Lawrence Iles examines the life of Sir John Harris (1874–1940), campaigner against slavery and colonial exploitation in Africa and Liberal MP for North West Hackney, 1923–24.

CAMPAIGNER AGAINST SLAVERY

Sir John Harris was one of the last Liberal politicians to regard his political career as an adjunct of his religious faith; and one of the first MPs to have made a career (albeit modestly) from lobbying, in his case against slavery and colonial exploitation in a Britain uneasily coming to terms with the transition from Empire to 'Commonwealth trusteeship' as he called it. His brand of nonconformist Liberalism was going out of fashion by the 1920s and, as a result, his career in Parliament was brief. But his work as Secretary of the British International Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society for thirty years from 1910 was highly influential in terms of bringing race issues to the attention of the public.

John Hobbis Harris was born on 29 July 1874 at Brightwell, Berkshire, the son of John and Elizabeth Harris. His family was relatively prosperous – his father was described on the 1881 census as a master plumber and glazier – and he was educated at the King Alfred School, Wantage, and privately.

Harris seems to have been something of a rebellious spirit at school, with no clear idea of where his talents lay, never mind how to use them. He trained in accountancy in London but the turning point in his life came on 6 May 1898 when he married Alice Seely, of Frome, Somerset, like Harris a firm Baptist. They were to have four children. Alice's strong personality must have influenced their decision to become missionaries for their church. By 1904 they had departed for the Belgian Congo (now the Democratic Republic of Congo), a country apparently chosen by chance, on a trip which was to change their lives.

On returning to London Harris wrote, lectured and displayed photographs of the horrors he and his wife had witnessed: cannibalism, the mutilation of children's genitals, murderous gang rapes, and the systematic extermination of 'unproductive' elderly villagers. This was not, as might have been popularly imagined, due to the barbarity of a savage population, and tribal animosities, but was a deliberate policy of the state's government, with which the Belgian King, Leopold II, was closely connected. Harris linked the atrocities he saw to the flourishing trade in rubber, which was a principal export of the Congo and a source of profit to its ruler. Demand for rubber was increasing rapidly because of the development of the motor car. The atrocities Harris chronicled were intended to intimidate Congolese villagers into working in rubber plantations and to generate higher production.

While not being the first to point to the exploitation of native populations by their colonial masters – Joseph Conrad had done as much in his 1902 novel *Heart of Darkness* – Harris provided details of more outrages than could be safely ignored by even the most ardent imperialist. Although not a writer of sparkling prose, he worked tirelessly to find new facts and to bring them before the British population and government. Inevitably, he was not popular with the Belgian authorities and required protection by the British government – including by Roger Casement, later to achieve notoriety in Ireland – on later visits to the Congo. He cultivated good relations with the UK government, which urged the Belgian King to be more open about the role of his agents in the territory. By 1914, Harris had secured Papal condemnation of the Congolese atrocities and had done much to associate Leopold II with colonial exploitation in the public mind.

The situation in the Congo was not the only focus for Harris before 1914. He clashed with senior ministers, not least Lord Morley, in attacking Portugal, a traditional ally of the UK, for the use of indentured labour on plantations in the Cape Verde Islands. He also exposed the expropriation of land by white settlers in Rhodesia. Harris and his wife were the subject

of physical threats and vicious assaults in print as a result of such campaigns, but they were undeterred.

Harris was a Liberal throughout his life, serving the Dulwich Liberal Association and London Liberal Federation for many years. His political and religious faiths were intertwined and for that reason, although we was on the radical wing of the Liberal Party, he was never tempted to join Labour.

As with many Liberals, the First World War made a deep impact on Harris. Ever the optimist, he saw opportunities for a new colonial system to emerge from the fall of Germany's African possessions. He advocated a 'new commonwealth', presided over by the British, French, US, Australian and New Zealand governments in Asia, Africa, and the Pacific, in which traditional patterns of land ownership would be combined with modern scientific developments and a benign capitalism to secure steady economic growth; and in which majority populations would be granted some measure of self-government. Harris's ideas were supported by many in the Liberal and Labour parties but were derided by the Labour left, particularly Fenner Brockway and his younger supporters such as Barbara Castle, and the evolving South African National Congress and Kenyan Kikuyu Native Rights Association, which called for full self-government.

Harris's vision did not become reality. Where autonomy was granted, it was to minority white populations which expropriated land for themselves and used all available means to keep the natives in their places. This outcome did not affect Harris's religious faith: the white establishment in countries such as Kenya was firmly Church of England and little better could be expected of them. Harris's political beliefs were shaken, however. His advocacy of self-government waned to the extent that in 1933 he called (in the *Liberal Women's News*) for direct rule of the colonies from London in order to protect the welfare of the indigenous populations.

Harris's parliamentary career was short but active. He first stood in 1922, perhaps motivated by distaste with the Lloyd George government and a desire to put an undiluted brand of Liberalism before the electorate. He contested North West Camberwell, which was held by a prominent Lloyd Georgite, T.J. Macnamara, but came a distant third. In 1923 he was elected for North Hackney, defeating the incumbent Tory with a 14.2 per cent swing. This was one of a number of inner London seats in which the Liberals polled well during the inter-war years. It was predominantly working class, but, owing to the preponderance of small employers, was not heavily unionised. This characteristic helped the Liberals withstand the onslaught of Labour throughout much of the inter-war period, and the Liberals retained some residual strength in such seats into the 1950s.

For Harris, the House of Commons provided an unrivalled platform from which he could air his views and press for government action on a range of international issues, from the Abyssinian slave trade to the vegetable oil industry in West Africa and from prostitution in Hong Kong to the Takoradi Harbour Works in the Gold Coast.

In the few months available to him before the Labour government fell towards the end of 1924, he spoke over twenty times and asked over sixty questions. His focus was not solely on foreign affairs; he questioned the government vigorously on issues affecting military servicemen and also on the working conditions of civil servants. He presented a bill to remove the disqualification of Church of England ministers from sitting in the House of Commons, a measure which hinted at support for disestablishment. The under-resourcing of medical and sanitary inspectors was another concern, of particular importance in inner-city Hackney.

His views were the product of an odd mixture of individualism and collectivism; he was one of

only three Liberals to vote for an Independent Labour Party motion calling for the nationalisation of natural monopolies such as water, but he also argued for strikes by key workers, such as bus drivers, to be prohibited. Although a radical, he voted against the Labour government in the division on the Zinoviev allegations which precipitated the 1924 election.

Like most Liberals, he lost heavily in 1924 and did not return to Parliament, making fruitless attempts to do so for North Hackney in 1929, where he was narrowly pushed into third place by Labour, and for Westbury in 1931. This last campaign was significant because Westbury was one of the Liberal Party's most winnable seats. Harcourt Johnstone had lost in 1929 by only sixty-seven votes, but Harris was defeated by nearly 6,000 in a disastrous election for his party. It is noticeable that his later election addresses had lost the sanctimonious edge of their predecessors, in which he had more or less urged electors to vote for Good (Harris) against Evil (his opponents). Harris appreciated that the days when the Liberals could bank on the nonconformist vote had gone, thanks to the challenge of a largely secular Labour Party, and its message that economics was the key issue of the age.

In or out of Parliament, Harris was a prodigious writer of books, pamphlets, articles (especially for the *Contemporary Review* and the *Daily Herald,* as its 'native affairs authority') and letters (especially to *The Times*). The Vauxhall Bridge office of his anti-slavery league was always busy. He was a member of the executive committee of the League of Nations and, in 1926, helped negotiate a formal protocol that was intended to prohibit a person being defined as a 'chattel' and therefore capable of being another's property. In 1933 he began to raise the issue of the treatment of the black population in the southern states of the United States, exposing the practice of lynching, and comparing unfavourably the attitude of the US state authorities with the governments of Kenya and South Africa. He was not afraid to speak out against slavery and barbaric practices in countries such as Ethiopia and China, where there was no colonial power to be blamed, earning the reprobation of fellow campaigners who felt that this could undermine their efforts to put pressure on the colonial powers. Harris, however, exposed and condemned oppression wherever he found it.

Harris was knighted in 1933, possibly on the recommendation of his friend Sir John Simon. During the 1930s he seemed to have lost some of his former cutting edge and in his writing often supported rather than challenged the status quo, for example in arguing against mixed-race marriages. In many respects he was now well behind the latest thinking on race issues and his attitudes and the terminology he used were old-fashioned compared to those of the new generation of activists on the left in the UK and Africa. Some African-Americans were suspicious of his involvement in their cause, considering him an apologist for old-style European colonialism, but he had the strong support of activists such as Dr William du Bois and Dr Carter Woodson who ensured his books and articles were published widely in the US.

In 1938, Harris and his wife returned to Africa to visit the protectorates established in modern-day Botswana and Lesotho. They visited the Kalahari Desert to interview a man who claimed to be the oldest in the world and a former warrior of the Zulu King Chaka. More seriously, on the same visit, Harris had an angry confrontation with South African premier General Hertzog about the discrimination against the non-white majority practised by his government, which heralded the apartheid regime of later years. Shortly afterwards, Harris's health began to fail and he suffered a number of heart attacks. Forced into semi-retirement, he remained reasonably active up until his death at the age of sixty-five on 30 April 1940.

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Sir John Simon had described him, at a dinner to celebrate his knighthood, as possessing 'boundless enthusiasm and optimism, detailed knowledge and courage'. Lord Noel-Buxton described him on his death as a genial, open-minded man, religious to his core but lacking in religious bigotry. As a campaigner and politician he had the common touch, the ability to convey a complicated message with power and simplicity in his speeches and writing. Parliamentarians with backgrounds in pressure groups are now common, but Harris was one of the first, and most effective, of the breed.

Among the most significant of Harris's books catalogued by the British Library are *Down in Darkest Africa* (1912), *Portuguese Slavery: Britain's Dilemma* (1913), *Germany's Lost Colonial Empire, and the Essentials of Reconstruction* (1917), *Africa: Slave or Free* (1919), *The Chartered Millions: Rhodesia and the Challenge to the British Commonwealth* (1920), *Slavery or 'Sacred Trust'?* (1926) and *A Century of Emancipation* (1933). The records of the British International Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society and Harris's unpublished autobiography are held at Rhodes House, Oxford University. Anti-Slavery International in Lambeth hold some of the photographs taken by Alice Harris of the Congolese atrocities. There is also a substantial collection of Harris's journalistic output at the McGill University Library, Montreal.

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