

would share her conviction that having parlour maids in the dining room was altogether too middle-class. 'I must say that I never thought that I would see parlour maids at Knole ... instead of liveries and even powdered hair' (p. 201). The writer, Naomi Mitchison, faced a similar struggle to adjust when she volunteered as a VAD nurse: 'I had never done real manual household work; I had never used mops and polishes and disinfectants. I was told to make tea but hadn't realised that tea must be made with boiling water. All that had been left to the servants' (p. 233).

But the book's subtitle and dates indicate the waging of a very different war, for it was in 1912 that the sixty-year-old prime minister became infatuated with a young woman of 25, who happened to be a good friend of Violet and the object too of the affections of Asquith's ministerial subordinate, Edwin Montagu. Coming on top of the rivalry deriving from her step-daughter, it is small wonder that Margot should later complain that 'I have only been alone with Henry and my children three weeks in nineteen years' (p. 3). The new plot would have been almost too extraordinary for a work of fiction:

Here were two men in love with the same woman – a woman who was the best friend of the daughter of one of them. A young woman who must have realised her friend's father was in love with her but who nevertheless played along with the relationship while keeping a hold on the other suitor – a suitor who could not conceive of the older man as any way a serious rival. A daughter who loved her father so all-consumingly that she was not only jealous of her step-mother but would never find another man to live up to him. A wife who loved her husband deeply, conscious of her fading attractions and miserably aware of his feelings for the younger woman (p. 210).

The Asquiths' marriage had run into trouble after a series of difficult pregnancies. Only two children had survived from five births and in 1907 Margot was advised by her doctors that further pregnancies should be avoided. In the absence of reliable contraception, this meant in practice the end of sexual relations between husband and wife. In the circumstances it was perhaps unsurprising that Asquith, described by

Courcy as a 'groper' with 'a penchant for peering down "Pennsylvania Avenue", as a woman's cleavage was then known', should have turned his attentions elsewhere (p. 82). The ultimately unanswerable question of whether his relationship with Venetia Stanley was ever consummated has been endlessly debated. De Courcy offers the most plausible interpretation:

It was a relationship charged with intense erotic obsession on Asquith's side and the willing acceptance of greater or lesser physical intimacies on Venetia's as the price to be paid for close friendship with someone of such intellectual calibre ... it is impossible to imagine that there was no physical approach at all (p. 224).

The wider significance of the relationship has already been explored following the publication in 1982 of Asquith's side of the enormous correspondence between the prime minister and his young confidante. De Courcy confirms that, whatever else is said about the liaison, it was entirely inappropriate: 'He described Cabinet meetings and the foibles of his colleagues; military secrets were betrayed; he told her of high-level disagreements' (p. 222). When in 1915 Venetia finally decided to marry Montagu, Margot was understandably

delighted. Bumping into Jackie Fisher, who was waiting to see her husband in Downing Street, she suggested to a surprised First Sea Lord that they should there and then dance in celebration. Asquith, by contrast, was left a broken man. 'No hell can be so bad' (p. 273). His premiership had more than a year and a half to run. Arguably, however, he was never the same again. His ejection from office in December 1916, in what amounted to a palace coup, again brought Margot, seemingly unaware of her husband's failing powers, to despair. The economist, Maynard Keynes, dined with the Asquiths two days after the deposition. Margot 'started to cry with the soup, sent for cigarettes, and dropped tears and ashes together into her plate – utterly overcome' (p. 339).

Asquith's premiership can be and has been chronicled without the inclusion of this personal history. Anne de Courcy's compelling narrative shows how much is lost in such bowdlerised accounts.

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- 1 M. Brock and E. Brock (eds.), *Margot Asquith's Great War Diary 1914–1916* (London, 2014), p. xlvii.
- 2 J. Vincent (ed.), *The Crawford Papers* (Manchester, 1984), p. 471.

Fascinating diary entries of a Liberal junior minister in the thick of events

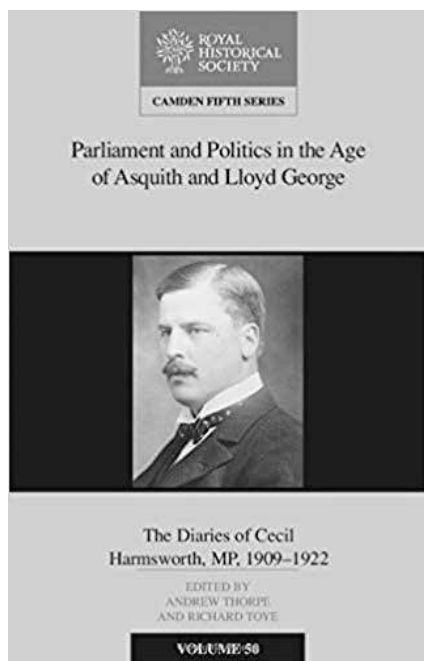
Andrew Thorpe and Richard Toye (eds.), *Parliament and Politics in the Age of Asquith and Lloyd George: the Diaries of Cecil Harmsworth, MP, 1909–1922*, Camden Fifth Series, Volume 50 (Cambridge University Press, 2016)

Review by **Dr J. Graham Jones**

THE ROYAL HISTORICAL Society (and its predecessor body, the Camden Society) has ever since 1838 published editions of key sources on British history. The publication is ongoing (two volumes per annum) and is now published in association with Cambridge University Press. The present offering, volume 50 in the Camden Fifth Series inaugurated in 1993, is one of the few publishing an important source from the twentieth century in a series where many

volumes are devoted to the mediaeval and Tudor periods.

Commendable, too, is the enlistment of two of our most eminent twentieth-century political historians to undertake the task. Most of the laborious, intricate task of transcribing and selecting the material was undertaken by Professor Toye, while both editors are jointly responsible for the detailed, genuinely helpful annotations and the drafting of the introduction to the work. In a sense,



this work is a kind of prequel to the two volumes of the Sir Cuthbert Headlam diaries, which cover the years 1923–51, meticulously edited by Stuart Ball of Leicester in 1992 and 1999.

Cecil Bisshopp Harmsworth, later 1st Baron Harmsworth (1869–1948) opted for a political career, spurning a career within the Harmsworth journalistic empire to which he contributed in his younger days. His two elder brothers were the far more famous press barons Lords Northcliffe and Rothermere. He was the Liberal MP for the Droitwich division from 1906 until his electoral defeat in January 1910, and he then returned to the House as the MP for Luton in a by-election in 1911 until, sensing the real likelihood of imminent electoral defeat, he chose to retire from parliament in 1922. The editors of this volume rightly assert that ‘a sense of promise unfulfilled hangs over his career’ in politics (p. 1). He later entered the Upper House, still a self-avowed Liberal, as Lord Harmsworth in 1939, but made conspicuously little impression in the House of Lords, although he did make a major contribution as a generous public benefactor.

His political career thus spans the most crucial period in the whole history of the Liberal Party. In 1917, following the holding of some minor governmental posts under Asquith, he became a member of Lloyd George’s celebrated War Cabinet secretariat based in the Garden Suburb behind 10 Downing Street, and he was under-secretary of state at the Foreign Office from 1919

until the collapse of the coalition government in the autumn of 1922. As he inevitably became embroiled in the constitutional crisis of that year, his diary, now held at the library of the University of Exeter, becomes more intensely political from 1909 onwards and contributes much to our understanding of one of the most exciting and momentous periods in British political and constitutional history. Entries concerning Harmsworth’s personal and family life have been generally eschewed from this printed edition.

Amongst other compelling themes, the diarist describes successive fraught sittings of the House of Commons, often until the small hours of the night, and the eminent political figures of the age are given vivid pen-portraits from Harmsworth’s astute and fast-flowing pen. The entries describe political life during the reigns of the two giants H. H. Asquith and David Lloyd George, the key political issues and campaigns of the age are delineated, and lesser figures flit in and out of this fascinating story as it unfolds. Richard Toye has selected wisely throughout, and events of major importance are intertwined with more minor episodes, some of these detailing the diarist’s own political fortunes and career. Humour is never far from the surface too. For example, in his entry for 14 July 1909 (p. 30), he notes, ‘One Member heard to observe that the worst of all-night sittings was he never knew when to leave off drinking whiskies and sodas and to begin drinking tea. To bed at 9.30 a.m.’! And such observations on the foibles of human nature surface regularly throughout the text. This, of course, was the year of the People’s Budget, and Harmsworth engaged in a little bet with Samuel T. Evans MP, the solicitor-general, ‘five pounds to one that the Lords would reject the Budget. . . . Sam didn’t pay me’ (p. 37).

For Harmsworth personally came soon afterwards the sad spectre of unexpected electoral defeat at Droitwich by the agonisingly slim margin of just 105 votes – ‘Our friends’ disappointment is intense and members of them cry when I address them out of an upper window at the Committee Room’ (p. 59). But his period in the political wilderness was mercifully brief as re-election at fairly marginal Luton followed in July 1911 (see pp. 86–88). The diary entry for 27 July, by far the most substantial in the book, when he returned to the House for the first time to take his oath, describes in great detail the uproarious scenes in the

House of Commons caused by the rebellious opposition benches against Asquith – ‘One of the most discreditable episodes in the history of the House of Commons. . . . Mr Balfour, flushed and embarrassed, kept to his seat while the storm raged, uncontrolled around him’ (p. 93).

Many of the key political events of these years are referred to in the text of the diary. In the autumn of 1911 intense discussions were ongoing on the bill to disestablish and disendow the Welsh church, for the Liberal Party an intense preoccupation which the diarist finds puzzling: ‘It is indeed astonishing that a whole people – or a huge majority of them – should find in the Disestablishment and Disendowment of the Church the most ardent expression of [Welsh] nationality’ (p. 101, diary entry for 4 October 1911). There are also several references to the escalating disturbances perpetrated by the militant section of the Suffragette movement: ‘The Militant Suffragettes make a raid on the plate glass windows of Bond Street, Regent Street and Piccadilly. We drive around after dinner at the Granards to view the damage. Brown paper patches on windows everywhere and many shops barricaded. After dinner Asquith says across the table to Grey – “Well, Grey, your friends have been breaking my windows again” ’ (p. 113, entry for 1 March 1912).

The events of the First World War obviously occupy centre stage in the diary. On the day war was declared, Harmsworth writes, ‘Practically all parties in the House are united. The small group who pleaded for our neutrality yesterday is now silenced. The invasion by Germany of the rights of Belgium has brought everybody into line’ (p. 165, 4 August 1914). There are fascinating entries, too, on the political manoeuvres which led to the toppling of Asquith as prime minister in December 1916. On 4 December, just days earlier, ‘In the H. of C. confusion and bewilderment. Most people have been growing uneasy under the nerveless direction of the P.M. but most people also regard the possible premiership of Ll.-G. with dismay. It is not exactly a case of better the divvle you know than the divvle you don’t know – (for we know both divvles intimately). But Ll.-G.’s erratic record!’ (pp. 235–6). Within less than five months, his opinion of Lloyd George had much improved, ‘He has just come from a prolonged War Cabinet and is as fresh and keen on my political foibles . . . as if he had no other

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responsibilities in life' (p. 247, 1 May 1917).

The deftly drawn pen-portraits of eminent public figures are a joy to read too. Harmsworth is clearly a fan of the former Liberal Prime Minister Lord Rosebery, now a respected political elder statesman, whose speeches continue to enthral the Lords: 'He has all the gifts of great oratory – a fine presence, beautiful voice, action, passion, language' (p. 44, 24 November 1909). Just days later Asquith was described thus: 'With his fresh massive clean shaven face and fine white hair, Asquith suggests to me at times a Pilgrim Father. Then again I think of him as Oliver Cromwell whom he grows to resemble more and more every day – without the warts. The highest office and responsibility have "made" Asquith. Until recently he was undervalued even by his own side in politics' (p. 46, 2 December 1909).

There are also many revealing references to various members of the British royal family. King George V, opening parliament in February 1912 on his return from the triumphal tour of the Indian sub-continent: 'The King husky but audible, but sunburned after his Indian tour' (p. 111, 14 February 1912). Harmsworth was much impressed by Edward, Prince of Wales, 'He is surely the most attractive Prince we have had for centuries – small, very fair and quite boyish in spite of his twenty five years. I see him furtively peeping at his notes during the dinner and too much absorbed for conversation. When his time comes, he makes just the nervous little speech that goes down best with an English audience, without a trace of the guttural accent which is father has and was that much more strongly marked in the case of Edward VII' (p. 294, 30 May 1919).

Predictably, references and delightful cameo portraits of Lloyd George,

the central political figure of these frenzied years, abound throughout the text. There is a fascinating depiction of the launch of Lloyd George's revived Land Campaign at Bishop's Stortford in Hertfordshire in the heart of rural England in the autumn of 1913: 'A vast meeting – a sea of pink bald people – a delirious reception for Ll.-G. and an atmosphere that thickens momentarily. Ll.-G. Speaks for 2 hours and twenty minutes' (pp. 149–50, 11 October 1913). Harmsworth relished taking breakfast with the engaging Lloyd George family (including Dame Margaret and their elder daughter Olwen, the latter clad in her nurse's uniform) at 11 Downing Street in the middle of the war: 'It is a simple domestic party, each of us fetching his or her fish, or bacon and eggs from a side table. Ll.-G. is as brisk at this hour as most other people are when the world is well-aired and hums a cheerful stave as he moves to and from the side-table' (p. 226, 20 June 1916). One of the last such discussions follows the fateful Carlton Club meeting in the autumn of 1922 following which the prime minister tendered his resignation to King George V. At a meeting of coalition Liberal MPs which followed, 'Ll.-G. is quiet but remarkably cheerful and he breaks into merry laughter more than once during the long discussion that ensues. What is to be done now?' (p. 339, 19 October 1922).

This superb work is crowned by immensely full and helpful footnotes, clearly the result of intense, painstaking research (even detective) work, and a very full index. It is an important source enabling the rigorous scholarly reassessment of the social and political culture of the age of Asquith and Lloyd George.

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the world of professional agents engaged in voter registration, electioneering and the political, social and educational activities of local political parties. Those 'grimy engineers', as they were described in 1909, served below decks under charming gold-braided officers walking on the bridge and navigating the party's course. These 'hidden workers' became a vital link between the politics of Westminster and grassroots activism in the constituencies.

Rix's investigation of party agents' professional associations, party publications, extant regional organisational records, local newspapers and election manuals illuminates three main themes: firstly, the gradual, partial and uneven professionalisation and emergent status of full-time party agents; secondly, the nature of party activity at the grassroots; and thirdly, the complex and shifting interconnections between politics at the national level and in the local context. What emerges is a subtle, judiciously judged and nuanced sense of how party agents became crucial intermediaries between politicians and voters: an essential feature of the mass electoral culture that gradually moved towards full democracy in the early twentieth century.

Importantly, Rix shows that the professionalisation of party agents was not synonymous with the 'nationalisation' of politics – an interpretative link prominent in the existing historical literature. While professional bodies, such as the National Association of Liberal Secretaries and Agents (NALSA) and the National Society of Conservative

Agents at work

Kathryn Rix, *Parties, Agents and Electoral Culture in England 1880–1910* (Boydell Press, 2016)

Reviewed by **Angus Hawkins**

KATHRYN RIX'S AUTHORITY, original and well-written study of full-time party agents between 1880 and 1910 is to be warmly

welcomed. A model of archival research, it demonstrates the value of thorough scholarship in correcting conventional easy generalisations. Rix brings to light