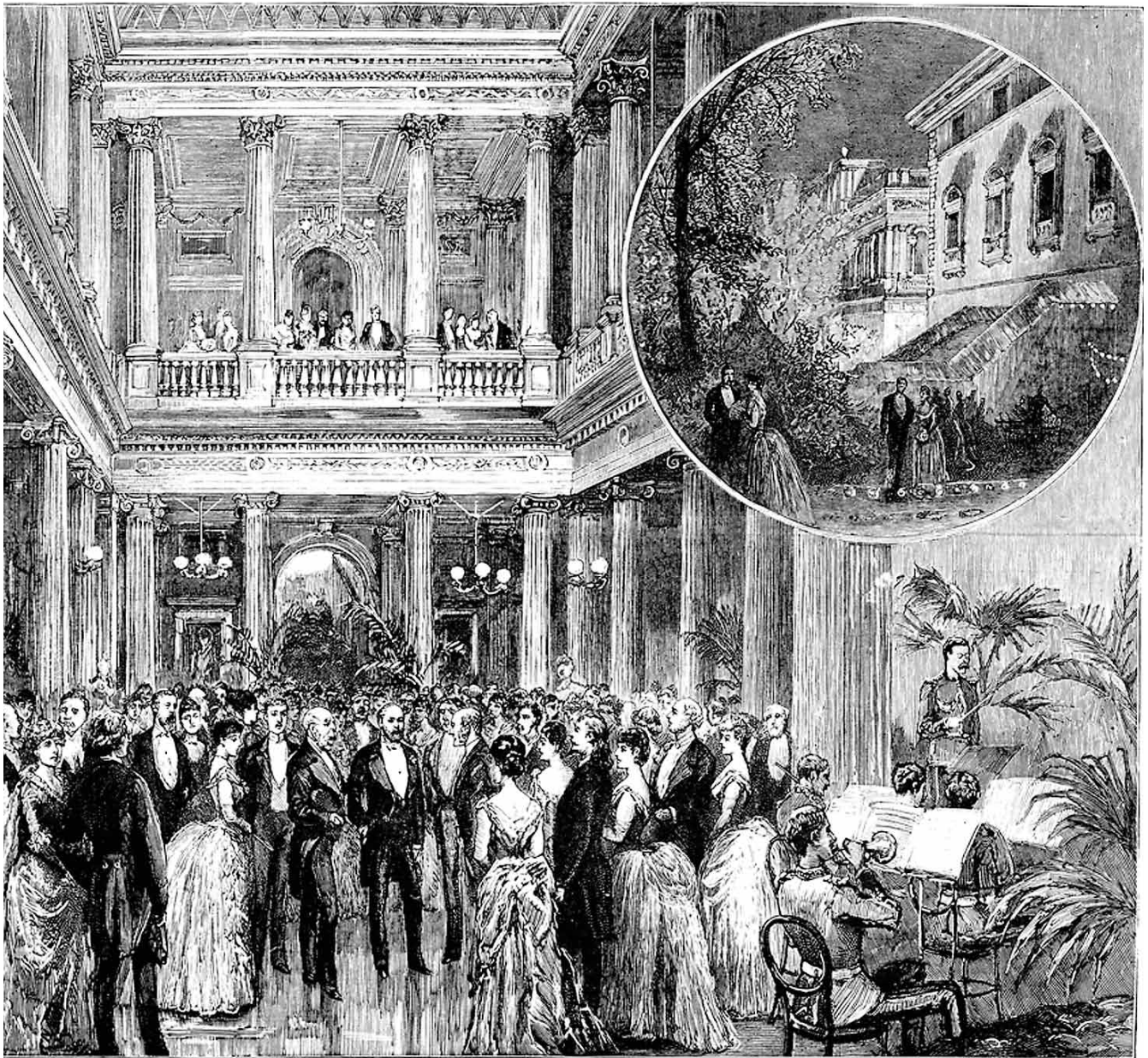


# THE REFORM CLUB THE END O



# B'S JUBILEE BALL OF AN ERA

The ball held at the Reform Club in London on the balmy night of Wednesday 15 June 1887 to celebrate Queen Victoria's Jubilee, as well as being the Club's own fiftieth anniversary, was a watershed in the history of the Club, marking the moment, in the contemporary assessment of *The Times*, when it gave up its role 'as a militant Liberal organisation' and became 'to a great extent neutral.' **Peter Urbach** traces the Reform Club's evolution from a Liberal political to a liberal social institution.

The Jubilee Ball at the Reform Club – the Club Chairman greets the royal party; 'Buffalo Bill' (pony tail and goatee beard) in the middle foreground; Henry Irving and Ellen Terry at the left (*The Graphic*, 25 June 1887).

IN ITSELF, THE ball was a remarkable and memorable event. *The Graphic*<sup>1</sup> thought it would probably be remembered as one of the chief entertainments of the year. For *The Lady's Pictorial*<sup>2</sup> it surpassed anything yet seen in that season of Jubilee festivities, and presented a spectacle so splendid that it would be long remembered in the annals of London Society. And *The Times*<sup>3</sup> thought it had eclipsed all the historically important entertainments that had hitherto taken place in the clubhouse.

The ball, which cost the Club over £600,<sup>4</sup> was attended by more than 2,000 members and guests, comprising the most celebrated in politics, fashion, the stage, literature, music and art. They arrived to a blaze of light that lit up the whole of Pall Mall and were waited upon by a small army of footmen who ushered them up the steps into the Saloon, where they were greeted by the popular Club chairman, Mr Inderwick, QC. The Saloon was illuminated as if by brilliant sunlight, masses of palms and coloured flowers decorated the space, and members of the band of the 2nd Life Guards, resplendent in their red coats, discoursed gay military strains.<sup>5</sup>

The occasion was unique in the history of any London political club, in that party distinctions were for the first time set aside, so allowing the presence of royalty, whom it would have been highly improper to mix up in any proceedings tinted with the colour of party.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, the Prince of Wales, his eldest son, Prince Albert Victor, and the Queen's cousin, the Duke of Cambridge, Commander-in-Chief of the British Army, attended by Earl and Countess Spencer and the Duchess of Manchester, felt able to honour the entertainment with their presence.

Indian nobility was represented too: the Rao of Kuch; Maharajah Holkar; Maharajah and Maharanee of Kutch Bihar; Maharajah Sir Pratap Singh, the famous warrior; Nawab Asman Jah Bahadur, Prime Minister of Hyderabad; and the Thakur Sahibs of Morvi, of Limri and of Gondal. The Lord Mayor of London, the United States' Minister, and most of the foreign ambassadors to the Court of St James were also in attendance.

The genial neutrality that the Reform Club loyally observed for the Queen's Jubilee was signalled too by the presence of prominent figures from both sections of the recently fractured Liberal Party, now out of power, as well as by leaders of the current Conservative government.<sup>7</sup> So Lords Herschell, Hartington, Granville, and Rosebery, Sir Charles Russell, and Joseph Chamberlain shared the Club's hospitality with Conservative Cabinet ministers: Earl Cadogan (Lord Privy Seal), Lord Halsbury (Lord Chancellor), Lord Stanley (President of the Board of Trade), W. H. Smith (First Lord of the Treasury), Henry Matthews (Home Secretary), Sir Henry Holland (Colonial Secretary), Charles

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Ritchie (President of the Local Government Board), A. J. Balfour (Irish Secretary), Viscount Cross (Secretary for India), and Edward Stanhope (Secretary for War).

Lions of the stage were also present: Henry Irving, who was piloting about Kate Terry and her sister Ellen; the actor-managers Mr and Mrs Kendal and Mr and Mrs Squire Bancroft; and Colonel Cody, who as 'Buffalo Bill' was taking London by storm with his Wild West show. Art was represented by Sir John Millais, John Tenniel, and Arthur Stockdale Cope and by the directors of both the National Gallery and the South Kensington Museum.

'One of the Guests' reflected that such a list on such a full night (for it was the night of Lady Salisbury's reception at the Foreign Office and many other entertainments) was a remarkable and refreshing sign of the times.<sup>8</sup>

The occasion was unique in a second respect, as *The Graphic* noted. Although ladies had occasionally entered the club, they had never before danced within its precincts. The Coffee Room, with its slippery polished floor, made a capital ballroom. Again, flowers, palms and ferns were used for decorative effect, music was provided by the remaining portion of the red-coated musicians, and the windows had been removed altogether, in order to keep the dancers comparatively cool. State chairs had been placed at the top of the ballroom from where the Indian visitors were amused spectators of the scene. Maharajah Holkar, gorgeous in turban and jewels and accompanied by a numerous suite, watched the dancers for a considerable time.

The Library was reserved for a splendid supper for all except the royal party, which was served privately in the Card Room, while other club rooms were thrown open as lounging places for the weary. But the great success of the evening, preventing it from turning into a terrific crush, was the garden. To the irreverent it suggested a *café chantant* in the Champs Elysée, with its small tables and groups of men in evening dress, strings of coloured lamps, and refreshments supplied from a huge tent. The Prince of Wales, the Duke of Cambridge and Prince Albert Victor (who by the bye, looked more of a 'masher' than ever, much bronzed after his

stay at Gibraltar), sat in the garden quite a long time watching the ball through the open windows.

They were no doubt also captivated by the elegantly dressed ladies, an aspect of the evening that *The Lady's Pictorial* analysed closely. Lady Berwick looked extremely effective, as usual; Baroness de Worms, who wore a beautifully made white gown and a great many splendid jewels, was literally ablaze with diamonds; Miss Ellen Terry wore a picturesque gown of deep amber brocade made with puffed sleeves and a high Medici collar; Mrs Bottomley Firth a low black gown; and Mrs Warren de la Rue a gown of pale green brocade and exquisite diamonds. Pretty Miss Fortescue appeared in white and pearls, looking all the better for her American tour. The Misses Hepworth Dixon were dressed alike in pale lilac silk and tulle, with bouquets of mauve rhododendrons, while Mrs Holland, the wife of the member for Brighton, was in green and pink and carried a bouquet made entirely of reeds and grasses.

So much for contemporary accounts of the Jubilee Ball, whose picturesque phrases I have plundered wholesale in order to convey the breathless excitement that the event aroused.

*The Times*, however, repeatedly struck a more serious note as it reflected on the social and political significance of the ball: 'Liberals cannot help feeling that the event marks decisively the close of the militant phase of reform ... The Reform Club, which was established ... as a militant Liberal organisation ... has become to a great extent neutral.' And in a second article, published on the same day: 'The pugnacious political spirit which animated the original members of the Reform has given place in their successors to a spirit of tolerance or indifference. They agree to differ among themselves as well as with their political opponents. The club has sobered down.'<sup>9</sup>

The Club had indeed changed. Political divisions that might have destroyed it were being set aside, and it was starting to loosen its exclusive ties to the Liberal Party.

### The first fifty years

Let us consider the course that the Reform Club took during its

first fifty years. It was established initially as the principal social and administrative arm of the reforming party – a coalition of Whigs and Radicals that eventually became the basis of the Liberal Party – in the wake of its triumph in securing the passage of the Great Reform Bill in 1832.

The Reformers did not act immediately to form a club. The huge majority that they won in the general election of December 1832 under the new electoral rules had induced a degree of complacency that their opponents did not share. The Tories rose more quickly to the challenges presented by the Reform Act, especially its requirement that a register of electors be compiled for every constituency. They worked hard to encourage their own supporters to register, and did all in their power to frustrate the registration of Reformers by raising legal challenges wherever possible against their eligibility. The effectiveness of these efforts was demonstrated at the next general election, held early in 1835, when the government's majority was greatly reduced.

The Carlton Club, which the Tories had established in 1832, did duty as their party's headquarters and centre of operations. The Reformers learned the lesson from their opponents' success and in May 1835 they launched their own central organisation – the Reform Association – under the leadership of Joseph Parkes, and with the solicitor James Coppock employed as full-time election agent. The Association was superseded in May 1836 by the Reform Club. The Club was intended to act as a central base for the reforming parties, the equivalent of the Carlton Club, whose premises were next door in Pall Mall, and to provide a meeting place for men of a liberal, reformist outlook. James Coppock was its first secretary.<sup>10</sup> The Club's political function was further underlined by the large number of Whig MPs who soon joined the club – 237 out of a total of 385.

From then, the Reform Club served as home to the Whig and later to the Liberal Party, as a place for numerous party meetings, and as a base for political grandstanding. For example, the banquet for Lord Palmerston in July 1850 was the party's way of confirming

Opposite page: *Punch* (18 June 1887) devoted a full page to whimsical sketches intended to illustrate the Reform Club's Jubilee Ball and to lines of doggerel (one stanza is reproduced here) aiming political darts at William Gladstone and his former Cabinet colleagues. Gladstone was no longer a member of the Club at this date and was not among the guests.

*Terpsichore at the Reform Club?*  
Verily,  
'Twill puzzle  
Party now to foot  
it merrily,  
Although 'tis  
clearly obvious at  
a glance  
GLADSTONE has  
led us all 'a pretty  
dance'.

publicly its confidence in him and his foreign policy after the Don Pacifico affair. And in March 1854, the Reform Club laid on a banquet for Vice-Admiral Sir Charles Napier to celebrate his appointment to the command of the Baltic fleet and to enable the government to re-emphasise Britain's alliance with France and Turkey against Russia. One commentator remarked that 'The dinner decidedly smelt of gunpowder.'<sup>11</sup>

The Reform's political role was reiterated in May 1862 by a circular to members announcing the intention to establish a voluntary association among the members of the Club, to 'promote Unity of Action among the Liberal Party' and to 'assist in the Conduct of Election Petitions, and in the Prevention of Bribery and Corruption'. The following year, in another circular, the Committee recommended that 'apartments in the Club should be made use of, as heretofore, for political purposes, in order that the head quarters of the Liberal party may be known and understood to be in the Reform Club, where advice may be available in cases where liberal constituencies may seek it'.<sup>12</sup> These initiatives led to the formal establishment of the Reform Club's Political Committee in 1869.

In February 1875, the Reform was the venue for a general meeting of Liberal members of parliament to elect a successor to Gladstone as leader.

A notable event in 1879 occurred when the Reform Club entertained the Earl of Dufferin shortly before he took up his post as ambassador in St Petersburg. The Liberals were out of office at this date and uneasy that one of their number had been appointed by one of their opponents, namely, Disraeli, especially as Gladstone had lately begun a ferocious assault on the government's Eastern policy which Dufferin was now bound to defend. The banquet gave the Liberal Party an opportunity to trumpet Dufferin's achievements as Governor General of Canada, and afforded him the opportunity to declare publicly that although he was now an agent of the Conservative government in foreign affairs, he remained a Liberal in domestic politics.

**The Home Rule split**

Over the years, political disagreements and tensions appeared within the party and, hence, within the Reform Club, not least on electoral reform, which some wished to advance

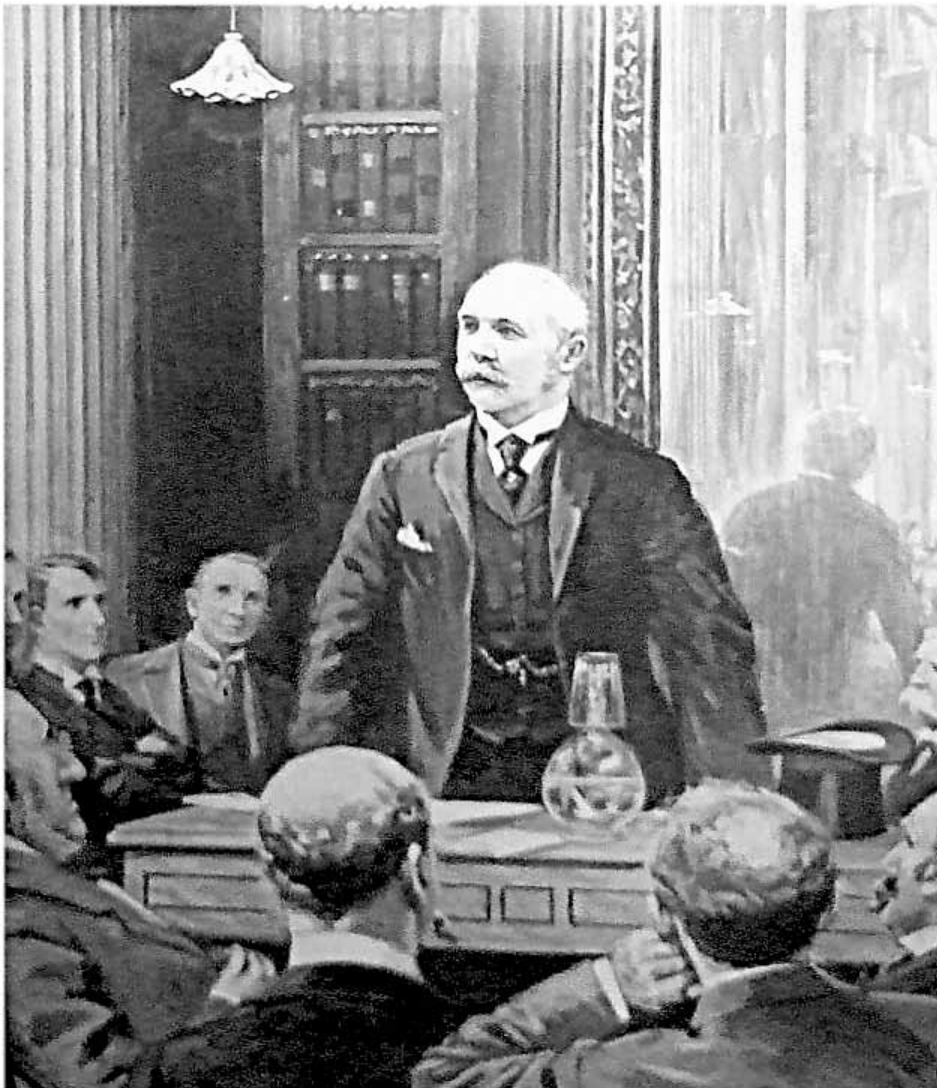
further, while others felt had gone far enough. But nothing divided Liberals so sharply and caused more dissension than Gladstone's desire to grant Home Rule to Ireland. At the beginning of 1886, Lord Hartington and Joseph Chamberlain led a breakaway faction of Liberal members of parliament in rebellion against the policy, so much so that by allying themselves with the Conservatives these 'Liberal Unionists' helped ensure Gladstone's defeat in the general election of June 1886.

These political divisions resonated in clubland. The recently formed National Liberal Club opened its imposing new clubhouse to some 6,000 members in June 1887, a few days before the country celebrated the Queen's Jubilee, but by the end of the following year the two sections of the Liberal Party concluded that they could not coexist there and, led by Lord Hartington, 400 Liberal Unionists seceded en masse.

Things developed differently at the Reform, where disagreement over Irish policy was more evenly balanced. Before deciding how to mark its own jubilee, efforts were made 'to introduce harmony amongst the rival sections of the Liberal party in the club,' in



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the hope that 'both sections of the party will take part in the jubilee celebration.' To this end a special dinner was given in late April 1887 for leading Liberal Unionists and Home Rulers.<sup>13</sup>

At about the same time, the rivalry between the two sections was played out in a less direct, rather comical, gentlemanly way. Sir Henry Lucy described what happened: 'Just after the split in the Liberal party opened, the Dissident Liberals at the Reform set in foot a scheme to present the Club with a portrait of Lord Hartington. Thereupon the Home Rulers opened a subscription for a portrait of Mr Gladstone. Subscription was limited to a guinea, the list, of course, open only to members. An interesting and occasionally exciting race followed. Lord Hartington having got the start, kept it for a few weeks. But the Gladstonians doggedly forged ahead, till the two favourites were running neck and neck, finishing, as a sporting

member put it, so that an umbrella would have covered both.'<sup>14</sup>

Reform Club records confirm Lucy's account. A portrait of Hartington was in fact commissioned by the committee and completed, and one of Gladstone (who refused to sit for the commissioned artist) was purchased, the costs of each being met out of the guineas that members had subscribed. Today, Hartington and Gladstone hang fraternally side by side in the clubhouse.<sup>15</sup>

The two Liberal factions within the Reform Club had evidently found a *modus vivendi* which, by mid-1887, gave it the appearance of political neutrality, sufficient at any rate for both royalty and representatives of all the political groups to feel able to accept the Club's hospitality to celebrate its own and the Queen's Jubilee.

### A brief political revival

But political neutrality proved hard to maintain, and within a few

years, the old political allegiances and controversies were stirring again in the Reform. They stirred, for example, on the occasion of the 'Gladstonian' banquet at the club in March 1892 to celebrate the success of 'Progressive' candidates at the county council elections. Many grandees of the Liberal Party were invited to attend, as well as Liberal members and candidates. *The Times's* correspondent expected that the event would provoke 'great indignation amongst the Unionists of the club, who consider that their forbearance has been grossly imposed upon.'<sup>16</sup> And indeed it seems to have done just that, for six club members let it be known 'on behalf of a large number of ... fellow-members' that they dissociated themselves 'from all complicity in proceedings which violate the usages and comity of club life.' And they protested against 'the inference, perhaps not unnatural in these circumstances, that the Reform Club has ... been turned into a Separatist caucus.'<sup>17</sup>

Controversy also arose over the Liberal Party meeting to elect a new leader – in the event, Campbell-Bannerman – that took place on 6 February 1899 in the same club room where Gladstone's successor had been elected party leader in 1875. And those former times were further evoked by the invitations, which employed exactly the same wording as had been used to summon members of the parliamentary party twenty-four years earlier.<sup>18</sup>

Members of the Opposition bench who were anxious 'to see the glories of the Reform Club revived as the acknowledged headquarters of the Liberal party,' considered their cause to have received a great stimulus from the success of the meeting. But the return of the Club to a political role continued to be controversial, and hostility was voiced by 'a small Radical faction' and by 'the large Liberal Unionist section in the club, including some of the wealthiest and most influential members, many of whom have welcomed the apparent supersession of the political by the social element.'<sup>19</sup>

The most significant Liberal Party meeting at the Club after this was in July 1901, during another, major party crisis. On this occasion the Liberal Imperialists and the pro-Boers managed to paper over their bitter differences on the

legitimacy of the war in South Africa by means of 'resolutions which convey the smallest amount of logical meaning,' followed by a unanimous vote of confidence in Campbell-Bannerman.<sup>20</sup>

The 'sedative concoction' that was mixed at the meeting seems to have satisfied the party, but many club members were furious. One of them had objected in advance to the committee's plan to exclude members from a club room for the purpose of holding a political meeting 'which, presumably, will be largely composed of Radical and pro-Boer members of Parliament,' giving rise thereby to 'the presumption ... that the Reform Club is the headquarters of Radicalism in England, which it distinctly is not.' He urged the committee for the sake of 'the welfare ... if not the existence' of the Club to respect the feeling of 'the great majority' of members and not grant facilities for any more such meetings.<sup>21</sup>

'Another Member of The Reform Club' added that 'the so-called Liberal party in the House of Commons does not now, even approximately, represent the views of the majority of the club. Far from it ... The Liberal party, of which we used all to be so proud, was destroyed in 1886, and the party which now claims to represent it has since become so discredited that the majority of the club have the strongest objection to it being looked upon or used as the headquarters of that party.'<sup>22</sup>

These protests had their effect and very few more Liberal Party meetings took place in the Reform Club. The Club itself invited Campbell-Bannerman in 1906 to be fêted by his fellow members on his landslide victory over the Conservatives in the recent general election, a meeting that was so popular that members had to ballot for a place. Two years later the Liberal Party convened at the Club to welcome Asquith as its new leader, and as Prime Minister, after Campbell-Bannerman's death. And in December 1916 Asquith summoned Liberal members of both Houses of Parliament to the Club to secure a vote of confidence in his leadership of the party and in Lloyd George as the new Prime Minister. That was the last time that the Liberal Party held any significant official meeting at the Reform Club.<sup>23</sup>

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The Reform Club had weathered the storms of two major schisms and numerous lesser divisions in the Liberal Party. But it had managed this only by gradually casting off its historic political role, opting instead to continue as a social club, though still retaining a liberal character.

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- 1 *The Graphic*, 25 June 1887.
- 2 *The Lady's Pictorial*, 25 June 1887.
- 3 *The Times*, 16 June 1887.
- 4 George Woodbridge, *The Reform Club 1836–1978* (Reform Club, 1978).
- 5 *The Lady's Pictorial*, 25 June 1887.
- 6 *The Times*, *ibid.*

**Letters**

*continued from p. 25*

highly as Prime Minister, with no suggestion of hearty dislike. Nor is there any such indication in Jenkins' biography of Asquith.

It would be a pity if this comment were to be accepted as Jenkins' real judgement. Perhaps John Campbell, in his forthcoming biography of Jenkins, will help.

*Alan Mumford*

**C. L. Mowat and Lloyd George**

I much enjoyed the issue dedicated to David Lloyd George (*Journal of Liberal History* 77); it was interesting, informative and, rightly, contentious.

If I was disappointed it was at the lack of an article exploring LG's role at the very start of the 1914–18 war, when he was Chancellor of the Exchequer. Such an article would be much appreciated by a wide readership, particularly since the present Governor of the Bank of England, Mervyn King, observed in 2008 that: 'Not since the beginning of the First World War has our banking system been so close to collapse.'

- 7 *The Times*, *ibid.*
- 8 *The Times*, letter, 21 June 1887.
- 9 *The Times*, 16 June 1887.
- 10 Philip Salmon, *Electoral Reform at Work. Local Politics and National Parties 1832–1841* (Royal Historical Association/Boydell Press, 2002).
- 11 *The Times*, 16 Mar. 1854.
- 12 The Reform Club Archive.
- 13 *The Manchester Evening News*, 19 Apr. 1887.
- 14 Henry Lucy, *A Diary of the Salisbury Parliament 1886–1892* (Cassell & Co., 1892).
- 15 Peter Urbach, 'The Reform Club's portrait of the Grand Old Man', *Reform Review*, Winter 2009/10, pp. 4–5.
- 16 *The Times*, 12 Mar. 1892.
- 17 *The Times*, 15 Mar. 1892.
- 18 *The Times*, 1 Feb. 1899.
- 19 *The Glasgow Herald*, 16 Feb. 1899.
- 20 *The Times*, 10 July 1901.
- 21 *The Times*, 5 July 1901.
- 22 *The Times*, 13 July 1901.
- 23 Michael Sharpe, *The Political Committee of the Reform Club* (Reform Club, 1996), p. 72.

I was a history student at Swansea University in the mid 1950s where, to our immense benefit, Professor C. L. Mowat spent a sabbatical year. I still recall with pleasure the inspiring lectures of a great historian – and the friendliest of men.

Although his excellent and very popular book, *Britain Between the Wars 1918–40*, published in 1954, did not deal directly with the LG–Asquith split he makes it abundantly clear that he sided with Lloyd George. He contrasts Neville Chamberlain's attitude to Churchill after his fall in 1940 to that of Asquith's to Lloyd George after 1916.

His brief book on Lloyd George in the Clarendon Series, published in 1964, underlined his pro-Lloyd George interpretation of the December 1916 split. I think his outstanding publications should at least have been acknowledged when Chris Wrigley examined the much changed attitude towards Lloyd George.

*Rufus Adams*