

of interest is its focus on Chamberlain's failure to understand the antipathy of the defeated leaders to the Colonial Secretary's 'conciliatory' efforts build a new dispensation that largely excluded the Boers. Tom Brooking gives a very different view in outlining Chamberlain's friendship with Richard Seddon and the way in which both domestic and imperial policies developed interactively between the colonies and the mother country. Seddon was an autodidactic mechanical engineer and later populist prime minister of New Zealand. He visited Britain in 1897, the year of Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, and the two men exchanged correspondence thereafter. Seddon was a pioneer in his own country for social security and an advocate for closer imperial relations, consequently an ally for Chamberlain over imperial preference, though unfortunately for Joe, in a minority even among the self-governing colonies.

As Oliver Betts makes clear, tariff reform was a tricky sell even for as charismatic a politician as Chamberlain. Chamberlain proposed imperial preference not only as a tool for fusing the empire together but also as the answer to the worries about the advance of Germany and America as industrial nations and the means to fund old age pensions. As usual, Chamberlain had spotted a salient question but the electorate overwhelmingly judged that he had chosen the wrong solution. His Liberal opponents bogged him down in arguments about the costs of everyday shopping – the Big vs the Small Loaf. If the losers from the policy were obvious and

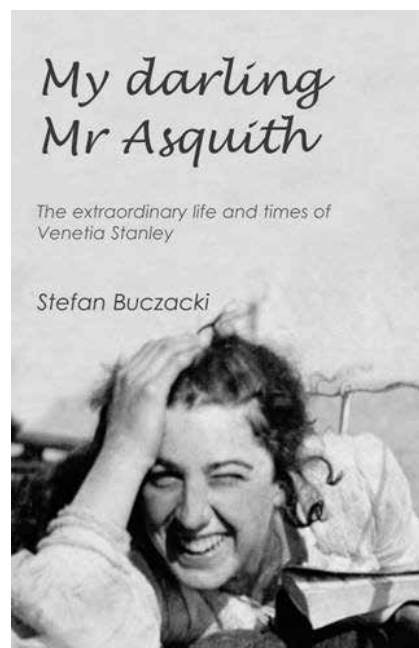
determined to vote against, it was harder to identify and motivate the potential winners. In echoes of the recent EU referendum, Betts utilises the evidence from Booth's survey to suggest that small British traders were less worried about the threats of imports from the Continent than the competition from foreign refugees lowering wage costs in their immediate neighbourhood.

Mrs May had an unexpectedly easy ride to the leadership of the Conservative Party but, in one of her few speeches as candidate, she highlighted Chamberlain as a political lodestar.<sup>2</sup> But was he a sensible choice – saint or devil? Undoubtedly, he was an effective organiser and manager. True, his objective was always the welfare of his fellow citizens. Agreed, he was innovative in extending the role of government. But, with his tendencies towards insubordination, egotism and disloyalty, he was not a team player. As Gladstone, Devonshire, Salisbury and Balfour all discovered, Chamberlain was unavoidable but insufferable. Ian Cawood and the late Chris Upton, have provided the inspiration for a realistic reassessment of Chamberlain's achievements and a deeper understanding of Victorian political culture which usefully supplements Cawood's work on the Liberal Unionists.

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1 Peter Marsh, *Joseph Chamberlain, Entrepreneur in Politics* (Yale University Press, 1994).

2 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-37053114>.



and letters. He read and reread her letters to him (not available) and wrote 206 to her in 1915 alone. Buczacki claims he has identified letters of general and political interest not used by the Brocks and quotes from sixteenth such letters. None of them justifies his assertion. He includes, for example, more terrible poems, an explanation that Asquith cannot meet her because he has to see the Archbishop of York, and a reflection on seeing her on to a train.

Asquith wrote about his social activities, and commented on political events. He asked for her opinions on political appointments and revealed military secrets. Buczacki confirms the Brocks' analysis disposing of the canard that Asquith wrote many letters while in cabinet. He wrote fulsome and finally increasingly desperate declarations of his love for her: 'I love you with heart and soul'. She wrote on 11 May 1915 announcing that she was going to marry Edwin Montagu, a protégé of Asquith, who had proposed to Venetia several times from 1912 but had been rejected. Venetia described Montagu as an interesting companion, but ugly and unattractive.

The author reviews the overheated correspondence between Venetia and Violet Asquith (her best friend) to assess whether either or both had lesbian tendencies, and finds it highly unlikely. He follows the phallogocentric attitude of other commentators in pursuing the question of whether Venetia and Asquith had full sex. His case for saying it did not happen is much stronger than that of Judge Oliver Popplewell,

## Asquith's obsession

Stefan Buczacki, *My Darling Mr Asquith: The extraordinary life and times of Venetia Stanley* (Cato & Clarke 2016)

Review by **Alan Mumford**

THE AUTHOR CLAIMS that Venetia Stanley 'has had a poor press' but his evidence for this is very thin. He claims that, almost without exception, every book touching on Venetia's life has concentrated on 'three years during which Asquith wrote around 600 intimate letters to her.' In fact, the letters read by Buczacki and the Brocks<sup>1</sup> began (in relatively anodyne form) in 1910 and ended in May 1915, and my calculation is

that there were 568. The author portrays Venetia as a woman of more substance than simply being the recipient of letters from Asquith, and devotes only 20 per cent of the book to that relationship. The book title is misleading.

Asquith was 60 in 1912 when he developed an obsessional love for Venetia, aged 25. Politically, the importance of this lies in the time and emotional energy he was expending in meetings

## Jeremy Thorpe and Norman Scott

John Preston, *A Very English Scandal: Sex, Lies and a Murder Plot at the Heart of the Establishment* (Viking, 2016)

Review by Michael Steed

who finds them guilty.<sup>2</sup> In one of the few areas in which Buczacki offers something entirely new, he criticises Asquith as unfaithful in a wider sense to Margot. Asquith liked young women and we are given much more detail on Asquith as a 'groper'. Buczacki does not comment on the difference in power and status between them.

He does not criticise Venetia for her contribution to Asquith's unfaithfulness as she allowed Asquith to make fervent assertions of love towards her. Buczacki does not quote Asquith's letter to her after she assured him that she did not want him ever to stop loving her and wanting her.

No new insights are offered on the reasons why she decided to marry Edwin Montagu despite her physical repulsion towards him. Extraordinarily, Buczacki omits her statement to Montagu that she 'agreed to have some relationship with him whenever she chose, while retaining her right to have sex outside the marriage'.<sup>3</sup>

The letter Asquith received on 12 May was a hammer blow. Buczacki strangely does not comment on the extent to which Asquith's decision, on 17 May, to form a coalition was significantly influenced by his emotional turmoil.

There is nothing of political significance in Venetia's remaining thirty-three years. She continued to have distaste for physical relations with Montagu, but had affairs including at least two before Montagu died in 1924. She was uncaring in bringing up her (probably not their) daughter Judith. The book shows Venetia was entirely self-centred and self-satisfying as she pursued the 'fun' which she had set as her mantra for life as a young woman. Buczacki's aim, to contradict what he claims to have been the poor press about her, has not been achieved.

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1 M. and E. Brock (eds.), *H. H. Asquith Letters to Venetia Stanley* (Oxford University Press, 1982).

2 O. Poplewell, *The Prime Minister and his Mistress* (Lulu Publishing Services, 2014).

3 N. B. Levine, *Politics Religion and Love* (New York University Press, 1991).

**E**VEN IF HE had never met Norman Scott, Jeremy Thorpe would be a controversial figure in Liberal Party history. His firmly upper-class style was strikingly at odds with the zeitgeist of the 1960s, and so with the ethos of young recruits to the Liberal cause who were flocking into the party at that time. Yet his principled stances on Europe, on apartheid and on human rights generally not only proclaimed a continuity with classic Gladstonian Liberalism, they were highly relevant to this period's political agenda. His personal impact on the peak electoral performance of the party in February 1974 is undeniable; yet when he resigned as leader in 1976, it still had only thirteen MPs compared to the dozen that Jo Grimond had bequeathed him in 1967. The thirteen did represent a much higher Liberal vote in the October 1974 election than the dozen had after 1966; yet in two out the three election campaigns where Thorpe lead the party, it lost ground in votes badly.

John Preston's study of Jeremy Thorpe's role in wider social history, the events which lead to his 1979 trial for a murder plot, has only a little direct relevance to his role as Liberal leader. Preston, a fiction writer and journalist rather than historian, tells it as a racy thriller, starting with a conspiratorial dinner conversation between Jeremy and a fellow Liberal MP Peter Bessell in February 1965. Bessell, it turns out, is almost as much the central character of Preston's tale as Thorpe. But not quite; the plot weaves around Thorpe's use of Bessell, and the latter's adulation of Thorpe. Bessell's own career was a distorted reflection of his hero's. His finale – his pitiful performance at Thorpe's trial – was of the worm that turned.

Herein lies some value for the political historian in Preston's study. Jeremy Thorpe had an extraordinary magnetism, which led to widespread adoration, from North Devon constituents to leading Liberal activists. His transgressions were not to be believed. He was able to sell meagre political achievements as triumphs; he has even cast a spell over some political historians, as evidenced in the issues of this journal immediately

following his death.<sup>1</sup> So when he needed help with his personal problems, Thorpe was able to call on the devotion of both Bessell and a lifelong personal friend, David Holmes, to put their energies and dubious skills at the service of their idol. The series of unlikely subterfuges and ultimate (maybe murder) plot may sound more like fiction; but I, and others, can attest that such high-risk, half-serious and half-baked conspiratorial behaviour was very much in character for the Jeremy Thorpe we knew. Preston's is an interesting, and legitimate, take on Thorpe.

That take relies overmuch on Bessell and Holmes, both of whom Preston considers as reliable sources. So he concludes that murder was the unquestionable intention of the conspiracy (which was undoubtedly Thorpe-inspired) that led to the shooting of Scott's dog and thence to the Old Bailey trial. In thriller style, Preston makes that the clear destination.

This contrasts with the sceptical stance of Michael Bloch<sup>2</sup> who, in my judgement, understood the complex psychology of Jeremy, the adored only son of Ursula, very much better. Bloch's biography, published in December 2014, immediately after Thorpe's death, examines the evidence forensically; Preston is not a detective. Bloch also researched the subject more thoroughly. There are several,

