

## Patrick Jackson

analyses the life and career of Lewis 'Loulou' Harcourt (1863–1922), son of and secretary to William Harcourt, Liberal MP and cabinet minister under Asquith.



# BIOGRAPHY: LEWIS HARCOURT

Lewis Vernon Harcourt was born in Pont Street, London, on 31 January 1863, the son of William (later Sir William) Vernon Harcourt and his wife Marie Therese Lister, who died soon after the birth. Reflecting his inherited place in the political establishment, the child was christened Lewis (with Lord Clarendon acting as godfather) in memory of Marie Therese's stepfather George Cornwall Lewis who had recently died and had been a Liberal Chancellor of the Exchequer and Home Secretary. However, Lewis Harcourt was known throughout his life as Loulou.

For many years William Harcourt feared that his delicate and precocious boy would not survive, and the anxiety resulted in an extraordinarily close and protective relationship: Harcourt told Loulou on his twelfth birthday that he had been left 'as both a trust and a consoler'.<sup>1</sup> Even his father's second marriage in 1876

did little to affect the relationship. The thirteen year old acted as best man at the ceremony in Westminster Abbey and accompanied his father and young American stepmother on the Paris holiday that followed their honeymoon.

When Loulou left Eton in 1881 he became private secretary to his father, now Home Secretary in Gladstone's second government, and he continued to perform this confidential task until shortly before William Harcourt's death in 1904. Loulou taught himself shorthand and typing and was willing to undertake the humblest secretarial duties. His father was wealthy and well connected, and Loulou grew up with ready access to all the drawing rooms of London society and to the country-house parties where political alliances were made. Despite his over-indulgent upbringing Loulou was generally well liked and a welcome guest: older women such as Mrs Gladstone mothered him and confided

in him, and the childless John Morley contrasted his charm with his father's abrasive tactlessness.

Lewis Harcourt loved gossip and he was a good listener: politics were always the main preoccupation, but he also enjoyed photography, theatre going, and grouse shooting. The seventy-four volumes of Loulou's journal, now in the Bodleian Library, provide a lively account of political and social life in upper-middle-class London at the end of the nineteenth century and the narrative is spiced by racy anecdotes. These include the embarrassing expiry of a circuit judge in a brothel, the death-bed confession of a clergyman who said that he had married Queen Victoria to John Brown, and the story of an archdeacon charged with sexual impropriety who, according to Loulou, had to pay a high price for girls because he insisted that they must be not only young but High Church.

The political partnership between Lewis Harcourt and his

father grew even closer over the years and, despite the emotional intensity of the relationship, there were no quarrels or estrangements. This was remarkable because William Harcourt never managed to curb an exuberant and fiery temper and succeeded in exasperating and alienating most of his colleagues. In contrast, Loulou (tall and thin alongside his Falstaffian father) was self-controlled and quietly determined. When A. G. Gardiner included Lewis Harcourt in the 1908 collection of biographical essays *Prophets, Priests and Kings*, he described the inscrutable smile of a 'dominating, masterful figure' whose thoughts were 'known only to Mr Lewis Harcourt and his maker'.

Loulou became a shrewd judge of his father's political speeches and actions, and his influence behind the scenes was considerable. At the time of the Home Rule split in 1886, he was less sceptical than William Harcourt about the feasibility of Gladstone's proposals and he helped to ensure that his father remained at the old man's side, effectively as his deputy, rather than leaving the Liberal Party with Lord Hartington and Joseph Chamberlain, the two colleagues with whom he had previously worked most closely. From time to time Lewis Harcourt was tempted to embark on an independent political career. Several constituencies sounded him out about standing as a parliamentary candidate, and in 1892 he was offered the post of junior whip in Gladstone's fourth and last government, but he knew that he was indispensable to his father. However he served the party by acting as secretary of the Home Counties Liberal Federation from its foundation in 1887 and by organising election campaigns and supervising fundraising activities in the south east of England. He was also a founder member of the National Liberal Club.

In 1894 Lewis Harcourt played a controversial part in the

intrigues that followed Gladstone's retirement. His father had acted as deputy leader in the House of Commons and would have been the preferred successor for most Liberal backbenchers, who relished his pugnacious leadership. However the Queen chose Lord Rosebery, whose imperial policies approximated to those of Lord Salisbury. Rosebery expressed strong reservations (fully justified in the event) about his suitability for the premiership, and he would probably have abandoned the attempt to form a government if there had been any serious resistance by cabinet colleagues. Loulou fought a tenacious rearguard action in support of his father's claims, or rather, in Loulou's view, his entitlement after all the hard work they had both contributed during the bleak years of opposition. He encouraged a protest by backbenchers against the imposition of Rosebery and he used all his influence with the Liberal leaders to whom he was closest. He pressed Spencer to reduce the high naval estimates that were the proximate cause of Gladstone's departure and dangled before John Morley the tempting prospect of becoming either Chancellor of the Exchequer or Foreign Secretary in a Harcourt government. This strenuous manoeuvring was fruitless. Harcourt's high-handed treatment of colleagues during his period at the Treasury left many of them unprepared to serve under him, and he was too proud to play any part in his son's intrigues. The only outcome was to make Harcourt's humiliation more obvious, and permanently to sour relations with Rosebery who never forgave Loulou for the part he had played.

In the Rosebery government Loulou helped with the 1894 budget, his father's greatest achievement, encouraging the radicalism that underlay the introduction of steeply graduated death duties applied to both landed and personal property. He also urged the inclusion in the

budget of a graduated income tax, but Harcourt was persuaded by officials that this would overload the fiscal machinery.

During the years in opposition after the 1895 election defeat Loulou supported his father against the carping criticisms of the Liberal imperialists (Grey, Haldane and, more ambivalently, Asquith) who looked forward to Rosebery's return from political exile. At the end of 1898 Harcourt resigned the Commons leadership, in a manoeuvre coordinated by Loulou and Morley that was designed to force into the open the intrigues of Rosebery's supporters. Campbell-Bannerman and most of the other Liberal leaders condemned the move, but when Campbell-Bannerman took over the leadership he was subjected to similar treatment by the Liberal Imperialists and he welcomed Harcourt's loyal support, particularly during the Boer War when there were bitter divisions of opinion in the party.

In 1904, shortly before his father's death, the forty-one-year-old Loulou was elected to Parliament as the member for Lord Hartington's old Lancashire constituency of Rossendale. Harcourt escorted him into the House of Commons and reported that 'the dearest wish of my life was fulfilled. The House was crowded on both sides and ... cheered the rising and the setting sun'.<sup>2</sup> After a partnership of twenty-five years with his father, Lewis Harcourt's own political career lasted only half as long, but for nearly all that time the Liberal Party was in power and Loulou was in office. This suited him very well: he was not by temperament a back-bencher, nor an inspiring public speaker like his father, but a political organiser who enjoyed operating in the inner corridors of power.

He waited two years before making his maiden speech as First Commissioner of Works in Campbell-Bannerman's government; in March 1907 he was promoted to the cabinet in the same

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post, having declined a transfer to the Department of Education because he enjoyed his responsibilities for the royal parks and palaces, including the Houses of Parliament. In 1910 Asquith promoted Loulou to succeed Lord Crewe as Colonial Secretary, and during his period of office new railway links were established in Nigeria (where Port Harcourt was named after him) and in East Africa. He was also responsible for steering through the House of Commons several measures unconnected with his departmental responsibilities: in 1906 a bill, rejected by the House of Lords, abolishing the entitlement to plural voting for electors with property in several constituencies; in 1907 a Small Holdings and Allotments Bill; and in 1909 a London Elections Bill.

In many respects Lewis Harcourt's liberalism reflected traditional nineteenth-century principles, especially those inculcated by his father. Asquith admired his caution and administrative competence, and the two men got on well together despite Asquith's former association with Rosebery and the Liberal Imperialists. Loulou regularly sat next to the Prime Minister in cabinet and favoured quiet asides rather

**Sir William Harcourt in the House of Commons, by F. C. Gould**

than attempts to dominate the discussion in his father's style. Not all his colleagues appreciated this approach: Charles Hobhouse described him as 'subtle, secretive, adroit, and not very reliable or *au fond* courageous'.<sup>3</sup>

Loulou had married the wealthy daughter of an American banker and he entertained lavishly at his town house in Brook Street, Mayfair (later the Savile Club) and at the Harcourt family seat at Nuneham Courtenay, Oxfordshire, where the Asquiths were regular guests. Like Asquith (and William Harcourt) Loulou strongly opposed the granting of the parliamentary franchise to women and he played a prominent part in the anti-suffrage campaign. He voted against the Parliamentary Franchise (Women) Bill in March 1912 and against the Representation of the People (Women) Bill in May 1913, and his outspoken views made him a target for the militant suffragettes. In 1912 an attempt was made to set fire to the children's quarters at Nuneham Courtenay.

Opposition to women's suffrage was not the only question on which Loulou seemed to look back to his father's political views. Although the 1894 Budget had been seen as radical, William Harcourt was firmly committed to Gladstonian principles of retrenchment, and Loulou regarded Lloyd George's financial policy as reckless and electorally damaging. Lloyd George described him as the most resolute of the cabinet critics of the 1909 People's Budget. However Loulou strongly supported the campaign to restrict the veto powers of the House of Lords which culminated in the 1911 Parliament Act and, during the Home Rule crisis of 1913, he warned George V of the potentially serious consequences if the decisions of the House of Commons were not allowed to prevail.

Lewis Harcourt remained powerfully influenced by his father's views on foreign policy,

particularly the need to avoid continental commitments. William Harcourt had braved unpopularity by his opposition to the Boer War and, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, he had struggled to resist the inexorable pressure for increased naval and military expenditure. In 1908 and 1909 Loulou took a similarly strong, but ultimately unsuccessful, line against Fisher's naval estimates. Like most of his colleagues, Loulou only became aware towards the end of 1911 of the Anglo-French staff talks that had been taking place in secret for nearly six years. When the cabinet debated the subject on 1 November 1911, Asquith claimed that the government was not committed to military intervention in the event of war with Germany, and Loulou continued to reject the view that war was inevitable, seeking to negotiate the peaceful settlement of outstanding colonial disputes. At the end of July 1914 he initially argued the case for neutrality, but finally allowed himself to be persuaded that the invasion of Belgium made British involvement inescapable. Apart from John Morley and John Burns, who both resigned, all the cabinet ministers who had expressed strong reservations in November 1911 supported the decision to go to war.

Like many other Liberals, Loulou was opposed to conscription and was regarded by critics of the government as one of the ministers who failed to appreciate the need for more radical measures to win the war. When a coalition government was formed in May 1915, Asquith moved him back to the Office of Works, to be succeeded as Colonial Secretary by the Conservative leader Bonar Law whose brusqueness came as a shock after his predecessor's suavity. Lord Esher said that in any other country Loulou would be the Tory and Bonar Law the democrat.<sup>4</sup>

Although he was only 53 in 1916, Lewis Harcourt was exhausted and in poor health after

over ten years in ministerial office and he was content to resign with Asquith in December of that year and to go to the House of Lords in January 1917 when the King agreed to revive the family viscountcy which had been held by a Lord Chancellor in the reign of Queen Anne.

He was an infrequent participant in the business of the Upper House, although in January 1918 he took part in the debates on the Representation of the People Bill. He now accepted the inevitability of women's suffrage, but continued to share his father's scepticism about proportional representation.

Loulou retained his interest in the electoral organisation of the Liberal Party and he had a wide range of prestigious non-political activities, as befitted a life-long member of the charmed circle of the great and the good. He helped to found the London Museum in 1911, was a member of the advisory committee of the Victoria and Albert Museum and of the council of the British School at Rome, and was also a trustee of the Wallace Collection, the National Portrait Gallery, and (like his father) the British Museum.

On 24 February 1922, at the age of 59, Lewis Harcourt was found dead at his Brook Street town house (not Nuneham, as suggested in the *Dictionary of National Biography*), and was succeeded as the second viscount by his son. He had taken an overdose of a sleeping draught and there were rumours of suicide, but the coroner returned a verdict of misadventure.

On the following day Loulou had intended to meet A. G. Gardiner to discuss progress on the biography of his father in which he had been closely involved. He would have been ready to accept that nothing in his own political career matched the vital contribution he had made to the career of his father.

In 1908 Gardiner singled out Loulou as 'one of the three men

in the Liberal Party to whom all things seem possible',<sup>5</sup> but despite his organisational skills he never fulfilled this potential. He lacked his father's passionate involvement, and with hindsight one can see Lewis Harcourt as an example of the way in which some of the Liberal leaders, after the great electoral victory of 1906, looked to the past and failed to come to grips with the industrial and social problems of the new century. When he was deprived of his father's guidance in 1904 Loulou confided to Spencer that he felt 'very rudderless in details, but firmly anchored in principles'.<sup>6</sup> The principles remained valid, but his father had always recognised the need to adapt them flexibly to circumstances.

### Sources

The main primary source is Lewis Harcourt's unpublished journal, now in the Bodleian Library, Oxford. Among the secondary authorities, A. G. Gardiner's *Prophets, Priests and Kings* (1908) contains a perceptive portrait of Lewis Harcourt, and Gardiner's *Life of Sir William Harcourt* (1923), written with Lewis Harcourt's close co-operation, contains a definitive account of his career as secretary and companion to his father. The *Dictionary of National Biography* article on Lewis Harcourt by Lord Onslow (1937) is flawed by inaccuracy on several points of detail.

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**Lewis Harcourt, by Harry Furniss**

- 1 Harcourt Papers, DEP 649, f1.
- 2 Harcourt to his sister, 18 March 1904, Alfred Gardiner, *The Life of Sir William Harcourt* (Constable, 1923), vol. 2, p567.
- 3 Edward David (ed.), *Inside Asquith's Cabinet: From the Diaries of Charles Hobhouse* (John Murray, 1977), p229.
- 4 Maurice V. Brett (ed.), *Journals and Letters of Reginald, Viscount Esher* (Nicholson & Watson, 1934-38), vol. 3, p137.
- 5 A. G. Gardiner, *Prophets, Priests and Kings* (Alston Rivers, 1908), p122.
- 6 Spencer Papers, KS 218, 21 December 1904.

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