

(pp.1–79), which sheds light on the context and meaning of the episodes mentioned in the minutes. *Women's Rights and Women's Duties* is an extremely valuable source for both the history of modern Liberalism and the study of women's political activism at the turn of the century.

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- 1 From a leaflet of the Warwick and Leamington Women's Liberal Association, 1890, cit. in L. Walker, 'Party political women: a comparative study of Liberal women and the Primrose League', in J. Rendall (ed.), *Equal or Different: Women's Politics 1800–1914* (Oxford, 1987), p.177.
- 2 Ishbel, Lady Aberdeen, 'We Two'. *Reminiscences of Lord and Lady Aberdeen*, vol.1 (London, 1925), p.278.

From Walpole, 1720, to Blair, 2005

Roger Ellis and Geoffrey Treasure, *Britain's Prime Ministers* (London: Shephard-Walwyn, 2005)

Reviewed by **Dr J. Graham Jones**

THIS IMPRESSIVE, eminently readable tome fills a distinct gap and is to be very warmly welcomed. We are presented with splendid biographical entries for each British Prime Minister from Sir Robert Walpole, generally considered the first to occupy the office, until the present incumbent, Tony Blair. Writing from the vantage point of the summer of 2005, the authors conclude, 'It is too soon to hazard a verdict on Blair's New Labour governments', although they admit that a risk exists that they may well 'be written down as the most disappointing governments of modern times' (p. 292).

Though Walpole never officially held the title of 'Prime Minister', his long tenure as principal minister of the Crown and the dominant figure in the House of Commons effectively established him as Britain's first Prime Minister. The circumstances of the Hanoverian succession left him and his successors more answerable to a majority in Parliament than to the King. Although George III sought a more active role in government, leadership of Parliament became the

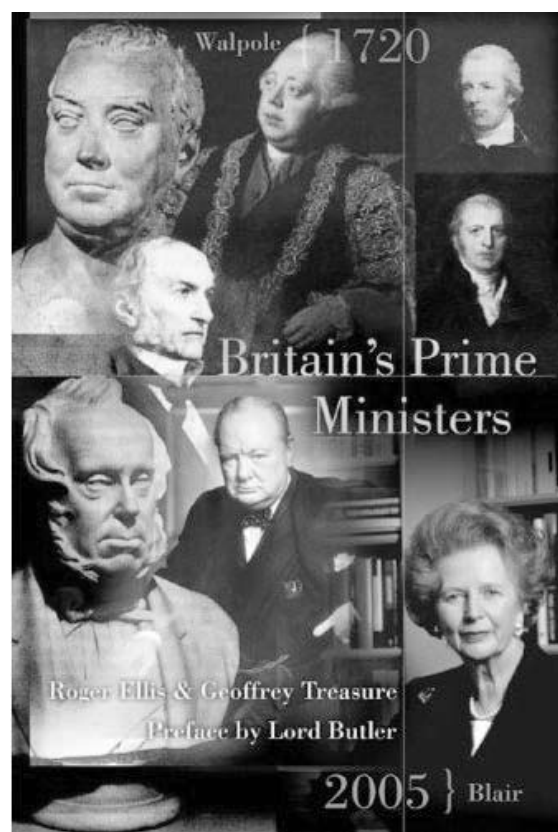
determining factor of who was Prime Minister.

The nineteenth century into the twentieth marked a new shift in emphasis. At the beginning of this period, Parliament was dominated by a land-owning oligarchy, but as the franchise was gradually extended to adult male and, finally female, suffrage, the Prime Minister became answerable to the democratic vote. The creation of the welfare state and management of the economy gave a different emphasis to the role in the second half of the twentieth century. These essays, revealing how each holder moulded the office in response to the situation of the time, make a valuable contribution to the current debate about the nature of the office.

The length and detail of the individual entries vary considerably. The average length is about 2,500 words. The longest are reserved for Walpole and Churchill, but several other premiers also receive extended treatments, among them William Pitt the Elder, Pitt the Younger, the Earl of Liverpool, Gladstone, Lloyd George and Margaret Thatcher. By far the

shortest piece is on the little known Duke of Devonshire, who held office for just eight months in 1756–57. But there are also surprisingly brief articles on much more prominent individuals like Rosebery, Sir Henry Campbell Bannerman and Sir Alec Douglas-Home. Even Harold Wilson, who headed four Labour governments and dominated the Labour Party for a long time, is accorded no more than four and a half pages. The authors were no doubt constrained by considerations of space.

All the entries show evidence of wide, thoughtful and up-to-date reading, and the authors have skilfully woven their findings into a coherent narrative with a succinct, accessible style. Their assessments and conclusions are unfailingly judicious and penetrating. The seams of dual authorship are totally invisible, and it would be interesting to know the precise division of labour. Personal details and political history mingle freely. Most of the entries give information on the formative influences on their subjects,



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their background, upbringing and education. Their hobbies, pursuits and interests outside politics are mentioned; Clem Attlee, we are told, exuded a 'homely style ... He sucked at his pipe, did the crossword, was driven to his election meetings by his wife Vi in their small car' (p. 238). The authors also have an eagle eye for the short, apt quotation which does so much to enliven their writing (it would be interesting to know the source of some of them). It is notable, however, that the subjects' lives after their retirement from the premiership are given very short shrift. Jim Callaghan was defeated at the polls in May 1979, but lived on until March 2005, yet this lengthy period is dismissed in just five short sentences.

The preface by Lord Butler, who served Harold Wilson and Ted Heath as Private Secretary, and Margaret Thatcher, John Major and Tony Blair as Cabinet Secretary, adds insight into the current workings of the office of PM. A brief, thought-provoking introduction reflects on the changes which have taken place in the nature of the office of Prime Minister over the centuries. Each entry ends with a short list of the more significant biographies and there is a most helpful guide to further reading. The text is also enlivened with portraits and photographs of most of the more eminent and well-known Prime Ministers. The authors have quarried well in particular the magnificent resources of the National Portrait Gallery, but confine themselves to traditional head-and-shoulders portraits rather than family groups or pictures of significant political occasions and events. Some, such as the Karsh portrait of Churchill and the Bassano photograph of Baldwin, are already very well known and have been published many times before.

The general standard of accuracy throughout the volume is extremely high. It is evident

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that the authors have checked and counter-checked their facts with scrupulous attention to detail. It is not, however, true to say of Lloyd George that, in his Caernarvon Boroughs constituency, 'his political base was secure' (p. 194). It was anything but secure from his first election to Parliament in April 1890 right through until the general election of January 1906, and there was throughout this lengthy period a very real risk that he might have lost the seat to any one of his Tory opponents. Churchill returned to power in November 1951, not 1952 (p. 231). And is it really true to say that Harold Wilson was the only serving British premier in the twentieth century to retire voluntarily 'without the pressure of ill-health' (p. 254)? It is now widely believed that the cruel onset of Alzheimer's Disease had begun before 1976 and had begun to cloud his judgement and memory, and

that he was aware of this. Hence his sensational announcement of his impending retirement in March 1976. Following on from this, was not Stanley Baldwin generally hale and healthy at the time of his voluntary retirement following the coronation of George VI in June 1937?

This volume has been most attractively produced by its publishers who are to be warmly congratulated on its appearance. It provides the ideal, introductory sketch to the lives and careers of all British Prime Ministers. The study succeeds in being comprehensive and detailed without being at all superficial. It is certain to appeal to academics, college and university students and the general reader alike and will undoubtedly stand the test of time.

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Churchill reinterpreted

Richard Holmes, *In the Footsteps of Churchill* (BBC Books, 2005)

Reviewed by **Dr J. Graham Jones**

WITHOUT CHURCHILL, Britain might have been defeated. I do not say we would have been defeated. But we might have been. He was so perfectly suited to fill a particular need; the need was so vital; and the absence of anybody of his quality was so blatant that one cannot imagine what would have happened if he had not been there.¹¹

Attlee's graphic words are a sharp reminder of Britain's debt to Winston Churchill. But given the spate of biographies and other works covering Churchill and related themes which have poured from the presses over the years, one

might justifiably question the need for yet another biography. Any doubts are, however, at once dispelled by a perusal of this magisterial, highly readable tome – one of many published to coincide with the fortieth anniversary of Churchill's death in January 1965. The present volume was originally produced to accompany an eight-part BBC television series broadcast during the spring of 2005. Its author, Richard Holmes, is Professor of Military and Security Studies at Cranfield University and the Royal Military College of Science, a prolific writer with more than a dozen books to his name, and also a well-known