

## REVIEWS

multiple Rolls Royce owner') and David Penhaligon ('eccentric Liberal MP'). Doubtless, last-minute editorial revision led to their being excluded from the final published text.

Women figures are generally well represented. These include colourful individuals like Margot Asquith and her equally dynamic stepdaughter Lady Violet Bonham Carter. As noted, Lady Megan is here (but not her father, or her brother Gwilym, Viscount Tenby). Strangely, there is no entry for former cabinet ministers like Eirene White (1909–99) or her lifelong *bête noir*, Labour's famous 'Red Queen' Barbara Castle, later the Baroness Castle of Blackburn (1910–2002). The

editor had, of course, to make his choice.

The volume has an especially eye-catching dustjacket, but has no illustrations or cartoons. Their inclusion would undoubtedly have added to the appeal of the book. But this impressive tome will certainly interest, amuse, enthrall and entertain a large number of readers, young and old alike. A wide readership is assured. One anticipates eagerly the appearance of further works from this enterprising publishing house.

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rural areas, as the qualifications for voting were harmonised with those that already existed for the urban boroughs. Large numbers of agricultural labourers now had the vote for the first time. How would they use it?

### 'Why should we be beggars with a ballot in our hand?'

In 1885, Liberals won 51 per cent of the 158 constituencies that Lynch defines as 'rural and semi-rural'. In 1906, they won 69 per cent. But these were the only elections at which Liberals won a rural majority. In 1895 they sank as low as 18 per cent. The trend of the rural Liberal vote reflected the national trend and, obviously, national issues, whether home rule in 1886 or the Boer War in 1900, had a significant impact. But were there other factors that had a peculiar influence on rural seats – and could Liberals have exploited them better? These are the questions at the heart of Lynch's analysis.

The major problem she faced is that Liberal Party history has focused on leadership activities and on the limited, mostly urban, archives. Her solution has been to draw on local newspapers, combined in places with the census and directory data usually exploited by social rather than political historians. Victorian journalists thought nothing of taking a full page to record a meeting that political activists would struggle to convince the local paper to report today. A comprehensive analysis of the 158 constituencies by this method would occupy a lifetime rather than the ten years taken from a 'vague proposal for a doctoral thesis' (p. v) to Lynch's published monograph. Her sample has been limited to three constituencies in North Essex, South Oxfordshire and Holmfirth in the West Riding of Yorkshire, but this is sufficient to secure different agricultural and religious circumstances as well as to include a semi-rural area with mining and industry.

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## 'God made the land for the people'

Patricia Lynch: *The Liberal Party in Rural England 1885–1910: Radicalism and Community* (Clarendon Press, 2003)

Reviewed by **Tony Little**

In the first half of the twentieth century the Liberal Party moved from winning its greatest victory to near-extinction. In the same period the Labour Party moved from insignificance to the creation of a semi-socialist state in Britain. Predictably, historians have brought these two things together and constructed theories about their inevitability: the Liberal Party was doomed once large numbers of the working class were added to the electoral roll and, if not then, once the country had become adjusted to the mass mobilisation and state direction of industry required to win the Great War. Naturally, Liberals made matters worse for themselves by their misguided policies from Gladstone and home rule onwards, and by engaging in fratricidal quarrels, but ... and here clichés about beach equipment and ocean liners begin to occur. If this is

a parody of a broadly accepted view, it is one that has not been adequately challenged. And while Patricia Lynch does not pretend to offer an alternative thesis for the twentieth century – her book does not venture even as far as the Great War – she does challenge the seeds from which the determinist view grows.

The general election of 1885 was fought under new and unprecedented conditions. Most constituencies now returned a single member, and this feature has been very carefully analysed for the benefits that it conferred on one party over another. The other, and more important, feature was the two-thirds growth in the electorate in England and Wales, which had been enfranchised by the Third Reform Act (50–60 per cent growth in Ireland and Scotland). But this increase was not spread evenly; rather, it was concentrated in

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It has allowed her to construct a cohesive narrative and to argue that the factors discovered in the analysis of these seats are suggestive of general Liberal strengths and weaknesses which have hitherto been neglected in the twin assumptions that rural seats were Tory seats while urban politics became dominated by class.

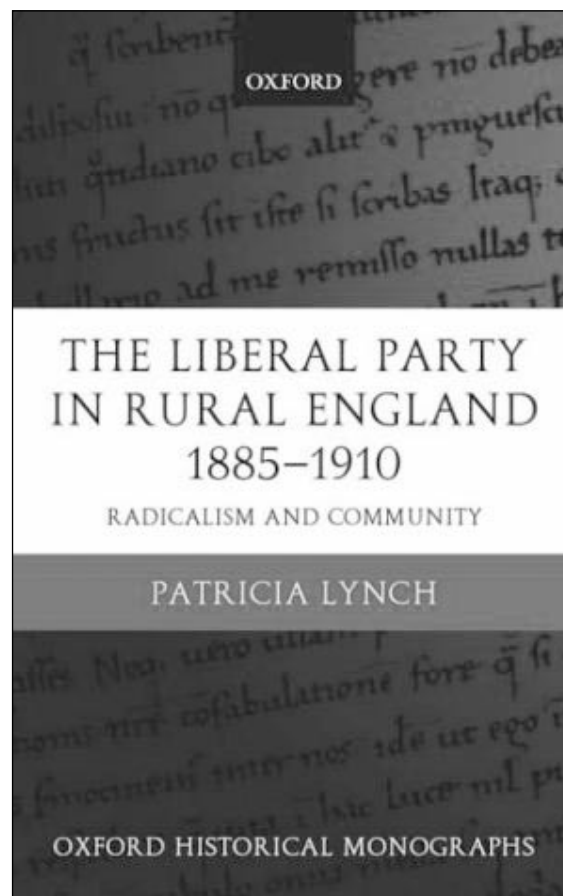
Her technique is particularly useful in analysing the social and occupational structure of the party's membership by following the names on testimonials or petitions through to local directories and the census. Unfortunately the analysis is more static than dynamic, both because it relies on inevitably limited sources of membership data and because she had access to nothing later than the 1891 census data when she carried out the analysis. Naturally, the constituency parties show an influx of new working-class members, but it seems that such members were unable to gain a proportionate share of official positions, which were largely retained by the middle classes. She is also able to demonstrate that the more densely populated constituencies found it easier to establish flourishing party branches. While this might be expected – the bigger the catchment group the more scope for recruiting enough members to form a viable group – the proof is in itself valuable, as are the arguments she advances to explain the competitive advantages that Conservatives had over the Liberals.

### **'Liberals will not falter from the fight'**

Lynch argues that these advantages were as much cultural as political. One of the great fears of the Liberal leadership was that the agricultural labourers and the small tenants would vote for their Tory landlords out of deference or fear. Although some active party workers were evicted and a few clerics refused traditional handouts to rural radicals, particularly in 1910,

the party suffered more from the self-imposed rural discipline of community harmony. Liberal propaganda against the local aristocracy, whether from democratic, class or land-reform motives, disturbed this natural neighbourliness and was both a valuable party weapon and confusingly counterproductive, particularly during local elections. The disharmony represented by the relatively rare general election was tolerated and ritualised. Rowdy meetings and the chairing, in torchlight procession round the towns and villages, of the victorious candidate in a hand-drawn carriage draped in party colours, had allowed the participation of the poorer sections of the community before they had the vote – and this persisted after 1885. But in local elections candidates generally felt obliged to adopt a different party label, such as Progressive, or to abandon party labels altogether. Even well-recognised party activists stood as independents.

Liberal earnestness was an even bigger drawback. Liberals saw party activity primarily as a means of education and proselytising – a common failing to this day – with lectures on home rule or temperance and a horse-drawn van touring the countryside, manned 'by several young men from Oxford University'. The Conservatives, by contrast, relied heavily on the Primrose League, whose activities were apparently social and inclusive even of supporters of another party. Conservatives were also quicker than Liberals to recruit female activists. Eventually, Liberals learnt the benefits of fêtes and 'programmes of interesting and amusing sports'. I particularly liked the Gretna Green cycle race in which 'pairs of ladies and gentlemen were required to ride hand-in-hand to a table "where both must sign name, address, and occupation, and re-mount and ride hand-in-hand to [the] winning post"'. Such fêtes could attract several thousand visitors.



### **'Why should we work hard and let the landlords take the best?'**

Lynch argues that, in the election of 1885, Liberals had the advantage of a rural radical tradition dating back to the time of the Chartists and could draw on long-standing rural discontent over the control exercised over village lives and livelihoods by the landowner and the Anglican clergy. Liberals raised the prospect of more extensive peasant proprietorship through proposals for allotments – the famous 'three acres and a cow' – and attacked the local elite and tithes, which, though not paid by agricultural labourers, were seen as a factor behind low agricultural wages. Irish home rule dominated the elections of 1886 to 1895 and the reduced focus on domestic policy held the party back in both rural and urban areas. But the impact was more acute in rural areas, which were suffering from an agricultural depression and a decline in population.

Within this overall picture, Lynch draws some interesting distinctions between the diverse experiences of her three constituencies with different crop and pasture dependencies: the Liberal Party's promotion of temperance was never going to be a success among barley-growing farmers and their labourers in Essex, for example. She is also able to draw attention to instances where local activists took their own initiative in promoting radical campaigns more relevant to the local populace. However, while she recognises the existence of Liberal Unionists, it is disappointing that she did not directly explore the impact on local Liberal activity of the disruption caused to the party by home rule and how it was reflected in the social composition of her local parties. Almost certainly a factor in the 1886 election, the split probably still worked against the party in 1892.

The 'khaki election' of 1900 marked a Conservative high point. Rural areas were as patriotic as any city, and Liberal preaching against the Boer War did not go down well in the countryside, which had contributed disproportionately to the armed forces. Thereafter, however, the Tories slowly lost control of rural affections. The use of Chinese indentured labour on the Rand tarnished the victory in South Africa; poorly paid agricultural workers could readily identify with their wretched conditions. The Tory 1902 Education Act was very damaging in sparsely populated areas, where a government-funded Anglican village school would preclude the possibility of any non-denominational education. The Act also made education a county council responsibility, whereas women had a vote only at the district council level. Joseph Chamberlain's tariff reform campaign was not an immediate Conservative vote-loser – it offered the superficially attractive prospect of protection to agriculture – but over time

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the fear of higher food prices and low wages was a greater worry to rural voters and their wives. The prospect of land reform looked more attractive, and Liberal speakers were able to draw on the folk memories of the poor conditions before the abolition of the Corn Laws in the 'hungry forties'.

**'Make them pay their taxes on the land just like the rest'**

The People's Budget of 1909 offered rural Liberal campaigners two apparently popular rallying cries – an attack on rich aristocrats anxious to overthrow the will of the Commons just to avoid higher income tax, and the prospect of a new tax which might encourage the renting of uncultivated land. So why did the Liberals lose half their rural seats in the two elections of 1910? Apart from intimidation, Lynch suggests that the rising cost of living was a major factor militating against Liberal arguments for free trade and also that the Conservatives, with more to lose, were better motivated to mobilise their forces and attract previous abstainers.

But what about the Labour challenge? Of Lynch's three constituencies only one provided the right background for a detailed analysis. While in the most rural areas agricultural unions had gained and lost a foothold, only Holmfirth contained the textile factories and coal mines that provided a sound basis for union survival. Holmfirth's Labour movement originated among the miners, who had traditionally been strong Liberals. Difficulties for the Liberals began towards 1890 when coal prices and wages were under pressure. Unionised workers tried to make support for an Eight Hours Bill a condition of their support but the Liberal candidate, H. J. Wilson, resisted. A short-term reconciliation was followed by a break in which the miners teamed up with the

Independent Labour Party from Bradford to seek a working-class candidate. While this proved impossible in the 1892 and 1895 general elections, where policy differences between Labour and Liberal were slight, activists were determined to try again. By the 1910 election, not only had Wilson and the Liberal government alienated a section of the more socialist workers but union members had grown to represent nearly half the electorate – seemingly a good base for a new Labour candidate. The Liberals concentrated on traditional radical policies and not the politics of class. Wilson retained the seat, losing support among the textile workers but holding on to the mining vote. After Wilson retired in 1912, Labour put up a mineworker but despite an improved poll lost to an unknown Liberal stockbroker from Manchester.

Patricia Lynch has used her sources well and provides substantial evidence for the local arguments she advances. While this is clearly an academic work, which demands some familiarity with the period under consideration, it is well recommended to the attention of the general reader. Within the evidence, her work is persuasive: neither a class-based politics nor a Tory countryside was inevitable. The unanswered question is whether her small sample is representative of rural voters more generally. Her achievements represent a challenge, which I hope will be taken up, to build a broader picture of Liberal activity at a constituency level in this crucial period and into the second decade of the twentieth century. She has set a standard well worth emulating.

*Tony Little is Chair of the Liberal Democrat History Group. The heading and sub-headings are from 'The Land', a song championed by the proponents of Henry George's land value tax policy and adopted by Liberals in the 1910 elections (source: Liberator Song Book, 1995 edition).*