1945–51.
4 Letter dated 27 January 1948 from Clement Davies to A. P. Wadsworth, Editor *Manchester Guardian. Guardian* Archives, John Rylands Library, University of Manchester.
5 *Liverpool Daily Post,* 13 February 1950.
6 Letter from the late Sir Leonard Smith to reviewer dated 1 February 1986.
7 Interview with the late Phyllis Preston by the reviewer, 17 November 1988.
8 *Manchester Guardian,* 9 April 1953.
9 *The Economist,* 23 April 1955.

'Why was I born at this time … to know more dead than living people?'

Colin Clifford: *The Asquiths* (John Murray, 2002)

Reviewed by **Iain Sharpe**

The political fortunes of the Asquith family were destroyed by the First World War. In the summer of 1914, H. H. Asquith had been prime minister for more than six years. With the Conservative Party in disarray and demoralised, Asquith's Liberal Party could look forward to an unprecedented fourth successive election victory.

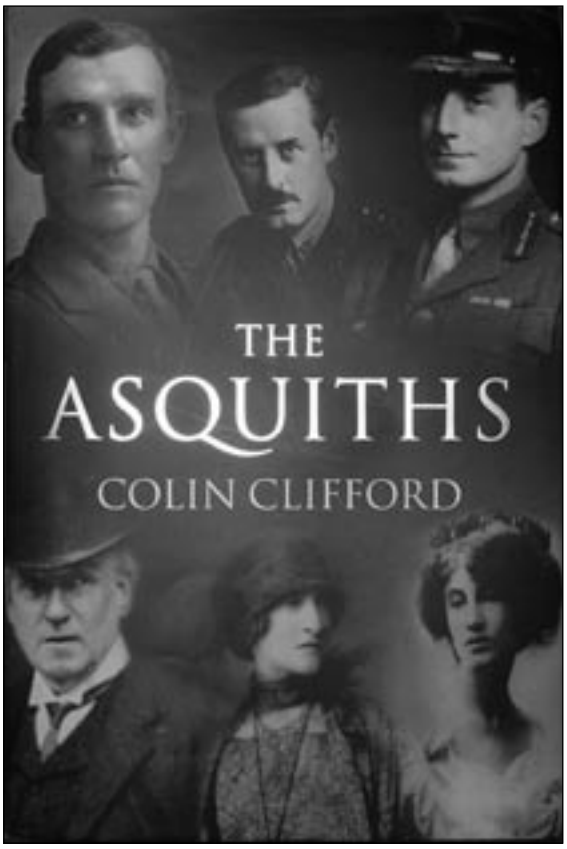
The Asquiths seemed likely to become a political dynasty, like the Chamberlains or the Churchills. H. H. Asquith's eldest son Raymond had been one of the most brilliant Oxford scholars of his generation. Both Raymond and Herbert, his second son, had followed in their father's footsteps in becoming President of the Oxford Union and being called to the bar. Both intended to pursue political careers. Asquith's second marriage to society figure Margot Tennant in 1894 gave the family an air of social glamour in addition to intellectual and political prowess. Asquith's remaining three children from his first marriage, Arthur ('Oc'), Cyril ('Cys') and Violet were, like their elder siblings, both clever and talented.

The Asquiths' political fortunes were not to last, however. By the end of the First World War, Asquith had been ousted from office, and in the general election of 1918 he lost his parliamentary seat. The Liberal Party collapsed, although Lloyd George continued to head a Conservative-dominated coalition. Raymond had been killed at the Battle of the Somme in 1916, and Herbert never really recovered from his experiences in the First World War. Violet, who was described by Winston Churchill as her father's 'champion redoubtable' in the years after his fall from power, was a stalwart of the Liberal Party for many years, but her own attempts to enter parliament were unsuccessful.

Colin Clifford's book is a family rather than a political biography of the Asquiths, although inevitably politics is never far from centre stage. This study complements the volumes of Violet Bonham-Carter's letters and diaries that have been published over the past decade, giving a clearer portrait of the Asquith children and their circle. For example, although Raymond Asquith has often been portrayed as a figure symbolic of the brilliant generation who lost their lives in the carnage of the First World War, Clifford shows how his hedonism and intellectual detachment may have meant he was just a little too aloof and not quite serious enough to achieve the brilliant career expected of him. In the summer of 1914 as the international crisis over the Balkans was brewing, he was at the centre of a London Society scandal. At a party on a boat on the Thames he had offered Diana Manners (later to become Diana Cooper, wife of Duff Cooper) £10 to persuade a mutual friend to jump in the river. When both the friend and a member of the party who had tried to rescue him drowned, Raymond showed little remorse, and in what seemed like a cover-up avoided having to give evidence at the subsequent inquest.

The book also sheds light on the difficult relationship between Margot Asquith and her stepdaughter Violet. Both wanted to be the centre of attention and tried to upstage the other. For example, Margot disapproved of Violet's 'deathbed betrothal' to Archie Gordon, after the latter's fatal injury in a car crash, as an excessive drama, but then made such an exaggerated display of grief at the funeral that she had to be comforted by, of all people, the dead man's mother.

Clifford gives a very vivid picture of society life before the First World War and of the



tragedy that engulfed this generation. He poignantly quotes H. H. Asquith's daughter-in-law Cynthia : 'Oh why was I born at this time: before one is thirty to know more dead than living people?' He also conveys a strong sense of the distance the war put between Asquith and the sons on whom he had always doted. He never wrote to his sons when they were at the Front – perhaps feeling unable to add to his own emotional burden as prime minister by acknowledging the daily danger his children faced. In turn, both Herbert and Raymond Asquith were critical of the lack of dynamism shown by their father's government in trying to win the war.

While Colin Clifford gives a vivid portrayal of the Asquith family, bringing the various characters to life, the book is not without its flaws. He seems blinkered in his condemnation of Lloyd George, refusing to accept that anything the Lloyd George Government did helped to achieve victory. He forgets that Asquith himself was not above a little political intrigue as we know from his role in the Liberal League in 1902 and the Relugas Compact of 1905 that sought to push Campbell-Bannerman upstairs to the House of Lords. Likewise, he is guilty occasionally of sweeping generalisations such as 'Asquith, like many politicians, was an inveterate "groper"'. Asquith's peccadilloes were well-known, but why tar politicians in general with the same brush?

I was disappointed by the brisk treatment given to the later lives of the Asquith children, since this is the real untrodden ground – much of the rest of the story has been covered in biographies of H. H. and Margot Asquith and in the published letters and diaries of Violet Bonham-Carter. But, nonetheless, this is an enjoyable book which adds detail and colour to the Asquith family history.

Iain Sharpe is a Liberal Democrat councillor in Watford.

The big grapefruit

David Walters: *The Strange Rebirth of Liberal England* (Politico's, 2003)

Reviewed by **David Boyle**

Roy Jenkins' unusual pronunciation of the phrase 'the Big Breakthrough' in the early days of the Alliance in the early 1980s provides the first of many jokes in David Walter's new recent history of the party. One lady is supposed to have asked him afterwards to say a little more about when he meant by 'the Big Grapefruit'.

Some of the jokes, anecdotes and gossip in *The Strange Rebirth of Liberal England* will be familiar to readers of this journal; some may be new. But their inclusion in the book does give an authentic sense of what it has been like to be a Liberal Democrat or Liberal over the past three decades – not just the by-election highs and general election lows, but the extraordinary hand-to-mouth, make-do-and-mend business of punching above your political weight.

This is not the first book to adapt the title of Trevor Wilson's famous *Strange Death of Liberal England*, which tracked the party's decline until 1935, but it is one of the best reads. As you would expect from a former ITN broadcaster and the party's director of media communications, David Walter has produced a compelling, beautifully crafted narrative. It's a story that is well balanced between anecdote and analysis, and – for someone like me, who lived through much of it – it reads disturbingly like the story of our lives. The disappointments, the apparent triumphs, the infuriating rows that seemed so important at the time: it's all very nostalgic.

There needs to be a larger book that considers the impact of the Liberal Democrats and their predecessor parties on life in Britain since 1970, culminating in the Cook–Maclennan talks and the Joint Consultative Committee, which I believe history will judge to have been vitally important. This book is not that, but then it doesn't claim to be. It is, however, an antidote to those endless loving rehearsals of obscure arguments and characters in long-forgotten Labour administrations, dragged out to be fronted by aging columnists who are completely ignorant about the contemporary Liberal equivalents.

For that reason it is a timely book, and it has some analysis