

The book is an admirable introductory text for those unfamiliar with the course of Churchill's life and career. It will appeal immensely both to the general reader and to students in the sixth form and at colleges and universities. The volume is a powerful reminder of the fine line which can often separate an outcast from a hero. OUP is also

to be congratulated on selling the book for the bargain price of £12.99, well within the reach of the book lover, and contrary to their usual practice!

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A story of four Liberal Parties

Roy Douglas: *Liberals: A History of the Liberal and Liberal Democrat Parties* (Hambledon, 2005)

Reviewed by **William Wallace**

It's no easy task to capture the 150-year history of a party in 300 pages. The different elements of a party and its tradition, intellectual and social as well as party political and personality driven, shift over time. In such a compressed history the reader needs a convincing narrative: threads of continuity that link together the different leaders, the periods in power and periods in the wilderness. The underlying question, of course, must be how far the contemporary Liberal Democrat party stands for similar principles and policies, or represents similar interests, to those of its Edwardian and Victorian predecessors.

Roy Douglas has an encyclopaedic knowledge of twentieth-century British history. He fought five elections as a Liberal candidate, from 1950 to 1964, through the party's thinnest years. He published an earlier party history (covering the years from 1895 to 1970) thirty years ago, and has interviewed a great many leading Liberals over many years. The focus of this book, however, is not on the Liberal Party as he knew it best, staggering out of near-extinction to revival in the 1950s and 1960s. One hundred of the 300 pages are devoted to the twenty years between 1905 and 1924: the greatest years of

Liberal government, and the most catastrophic collapse. He argues that the Liberals were regaining the ground they had lost to the independent Labour Party in 1911–13; 'once the Liberal Government began to adopt a truly radical programme, and also arranged for the payment of MPs, the Labour Party began to wither away' (p. 149). This leaves him with some difficulty in explaining the rapid collapse of the Liberal Party over the following ten years; he attributes this firstly to the traumas of the war, and secondly to the deep rift between Asquith and Lloyd George.

He is much less confident in explaining how the disorganised and dispirited rabble that were the Liberals in Parliament by 1924 nevertheless managed to linger on for another generation, or to what extent the new members drawn in from the late 1950s onwards resembled the old. This is a pity, because he was himself one of those who kept the old faith, and fought in hopeless circumstances, in the post-war years. There are hints of his personal preferences – for free trade, against European integration – but no account of the rowdy Liberal Assemblies at which Oliver Smedley, Arthur Seldon and others defended

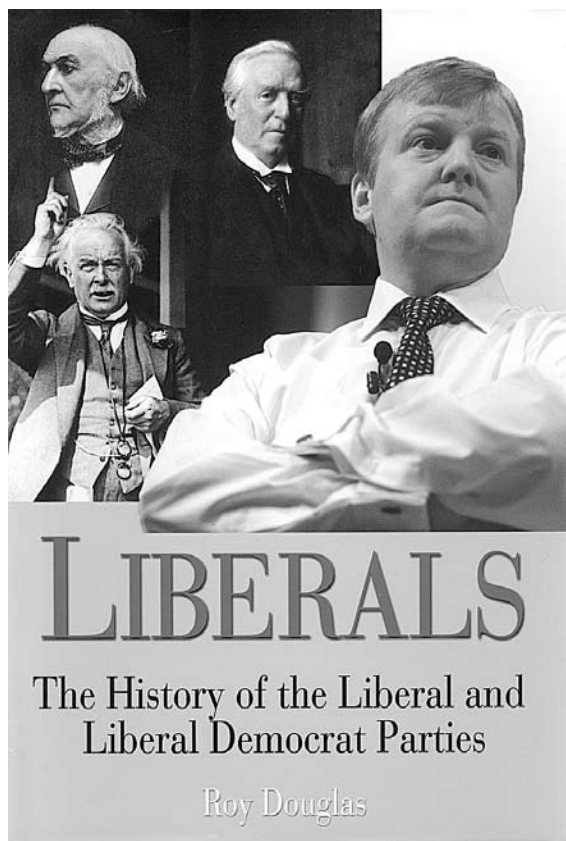
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traditional economic liberalism, before walking off to found the Institute of Economic Affairs. He was not a fan of Jo Grimond, who gets far too little credit here for his role in the revival; he is, however, a strong defender of Jeremy Thorpe. He holds, correctly, that but for David Owen the Alliance between the Liberals and the Social Democrats would have moved swiftly towards a merger after the 1983 election, and that the 1987 election campaign was a near-disaster. David Owen, he concludes, 'must stand with Joseph Chamberlain as one of the great wreckers of British politics' (p. 300).

The primary focus of the chapters which cover the seventy-five years after 1924 are on the leadership, the parliamentary party, its repeated struggles to rebuild – and finance – an organisation outside Westminster, and the occasional glories of by-election gains. There is very little on the evolution of policy, beyond an insistence that a commitment to liberty (if not always to free trade and free markets) has distinguished the party from Gladstone's tenure to the present day. There is surprisingly little on Liberal thought and Liberal thinkers. And there's sadly little on the importance of religious nonconformity to the party, which might have thrown some light on the difficulties many local parties had with working men as candidates at the end of the nineteenth century, when the pillars of the nonconformist churches were often their employers. There is evidence from other studies, and from the Butler–Stokes electoral studies of the 1960s, that nonconformist roots played a significant part in regenerating local parties in the 1960s, and in inclining hesitant voters towards Liberal support. Douglas also virtually ignores the importance of community politics, the rebuilding of Liberal support and organisation from the bottom up through local government over the past forty years.

REVIEWS

There have been four distinct Liberal Parties since the organisation first took recognisable shape at the end of the 1850s: Gladstone's party, which he dominated and ultimately nearly destroyed; the 'New Liberals' of the turn of the century, whose ideas and determination sustained the Liberal government of 1906–14; the new Liberal Party that emerged forty years later out of the smouldering ashes of the old, under Grimond's leadership, but failed nevertheless to break through in national representation; and today's Liberal Democrats, rebuilt on the wreckage of the Alliance and on the local government base it had left behind, under Paddy Ashdown. This volume does not link these four movements entirely convincingly into a single tradition or socio-economic base. Its description of the party between 1925 and 1950, with warring Asquithians and Lloyd Georgists, leaves the reader wondering how on earth it managed to linger past the Second World War, and why it did not disappear into the Conservatives under Winston



Churchill. There's no hint of the sheer stubbornness of Liberal nonconformists, tempted by the other parties but recoiling against Labour's collectivism and (after Suez) Conservative imperialism, who rebuilt constituency organisations once Grimond gave the party a sense of direction again. So we must hope that Dr Douglas will now write a more focused history of the Liberal

Party between 1945 and 1975, to tell the story from his own perspective of how close the old Liberal Party came to extinction, and how and why it recovered.

William Wallace (Lord Wallace of Saltire) is Honorary President of the Liberal Democrat History Group and Deputy Leader of the Liberal Democrats in the House of Lords.

Famous for being famous?

Leo McKinstry: *Rosebery: Statesman in Turmoil* (John Murray, 2005)

Reviewed by **Martin Pugh**

At the height of his fame Lord Rosebery had only to arrive at Waterloo Station to bring the whole place to a halt in the same way that a Madonna or a Beckham would do today. He possessed, as Leo McKinstry shows very effectively in this new biography, what we would today call 'star quality'. Though trapped in the House of Lords throughout his political career, Rosebery somehow contrived to appear more modern and more in touch than most of the lawerly, crotchety figures at the top of the Liberal Party during the late-Victorian era. He lived in a period when the glamour conveyed by wealth, title and land represented an asset with the expanding democracy. Despite being a basically insecure and even neurotic person, Rosebery could deliver inspiring speeches to mass audiences; and his fondness for horse-racing made him appear closer to popular tastes than was really the case. He remains the only prime minister whose horses have won the Derby; even as a student he had opted to leave Oxford without a degree when the authorities insisted that he suspend his racing while he was at the university. Of course, as Robert Spence Watson of the National Liberal

Federation reminded him, in a party dominated by the non-conformist conscience, horses and gambling commanded less than complete approval. But by the same token Rosebery was an asset to Liberalism by virtue of his capacity to appeal beyond the regular Liberal loyalists to an uncommitted electorate. McKinstry rightly emphasises that Rosebery spoke to the two popular themes of late-Victorian Britain: empire and democracy. As President of the Imperial Federation League he articulated the idea of the Commonwealth, admittedly with reference to the white colonies alone, and more generally he tapped into the feeling that the expansion of the empire was both a moral good and a material necessity for Britons; in one of his memorable phrases, he suggested that Britain was engaged in 'pegging out claims for the future' in Africa and elsewhere.

On the domestic front Rosebery espoused a catalogue of progressive and radical causes including agricultural trade unions, the secret ballot, the eight-hour working day and compulsory state education; he criticised parliament for failing to raise working-class living standards and he rejected