

at the end in the form of a final chapter comparing the British Conservatives with their Canadian counterparts, who were all but destroyed by the first-past-the-post system in 1993.

If I have a criticism it is that the author may be too close to the subject. There is no doubt that the Liberal rebirth has been an extraordinary achievement for all those described in the book, but the tactfully written sentences that are apparent in the chapters about recent years could perhaps have been written more boldly.

The party's obsessions are also taken at face value: maybe by-elections are important – they certainly seemed so at the time – but there is a case to be made that they have acted as temporary fixes in the absence of some more permanent solu-

tion. Again, some day soon, we need more analysis.

The other criticism might be the cover, and you can't really blame the author for that. Maybe the idea of the Bird of Liberty arising from the flames like a phoenix was irresistible, but the result makes the book look like a particularly comprehensive Liberal Democrat policy paper, and – fond as I am of policy papers – that does it no favours for gathering a wider readership.

Still it is a book that cried out to be written, and it is written supremely well. I just hope those wider readers pick it up as well.

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Twentieth century politics surveyed

William D. Rubinstein: *Twentieth-Century Britain: a Political History* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003)

Reviewed by **Dr J. Graham Jones**

Dr William D. Rubinstein, Professor of Modern History at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, is one of our most prolific and versatile modern historians. Among his most substantial, highly acclaimed works are *Capitalism, Culture and Decline in Britain, 1750–1990* (1991) and the authoritative *Britain's Century: a Political and Social History, 1815–1905* (1999).

With the appearance of this present work, Rubinstein has placed us further in his debt. Here he has given us a highly lucid, eminently readable, balanced account of the political development of Britain throughout the whole time span of the twentieth century. (The work is, therefore, fully up to date.) The author is clearly impressively well read, with a

complete mastery of the vast array of secondary literature in this popular field of study, and all the information is neatly crafted into a coherent, compelling narrative account. Within the constraints of space imposed upon him, Rubinstein's approach is scholarly, detailed and penetrating. The volume will undoubtedly draw many general readers and, in addition, bears all the hallmarks of a fine textbook, a great asset to teachers and students alike, appealing especially to history and politics students in the sixth form, at colleges of education and in the first year at university.

Adopting a strictly chronological approach, the author examines each general election campaign and its outcome, the composition of each administration, its policies, goals,

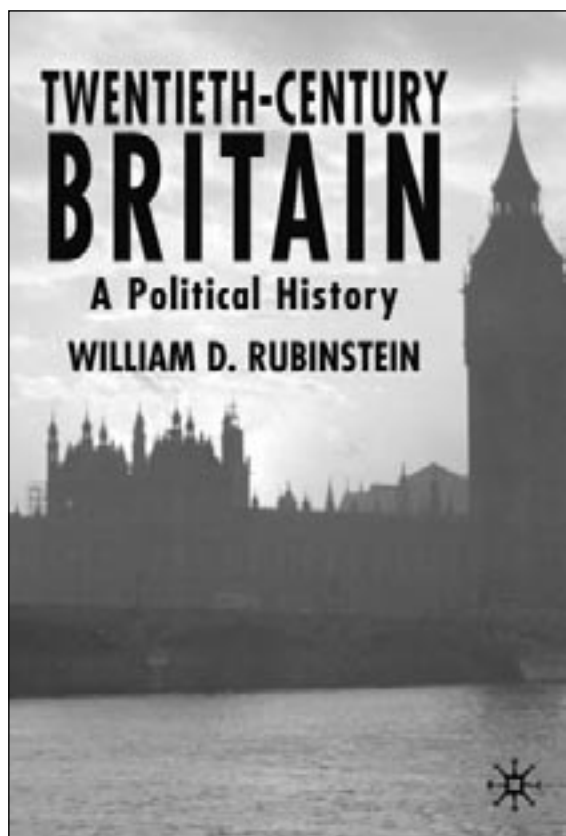
It's a story that is well balanced between anecdote and analysis, and – for someone like me, who lived through much of it – it reads disturbingly like the story of our lives.

achievements and failures. Useful tables of election statistics are included at each appropriate point, and statistical and numerical material is judiciously woven into the narrative without impinging upon the flow of the author's writing. Economic, social and cultural themes are generally subordinated to the political analysis.

Especially impressive are the exquisitely penned character sketches of prominent politicians, among them (out of many more) Clement Attlee, Neville Chamberlain, Ted Heath and Harold Wilson. Of Attlee, we read, 'He had an encyclopaedic knowledge of cricket, did *The Times* crossword puzzle daily as a hobby, and remained a sceptical but, in the final analysis, loyal Anglican. In all respects, including appearance, he looked like every upper-middle-class Tory commuter on the 8:07 from Tunbridge Wells ... Practical and competent, but utterly without charisma, he was widely viewed as a man who had risen far above his level of ability and reached a senior position because so few were left in the Parliamentary Labour Party after the slaughter of 1931. Few knew precisely what to make of him.' (pp. 208–09.)

Of Harold Wilson and Ted Heath, Rubinstein is more scathing. Of the former he writes, 'Few people could think of Harold Wilson without smirking, and he appeared to many to be a clever mountebank who could not be taken seriously as a major figure' (p. 294). Of Ted Heath, 'He was utterly self-centred and oblivious to the feelings of others to an extent which many found repellant and abnormal, and always gave the impression of heroic solipsistic stubbornness to his supporters (but to few others)' (p. 295).

There is, however, some imbalance in the structure of the book. The late lamented A. J. P. Taylor once wrote, 'History gets thicker as it approaches recent times: more



people, more events, and more books written about them'.¹ Professor Rubinstein, however, is clearly more attracted by the period up to 1945, to which he devotes 231 pages, than by the ensuing decades, which receive no more than 116 pages. There is, as a result, a rather breathless touch to the narrative for the period after the Second World War. This, too, is 'English history' in A. J. P. Taylor's best traditions. Rubinstein devotes but little attention to Wales; only the fierce Tonyandy Riots of 1910 (p. 54) and the dreary, prolonged campaign to disestablish the Church in Wales (pp. 61–62) receive any extended attention. Scotland fares even worse. Throughout the text, the author takes a high-politics, Westminster perspective, with little space devoted to the provinces

Readers of the *Journal of Liberal History* may feel a little disappointed that Professor Rubinstein is not greatly attracted by the history of the Liberal Party. As the party's influence gradually recedes during the course of the twentieth

century, so it impinges less and less upon the unfolding story. 'After 1929, the Liberals seemed to have lost all sense of purpose' (p. 176) he writes, rather dismissively, half way through the book. Not all historians would agree. Nor does the author enthuse at the party's breakthroughs at Torrington and Orpington in the 1950s and '60s or the party's unexpected triumph leading to a solid phalanx of forty-six MPs in the 1997 parliament. (By today there are, of course, even more.)

The constraints of space imposed upon Rubinstein inevitably lead to a few factual errors and to misjudgements which verge upon the crude in thought or expression. The claim that 'the working classes never embraced Communism' (p. 170) is surely far wide of the mark given the extensive support received by the party in some areas during much of the inter-war period. We read (p. 273) that, in 1963, following the retirement of Harold Macmillan, Lord Home, the then Foreign Secretary renounced his peerage in order to stand for the leadership of the Conservative Party, thus becoming Sir Alec Douglas Home, 'the name by which

he is known today'. In fact, he again became Lord Home of the Hirsell in 1974 and died in 1995! But, generally, the standard of accuracy is extremely high and impressive. Rubinstein is an undisputed master of his subject.

Although the volume has a useful index, there is no bibliography or guide to further reading. True, a full list of relevant secondary sources would, of course, have required a second volume to itself, but a select listing of especially helpful general works, biographies and memoirs would have been a most welcome addition. The inclusion of illustrations and/or cartoons would also have added so much to the appeal of the book. But overall Professor Rubinstein's masterly overview is a singular accomplishment, certain to receive wide acclaim and stand the test of time. Many, many students and other readers will stand in the author's debt.

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1 A. J. P. Taylor, *English History, 1914–1945* (Pelican paperback edn., 1975), p. 729.

Apologies

The Liberal Democrat History Group wishes to apologise for the late despatch of this issue of the *Journal of Liberal History*, and also for our failure to organise a summer discussion meeting.

The two events are connected: we had hoped to organise a joint meeting with the Conservative History Group on the fall of the Chamberlain Government, but unfortunately the CHG was never able to confirm a date or speakers. By the time we reached the conclusion that we should abandon the project (at least for the time being), it was too late to organise an alternative meeting before the summer holidays. And the *Journal* was held back to be able to advertise the meeting, but unfortunately its production schedule then collided with various other projects, and it became even more delayed. Our apologies to all our readers.

Normal service will be resumed from the autumn, with *Journal* 44, due in mid-September, advertising details of our fringe meeting at the Liberal Democrat conference. And we hope to organise an additional event to compensate for the lack of a summer meeting: a guided tour of the Reform Club, followed by a drinks reception, provisionally in October. See the next *Journal* for more details.