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# No proper account

Eric Hopkins: *Charles Masterman (1873–1927): Politician and Journalist – The Splendid Failure* (Lampeter Press, Lewistown, USA, 1999; pp303)  
Reviewed by Lawrence Irvine Iles

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This book does not do justice to its subject, and indeed is at times offensive in its allegations. C. F. G. Masterman was the Wimbledon-born younger son of a vast Disraelian Tory Evangelical household. Through his own academic endeavour and a brilliantly incisive, innovative and sardonic writing style he won scholarships to Wellington and Cambridge, enabling him to escape Home Counties narrow-mindedness. At Cambridge he became President of the Union and a postgraduate writer Fellow, as well as secretary of the University Liberal Club, where he led a team of left-wing ‘progressives’ in capturing many of the student forums and publications outlets. He and his team, who included Noel Buxton (later the first Labour Agriculture Minister), shocked the usually dominant Tory college authorities, not least by their hostility to the Unionist Government’s South African policies, which he characterised, in a book entitled *The Heart of the Empire*, as capitalistic Imperialism at its racist and jingoistic extreme.

After Cambridge, and a period lecturing in literature all over Britain on London University’s extension programmes, Masterman, who was very much a Christian socialist in his own eyes (as well as – grudgingly – those of Keir Hardie) considered Anglican ordination. He rejected this, however, unable to stomach the literalism of much of the dogma, and the Tory sympathies of many of his potential parishioners. Instead, while still a working journalist he was elected in 1906 as Liberal MP for North West Ham, although not without some difficulty. He was temporarily

‘deselected’ in the run-up to the election by a group of right-wing shopowner Liberals who regularly made common cause in city politics with local Tories, an episode inadequately covered by Hopkins, who misunderstands the social make-up of the borough.

By 1908 Masterman had entered the government despite middle-class and nonconformist opposition. He had quickly made influential friends with Lloyd George, Winston Churchill and others on the left of the party. By 1912 he was Lloyd George’s official number two as Financial Secretary to the Treasury, pioneering national health and insurance provisions through the 1912–13 Parliament. In 1914 he entered the Cabinet as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. Closely associated with the more radical clauses of the 1909 budget, he was also, by virtue of his personal friendship with Ramsay Macdonald, Lloyd George’s secret conduit to the Labour Party’s MPs between 1910 and 1914. This was a key role given the unreliability of the Irish Nationalist vote in perilous Commons divisions.

But his very success was to cost him his seat until 1923. Obligated to resign his seat, as was the requirement of the time for holding an office of profit under the Crown, he lost by-elections to the Tories at both Bethnal Green and Ipswich and had to resign from the Cabinet early in 1915. Although not (contrary to Hopkins) an indifferent campaigner, his opponents were successfully able to ridicule his immersion in the administrative minutiae of his

insurance reforms (he was the first chair of the newly-established Insurance Commission), and within the Liberal Party his defeats lent him an aura of failure. An opponent of Lloyd George’s coalitions with the Conservatives between 1916 and 1922, he forged a new – if wary – alliance with him in 1923, entering Parliament again briefly as the senior MP for Manchester. Prior to this he had flirted with Labour under Harold Laski’s urging, but never actually joined the party. Hopkins suggests a sustained psychological breakdown, but there is no evidence for this. He also suggests Masterman was a closet homosexual, citing his nude bathing while a visiting schoolmaster at Bembridge, and his keen interest in photography – but in fact he was a founder of the Society of Progressive Education, which embodied a back-to-nature ethos, as well as a talented photographer in his own right, one of whose last books was an acclaimed accompaniment to a German collection of British landscapes.

Hopkins’ agenda negates any value that this biography might have had. Better by far is that by Masterman’s wife Lucy, *CFG; As I Knew Him*, published in 1939. Reviewing it then, Richard Crossman described Masterman as a brilliant intellectual polyglot to whom history had failed to give proper account for the services he had rendered to his all-too-conservative country and – above all – its poorest and most economically deprived citizens. It is both a significantly more measured judgement than that of Hopkins, as well as an epitaph to be proud of.

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*This review has been edited for reasons of space.*