

appetite and fear” (p. 230). This was largely a caricature of the situation in the late nineteenth century, when France, Italy and Spain saw vigorous struggles to establish the rule of law on liberal principles. However, Kelly’s interpretation of Green is sadly more relevant to the situation in the early twenty-first century, when it seems to provide a fitting epitaph for *Berlusconismo* as a system of degenerate democracy. By the same token, it is unfortunate that the philosophers considered by Kelly are all British or French: Italians and Spanish liberals would have provided an interesting counterpoint here. Moreover, Green, despite his eulogy of Dissent, drew his main inspiration not from British and French philosophy, but from German idealism, and it is

somewhat difficult to understand his thought – including his secularised Protestantism – without reference to his models and sources of inspiration. Finally, it is a pity that Kelly does not pay more attention to religion, not only because of its centrality to political cultures in general, but especially because the thinkers which he studies – most obviously Locke, Smith and Tocqueville – operated within an explicitly Christian definition of liberty and took the view that religious freedom was essential to liberalism.

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Judy’s story

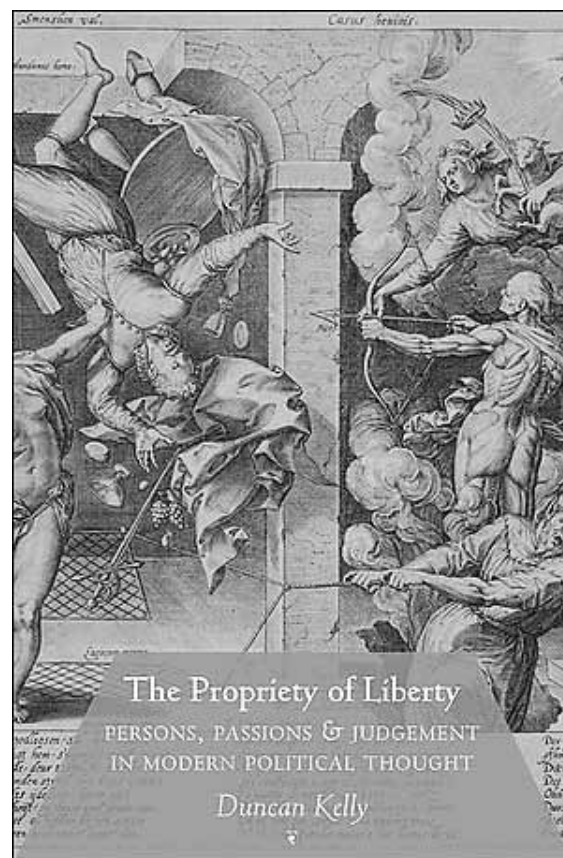
Judy Steel, *Tales from the Tap End* (Birlinn Ltd, 2010)

Reviewed by **Celia Thomas**

ANYONE THINKING *Tales from the Tap End* might be just a light, gossipy book of memoirs about David Steel and his fellow politicians by a sycophantic wife should think again. This is very much Judy’s own story, proudly starting with her Orca-dian great-great-grandparents who left for the mainland around 1867. Their granddaughter, ‘Auntie G’, is quite a presence throughout the book, starting with her crucial role in Judy’s childhood when she and her three siblings were left by their parents who, for long spells, were working in West Africa. Although born in Scotland, Judy spent part of her childhood in Buckinghamshire, when her father took a job at a timber research laboratory in Princes Risborough. Coming back from school one day, she was handed a leaflet by a Liberal by-election candidate in which she discovered that the party was in favour of, among other things, a Scottish parliament. Thus at the age of ten she became a fervent Liberal, so passionate was she about all things Scottish, although she only joined

the party formally towards the end of her time at university.

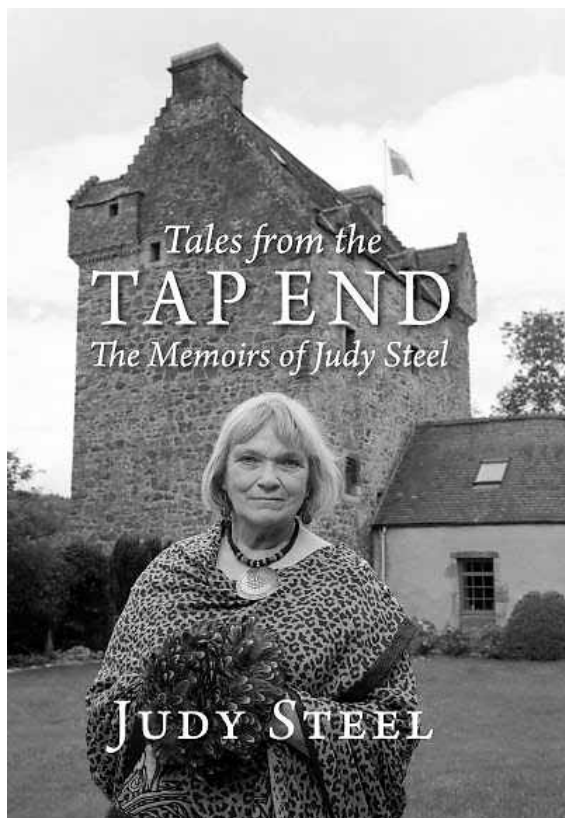
Judy met David when they were both students studying law at Edinburgh University; but while she practised briefly as a solicitor, working first as a Parliament House assistant, David chose politics – becoming assistant secretary with the Scottish Liberal Party. They married in 1962. From then on, we are reminded not only of the main political events since then, starting with the Profumo scandal, but also the early by-elections – particularly crucial to Liberal fortunes. Within six weeks of the 1964 general election, when David stood for the first time for Roxburgh, Selkirk and Peebles, the MP died suddenly, and at the subsequent by-election, vividly described by Judy, David won with a majority of 4,657. (“‘It’s Boy David!’ screamed the headlines, and I found myself in bed with a Member of Parliament.’) Soon they were both on the campaign trail again for the 1966 general election, during which time they met a constituent whose brother Sandy ‘won the Border Burghs for Mr Gladstone in 1886’, and Judy finds the



perfect family house which they subsequently buy. The interweaving of political and family events, together with tales of the social and cultural history of the towns and villages of the Borders in Judy’s lively style, characterises the whole book.

The first political milestone Judy chronicles from her own point of view is the Abortion Act of 1968, which David bravely pilots through the Commons, having come third in the ballot for private members’ bills. ‘At Cherrydene, I received some mail directed at me personally which either begged me to intervene or told me I was married to Herod.’ She sets out the arguments clearly and succinctly concluding: ‘Halting that traffic in women’s misery was no mean achievement for a politician who was only thirty years old when the Bill was given its Royal Assent.’

Other milestones follow – the plight of Ugandan Asians, the indecisive February 1974 election, the referendum on Europe in 1975 – all interlaced with the life of the Borders – the Common Ridings and the rivalry between the towns, a potted history of many of their friends, their growing family, and Judy’s involvement in the arts. In 1976 she recalls events



surrounding the resignation of Jeremy Thorpe from the party leadership, which ultimately resulted in David winning the leadership of the party in 1976. Judy writes her version of the whole matter in a clear-eyed way. Being the wife of a party leader pitched her into a new life, much of which she enjoyed – Wimbledon, overseas visits, royal banquets – and about which she is very funny.

However, the ‘bumpy road’ which David had predicted happened all too soon with the eighteen-month Lib–Lab Pact, which caused such heartache for the party. Then, three years later in 1981, the SDP was officially launched in the wake of the Labour Party’s lurch to the left, and, a few months later, the Alliance with the Liberals was formed. The 1983 election campaign, with its uneasy joint leadership of Roy Jenkins and David Steel, was a difficult one – not least because of the ‘Etrick Bridge Summit’, convened to try to sort this relationship out. Judy is characteristically honest but doesn’t shed much light: ‘What went on around my dining table I do not know, for although Peter (Hellyer) and I kept our ears to the door, we were not able to make anything out.’ Although the Alliance ended up

with 25 per cent of the votes, they had only twenty-three seats, and David was keen to resign. Judy was appalled, and she and Archy Kirkwood talked David into continuing, although they agreed he should have a ‘sabbatical’. However, after the 1987 election, which precipitated the formation of the Liberal Democrats, David did resign as leader, and he and Judy took on the enormous project of transforming a derelict Border tower into a family home with money from a successful libel action against the News of the World. Later still, Judy is able to tell the story of the first election to the Scottish Parliament, of which David became Presiding Officer, having become a peer in 1997. Young people new to the party could do no better than read Judy’s potted version of this particular period of political history which is concise and well-judged.

Soon after the general election of 1979, Judy had her first encounters with the performing arts, which take up more and more of her life and lead to her membership of the drama committee of the Scottish Arts Council. Sometime in the 1980s she became immersed in the writings of the Etrick Shepherd – James Hogg – a celebrated local eighteenth-century farmer, writer, novelist, poet and musician – eventually founding a Borders Festival of Ballads and Legends in his honour, and writing a play herself based on one of his stories. The festival became a fixture, for which Judy wrote a great deal, organising many of the events, and directing some of the performances herself. Some were

great hits, and others failed – she is as honest about her artistic endeavours as she is about everything else – but what surely was successful was that she used her experience of small political meetings in village halls to inspire her determination to bring dramatic performances about local heroes such as James Hogg, to those same village halls all over the Borders.

The whole narrative of the book is interspersed with poems by Robert Burns, James Hogg, Sir Walter Scott and others – and by Judy herself. This is quite a strange thing to do, but it works here and gives the book a very distinctive character. Judy is an accomplished poet, and I’m glad she did not refrain from putting in her own work. She also uses the device of placing a piece of up-to-date-prose – written like a diary entry – before recounting an event many years before, as though worried that readers will become quickly bored by the past. It does mean one has to remember quite hard which year we are in – and I could have done with more help here. Even more curiously, there are also a few recipes – both hers and those of her friends.

All in all, this is a book to treasure. It combines social history and geography, autobiography, biography, political history, storytelling and poetry – all told with flair, humour, honesty and verve. I didn’t want it to end.

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