

through society long after the plots had been handed back to the housing developers. Many of those using them for growing vegetables had no idea how to distribute their produce, and refused to sell it – but gave it away around the neighbourhood as a sign of largesse. Those who did sell it found, on average that allotment growing could produce food to the value of £80 an acre – in the days when a hefty bag of potatoes cost 5d (about 2p).¹⁹ The argument for allotments as a tool of poverty reduction seemed to have been won.

The desperate need for home grown food in the First World War had also converted Lloyd George to the old Liberal Unionist position, leading to the Land Settlement (Facilities) Bill of December 1918, designed to resettle returning soldiers on the land. Collings was ill, but his friends rallied round and organised a successful amendment allowing smallholders to buy their land after six years, and to pay back the money over sixty years.

Two years later, another 208,000 acres had been acquired for former soldiers. Collings died on 20 November 1920, believing that his campaign had achieved its objectives. He could look back on an extraordinary focused life of commitment to the cause, stretching from the days of town planning, *Ideal Home* magazine and hens in suburban back gardens, right back to Cobbett, the Great Reform Act, and the Captain Swing riots. He was old enough to have signed the petition calling for the repeal of the Corn Laws in the 1840s and to have regretted doing so. It was a long lifetime, nine decades, of unprecedented change.

Actually, Collings was wrong. The kind of transformation in land ownership and small-scale agriculture he imagined, and could see in other European countries on his summer jaunts with Chamberlain, did not come to pass after all. The great opportunity that opened up for land reform on that scale was a victim Home Rule divisions in the Liberal Party and the frustration of Lloyd George's Land Campaign by the First World War. The 1885 slogan 'Three acres and a cow' continued to be associated with the Liberal Party well into the second half of the twentieth century, but with little understanding about its

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origins or objectives. When the generation after Collings began to pull together the lost and frayed strands of his campaign, they did so outside the Liberal Party.

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- 1 *The Independent*, 1 May 2011.
- 2 J. Collings, *Land Reform* (Longmans, Green, 1908), p. xvii.
- 3 J. Collings and Sir John L. Green, *Life of the Rt Hon. Jesse Collings* (Longmans, Green, 1920).
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 124.
- 5 Simon Grimble, *Landscape Writing and the Condition of England 1878–1917: Ruskin to modernism* (Edwin Mellen Press, 2004), p. 86.
- 6 J. Garvin, *The Life of Joseph Chamberlain* (London, 1932), p. 549.
- 7 *Manchester Guardian*, 25 Mar. 1880.
- 8 Joseph Chamberlain speech, 30 Mar. 1883.

- 9 Collings and Green, *Life of Collings*, p. 181.
- 10 See Ian Packer, *Lloyd George, Liberalism and the Land: The land issue and party politics in England 1906–1914* (Royal Historical Society/Boydell Press, 2001), pp. 12–13.
- 11 Collings and Green, *Life of Collings*, pp. 185–6.
- 12 See Paul Readman, *Land and Nation in England: Patriotism, national identity and the politics of land 1880–1914* (Royal Historical Society/Boydell Press, 2008), p. 20.
- 13 J. Collings, *The Colonization of Rural Britain* (Rural World, 1914), vol. 2, pp. 332–3.
- 14 Collings and Green, *Life of Collings*, p. 273.
- 15 Collings, *Colonization*, p. 339.
- 16 This was in July 1913, see Collings, *Colonization*, p. 333.
- 17 *The Times*, 12 Oct. 1913.
- 18 Gerald W. Butcher, *Allotments for All: The story of a great movement* (George Allen & Unwin, 1918), p. 18.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 31.

REVIEWS

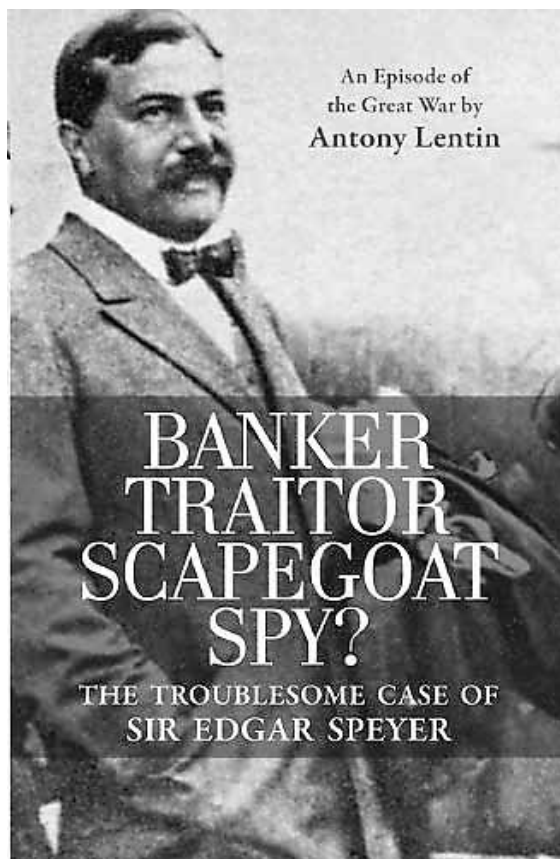
Scapegoat for Liberalism?

Antony Lentin, *Banker, Traitor, Scapegoat, Spy? The Troublesome Case of Sir Edgar Speyer* (Haus, 2013)

Reviewed by **David Dutton**

THE FIRST WORLD War gave rise to countless acts of patriotic bravery and self-sacrifice. But it also prompted a large number of instances of ugly xenophobia. As is well known, the First Sea Lord, Prince Louis of Battenberg, second cousin of King George V, father of Louis Mountbatten and a nationalised British subject who had served in the Royal Navy from the age of fourteen, was forced from office in October 1914, solely on account of his German birth. The offence of Lord Haldane was equally slight. An admirer of German culture, he had once described Germany as his 'spiritual home'. At the same

time, however, as War Minister under Campbell-Bannerman and Asquith, Haldane had done more than anyone else to prepare the British Expeditionary Force for military combat in 1914. This, however, did not spare the by-then Lord Chancellor from a vitriolic campaign in the right-wing press. The recipient of more than 2,500 abusive letters in a single day, Haldane was summarily dropped from the government at the formation of the first wartime coalition in May 1915 – the price Prime Minister Asquith was prepared to pay to ensure Conservative participation in the government and his own position at its head. Even innocent



dachshunds, impeccably loyal to their British masters and mistresses, were the victims of unthinking persecution.

The fate of the German-born Edgar Speyer was arguably even crueller. In the same month that Haldane left office, Speyer, accompanied by his wife and children, sailed to New York to escape a sustained campaign of vilification in Britain which charged him with disloyalty and more. By this time he had tried, unsuccessfully, voluntarily to resign the privy councillorship to which he had been raised on Asquith's recommendation in 1909. Worse, however, was to follow. In 1921, after a lengthy investigation of his wartime activities, he was found guilty by a judicial committee of enquiry of disloyalty and disaffection to the Crown and of communicating and trading with the enemy. For this he was deprived of the British citizenship he had held since the age of twenty-nine and expelled from the Privy Council, the last individual to suffer this indignity until the Labour MP, Eliot Morley, in 2011, following imprisonment for fraudulent claims for parliamentary expenses.

Speyer's is not now a household name. Yet he was a leading figure in British society in the years

before the outbreak of the First World War. A wealthy member of a Jewish merchant-banking family from Frankfurt, Speyer settled permanently in London in 1886 as chairman of Speyer Bros., the British branch of the family enterprise. It was Speyer's money that financed the Underground Electric Railway Company of London, bringing electrification to the Metropolitan and District lines of the London 'Tube' and completion to major sections of what became the Piccadilly, Bakerloo and Northern lines. As Tony Lentin writes, 'He saw the Company not only as a hoped-for source of profit which he must strive to keep solvent but also as a great public amenity, an agent of urban and social progress. The Underground became an end in itself' (p. 6). According to the *Daily Mirror*, by 1912 Speyer had become 'London's "King of the Underground" ... the master-mind dealing with the mammoth problem of London's passenger-traffic' (p. 10). At the same time, he became a generous patron of the arts, saving the annual Promenade Concerts from bankruptcy, underwriting their losses and putting them on a secure financial footing. Speyer's enormous wealth also enabled him to support such varied causes as the Whitechapel Art Gallery, the Poplar Hospital and Captain Scott's expeditions to the Antarctic.

Then as now, wealth opened doors and Speyer became prominent on the fringes of Liberal politics, developing into an intimate of both Campbell-Bannerman and Asquith, and of the latter's wife, Margot. His contributions to party funds for the general election of 1906 no doubt eased the path to the baronetcy he secured later that year. The following year Lloyd George asked him to advise on the establishment of the Port of London Authority. Speyer gave public support to the People's Budget of 1909 and was on the long list of those earmarked for a peerage in the event that their Unionist lordships had not seen the error of their ways and allowed the Parliament Bill to reach the statute book in the summer of 1911. Winston and Clementine Churchill were even renting a holiday cottage from the Speyers as the European storm clouds gathered three years later.

In an essay published in 1912, Speyer lauded Germany and England as 'citizens of the world' and wrote of the prospect of continuing good relations between two kindred nations. Yet he would be a collateral casualty of the collapse of that vision following the outbreak of hostilities in August 1914. Spymania predated the coming of war, but the fear of the 'enemy within' inevitably intensified once fighting began. It was not long before figures on the right of the political spectrum started to ask whether someone born in Germany, no matter how pronounced his Anglophilia, could really be trusted. Journalists such as Leo Maxse of the *National Review* and H. A. Gwynne of the *Morning Post* were suspicious of Speyer's continuing entrée into 10 Downing Street. It was rumoured that at one dinner party in October 1914, he had been present during discussions of the disposition of the Royal Navy. 'One's blood boils at these things,' wrote the former Tory whip, the Earl of Crawford, 'while we know that communications are being made to the enemy' (p. 43).

Over the months that followed, indiscriminate hostility towards those of German birth was one way to vent frustration at the failure of the military to produce the promised early victory. 'I get lots of violent and abusive letters saying I am pro-German,' complained Margot Asquith. 'This is because I won't drop my German friends, Sir Edgar Speyer, [Sir Ernest] Cassel etc.' (p. 59). Even the king, whom no one could claim was of undiluted British blood, was alarmed, a feeling that would lead to the masterstroke of the creation of the House of Windsor to replace that of the distinctly suspect Saxe-Coburg-Gotha.

Denounced by Maxse as one of a group of 'opulent, sinister, powerful, truculent Prussians' and no doubt recoiling from Horatio Bottomley's assertion that 'you cannot naturalise an unnatural beast, a human abortion, a hellish freak' (pp. 62-3), Speyer's decision to seek sanctuary in the then neutral United States was entirely understandable. His 'departure from these shores,' writes Lentin, 'and the fall of the last purely Liberal government were coincidental but symbolic of the decline of

liberalism generally' (p. 164). The decision of the Home Office in 1919 to re-open the case, a decision that led ultimately to Speyer's disgrace and 'conviction', was altogether less comprehensible.

Was this a flagrant miscarriage of justice inflicted on one of the country's greatest benefactors of the twentieth century? As an accomplished historian of this period and also a qualified barrister, Antony Lentin is well placed to decide. He does not, however, act unreservedly as the counsel for the defence. Rather his task is that of a fair-minded judge (something largely denied to Speyer through the person of Mr Justice Salter, for twenty years the Unionist MP for Basingstoke), summing up the available evidence for his readership, the jury. Yet the conclusion seems inescapable. Speyer had committed minor and technical misdemeanours, including deliberately evading the censor. But there is no proof that he had set out to betray his adopted country or indeed done anything to merit the punishments imposed. If not quite a British Dreyfus, Speyer had good reason to feel bitter at his treatment. He was, judges Lentin, in a phrase

previously used by the late Stephen Koss of Haldane, 'a scapegoat for Liberalism'. 'Conservatives were paying off old scores, taking vicarious revenge for their deep-seated grievances both against Asquith's pre-war administration and for his wartime failings' (p. 166).

This is a compelling tale told with skill and verve. One would have liked a little more on the deeper origins of wartime hostility, not all of which came to light only with the outbreak of conflict, and of the anti-Semitism which was clearly a factor. Sir Almeric Fitzroy, clerk to the Privy Council, described Speyer as 'a most characteristic little Jew' and, when swearing him into that august body, pointedly offered him the Old Testament, 'and thus saved the Gospels from outrage' (p. 27). Overall, however, this is a valuable and salutary study of the perilous route by which patriotism can shade imperceptibly into jingoism and thence into pure xenophobia.

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The quarrel kept the (Gladstonian) Liberals out of power for most of the following two decades and the home rule policy blighted both the 1892 and 1906 Liberal governments. The two candidates angling to succeed the aging Gladstone, the Whig, Lord Hartington, and, the Radical, Joe Chamberlain, both sided with the Unionists and in turn led the LUs in the Commons.

A devolved parliament no longer seems such an outlandish idea and it is hard to recreate the passions with which home rule was debated, compounded of enthusiasm for the Empire then approaching its zenith, resentment of Parnell's obstructive parliamentary tactics and the violence of Irish agrarian campaigners, British Protestant fear of regimented Irish Catholicism, and old-fashioned racial prejudice against the Irish, which had been stoked up in Stuart times and festered at least until the 1950s.

Gladstone had once defined Liberalism as 'trust in the people only qualified by prudence'. Gladstone believed that he had detected in Parnell, a Protestant landowner, the reasonableness and conservatism of a man with whom he could do business. I have always considered that the essential difference between the Gladstonians and the Unionists was this element of faith for the future. Gladstone judged that home rule would strengthen the ties between Britain and Ireland, the Unionists feared that home rule would begin the dissolution of the Empire. Alex Salmond's referendum on Scottish independence will put these hypotheses to a practical test.

While the home rule dispute is a staple part of analyses of the Victorian Liberal Party and biographies of Gladstone, little has been written on the Liberal Unionist party as a topic of interest for itself. The focus has been on the dispute or on its implications for the Liberal Party or on the leavening of the Conservative Party with a mildly more progressive element. So much attention has been paid to the LU leaders, especially Chamberlain, that it has often been considered a party of chiefs without Indians, or as Gladstone put it 'clergymen without a church' (p. 10). The traditional narrative – which suggested that the party merely provided disillusioned Whig aristocrats with a comforting

Bitterest allies

Ian Cawood, *The Liberal Unionist Party: A History* (I.B. Tauris, 2012)

Reviewed by **Tony Little**

ON 17 DECEMBER 1885, a newspaper scoop revealed what some Liberals had long feared: Gladstone had been converted to home rule. Gladstone's proposal for a devolved Irish parliament resolved the impasse created by 1885 election where Parnell's Irish nationalist party held the balance of power. But his move split the Liberal Party and ninety-three Liberals joined the Conservatives in crushing the Home Rule Bill.

Division in the Liberal forces was nothing new. It had kept them out of power for parts of the 1850s. It had overpowered Russell's 1865 government and Gladstone's first

administration. What was different about 1886?

The defeat of home rule, Ian Cawood claims, created the biggest defection from any British political party. It was followed by an immediate general election in which Gladstonian Liberals fought the Unionist Liberals who were protected by an electoral pact with the Tories. The split became institutionalised. The Unionists formed a separate party and supported Salisbury's minority Conservative administration between 1886 and 1892. In 1895, the Liberal Unionists (LUs) formed a coalition with the Conservatives and in 1912 the two parties merged.

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