

her position on Suez helped the Liberal Party to have a unique voice, but also on the grassroots. In the dark days of the 1950s Violet was a tireless campaigner, travelling, speaking everywhere and canvassing to keep the Liberal Party alive.

Jane concluded that Violet was a 'wonderful daughter, deeply loving mother, absolutely terrible mother-in-law ... and a great, great liberal.'

As Violet Bonham Carter's contribution was largely outside Parliament it fell to the final speaker, Jo Swinson MP, to bring the meeting up to date and focus on some women Liberals' contributions in the House of Commons. She started by highlighting that, even though the booklet had mainly concentrated on the great heritage of Liberal women, there were a number of women who today and over the past few decades had made major contributions to the party.

She started with a personal tribute to Shirley Williams, who she described as an 'inspiration' and also 'personally supportive' to her and other women in the party. She highlighted her rational but also emotional intelligence and suggested that, had she been born a few decades later, she could have been leader of the party. In a return to the earlier stories she also described Shirley as a lifelong nonconformist, summing her up, as many others have done, as 'she's just Shirley'.

She did highlight however just how far women have to go to achieve equality of representation. Jo pointed out that just over ten years ago when Sandra Gidley was elected to Parliament there were so few women in the Liberal Democrat Parliamentary Party that it was possible for male colleagues to ask her, 'will you be like a Ray (Michie) or like a Jenny (Tonge) or like a Jackie (Ballard)?' Sandra was quite right to point out in her response that there were not just three models of a female MP in the same way there are no three models of a male one when she responded, 'I think I'll be like a Sandra'. Even today only seven of the fifty seven Liberal Democrat MPs are women which allowed Jo a brief word about each one of her female colleagues, including our panel chair Lynne Featherstone, who Jo commended for her courageous work as Equalities Minister. She also highlighted the work of Kirsty Williams, who

Her influence on the Liberal Party was huge, not just on these headline issues, where, for example, her position on Suez helped the Liberal Party to have a unique voice, but also on the grassroots. In the dark days of the 1950s Violet was a tireless campaigner, travelling, speaking everywhere and canvassing to keep the Liberal Party alive.

is currently the only female leader of any part of the Liberal Democrats and was also the first female leader of any party in Wales.

Jo went on to point out that, while only seven of the Liberal Democrat MPs were female, women were making a huge contribution to the party up and down the country. In the dark days it was often women that kept the party alive in many constituencies and now the party is full of unsung female heroes. She particularly wanted to highlight the contribution her own mother had made to her election campaign, driving her to meetings, cooking for her and delivering a whole area of her constituency over and over again. She pointed out there were women like that all over the country who are often not thanked for all they do, but it would be impossible for the party to win seats without them.

Jo had just been appointed as junior Equalities Minister when she made her speech and she described her 'pride and humility to take this agenda forward.' She accepted in the speech that there was a long way to go both in the Liberal Democrats and in the Cabinet. In answer to a question, she also went back to a theme which had been present throughout the meeting about the balance between motherhood and

active politics and whether this was possible with the demands made by Liberal Democrats of their candidates. She accepted more needed to be done not just for women, but for all parents and carers to be active in politics. She believed that, for more women to come forward as candidates, local Lib Dem parties need to review which tasks have to be done by the candidate, enabling them to concentrate their time for the most important task of meeting voters, while freeing up enough time for a family life. It was clear from her answer that, while the legal equalities sought by the earliest women to contribute to liberalism have been achieved, there is still a faintly ironic ring to the title *Mothers of Liberty*.

Jo ended on an optimistic note however. Earlier in the evening she had attended a Leadership Centre reception for people from under-represented groups seeking to be candidates for the Liberal Democrats. The two events on the same evening had convinced her that there was a great heritage of women in the party and also a bright future. Updated editions of *Mothers of Liberty* could be a whole lot longer.

Ruth Polling is a member of the Liberal Democrat History Group's committee, and the Group's conference organiser.

REVIEWS

'Remains to be seen'

Chris Bowers, *Nick Clegg: The Biography* (Biteback, 2011; paperback edition, 2012); Jasper Gerard, *The Clegg Coup* (Gibson Square, 2011)

Reviewed by **Duncan Brack**

MID-CAREER BIOGRAPHIES ARE always chancy things to write. It's usually difficult to assess a politician's record and impact properly until they retire, or die, early judgments may be rendered irrelevant by subsequent

events, and individuals may be less willing to say what they really think about someone who's still their boss or colleague, or still alive.

Nevertheless, such is the interest in Nick Clegg, as the first Liberal leader to enter UK government

since 1945, that not one but two biographies of him appeared in 2011; and the better of the two, Chris Bowers' *Nick Clegg: The Biography*, was republished in paperback in autumn 2012. Effectively this is a second edition, with the last four (out of fifteen) chapters substantially rewritten – rather demonstrating my point about the perils of instant history. Accordingly, the phrase 'remains to be seen' features on quite a few occasions as the authors attempt to analyse the impact of Clegg and his leadership.

(It should be noted that the publicity for *The Clegg Coup* claims that, 'contrary to news reports, the book is not a biography'. This is a strange claim to make, as essentially it is, though it also looks more extensively at the roles played by key Clegg allies such as Danny Alexander, David Laws and Paul Marshall. The author also claims, with a refreshing lack of false modesty, that it is the first major study of Liberalism since Dangerfield's *The Strange Death of Liberal England* in 1935. It isn't.)

Both books suffer from weaknesses which limit their value. Neither uses footnotes or references, so the reader is often unsure whether quotes stem from public statements or private interviews. *Nick Clegg* does at least contain a bibliography; *The Clegg Coup* doesn't.

More seriously, both of them are based almost entirely on interviews; the authors seem incapable of using any written source, or at least anything written by Clegg himself – including, most notably, Clegg's chapters in *The Orange Book* and its social-liberal riposte, *Reinventing the State*, his 2009 booklet for Demos, *The Liberal Moment*, or any of his speeches, most of which are never even mentioned. This is a major flaw; Clegg has used his more thoughtful speeches to explore his interpretation of Liberalism, and of the purpose of the Liberal Democrats, and anyone interested in understanding the man and his politics has to analyse them.

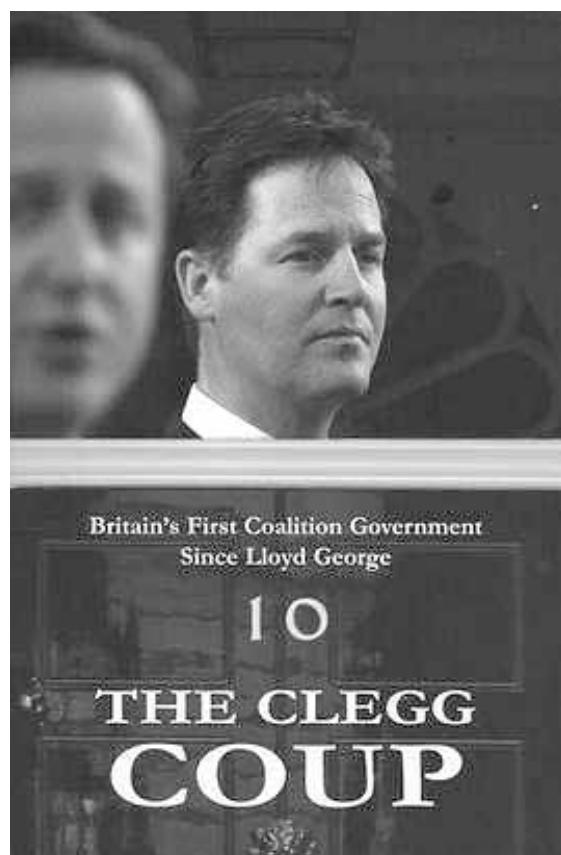
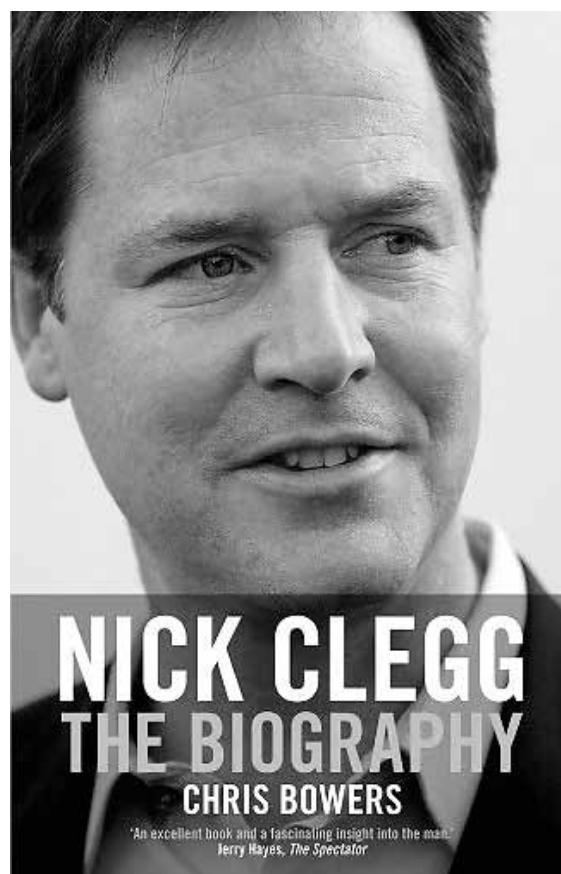
The – mostly minor – errors present in the 2011 edition of *Nick Clegg* have been corrected in the 2012 version, though a few more have crept in: the Copenhagen climate change conference was in 2009, not 2010, for example; clause IV in Labour's old constitution was about nationalisation, not about

the trade unions. *The Clegg Coup* contains far more mistakes, including claiming that the last British peacetime coalition was formed in 1918 (what about 1931?), calling the Liberal who helped to end the post-war identity card system Trevor Wilcox (his name was Harry Willcock), implying that Vicky Pryce left her government job when Chris Huhne's affair was revealed (she had resigned before the election), confusing the June 2010 £6 billion cuts emergency package with the whole coalition cuts programme, mixing up Kosovo and Bosnia, and warning us to be 'wary of Greeks bearing gilts' (p. 245 – not, sadly, a clever reference to the Greek debt crisis).

Neither book will win any prizes for style. Bowers' book is a bit pedestrian and long-winded, but overall not too bad. Gerard's version is something else again. No cliché is left unused, no metaphor is unmixed, no prose is ever too purple. The Labour constituencies surrounding Clegg's Sheffield Hallam seat aren't merely coloured red on an electoral map, for instance – they're an 'angry' red. TV studio sofas are always 'squishy'. People rarely 'say' anything; they 'howl', 'fume' or 'rumble'. There is far, far too much text like: 'Even for the steel city, the day seemed to be painted a particularly dark shade of gunmetal grey. But adherents to Liberalism were in a sunny mood that Sheffield morning ...' (p. 122)

This is the kind of language Gerard used for his Sunday newspaper columns, and for a brief piece it's OK, sometimes even quite funny. But reading page after page of this rapidly gets very wearing; you're left feeling rather like you've been hit on the head, slowly but repeatedly, with a rubber hammer. The only chapter that isn't written like this – an outline of the history of the party – is actually quite readable (albeit error-strewn), suggesting that the rest of the book could have been too.

On the positive side, however, the interviews conducted by both authors are very good value: wide-ranging, extensive and detailed. Bowers in particular has unearthed some points missed by other writers – for example, when Paddy Ashdown revealed that he was given Clegg's blessing to talk up the prospects of a Lib-Lab deal to the media during the coalition negotiations,



thus helping to increase the pressure on the Tories.

So what is the Clegg story? Both books do a good job of recounting Clegg's thoroughly international

family background, featuring ancestors on his father's side who included the Russian writer Baroness Moura Budberg (the so-called 'Mata Hari of Russia', a possible Bolshevik, Soviet and Nazi double agent, and the mistress of, among others, H. G. Wells and Maxim Gorky), while his Dutch mother was as a girl interned with her family by the Japanese in Indonesia during the war. Education at Westminster and Cambridge was followed by postgraduate study in the US.

This background left him with an international outlook, and a stubborn, self-confident and articulate nature; he was always encouraged to challenge authority. He developed a strong belief in fairness, and the rights, and responsibilities, of the individual. Bowers argues that it was his privileged background that drove him to aim to do something worthwhile with his life.

After a short period as a journalist, in 1994 Clegg joined the European Commission, ending up in Trade Commissioner Leon Brittan's private office. It was Brittan who first suggested that he become involved in politics and, having failed to convince him to join the Conservatives, recommended him to Paddy Ashdown. Ashdown first met him in 1997 and rapidly became a supporter ('unofficial godfather', according to Bowers), tipping him as a future leader; indeed, he tried to persuade Clegg to stand for the leadership on Charles Kennedy's resignation in 2006. Like Ashdown, Clegg was in many ways a political outsider (arguably a valuable characteristic of a party leader) – he had no family or college background in politics, and came into the party in a fairly unorthodox way.

Nick Clegg follows his early political career more thoroughly than does *The Clegg Coup*: selection for and then election, in 1999, to the European Parliament, then selection for Sheffield Hallam after the local party decided the seat was safe enough that they could afford to look for a candidate with potential leadership qualities.

Both books identify Danny Alexander as Clegg's closest political friend, dating back to a walk on the South Downs and a discussion about the future of the party during the 1997 autumn conference. Alexander subsequently became Clegg's chief of staff, drew up the

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2010 manifesto and is now the other Liberal Democrat in the 'quad' that resolves coalition disputes. As Gerard observed, 'Alexander sublimates his ego to support Clegg' (*The Clegg Coup*, p. 68), but does not lack ambition; apparently, he sees himself as a potential future party leader. Gerard also identifies David Laws as an ally, particularly in forcing the intellectual agenda; Laws now chairs the 2015 manifesto group. (Gerard also, astutely, reckoned that Laws was more suited to a policy job than a party management one – he 'would be better deployed in a department rich in policy possibilities such as Education' (p. 80). A year after the book came out, that's where he went.)

Both authors accept without questioning the notion that the Liberal Democrats were an immature bunch until Clegg came along. According to Bowers, 'the difference Clegg and the new generation of Liberal Democrats had brought about', was that 'theirs was no longer a cuddly philosophising-and-protest-vote party but one that was determined to use its leverage to get as many of its policies put into practice as it could' (*Nick Clegg*, p. 234). Former Lib Dem council leaders and ministers in Scottish and Welsh governments may beg to differ.

According to Gerard, Clegg single-handedly took the party into coalition after the 2010 election. 'He convened a meeting in Smith Square of his party's MPs, peers and leading officials. And by most accounts he played a blinder, winning over diehards and ditherers ...' (*The Clegg Coup*, p. 258). The facts that there had been daily parliamentary party meetings since the election, that the MPs had already decided to opt for coalition rather than confidence and supply, that there was no viable alternative option available, and that a special party conference five days later endorsed the deal by an overwhelming majority are entirely ignored.

This is the first of two major flaws with *The Clegg Coup*: it never considers whether any alternative choice was reasonably available – whether Clegg really made a difference, or whether any Lib Dem leader would have done the same thing because of the circumstances in which they found themselves. It simply assumes, in this instance, that because the party formed a coalition

with the Conservatives, Clegg must have steered it to the right.

I am not arguing that Clegg made no difference at all; after all, he was the first Liberal Democrat leader not to have been active in politics under Thatcher's and Major's Conservative governments, and his instincts always appeared to be more hostile to Labour than those of his predecessors, which at least made a coalition with the Tories less difficult. In fact neither book delves into Clegg's political beliefs to any great extent – probably a side-effect of never quoting anything he actually wrote – but *Nick Clegg* does touch on it. His former MEP colleague Andrew Duff is quoted as thinking Clegg would have been at home in Ted Heath's Conservative Party, while Conservative MP Ed Vaizey thinks that the EU was the only issue that stopped him being a Tory. Chris Davies, another European colleague, views him as more of a continental Liberal than a mainstream British Liberal. Bowers reckons he sees Labour as the opposition, and Conservatives as the competition – probably the opposite of what most Liberal Democrats think.

'I really just believe in the basic tenets of liberalism' says Clegg himself (in an interview), 'which starts from the premise that there's something wonderful about every person, there's something marvellous about their potential and talents, and you've got to do everything you possibly can in politics to emancipate individuals, to give them privacy, give them freedom, give them the ability to get ahead' (*Nick Clegg*, p. 340). His strong commitments to education and to social mobility follow from this, but his equally strong dislike of the Labour approach of treating individuals merely as members of groups possibly blinds him to problems of income and wealth inequality and the barriers they place in the way of social mobility. The pupil premium is indeed an assault on inequality, but of little relevance to anyone over school age.

The second flaw with *The Clegg Coup* is that the book never analyses what being steered to the right actually means – presumably because, in reality, there is not much evidence for it. On the few occasions when Gerard looks at changes in policy under Clegg, he

chooses only those which support his argument – such as the 2008 suggestion of cuts in public spending (in the document *Make it Happen*) – while ignoring those that don't, such as the mansion tax.

Similarly, by the 2010 election, the 'policy prospectus had been transformed into a serious programme' (p. 137) – but we're never told what this was. And in fact the manifesto's top four priorities – the pupil premium, constitutional reform, job creation through green growth and investment in infrastructure, and an increase in the income tax threshold, paid for by closing tax loopholes and green taxation – hardly bear out the argument for an *Orange Book* coup.

In government, Clegg and allies have apparently 'implemented the Orange Book agenda' (p. 88), but, true to form, we're never told what it is. As this *Journal* pointed out when we reviewed *The Orange Book* back in 2005, almost everything in it was existing party policy, with the almost single exception of David Laws' proposal for a social insurance basis for health care (*The Clegg Coup* refers to it, wrongly, as private insurance) – which the coalition has not introduced.

Chris Bowers' *Nick Clegg* is more balanced; he does not see the 2010 manifesto as a lurch to the right, but simply as a response to economic circumstances. Thanks to his interviews, Bowers is good on the tensions within the party in the build-up to the election, mostly over tuition fees.

Although both authors are strong Clegg supporters (Gerard thinks he's the finest Liberal leader since Lloyd George), they are ready enough to outline his mistakes in government – over the distribution of ministerial posts (leaving the party in control of no high-profile departments), over the (with hindsight) excessive readiness to defend the coalition in its first year, over Clegg's willingness to trust Cameron (originating, thinks Bowers, in his more continental background, where partners in coalitions actually try to work together), and over the party's general inability to communicate what it's achieved and what it's stopped. According to Bowers, the party has proved better at policy than politics.

Both books deal with the tuition fees debacle at some length. Gerard

thinks that the Lib Dem negotiators' failure to push the issue in the coalition talks lay at the root of the problem, while Bowers blames poor communications; for example, the party never highlighted the fact that raising tuition fees enabled it to protect funding for further education, or tried to present the new system as a graduate tax, which is essentially what it is. Loyal to a fault, Bowers doesn't blame Clegg himself for this.

Bowers is good on the pressures faced by Clegg as Deputy Prime Minister, particularly the abuse he suffered over tuition fees. (Heart-breakingly, he quotes his sons as asking: 'Papa, why do the students hate you so much?' (*Nick Clegg*, p. 249).) Bowers observes, rightly, that Clegg had hardly needed to show much resilience or toughness until his entry into government – but unquestionably has since.

What of the future? Gerard, writing in the summer of 2011, was all sunlit uplands, claiming to detect a modest rise in the Lib Dem poll rating while the Tory one was plummeting (inspection of poll ratings from February to September 2011 shows no such thing). He identified four reasons for optimism over the party's future prospects: the breakdown in class identity, increased educational attainment, the flowering of liberal values, and the enthusiasm of young people (with the party polling at 6 per cent amongst 18–24 year-olds in the latest YouGov poll, the last seems unlikely).

Gerard correctly identifies the long-term decline in the Conservative plus Labour vote (down below two-thirds of the total in 2010, for the first time since Labour supplanted the Liberals in the 1920s), but entirely ignores the competition for third-party voters – from UKIP, the Greens, the Nationalists and others. To be fair, this was less obvious in 2011 than it is now. More interestingly, he raises the question of which voters the party is supposed to recruit to replace those departing in opposition to the coalition and its policies. An unnamed right-wing Liberal Democrat minister is quoted as saying: 'Unless we can get some of the fluffy bunny voters back, we are done for. I'm not sure there are enough centre ground voters. The Lib Dem base has been public sector workers, students and intellectuals. We have

contrived to fuck them all off.' (*The Clegg Coup*, p. 234).

This is perhaps the most serious criticism that can be levelled at Clegg: that while he was right to take the party into coalition, and while his record in government has been at least mixed, with several successes to offset against the disappointments, all of this has been conducted without enough thought to the party's ability to survive. Perhaps worryingly, Richard Allan, his predecessor as MP for Hallam, believes that: "Doing the right thing" is vitally important to him, so it's important to him to feel he made the right calls on the big issues. It doesn't mean he doesn't care about the party, he does care deeply, but if the party was screwed and the election went up in flames, he would be able to live with himself if he felt he had made the right decisions.' (*Nick Clegg*, p. 362)

But what are the right decisions? Assuming that the party will gain respect for simply participating in government, whatever the coalition's record, and hoping that the economy will recover in time for the 2015 election – when even the IMF is criticising the austerity programme as too harsh – is a pretty big gamble. And whether Clegg himself is now too tarred by the tuition fees issue, the classic example of the 'broken promises' for which he had attacked the other two parties during the 2010 campaign, is an open question.

Of course, we don't know – which, to end where I started, is the problem with writing a mid-career biography. Nevertheless, despite its weaknesses, *Nick Clegg: The Biography* contains interesting material and is well worth reading; even *The Clegg Coup* has some nuggets, if you can stand the style and its inability to support its central thesis.

I'll leave Chris Bowers to have the last word:

Not all Lib Dems will agree, but then such is the transformation in the party under Clegg's leadership and the 2010–15 coalition that it's hard to know who the Lib Dems will be in 2015. They will still be there, but possibly with a very different support crew than they had in 2010 – and with massive uncertainty about their future as a party. There's no question Clegg has contributed

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REVIEWS

to a spectacular revival in the prominence of liberalism in British government, but whether it's a sustainable revival or a revival that comes with an in-built self-destruct button remains to be seen. (Nick Clegg, p. 374).

Duncan Brack is Editor of the Journal of Liberal History; he also wrote the chapter on the Liberal Democrats in Duncan Brack and Robert Ingham (eds.), Peace, Reform and Liberation: A History of Liberal Politics in Britain 1679–2011 (Biteback, 2011).

of Scottish Rights, the opposition to Macaulay's representation of Edinburgh in the 1840s and 1850s. Further, he was intimately connected with a wider Liberal culture in which Scotland was very important on account of its consistent delivery of a large number of Liberal seats and its support of key Liberal causes. His third marriage to Priscilla, younger sister of John Bright, helped to deepen these connections but he was also close to Richard Cobden; indeed, the Cobden–McLaren connection is certainly worthy of further exploration. Pickard is especially good at bringing out the atmosphere of Scottish politics in this period and McLaren's wider connections. This has certainly been done in books by Hutchison and Fry at a more general level but the biographical focus of this study provides an exceptionally good window on the key features of the political landscape of Victorian Scotland. While Pickard's view is generally a positive one, he does not elide McLaren's more than occasional narrowness of view, which renders him an unappealing character at times. He was certainly representative of the belief in individual effort and responsibility which was central to Liberalism of this period. His

Scottish Liberal

Willis Pickard, *The Member for Scotland: A Life of Duncan McLaren* (John Donald, 2011)

Reviewed by **Ewen A. Cameron**

WILLIS PICKARD, VERY well-known in journalistic and educational circles in Scotland, has performed a signal service to Scottish history by writing this extremely well-documented biography of Duncan McLaren. Reading Pickard's notes and bibliography, it is striking that the last major biography, by J. B. Mackie, was published in 1889. Despite the fact that Mackie's book was commissioned by the McLaren family and its tone was in the tradition of Victorian hagiography, Pickard quotes the view of John Bright (McLaren's brother-in-law) that 'not one quarter of the praise due to McLaren has been given to him.' (p. 270). Pickard's book lies on the spectrum between this extreme and that of the modern contextualised biography where the subject can disappear entirely. Indeed, Pickard maintains a good balance between the details of his subject's life and career and the contexts – Edinburgh, Scotland, Voluntarism, Liberalism – in which he operated during the nineteenth century.

Despite his prominence in nineteenth-century Scotland, he is something of a forgotten figure, although many of the political campaigns in which he was involved have been much studied by recent writers on Scottish history, such as Graeme Morton. Iain Hutchison, Michael Fry and Robert Anderson. McLaren was born in 1800 to a family which had roots in the highland county of Argyll but he spent most of his life in business and political circles in the lowlands of Scotland. He was most prominent in Edinburgh, where he entered the drapery business and prospered; his

other business interests, in banking, property and railways, were less profitable. He carved out a career in local politics, his first election to the City Council came in 1833, a very difficult time for Scotland's capital which was virtually bankrupt, and he rose to be Lord Provost from 1851 to 1854. He contested Edinburgh's parliamentary representation for the first time in 1852, was elected in 1865 and served until his retirement in 1881. He died in 1886. These bare biographical bones do not do justice to the significance of McLaren's career or to the interesting material contained in Willis Pickard's excellent biography. Pickard has immersed himself in McLaren's voluminous correspondence and his extensive and disputatious published works. This research has produced a very clearly written and, as far as the Scottish context is concerned, successful account of McLaren's career.

McLaren was involved, sometimes tangentially, in many of the major controversies of nineteenth-century Scotland. There are, however, several features of his career which ensure that he is more than the kind of character whom Anthony Trollope might have permitted a brief appearance at the Duke of Omnium's dinner table. The first is that he was the archetypal representative of the thoroughly Liberal culture of Scotland after 1832. To be sure, McLaren was opposed to the Whig clique which dominated its politics in the early part of the period. He was at the forefront of all the leading campaigns which provided a radical challenge to the Whigs: the Anti Corn Law League, the National Association for the Vindication

