

LG's predecessor as Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, 'would have made a superb judge and was a great peacetime prime minister. By now [1916], however, it was clear that he lacked the dynamic energy and dedication required in a war leader' (p. 129).

The volume is superbly illustrated with a wealth of cartoons taken from contemporary newspapers and journals such as *Punch* and the *Pall Mall Gazette*. There are also a number of fascinating photographs, many previously unpublished, taken from the family album. All are notably well chosen to reflect the themes in the text and they add much to the appeal and interest of the book.

Given the amount of ground covered in a relatively short volume, some factual errors and misjudgements are nigh on inevitable. On page 14 there is some confusion between Lloyd George's eldest daughter Mair Eluned (born in 1890) and the second daughter Olwen Elizabeth (born in 1892). 'Every seat in Wales' did not fall to the

Liberals in 1906 (p. 36), and it is unclear why Baldwin and Chamberlain are described as merely 'nominal leaders of the Conservative Party' (p. 29). There is some misunderstanding of the use and application of the infamous Lloyd George Fund in the 1920s (p. 192), and few historians would agree that, had Lloyd George remained in good health, he 'would have dominated the National Government' formed in August 1931. The undying enmity of both Baldwin and MacDonald would surely have relegated 'the Goat' to the sidelines of political life at this juncture. Is it really true to claim that Lloyd George 'hated writing letters' (p. 151)? He always seemed to relish writing regularly both to his wife Dame Margaret and his younger brother William.

One surprising omission is the lack of any reference to the award of an earldom to Lloyd George in January 1945. In the previous November, at Churchill's personal instigation, a Royal Marines courier had arrived at LG's North Wales home Ty Newydd, Llanystumdwy, bearing the offer of an earldom from the Prime Minister to a terminally ill Lloyd George, who was by then wracked with cancer. The 'Cast of Main Characters' printed on pp. 249–63 is most helpful, but

Mr Lloyd George should note that Frances Stevenson was born in 1888 (not 1890), and that A. J. Sylvester lived from 1889 until 1989 (not 1885 until 1984).

Perhaps the greatest weakness of the scholarly apparatus is the rather inadequate notes printed on pp. 270–84. They are confined simply to identifying the direct quotations used in the book, and yet even these are highly selective and many are incomplete, failing to give the full call numbers of the relevant documents. Many important quotations in the text still remain unidentified. The reader would undoubtedly have been much better served by conventional scholarly footnotes or endnotes.

Yet, given the huge number of biographies of both Lloyd George and Churchill and the spate of more specialised studies of certain aspects of their careers, Robert Lloyd-George has still succeeded in producing a thoroughly worthwhile book, a stimulating read for professional historians and interested laymen alike, abounding with information and fresh perspectives. It is certain to arouse great interest.

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## A hand-to-mouth man?

Patrick Jackson: *Harcourt and Son: A Political Biography of Sir William Harcourt, 1827–1904* (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2004)

Reviewed by **Martin Pugh**

**S**ir William Harcourt was the kind of politician we rarely see nowadays. He was intelligent, cultured and well-read but also robust and aggressive, and in fact a bit of a verbal bully towards colleagues and opponents alike. Denis

Healey is perhaps the nearest modern example.

Harcourt was undoubtedly a major figure in Victorian Liberalism; he served as Liberal Leader in the Commons from 1895 to 1898 and effectively led the party there during several periods

when Gladstone was absent and neglectful of the need for party management. From an ideological perspective he can be seen as the link between the politics of Gladstone and the New Liberalism of the Asquith–Lloyd George era. Harcourt's papers have been available at the Bodleian Library for many years, and those of his contemporaries are plentiful, to put it mildly. Yet he has been remarkably neglected by historians; the only previous biography was by the Liberal journalist, A. G. Gardiner, in 1923.<sup>1</sup>

Despite this neglect, Harcourt makes a fine subject for a biography both as a person and as a public figure. Impulsive, condescending, larger-than-life, he was a brilliant public speaker who enjoyed attacking his own party as much as his opponents. He was unable to resist the temptation to be funny and flippant, and, as with Churchill, his language was often over the top. In fact Harcourt gave the impression of enjoying the game too much, hence the accusations of lawyerly opportunism that followed him throughout his career. That he failed to win the premiership on Gladstone's retirement in 1894 was obviously due to Queen Victoria's hostility to him, but must partly be ascribed to his inability to curb his tongue and conciliate his colleagues. His civil servants also found him trying, in the manner of a naughty child; if they pressed him to read a paper he disliked he retaliated by hiding it behind a bookcase.

Harcourt's family were landowners who came over with William the Conqueror and had lived at Stanton Harcourt in Oxfordshire for centuries. When his elder brother complained that he did not have the right ideas about the land, Harcourt tartly replied: 'You have the land and may leave the ideas to me.' After getting elected in Oxford in 1868, he was promoted to Solicitor General in 1873, which meant taking a knighthood. 'It is horribly

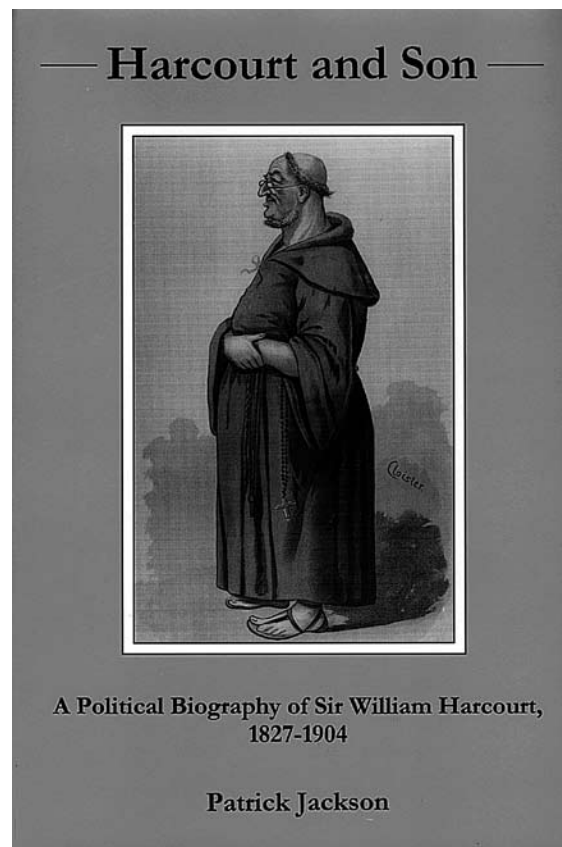
vulgar,' he protested, 'almost as bad as being a Baronet'. In these early years Harcourt's fellow Liberals in Parliament disliked him so much that they hoped he would join Disraeli. He certainly played a major part in the disintegration that eventually resulted in the breakdown of Gladstone's government in 1874. But Harcourt felt happier in opposition, though he found Gladstone infuriating – as, of course, did almost all the GOM's colleagues. However, although he saw the merits of Lord Hartington as an alternative Liberal leader, Harcourt became more appreciative of Gladstone as the one man capable of unifying the party; as a result – and rather paradoxically – he stayed loyal to Gladstone when he split the party over Home Rule in 1886, even though he did not really support the principle of Home Rule. For his part Gladstone recognised that Harcourt's energy and forensic talent fully justified keeping him in office or on the front bench, hence his promotion to Home Secretary in 1880 and Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1892.

It was as the new Home Secretary in 1880 that Harcourt became a famous victim of the rule that a minister must vacate his seat and win re-election on his appointment. He had eloquently defended the tradition but now found himself obliged to fight again in the highly marginal and corrupt borough of Oxford. He told the electors it was now 'my duty to consider the question of a cheap and pure supply of water for the people of London ... But how am I to do so when I am kept here by the cheap distribution of more or less beer in Oxford? [Hear, hear and laughter]'.<sup>2</sup> Harcourt lost but promptly moved to Derby, 'a thoroughly respectable constituency, which is more than can be said for your last place', Joseph Chamberlain told him.

Was Harcourt at all influenced by the presence of a

more organised working class in his new seat? He gave every appearance of being a strict retrenchment Liberal, following Gladstone's line in holding down expenditure and resisting costly policies of imperial expansion and reform of the armed forces; and he came unstuck in the 1895 election when he focused too much on temperance. Contrast this with Derby's Labour member after 1906, Jimmy Thomas, whose love of alcohol was legendary. However, we are given little indication of the interactions between Harcourt and his constituents. Derby gets only a brief mention in Patrick Jackson's book, which is focused almost entirely on high-politics sources.

The result is that in *Harcourt and Son*, as in many academic biographies, the important questions tend to get swamped by the literary tsunami of private correspondence generated by Victorian politicians. For example, when the author reaches the crisis over parliamentary reform in 1866–67 he plunges into the correspondence without explaining the issues or putting



# ELECTION 2005 IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The 2005 election saw the Liberal Democrats win a higher number of seats than at any time since 1923, and, for the second election in a row, gain both votes and seats after a period of Labour government – a historically unprecedented achievement. Yet many had hoped for an even better result, and the election campaign itself saw relatively little movement in the Lib Dem standing in the opinion polls. Does 2005 represent steady progress, or a missed opportunity?

Speakers: **John Curtice** (Professor of Politics, Strathclyde University), **Andrew Russell** (Senior Lecturer, Department of Government, Manchester University; author of *Neither left nor right? The Liberal Democrats and the electorate*), and **Chris Rennard** (Liberal Democrat Chief Executive).  
Chair: **Tony Little**.

**8.00pm Sunday 18th September**

Louis Room, Imperial Hotel, Blackpool

Please note that due to increased conference security, only those with conference photo-badges will be able to attend. For those only wishing to attend fringe meetings, registration is free but is limited to Liberal Democrat party members; and please allow time to register and pick up your badge at the Winter Gardens in Blackpool.

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Harcourt into context; for the reader who is not already familiar with the details it is difficult to make much of the account.

This failing becomes serious in the remarkably brief treatment of what was surely the peak of Harcourt's career: his famous budget of 1894. Despite his orthodox past, this had some appearance of a break with Gladstonianism; the GOM certainly didn't like it. Harcourt adopted several innovative policies, including a scheme of graduated death duties that reached a peak of 6 per cent payable on estates worth a million pounds. Harcourt also wanted to introduce a graduated income tax. There is certainly a case for seeing this budget as a crucial step on the way to the radical measures implemented by Asquith and Lloyd George after 1906 and as an early manifestation

of the ideas of the New Liberalism.<sup>3</sup> But there is little attempt in the book to evaluate his thinking or the evolution of Liberalism in the late-Victorian period. Instead the author presents the 1894 budget largely in terms of the infighting between Rosebery and Harcourt, as revealed in the correspondence. This approach trivialises a crucial theme in both Harcourt's life and the development of Liberal politics.

It may well be that Harcourt himself failed to see his innovations in terms of their wider significance. When the party lost office in 1895, his work as Leader in the Commons suggested that he had little consistent idea about the direction Liberalism should be taking. As one colleague remarked, Harcourt had 'always been a hand to mouth man and always will be'. There is clearly

something in this comment, but whether it offers a satisfactory perspective on his career remains in doubt.

*Martin Pugh was Professor of Modern History at Newcastle University until 1999 and Research Professor at Liverpool John Moores University 1999–2002. His latest book is The Pankhursts (Allen Lane, 2001).*

- 1 A. G. Gardiner, *The Life of Sir William Harcourt* (London: Constable, 1923).
- 2 *Daily Telegraph*, 3 May 1880, in Martin Pugh, "'Queen Anne is dead': The Abolition of Ministerial By-Elections, 1867–1926", *Parliamentary History*, 21, 2002, pp. 351–366.
- 3 See H. V. Emy, *Liberals, Radicals and Social Politics 1892–1914* (Cambridge University Press, 1973); Bruce K. Murray, *The People's Budget 1909–1910* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989).

**Conrad Russell**

*Continued from page 31*

of colleagues, some of them as young as his students. He was particularly supportive of women candidates – when he died there was much reference to his role during the Brent East by-election, both his contribution to it and how it provided him with a project. Sarah Teather tells me that his stories distracted others, and his practical ineptitude led the organisers to create a category of jobs for 'idiots or very clever earls'. Conrad was the worst envelope-stuffer in the world.

How lucky we were to work with him, to learn from him, and to be able to remember him with so much affection.

*Baroness Sally Hamwee is a Liberal Democrat ODPM spokesperson in the House of Lords and is Chair of the London Assembly.*