



ROY HATTERSLEY

CAMPBELL-BANNERMAN

the subject matter, his approach also had three specific limitations in this context.

First, Hattersley's own political experience gives him a particularly interesting perspective and response to many of the events in CB's life – but a political reflex is not the same as history. The book suffers slightly from a sense of not quite knowing if it was meant to be an historical analysis or a political comment on Campbell-Bannerman's term in office and the events of the period.

Second, no doubt due to his own ability and political perspective, Hattersley moves quite quickly through some rather complicated political manoeuvres and sometimes leaves the reader wondering about some of the personal and political background to various issues. Meanwhile, he tends to linger over other points that do not really seem, to the political outsider, to warrant such attention. His experienced eye is caught by the tell-tale detail, but some of these are made interesting

because of his existing in-depth knowledge of the topic; readers less in the know could be left a step behind as he uses history to make interesting but more subtle political points. This is useful as far as it goes, but does give the work a rather uneven feel at points.

Finally, he combines a chronological with a thematic structure, which means he moves forward and back in time according to his particular point. This is easy enough to follow if one is broadly familiar with the period and personalities in question, but may present problems for anyone approaching Campbell-Bannerman's life, not to mention the machinations of the Liberal Party in this period, for the first time. This approach also makes more apparent the habit of a regular writer of repeating certain turns of phrase under different headings. This is not a problem in terms of the content as much as it makes more obvious in this deliberately brief format the devices used for speed by the time-pressed author.

For readers already broadly familiar with Campbell-Bannerman's leadership, the most important aspect of the book is the bringing together of an examination of CB's young life and key points in his early political career with his time as Prime Minister. It seems clear

that his personality and his background, as well as those first experiences in the political arena, shaped this steady – some might even say boring – man into the radical or progressive he became. The juxtaposition of his personality and political position on various topics of the day is of enduring interest to all those involved in the study of this period of history.

The enjoyment of the book is derived not from being an attempt at a definitive history of a Prime Minister – because it is not. Instead, Hattersley provides a light touch and the easy style of an author happy in his task and familiar with his subject. Hattersley brings his own command of a broad sweep of political history to bear in such a way that you can almost feel that he is writing about friends. To the satisfaction of the reader, the subject matter lends itself to his more intimate political style. This approach may not work so well for other Prime Ministers in this series, but this volume is well worth a read.

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Asquith

Stephen Bates, *Asquith* (London: Haus Publishing, 2006)

Reviewed by **David Wrench**

WHEN C. L. Mowat, writing in 1955, referred to the 'giants of the Edwardian era, and of the war', he undoubtedly regarded Herbert Henry Asquith as one of the foremost among them.

The last custodian of a Liberal majority, and the last leader of a Liberal government, he has had few equals in the art of looking and sounding the part of Prime Minister. Revelations about his drinking and his infatuations

with young women have never seriously dented that impression. Until almost the moment of his downfall, every crisis, even every failure, seemed only to add to his indispensability.

Stephen Bates, who has provided this new biography of him, is one of Haus' 'journalists with a deep sense of the past and a track record of writing history' – a *Guardian* writer on religion and royalty. He is not, presumably, responsible for the infelicities of presentation that pervade the book, including the 'soundbites' that appear in the margins from time to time.

Generally, Bates moves confidently through Asquith's career, producing a lively and interesting narrative. One thing he does well is to reflect on the experience of being Prime Minister in the early twentieth century: travelling alone, paying taxi drivers himself and, in Asquith's case (and several others') writing staggering numbers of letters. On the recipients – mainly young and attractive women – he is frank but not judgemental. Venetia Stanley 'served as a safety-valve to unburden pent-up emotions and frustrations'. He fails to resist, however, the allegation that Asquith was a 'groper', despite the source, 'not necessarily the most reliable of second-hand witnesses'. This has some value as an illustration of politicians' relative immunity to scandal, so different to the present-day experience and so thoroughly exploited by Asquith's successor.

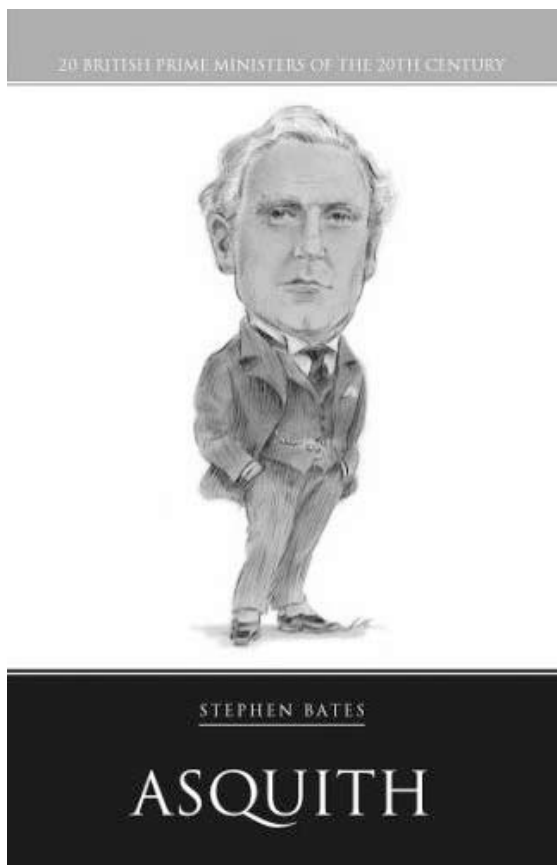
His political narrative is most sure-footed when dealing with well-known issues, such as the 'People's Budget', Irish Home Rule, and the early stages of the war. He is less clear about the funding of church schools, and his description of the Easter Rising in Dublin as 'led by a handful of Sinn Fein nationalists' is misleading. It seems odd

that the 'biographical box' for Roger Casement (does he really deserve a full page?) does not mention his infamous diaries. Bates can certainly be forgiven for taking his subject's side over the December 1916 crisis that led to his fall – 'the plotters schemed over their next move' – and he is dispassionate enough to admit that Asquith failed 'to see the coup coming'. He is clear enough on the faction-ridden nature of his coalition government, and the ways in which conscription and tariffs had weakened Asquith's position. It is unfortunate that little more than one page is devoted to the remainder of the war; hasty endings are a common feature of shorter biographies.

Bates comments, in a little bibliographical essay at the end of the book, that 'Asquith has received remarkably little attention from biographers in recent years'. He has not tried to rectify that; more than half his references are to the biographies by Jenkins (1964) and Koss (1976), with four to the *DNB*. There is no mention, for example, of George H. Cassar's *Asquith as War Leader* (1994), or John Turner's *British Politics and the Great War* (1992). This book is not aimed at professional historians, but its readership surely deserves a thorough synthesis of the existing literature. It is, nevertheless, a pleasant read, with one major exception. There is, throughout, an oppressive and judgemental hostility to the Conservatives that destroys any sense of an even-handed narrative. After 1906 the party 'scarcely bothered to make even the most perfunctory justification for its actions as being in the public interest'. The opposition of Conservative (not 'Unionist?') Irish landowners to Home Rule was 'not particularly coherent'. In the treatment of the 'People's Budget', the remark that '[battleships] were

a much more congenial project as far as the Conservatives were concerned than providing pensions for the elderly poor' is gratuitous to the point of incomprehensibility. In not wanting Asquith as their Chancellor, the electors of Oxford University acted 'vindictively, narrow-mindedly and discreditably'. That was probably their view of Asquith's treatment of the institutions they treasured, when they exercised their undoubted right to choose Lord Cave. But Bates has at least made sure that his *Guardian* readers will not be exposed to any unwelcome truths.

In his summary chapter, Bates makes the judgement that 'Perhaps his greatest blind spot was in not extending the vote to women before the war'. That is politically correct, but a political historian is more likely to identify his earlier mention of Asquith's view of Bonar Law. He quoted from Bishop Warburton: 'I never wrestle with a chimney sweep'. In his career the uncharismatic



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Unionist leader would hold in his hands the fates of the last two Liberal Prime Ministers. In both cases he let them drop. The greatest mistake that Asquith ever made, surely, was to fail to recruit him as an ally,

preferring instead the slippery Balfour who deserted him in the final crisis.

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characters like C. P. Snow and D. R. Daniel. The author has an eagle eye for the catchy phrase which he blends into his text with great dexterity to enliven his narrative. There are also a number of superb cartoons and illustrations, many of these previously unpublished and taken, we are told, from Getty Images and Topham Picturepoint. The use of helpful footnote references is to be welcomed, although this is haphazard and inconsistent, and many striking quotations in the text remain unidentified.

The final chapter – ‘Lloyd George; an assessment’ – is perhaps the most impressive in the book. Not everyone would agree with all of Hugh Purcell’s conclusions, but this superbly written, thought-provoking section reflects on the decline of the Liberals and concomitant rise of the Labour Party, looks at Lloyd George and the land question, and the theme of anti-socialism. The parallels drawn with Tony Blair are lively and stimulating. Purcell has considerable

Lloyd George

Hugh Purcell, *Lloyd George* (London: Haus Publishing, 2006)

Reviewed by **Dr J. Graham Jones**

HAUS PUBLISHING are to be warmly congratulated on the launch of this splendid enterprising series. This highly impressive offering on David Lloyd George, written by former BBC producer and author Hugh Purcell, augurs well for the success of the series as a whole.

This concise, lucid, highly readable volume is an excellent starting-point for readers unfamiliar with the course of Lloyd George’s life and career. From beginning to end the text provides evidence of wide, thoughtful and up-to-date reading, and the conclusions which Mr Purcell reaches as a result of his researches are generally judicious and penetrating. The volume is superbly paced, with a nice balance of political history and personal and family background, and the amount of fascinating detail apparently effortlessly packed into a relatively short tome is truly amazing.

Nor does the author shy away from discussing the many skeletons in LG’s cupboard, among them his highly colourful private life, the Marconi affair before the First World War, and the blatantly obvious ‘sale of honours’ and resultant accumulation of the notorious Lloyd George Political Fund which only served to poison relations within the Liberal Party literally

for decades. But it would also probably be fair to claim that there is something of an imbalance in the book’s coverage. The period of the First World War, the 1919 peace conference, the Irish question and LG’s so-called ‘wilderness years’ from 1922 until his death in 1945 are given a much more extended treatment than his early career as the backbench Liberal MP for the Caernarfon Boroughs from April 1890 and his innovative work as President of the Board of Trade, 1906–08, and as the reforming, truly radical Chancellor of the Exchequer from 1908 until 1915.

The very readable text is enlivened by the inclusion of tinted blocks containing additional panels of information: usually brief potted biographies of some of the key players in the Lloyd George story or pungent quotations from the mouth of Lloyd George himself. Here we can also read key extracts from the seminal works of other historians of LG, like the late John Grigg, Kenneth O. Morgan and Lloyd George’s great-granddaughter, Margaret Macmillan. The text itself abounds with lively quotations from many sources, notably Lloyd George’s own *War Memoirs*, which the author has clearly quarried with great gusto, the telling diaries of Frances Stevenson and those of other less well-known

20 BRITISH PRIME MINISTERS OF THE 20TH CENTURY



HUGH PURCELL

LLOYD GEORGE