

'A despot in the making'

Mark Bonham Carter and Mark Pottle (eds.),
Lantern Slides: The Diaries and Letters of Violet Bonham Carter 1904–1914 (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1996)

Reviewed by **Robert Ingham**

Although now fading fast from the public's consciousness, Lady Violet Bonham Carter was a Liberal colossus who bestrode the middle of the twentieth century. Strong-willed, opinionated, domineering, somewhat autocratic, she could sometimes give the impression that she had carried the Liberal Party on her back through the dark days of the 1940s and 1950s. The reality wasn't too far from that perception. Her broadcasting appearances, indefatigable service on committees of all kinds, influence in high places, and championing of the Liberal cause rallied morale and stiffened backbones during years of continual decline. She kept the Liberal flame of her father's generation burning, if faintly at times, until it could safely be passed to her son-in-law, Jo Grimond.

Anyone who has heard stories about 'Lady Vi' during the bleak period immediately post-war, or read of her in the histories and memoirs of the time, would be hard pushed to imagine her as a lovestruck teenager, whirling from ball to opera to European holiday during the dying years of aristocratic ascendancy. The triumph of *Lantern Slides*, the first volume of Violet Asquith's (as she then was) diaries, covering the period from 1904 to 1914, lies in the way Violet and her contemporaries vividly come to life, with barely a hint of editorial intervention.

Violet Asquith had a seat at the top table of British politics from a very young age. In June 1905, at the age of eighteen, for example, she dined with A. J. Balfour, the Prime Minister, who only a few months later was to resign, allowing the Liberals in. Bal-

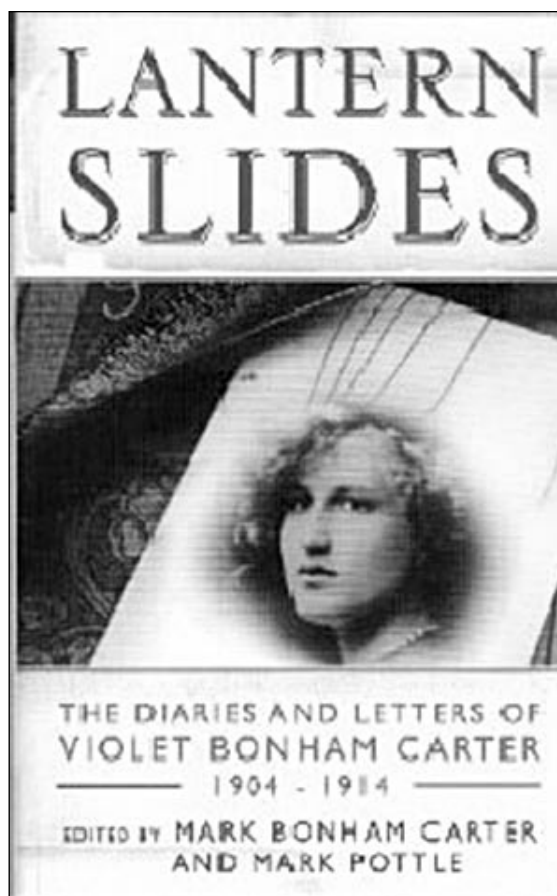
four's statement over lunch that Churchill 'with his name, chances and capacity ought to have gone further by now' was perhaps premature. A few weeks later she was arguing with Hilaire Belloc and Sir John Dickson-Poynder, a Conservative MP, about the propriety of maintaining close personal relations with people of the opposite political persuasion. Labour politicians did not often feature on the guest lists of the events Violet attended at this time, although in July 1905 she formed an unlikely threesome with John Burns and Edwin Montagu. Burns, the first working-class member of the Cabinet, jocularly characterised her as a 'despot in the making'.

It would be misleading to describe *Lantern Slides* as a political commentary, however. The political references are quite modest at first, although they come to dominate the later stages. Instead, the book is a personal account of an unusual young woman coming of age in the heart of the Edwardian establishment. Denied the opportunity to follow her brothers to Balliol by the conventions of the time, the diaries open with seventeen-year-old Violet and her older brother Arthur packed off with a maid to Paris for six months, so that he could learn French for a career in the City. In Paris, Violet led a carefree existence, seemingly unfettered by parental restrictions. Although lacking the formal education from which her brothers benefited, she could already hold her own when the conversation turned to Japanese art, Turkish politics or German literature.

On returning to England, Violet came out into society.

Attracting a dutiful crowd of potential suitors, who she mostly kept at arms length, Violet lived the popular image of the period: balls till late when up in London, and a succession of weekends in country houses. Violet was not so taken up by the high life as to neglect political affairs, and there is a marvellous account of the formation of the 1905 Liberal government, including the effort required to persuade Grey and Haldane to join. Failure to include them could have helped the Conservatives rally and reduced the scale of the Liberal triumph in 1906. Violet was appalled that she happened to be abroad, recovering from an infection, when her father was appointed Prime Minister, although she managed to capture from afar the absurdity of H. H. Asquith hurrying to Biarritz, to be sworn in by a holidaying monarch.

In her personal life, 1909 was a crucial year. One of Violet's wooers, Archie Gordon, was fatally wounded in a car accident. Rushing to his bedside,



Violet asked to marry him hours before he died. From then on, for some four years, Violet's diary was written as a letter to her late fiancé. In memory of Archie Gordon, she set up a boys' club in Hoxton, which she ran successfully for several years. She was helped by Mark Bonham Carter (known as Bongie), her father's Private Secretary, who throughout the period played the role of dependable friend of last resort. Violet and her friend Venetia Stanley joked that Bongie resembled Gabriel Oak from Hardy's *Far From the Madding Crowd*. By 1914, Bongie's warm letters addressed Violet in the same way as she addressed her diary to Archie Gordon. Their marriage, after a brief courtship, is covered in the second volume of diaries.

Of Violet's uneasy relationship with her stepmother, Margot, there is precious little. Her father is the subject of several uncritical appreciations. Their relationship was very close and warm, although not sufficiently close for Violet to detect that H. H. Asquith was a close confidante of Venetia Stanley at this time. There is not a sniff of this scandal, although it shocked Violet to the core when it was finally revealed in the 1960s. Relations with Lloyd George were not, at this time, particularly strained, although Violet records that she 'heaved' over one of his populist speeches on Lords reform in 1910.

After 1909, with Violet 'out' in society and mourning Archie Gordon, politics featured more prominently in her life. She gave vivid accounts of the 1909 Budget, the 1910 elections and the Marconi affair. Her robust views on the suffragettes and their cause are given vent on several occasions: had she been sympathetic to them, might she have persuaded her father to change his mind? It is interesting to note, too, how rowdy was the House of Commons at that time, with uproar far worse than anything experienced in recent times. Interestingly, in a

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conversation about the prospect of a 1915 general election, H. H. Asquith threatens that similar tactics would be employed by the Liberals against the Conservatives over Irish Home Rule, should the Liberals be defeated. 'Imagine, Winston and Lloyd George unmuzzled,' ponders the Liberal leader.

Violet herself was more than just a commentator at this time. She was active in the Liberal Social Council, visiting 'distant' Palmers Green and Harlesden to speak for the cause. She spoke regularly in public in support of the government and found she enjoyed it. There were also opportunities for foreign travel. With her father, she took a cruise with the Churchills on the Admiralty yacht *Enchantress*. While he was away, the Prime Minister missed some serious industrial action by the dockworkers and the resignation of the Lord Chancellor, Lord Loreburn. Even the normally calm Bongie was reduced to sending fevered telegrams reminding the Prime Minister of the dangers of leaving the government rudderless at such a sensitive time. Violet also visited her brother Arthur in the Sudan, where she rejected the advances of Bongie's older brother Edgar, and travelled to the United States and Canada,

where she dined with Theodore Roosevelt amongst others.

This first volume of the diaries ends with some correspondence with a vivacious Rupert Brooke, a sign of the horrors to come. The second volume of Violet's diaries are more fragmented, although the first sections chronicle the downfall of the society into which Violet was born. In the third volume, Violet is captured as an ageing member of the great and the good, on an endless treadmill of committee meetings, and a giant amongst pygmies in her own party. *Lantern Slides* is the best of the lot, and unmissable for students of the Edwardian era and its politics.

A word should be said for the editing. Violet's son Mark initiated the project but died shortly before publication. Mark Pottle assisted with *Lantern Slides* and then edited the other two volumes outright. They did a splendid job, not just in terms of allowing Violet to speak out, in her own words, and at her own sometimes breathless pace, but in providing detailed, helpful footnotes and appendices on the people and places mentioned.

Robert Ingham is a historical writer, and Biographies Editor of the Journal of Liberal History.

REPORT

Liberal Heroines

Fringe meeting report, March 2003, with Baroness (Liz) Barker and Diana Wallis MEP

Report by **Justine McGuinness**

Once again the History Group provided the most lively and simulating

fringe event at Conference. The reason was simple: an interesting subject and very passionate