

“He Would Not Stoop, He Did Not Conquer”

Book Review
by Tony Little

Robert Rhodes James: *Rosebery*
(Phoenix, 1995)

Part of the fun of history, especially for the amateur, is spotting parallels and seeing whether anyone has learnt the lessons or whether today's participants are doomed to repeat yesterday's mistakes. For example:

A charismatic leader has come to the end of the road without recognising it. Popularity in the country and with the party faded as the leader's relentless drive to change becomes unwelcome with the establishment. Eventually the leader is forced out and becomes a legend. The obvious replacement is an experienced cabinet minister who has served the party well but who has made enemies and so is passed over. Instead a powerful older woman indicates her support for a younger man with some limited experience of the Foreign Office and of London local government. He becomes the premier but is obliged to keep his opponent for the succession in the cabinet and fails to heal the party's divisions. John Major fighting off Michael Heseltine to succeed Mrs. T? No, Rosebery succeeding Gladstone, aided by Queen Victoria, leaving a disgruntled Harcourt to make mischief. The destruction of the unity in the cabinet and the party kept the Liberals out of power for ten years. Is there a significant difference this time? Well, Rosebery was as anxious to quit the premiership as Major is to cling tenaciously to it.

Lord Rosebery entered politics with all the blessings a good fairy might endow. Innate intelligence allowed academic achievement without struggle, his personality inspired worship in his followers who included the brightest and best in a new generation of Liberals. In Scotland he was immensely popular with the masses. He had much more than sufficient wealth, clear ideas and the ability to make decisions.

For such a serious young aristocrat, politics was the obvious career. He was tempted by Disraeli but made his entry into national politics by providing the organisation for Gladstone's Midlothian campaign of 1879-80. This was by far the most successful piece of political theatre in the nineteenth century. Typically, he fought off offers to join the Government in 1880 and only relented under pressure and when he felt that he might achieve more effective administration for Scotland. His promotion of course reflected his talents but also his loyalty. In a period when the bulk of the Whigs were drifting irretrievably away from Liberalism, Rosebery stuck by Gladstone and accepted Cabinet office at a time of government crisis when his action could be seen rather as foolhardy than the reward for Midlothian.

In the short lived Home Rule Government of 1886, he became Foreign Secretary in the place of Granville, who was recognised

as being no longer capable of such an exacting post, and instead of Dilke who was ruled out by a divorce scandal. While his tenure of office was not long enough to make much impact, in it Rosebery had found his *métier* and when Gladstone formed his final Government of 1892, Rosebery returned to the Foreign Office. This senior position marked him out as a possible successor to Gladstone and his approach to it cemented his good relations with the Queen. But his wider appeal depended on the radical approach he took on domestic issues. He supplemented his firm support in Scotland with a period on the newly formed London County Council, which he chaired between November 1889 and July 1890.

Gladstone's 1892 Government was frustrating, bogged down in a doomed bid for Home Rule and the ageing premier's efforts to insist on retrenchment. When Rosebery took over he found many of the frustrations beyond his unravelling. In the Lords his support was numerically small, but this is an area that Rhodes James, as a House of Commons man, does not dwell on. In the Commons, Harcourt and Morley were each prickly and each felt undervalued. As a peer, Rosebery was separated from the bulk of his party who looked to Harcourt as Leader of the House. As a cabinet, this reasonably talented team (it included two future premiers) lacked direction - the Government's main gift to posterity was Harcourt's death duties and some small extensions to the empire. When defeated on a minor matter in the Commons, the Government resigned in relief and lost the ensuing election. Rosebery led the opposition for a short while before finding in Gladstone's last public campaign a reason to abandon the bed of nails.

Inauspiciously, and still aged under 50, his official career was over, but Rosebery remained a public presence and potential leader until the formation of Campbell-Bannerman's Government in 1905 and did not die until 1929. From time to time he reappeared in public to proclaim his imperialist vision and each time he did so he raised hopes of a comeback but on each successive occasion he separated himself further from the party. His vision did have fervent followers but his failure to work as a leader and his lack of sympathy for Home Rule and for Campbell-Bannerman increasingly separated him from the party. By the time of the House of Lords Crisis of 1910-11 this former reformer was virtually a Conservative.

"I must plough my furrow alone"

For all his gifts Rosebery must be considered the least effective Liberal premier. The curse of the bad fairy outweighed all the blessings. The death of his wife Hannah Rothschild in 1890 was devastating, removing much of his ambition and determination. He suffered acutely from insomnia which must be peculiarly debilitating in such an arduous role as that of a party leader. But in truth the real failing seems to have been inherent in his personality.

Most Victorian politicians were very conscious of their honour and resigned more readily than today's Tories but Rosebery was unduly prickly. This made his ambition the more obvious the more he tried to hide it. He regarded each of his ministerial posts a burden he professed to be anxious to shed. He was insufferable to colleagues who should have been his equals

and regarded them as insufferable - in the case of Harcourt he was probably right. He conducted the Foreign Office as a fiefdom and resented the intervention of any other minister. In any politician these are fatal weaknesses. Whatever rivalry exists within a party it can only be effective when its leaders can work together, can argue out their case without rancour and can reach the compromise that is good for the country and the party. It may be unfair to say that Rosebery sought the glory without the work - the palm without the sand - but he did want a ministerial career without the politics, a government that did not require teamwork.

Because Rosebery was a failure he has not been blessed by many good biographies. Because he was one of the protagonists of imperialism he seems a dated, forgotten man. But as Enoch Powell has said, every political career must end in failure, and often the reasons for failure are of much greater value than the recitation of long outdated successes. So we must be especially grateful for the paperback reissue of Robert Rhodes James' elegant work. As always he covers the life in a straightforward way, not bogged down in forgotten trivia but emphasising the key elements of the events and the personality. He outlines the development of Rosebery's Liberal imperialism - Rosebery may well have been the first to envisage the British Empire as a Commonwealth in the way that it subsequently developed. He does not forget the influence that Rosebery exerted over Grey, Haldane and Asquith who, as more practical men, were able to develop Rosebery's approach in the final flowering of Liberal government before the First World War. If Rhodes James cannot finally bring himself quite to agree with Churchill's judgement of Rosebery he cannot in all honesty differ much from it.

Old Heroes for a New Party

*Conference Fringe Meeting Report
Scarborough, March 1995
by Patrick Mitchell*

Scarborough welcomed the return of the Liberal Democrats with a fine display of east coast weather conditions. A large audience took shelter from the cold and the wind for the second showing of 'Old Heroes for a New Party' in the comfortable, if somewhat gloomy, surroundings of the billiard room of the Royal Hotel, otherwise known as the Prince Regent Room.. The speakers managed to share the one reading lamp available.

The 'heroes' for our 1994 meeting had been Voltaire, Acton and Burke, not all of whom might occur to most of us as a first choice (which is one of the interesting things about the occasion). Our speakers this time had each chosen someone with special appeal to them.. Alan Beith, who spoke first, outlined the career of W.T. Stead (1849-1912), the Liberal journalist and activist, who had been a great innovator as editor of the *Northern Echo* in Darlington, and then of the *Pall Mall Gazette* after John Morley. He was an unorthodox man who articulated the religious radicalism which had supported Gladstone, and campaigned on the basis of a radical view of

Christianity. His great causes had been peace, temperance, and the rights of women. His determination to expose the vice of child prostitution led to his imprisonment for a short time. He died on the *Titanic*.

Sir William Goodhart, as a lawyer of American descent, introduced us to Judge Learned Hand (1872-1961), son and grandson of lawyers, who practised fairly unsuccessfully as a lawyer until 1909 when he became a Federal District Judge, later becoming an Appeals judge (though he never rose to the Supreme Court). His reputation was made both as a judge and as a political philosopher. In politics he was initially a Republican, but always a liberal, who became known from the 1920s onwards for his speeches on liberty.

It is less easy to see the particular appeal of Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman to Tony Greaves. Unfortunately we were unable to learn more, because Tony was unable to get to the meeting, so we will have to wait for a future occasion to discover what he would have had to say. In his absence Gordon Lishman, who chaired the meeting, treated us to an impromptu seminar in which members of the audience were asked to propose their own heroes. The discussion ranged widely, covering politicians from Oliver Cromwell to Helen Suzman, economists from Adam Smith to J.K. Galbraith, philosophers and novelists. No doubt some of them will feature in the next instalment of what seems sure to become a regular feature of our conference activities.

What is Liberal Democracy? The Importance of History

by James Lund

This series of articles has been overtaken by the recent course of politics. When it began, John Smith led a Labour Party still committed to public ownership of the means of production. Given the emergence of Tony Blair and the prospect of New Labour, what occasioned these articles, the possibility of winning increased, sustained electoral support for Liberal Democracy at the national level, looks much more difficult to fulfil.

Continuing success in local elections, in which only a minority of the electorate vote; a growing part in local government, the powers of which have been substantially diminished; the repeated stimulus of often spectacular by-election victories: none of these, we know from hard experience, will bring the sort of support at General Elections that the party wants. Nor will single issues, important as education is; as if the party were a populist pressure group.

The foregoing articles have apparently indicated little to improve this prospect. Yet in truth there is everything to play for in the longer term.. Thatcherism has largely destroyed traditional conservatism. What New Labour is to be or could be, no one yet knows.

What the Liberal Democrats need is what has been called 'a hegemonic project', such as the Liberals had in 1906, Labour