

# REVIEWS

## Politics and ponies

Garry Tregidga (ed.): *Killerton, Camborne and Westminster: The Political Correspondence of Sir Francis and Lady Acland, 1910–29* (Devon and Cornwall Record Society, 2006)

Reviewed by **Richard Toye**

SIR FRANCIS Acland (1874–1939) was a significant figure in Cornish politics and, to a lesser degree, in the Liberal Party nationally. He came from an established political dynasty, but, as Garry Tregidga rightly observes in his preface to this useful collection of documents, he has been neglected relative to other members of his family. For example, his father, Sir Arthur Acland, and his son, Sir Richard Acland, have received entries in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, but he himself has not. This neglect may be unjust but it is not, I think, wholly unaccountable.

Sir Francis was a capable political figure, with strongly held principles. First elected in 1906, he did not always win the seats he fought, but he invariably found his way back to the Commons in due course somehow, and was still an MP at the time of his death. This record of success was not at all bad when seen in the context of the near-total collapse of the Liberal Party from 1918 onwards. According to his *Times* obituary, he did miss the House of Commons during his enforced exile from it in the 1920s and early 1930s. However, he had a slightly semi-detached attitude to politics, about which he sometimes talked, rather half-heartedly, of giving up.

Acland sat first for Richmond in Yorkshire, from 1906 until the first general election of

1910, in which he lost his seat. In the second election of that year he got in at Camborne in Cornwall, a seat that he held until 1922. (His survival in 1918, when so many of his fellow Asquithian Liberals were swept away, was largely down to luck: his would-be Conservative challenger did not get back from India in time to be nominated.) In the 1922 election he fought the nearby Tiverton seat instead, and narrowly lost, before winning it in a by-election the following year, and losing it again in 1924. The last seat he held was North Cornwall, which he won in a by-election in 1932.

Up until 1916 he held a number of different junior posts, at the War Office, the Foreign Office, the Treasury, and the Board of Agriculture. The fall of H. H. Asquith as Prime Minister marked the end of Acland's ministerial career, although he was by no means an irreconcilable opponent of Lloyd George. If the split in the Liberal Party had not occurred he might one day have held a Cabinet job, but it is difficult to view this termination in a particularly tragic light, not least because he himself appears to have lacked ambition. After Asquith lost his seat in the 1918 election, the leadership of the independent Liberals went (on a temporary basis) to Sir Donald Maclean. Acland wrote: 'I lost my chance of doing it by being slack about all H[ouse]. of C[ommons]. things for the

last two years. [...] I don't regret much having put myself out of the running.'

Acland's obituarist wrote that he 'was a bright and entertaining platform speaker (on occasion, perhaps, too entertaining, as he was somewhat unguarded in his *obiter dicta*'); and also that he had 'the gift, certainly valuable in a party man, of stinging his opponents into lapses of temper and good taste'. Such liveliness and passion as is to be found in these letters, though, is largely down to Acland's first wife, Eleanor (who died in 1933). In the 1920s, she wrote about the travails of the Liberal Party with a real sense that something important was at stake. Her complaints about the 'local mugwumps' and the 'Liberal party big-wigs' may not have done full justice to the motives of those who were less radical than she was, but she undoubtedly had a sense of personal involvement in politics. Acland himself, by contrast, seems to have been

### KILLERTON, CAMBORNE AND WESTMINSTER

The Political Correspondence of Sir  
Francis and Lady Acland, 1910–29



Edited by  
Garry Tregidga

motivated mainly by a sense of duty. As Tregidga notes, in relation to one of his 1917 letters to Eleanor, this could sometimes stray into pomposity. The letter – written at a time when Acland was thinking of giving up Parliament – runs: ‘I possess, as you do, somehow such a very large amount of general competence that I don’t think I should for long be without pretty useful and honourable work.’ His industriousness and lucidity may have been admirable, but he is not a figure for whom it is easy to feel warmth.

The personal aspect of the Aclands’ life is not well represented in this volume. For example, in 1924 their daughter Ellen was killed in an accident at the age of ten. This must have been a shattering blow to both of them, and Eleanor wrote a book of commemoration. Yet they did not write about their pain in their letters to each other; or at least no such letters are published here, perhaps not having been preserved. The editor was obviously powerless to do anything about this deficiency. A more legitimate cause for complaint is that there are no documents here relating to either the first four or the last ten years of Acland’s parliamentary career. A quick search of the National Register of Archives suggests that

potentially relevant material does exist, at least for the 1930s, for example in the papers of Basil Liddell Hart.

If the book is not quite as comprehensive as it might be, it is nonetheless interesting and valuable. Tregidga’s wide-ranging introduction is a model of clarity, showing the relationship between Cornish issues and the national picture in a highly effective way. One aspect of Acland’s life that it does not mention is that in 1921 he became the first Vice-President of the Exmoor Pony Society. (His forebears had done much to save the ponies from extinction.) In some ways Exmoor ponies are like the post-1918 Liberal Party – hardy, lovable, difficult to manage, and really quite small. It would be nice to extend the analogy and to say that Francis Acland played a seminal role in the preservation of both, but although in both cases he did his bit, this would not really be true. Although apparently dutiful where the Society was concerned, he seems to have been even less interested in ponies than he was in politics.

*Richard Toye is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of History at Exeter University. He is the author of Lloyd George and Churchill: Rivals for Greatness (Macmillan, 2007).*

**In some ways Exmoor ponies are like the post-1918 Liberal Party – hardy, lovable, difficult to manage, and really quite small.**

scene. James Moore’s book is therefore a valuable corrective, detailing the development of Liberal politics at municipal level during the period 1886–95 and showing how local Liberal politicians developed an increasing commitment to schemes of social improvement – promoting everything from improved sewerage systems to public libraries.

The author focuses on Liberal Party organisation in Manchester and Leicester, the former of totemic significance for nineteenth-century Liberalism, the latter having some claim to be the capital of Midlands Liberalism after the defection of Joseph Chamberlain’s Birmingham following the 1886 Home Rule split. He shows how the Third Reform Act of 1885 acted as a trigger for a challenge by radicals to the control by local oligarchies of local Liberal organisations. This was particularly so in the selection of parliamentary candidates, where both Leicester and Manchester saw bitter contests for the Liberal nomination between patrician figures favoured by the local establishment and more populist candidates with a strong following among party activists. Although the latter were not always immediately successful, the battles over selection brought about, over time, a greater democratisation of party management.

A similar process took place in municipal politics. In both Manchester and Leicester, local government politics had become, by the 1880s, something of a cosy club, divorced from popular politics. In the former, appointments to the aldermanic bench created a bias within the council chamber in favour of moderates rather than radicals, while in Leicester, overwhelming Liberal domination of the Town Hall meant that local elections were not vigorously contested, with the

---

## Municipal Liberalism 1886–1985

James R. Moore: *The Transformation of Urban Liberalism* (Ashgate, 2006)

Reviewed by **Iain Sharpe**

**T**HE STUDY of late-Victorian Liberalism has been dominated by parliamentary politics and intellectual movements, largely to the exclusion of local and municipal perspectives – perhaps no

wonder given the richness and variety of Liberal thought, the dominant presence of William Gladstone at the head of the party, and the battles among the party leaders after his departure from the political