

# REVIEWS

## A Leader without a party

John Grigg: *Lloyd George: War Leader* (Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 2002)

Reviewed by **Ian Hunter**

The first three volumes of John Grigg's outstanding biography were published between 1973 and 1985. Seventeen years later the volume covering Lloyd George's first two years as premier has been published. It is the most impressive of the set. Sadly, Grigg did not live to finish the book, which is completed by an epilogue from Margaret Macmillan, Lloyd George's great-granddaughter. Interestingly there are reports that Grigg has left sufficient notes and partial drafts for a skilled and sympathetic writer to complete, at least to some extent, the planned fifth volume on the post-war premiership and the final twenty-three years of Lloyd George's life.

Overall, Grigg's biography has done much to restore some balance to the portrait of Lloyd George and to offset the criticism that writers biased towards the Tories and Asquith have dispensed over previous decades. Grigg provides a convincing and generally sympathetic picture of Lloyd George. The vast intellectual colour and political talents of the man are apparent but there is no attempt to ignore the less attractive egotism, selfishness, sexual philandering and occasional lack of principle that were also part of one known as 'the goat' by his enemies, particularly Baldwin. Grigg pulls few punches when analysing Lloyd George's relationship with his secretary, mistress and eventual second wife, Frances Stephenson. In particular, the little-reported fact that he had entered into a joint suicide pact with her is

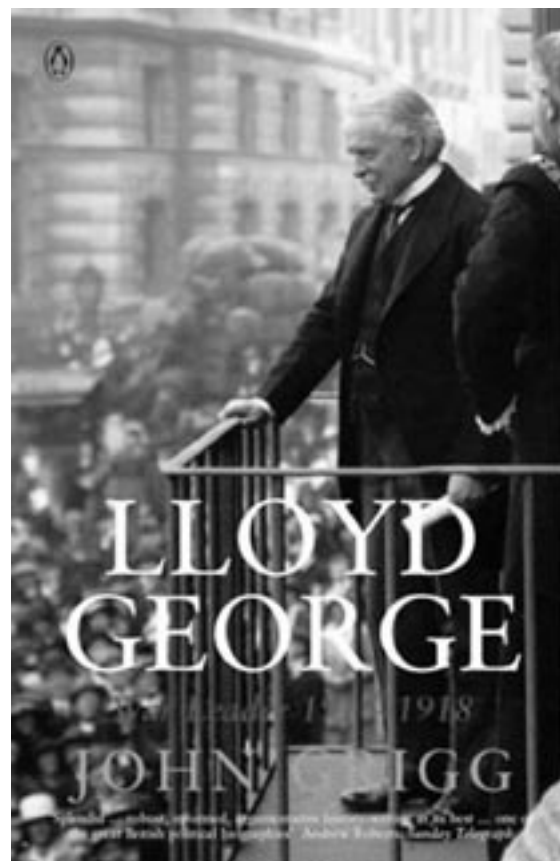
discussed with barely disguised contempt for Lloyd George's self-centeredness.

Grigg can hardly write a dull paragraph. This book dazzles with deep insight and understanding. Indeed it is almost two books in one – providing both a comprehensive summary of the key events and personalities during the period from 1916–18 as well as a sophisticated and controversial comparison of the war premierships of Churchill and Lloyd George. One of Grigg's main contentions is that the situation that Lloyd George faced in 1916 was even more desperate and critical than that faced by Churchill in 1940. One does not necessarily have to agree with Grigg to enjoy the challenge and freshness of his argument. Throughout the book Grigg sets out to judge Lloyd George's record in the First World War against the now better-remembered achievement of Churchill in the Second. The comparison does not find Lloyd George wanting.

One of the most attractive aspects of the book is that Grigg consistently maintains a sense of balance. In the chapter that covers Arthur Henderson and Neville Chamberlain (both individuals who fell foul of Lloyd George, and left his government) the writing is a master class in presenting both sides of the case without falling foul of accusations of sitting on the fence. Grigg is also excellent in his treatment of the difficult relationship that Lloyd George had with the military establishment. Although he managed to remove the ineffective and inflexible

Robertson as Chief of the General Staff, he had to tolerate Sir Douglas Haig as Commander-in-Chief of the British Army in France until the end of the war, in spite of having severe doubts about Haig's strategic judgment. Lloyd George had much less freedom of action than Churchill managed to achieve during his premiership. He was the Liberal leader of a government dominated by the Tory party and was dependent on them for his political survival. He became a leader without a party and this was at the heart of his downfall in 1922. It was not a mistake that Churchill would make in 1940 when, on the resignation of Chamberlain, he was offered and accepted the leadership of the Tory party.

Irrespective of the political weakness of his position Lloyd George achieved an immense amount by force of personality. He restructured the support apparatus around the cabinet with the creation of an informal 10 Downing Street secretariat separate from the official civil service machine. He appointed highly experienced men from



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outside politics as directors of manpower, shipping, food distribution, agriculture and other areas of the war effort. This was almost unheard of at the time but usually proved to be highly successful. The personal relationship that Lloyd George forged with leading Conservatives such as Bonar Law and Lord Derby partly compensated for his political weaknesses. It enabled him to dismiss Sir John Jellicoe from the Admiralty on Christmas Eve 1917 and to force the adoption of the convoy system on the Navy – a key factor in the defeat of the growing German submarine menace, which threatened to starve Britain into submission. His hold on the Tory high command psyche also helped him to restore Churchill from his Dardanelles-induced banishment to

office at the Ministry of Munitions in spite of Tory front- and back-bench opposition.

Grigg's final volume provides a fresh store of ammunition for anyone energised to argue that Lloyd George was one of the twentieth century's most remarkable British prime ministers, along with Winston Churchill, H. H. Asquith and, possibly, Margaret Thatcher. All were exceptional in that they had the capacity to make things happen that would not have happened otherwise. Grigg's work provides the case material for the advocate who would argue that Lloyd George was the greatest prime minister of his century.

*Ian Hunter is completing a part-time doctorate on the Liberal Party and the Churchill Coalition.*

early as 1954' in Liberal fortunes. The revival was more than that. By the local elections of May 1956, many more Liberal candidates were standing and the party's vote was moving sharply upwards. In the four by-elections during the twelve months before Grimond became leader in November 1956, Liberal candidates took nearly a quarter of the vote and even in the non-hoper of West Walthamstow they took 14.7%. What legacy did he leave that was so different? In the nine by-elections in the year following his resignation in January 1967, the Liberal vote averaged just 13.6%.

His impact on Liberal parliamentary success was just as limited. In 1955 there were six Liberal MPs, three of them dependent on local Conservative support, and an average general election vote of 15%. In 1970, the election following his departure, again just six Liberal MPs were elected (three with tiny majorities, all fewer than 700) and the average vote was 13.5%.

Obviously this reflected both the increasing number of candidates in weaker areas and three years of Jeremy Thorpe's leadership. Yet it is difficult to conclude that Jo's leadership itself produced an electoral revival or left the party stronger in popular support. The interesting pattern of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s is that there were three distinct revivals, one starting under Clement Davies (continuing under early Grimond), one under Jo Grimond, and one under Jeremy Thorpe. But as each revival ebbed it left the party a little stronger than before. Leadership seems almost irrelevant.

And if the party was certainly stronger organisationally when Jo Grimond left than when he took over, this could only be indirectly due to his leadership. The great gadfly was not an organisation man. The improvement in party organisation in fact owed most to a man who could have so

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### What difference did he make?

Michael McManus: *Jo Grimond: Towards the Sound of Gunfire* (Edinburgh: Birlinn Ltd., 2001)

Reviewed by **Michael Steed**

This is an overdue and comprehensive biography, but one that I found rather oddly focused. I had enjoyed reading the book, been impressed by the research behind it, irritated by the easily avoidable errors (as was David Steel in his laudatory review *Grimond: The Great Gadfly*),<sup>1</sup> but had wondered why it failed to tackle some obvious historical questions, all before I was asked to review it for this *Journal*. So I read several other reviews before composing this one.

Generally Michael McManus is seen to have served a useful purpose. Reviewers of my generation have welcomed the much-needed, thorough account of Jo Grimond's life, and have remembered how inspired they were by him – recalling a radical iconoclast and a man of

ideas. Generally, too, they have echoed McManus's view that the Liberal Party which Jo took over was a party nearly defunct, desperately close to annihilation in the House of Commons, and one which he duly rescued from oblivion. A similar consensus about Jo Grimond was evident at the Liberal Democrat History Group meeting in Brighton in September 2002.<sup>2</sup>

But let us apply the sharp edge of Grimond's own renowned iconoclasm to the significance of Grimond's career. Do the facts and figures support the view that Grimond averted what Steel called the 'near complete extinction' of the Liberal Party? They certainly do not. McManus himself acknowledges – but only briefly towards the end of the book (p. 375) – a 'modest recovery as

**Many of those who rose in the Liberal Party in the decades following Grimond's leadership, and who did so much to improve its fortunes, were his bequest to British politics.**