the individual to

something else – presumably one based upon the collective identity and ideology of class. Dangerfield conflates these wider social questions with the narrower electoral fate of one political party and its problems in government. Of course the issues are linked; the one illuminates the other, but they are not the same thing and Dangerfield keeps mixing them up. Here is Dangerfield on social change:

'In the streets of London the last horse-bus clattered towards extinction. The aeroplane called forth exclamations of rapture and alarm There was talk of wild young people of night clubs; of negroid dances. People gazed in horror at the paintings of Gauguin, and listened with delighted alarm to the barbaric measures of Stravinsky. The old order, the old bland world was dying fast and the Parliament Act was its not too premature obituary.' (pp 65–66).

It is prose like this, the literary legacy of history in Dangerfield's era, which makes this book so readable. The analysis may be flawed and the conclusions out of date, but like all good history it contains truths and insights which endure. This new edition provides a very welcome opportunity for Dangerfield's work to be revisited by all students of liberal history.

Strictly speaking this is a work of contemporary politics rather than of history but since the editor of this Journal is a contributor it would seem churlish not to mention it. But like every collection of essays, some parts are tastier than others. The introduction is a sound summary of the background to the party, the traditions it inherits and the dilemmas it faces. The book list at the end is comprehensive and would serve any new or old member as a solid programme for their leisure hours.

The two chapters by Jones and Steed on the thought and tradition of the party both lay out the roots of the party in New Liberal thinking, from the turn of the century, and something of the contribution made by social democrat thought. As someone from a Liberal background, I felt slightly disappointed at the limited attention both paid to the social democrat side. The threat from Dr Owen meant that the new party had to be tough and more practical in its policies than historically Liberal assemblies had been, but, philosophically, what did the social democrats bring to the party?

I was more seriously disappointed that neither of these two authors focused more on the Gladstonian traditions of the party. The political agenda in the 1980s and 1990s has been driven by a Thatcherite perversion of that tradition. Even the Labour government has adapted to it. So has Paddy Ashdown and the party's economic spokesmen, but it goes against the grain of a Liberal Democrat conference and activists who began their careers under Butskellism. Brack's piece on policy-making highlights some of the tensions this creates and has benefited from an ability to speak openly now that he does not bear official responsibility for policy creation.

The strength of the collection lies with those who have had practical experience of politics, and the weakness is with the purer academics. The Bennie, Curtice and Rudig survey of membership is fascinating in an 'I never knew that' sort of way and highlights the need to recruit across

Building the Party

Don Maclver (ed), *The Liberal Democrats*
(Prentice Hall, 1996)

Reviewed by Tony Little

The strained birth of the Liberal Democrats ensured that the infant party struggled over its first few years and it enjoyed little of the glow of the limelight which blessed the arrival of the SDP. In consequence, there seems to have been little study of how the new party was put together and how it has developed. Consequently, this collection of essays is very welcome and would serve as a sound introduction to any new member who wanted some background as to how the party ticks.