

for the centre-left in British politics to coalesce around agreed policies.

The result has been, particularly with our first-past-the-post electoral system, the Conservative Party being able to have the lion's share of office in the twentieth century. It is now for a new generation to take up the challenge of how we can provide, for what I am still confident is a (small 'l') liberal country, the political structures and programmes to reflect that liberalism. The agendas of social liberalism and social democracy continue to overlap, yet, like ships which pass in the night, we contrive to miss each other. Between 1997 and 2015 there were parliamentary majorities in both Houses which could have reformed the House of Lords, our constitutional structure and our voting system in a way which would enable elections and parliament to reflect that liberal consensus. Instead the Labour Party's short-termism and petty tribalism leave them and the country with political weather far more bleak for the centre-left than that which caused Dick Taverne to set sail against the tide in 1972.

The book reminds us that the first attempt to break the political mould that kept the centre left in semi-permanent opposition was not the formation of the SDP in 1981, but Taverne standing as Democratic Labour candidate in the by-election he himself caused by resigning as the Labour MP for Lincoln in October 1972. It was one of those events where I know exactly where I was when the announcement was made. I was sitting directly behind Tony Benn on the platform of the Labour Party Conference. I could see Benn shaking with emotion as he denounced Dick in the most apocalyptic terms. It was at that conference I believe that Benn also started the journey from centrist technocrat to left-wing ideologue. Although Dick demonstrated at Lincoln that moderate social democrats could mobilise public support, there were very few within the Labour Party who saw the future of social democracy outside the Labour Party fold. It is now over forty years since the Lincoln by-election and there is a depressing familiarity about the political landscape. A Tory government with a derisory share of the popular vote is able to dominate the political agenda whilst the centre-left is in disarray.

More encouragingly the book is also a reminder that political success is not only measured in terms of offices held or legislation passed. To have been

instrumental in founding both the Institute for Fiscal Studies, which has become the 'go to' authority on any changes to tax policy, and Sense about Science are achievements which continue to have an impact on the quality of decision making in their respective fields. I was particularly grateful to the Sense about Science team when, as a minister, I piloted through reform of our draconian libel laws to make easier genuine peer review of scientific ideas and products. So this is not a 'What might have been' story. On the contrary, it is an object lesson on how a political life out of office and out of parliament can be both useful and influential. It is also surprisingly generous about opponents and free of rancour about those who came late to banners Dick first unfurled. Perhaps if Dick had been more willing to tack and trim in his political life he would have gone further; but he would not have had so interesting or inspiring story to tell. Just before Christmas I bumped in to Dick in the Lords. He told me that he was initiating a new campaign on behalf of young refugees who are admitted as unaccompanied children and then, when they reach 18 are deported back to their homeland.

I do not know the details of these cases; but I know they could have no better champion than this child born in the Dutch East Indies who came to Britain as war loomed in Europe and stayed to become an influence for good in our political life.

Among his many talents Dick is a skilled sailor. A few years ago when he was well in to his seventies I saw him in the Lords Lobby one Monday morning. 'Do anything interesting at the weekend?' I asked. 'Oh, Janice and I went sailing – to Norway!' was the reply. Janice is Dick's wife. They have been married for over sixty years and one gets the impression that she has been very important to him weathering many a storm. 'Against the tide' is thus an apt title for a book which looks at politics and life beyond as seen by one who even in his eighty-eighth year shows no sign of seeking calmer waters.

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Alternative to war

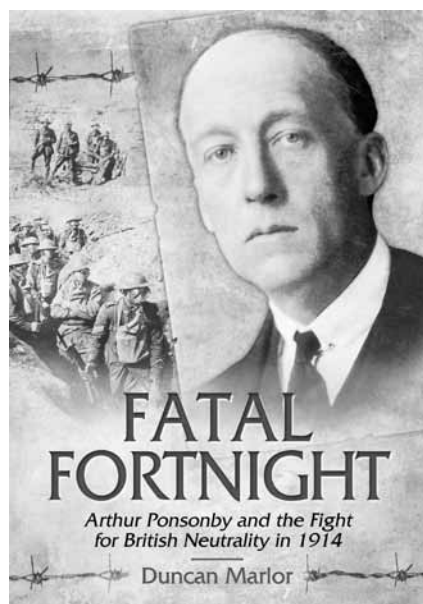
Duncan Marlor, *Fatal Fortnight: Arthur Ponsonby and the Fight for British Neutrality in 1914* (Frontline Books, 2014)

Review by **Dr Chris Cooper**

THE CENTENARY OF the outbreak of the First World War has witnessed a new wave of publications. One could be forgiven for asking whether another study of July and August 1914 can add anything noteworthy to what is already a well-trodden field. Duncan Marlor, however, deserves credit for finding an original angle, focusing upon the efforts of backbench MPs to keep Britain out of the emerging European war. As is well known, John Burns and John Morley resigned from Asquith's cabinet when Britain entered the war and Labour leaders Ramsay MacDonald and Keir Hardie were prominent backbench critics of it. But Marlor reveals a broader anti-war feeling. The focal point of his study, Arthur Ponsonby, 1st Baron Ponsonby of Shulbrede (1871–1946), was one of several dozen Radical Liberal and Labour MPs

who provided an ultimately unsuccessful resistance to Britain's involvement in the conflict. Sir Edward Grey delivered his celebrated speech in favour of British intervention on 3 August 1914, following the German government's ultimatum demanding their army's free passage through Belgium. But little attention has been paid to the chorus of MPs who spoke in the debate after the Foreign Secretary's appeal. As Marlor notes, the curious absence from the historical record of these impassioned pleas for British neutrality 'would do credit to Kremlin air-brushers' (p. xiv).

Ponsonby grew up in Windsor Castle, serving as Queen Victoria's Page of Honour before being educated at Eton and Balliol, Oxford. He had a fine political pedigree and could draw upon six years' experience working in Britain's diplomatic service and two years in the



Foreign Office. He was the son of one of Victoria's principal private secretaries and the great grandson of Earl Grey, the Whig prime minister credited with the passage of the Great Reform Act of 1832. After leaving the Foreign Office in 1902 he became secretary of the Liberal Central Association until being defeated as the Liberal candidate for Taunton in the 1906 general election. He then became principal private secretary to the prime minister, Henry Campbell-Bannerman, and, after the latter's death in 1908, he succeeded him as Liberal MP for Stirling Burghs following a by-election.

Though born into the aristocracy, Ponsonby was 'no mindless hooray-Henry', establishing himself on 'the progressive wing of the Liberal Party' (pp. 9–10). Once in parliament, he soon ruffled the establishment's feathers by voting against the king's proposed visit to his Russian cousin, Tsar Nicholas. What's more, this aristocratic radical did not share the belief of Winston Churchill and others that the Liberal Party should attack socialism. Indeed, Ponsonby, a keen social reformer, wanted to work with the fledgling Labour Party

and regarded socialism as an ideal to work towards. He also had a progressive approach to foreign affairs opposing the arms race and notions of the balance of power. Ponsonby 'wanted to see ministers more accountable on foreign policy and the processes of the Foreign Office less secretive' (p. 38). He became the chairman of the unofficial backbench Liberal Foreign Affairs Committee in 1913. This ginger group numbering around eighty members was increasingly concerned about the extent of Britain's commitments through the entente with France and, most worryingly for Liberal Radicals, tsarist Russia.

It was through this committee that Ponsonby toiled to secure Britain's neutrality as the attention of MPs shifted from potential conflict in Ireland to Britain's possible involvement in a full-scale continental war. The unfolding events during the 'fatal fortnight' from 27 July to 6 August allow Marlor to develop his consistent charge against Britain's leaders in general and Sir Edward Grey in particular: that British policy was undemocratic, with members of the cabinet and parliament being kept in the dark regarding the extent of Britain's commitments to her entente partners. Marlor contends that both Grey and Haldane, the war minister until 1912, 'developed the Entente into what amounted to an implicit military alliance with France behind the backs of most of the cabinet' (p. 19). Indeed, this policy 'was that of the Government but not of the backbenchers whose votes kept it in power' (pp. 65–66).

The position of Ponsonby's backbench committee was made clear on 29 July. Ponsonby, wanting a commitment to neutrality from the government, sent the committee's resolution to the foreign secretary which maintained that 'in no conceivable circumstances should [Britain] depart from a position of strict neutrality' (p. 45). Marlor's analysis shows that, had German leaders decided to respect Belgian neutrality,

Asquith's government might have collapsed or at least needed to be fundamentally restructured, as the cabinet and the Liberal Party were deeply divided over whether to support France and, by association, autocratic Russia. Many Liberals were keen, like William Glynn Gladstone, grandson of the celebrated prime minister, to 'let them [the powers of Europe] fight it out by themselves' (p. 82). But the consciences of the majority of both the cabinet and Liberal MPs were swayed by the crass German ultimatum to Belgium. Belgian resistance was, for so many, the game changer. Neutralists, from both the Labour and Liberal parties, were reduced, by Ponsonby's estimation, to only twenty or thirty MPs. He lamented the turn of events noting, 'I really feel almost as if the world were coming to an end' (p. 91).

Though unable to prevent Britain's possibly inevitable drift into war, the anti-war campaign culminated in the formation of the Union of Democratic Control, of which Ponsonby was a co-founder in late 1914. The group called for a negotiated peace and, more generally, wanted politics to be more democratic and conducted more openly. Significantly, the group helped bring Radical Liberal and Labour MPs together. With many of the anti-war MPs, such as Ponsonby, losing their seats in 1918, the Liberal Party was gravely damaged by the war and prominent Radical Liberals, including Ponsonby, migrated to the Labour Party. After losing Dunfermline as an 'Independent Democrat' in the 1918 general election, Ponsonby served as Labour MP for Sheffield Brightside from 1922 until he accepted a peerage in 1930. After his defection, he held a number of junior ministerial posts and, more prominently, became Leader of the Opposition in the House of Lords.

Marlor's study makes good use of archival sources including the private papers and diaries of those connected to the Liberal backbench committee, as well as a large collection of secondary sources. The contributions to parliamentary debates of those involved in the anti-war movement are noted in detail, though the lack of minutes from the Ponsonby-led committee is frustrating, despite Marlor's attempts to reconstruct the discussions of key meetings through other sources. A more fundamental concern with this study is the role of Ponsonby himself. His speech in the Commons on 3 August was uninspiring and he never emerged as leader of the

Future History Group meetings

- Monday 3 July, National Liberal Club: **The leadership of Charles Kennedy**, with Greg Hurst and Dick Newby (see back page for full details).
- September, Liberal Democrat conference, Bournemouth: joint meeting with the Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors, marking the 50th anniversary of the foundation of the Association of Liberal Councillors; details to be announced.
- January/February 2017: History Group AGM and speaker meeting; details to be announced.

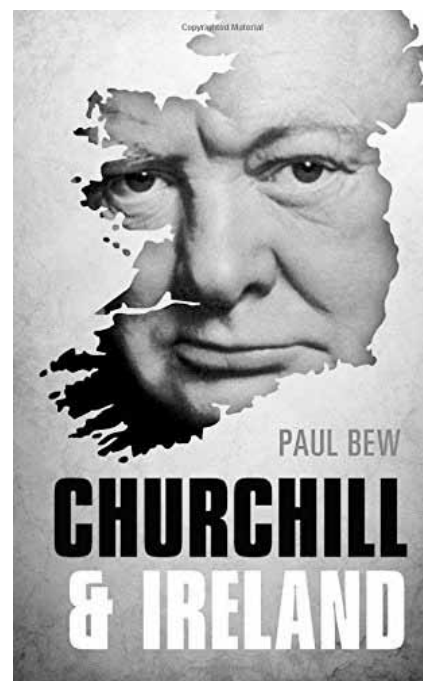
anti-war movement. Ponsonby is absent from large sections of the book and other Radical Liberals such as Charles Trevelyan and Phillip Morrell seem at least as important. Thus the subject of this biography is not quite as central to the surrounding story as Marlor might wish. Indeed, Trevelyan, after he resigned as a junior minister following Britain's declaration of war, assumed the leadership of the backbench committee.

The author is not afraid of making controversial or counterfactual claims. In the event of a German victory in a war where Britain had remained neutral, Marlor claims that 'An un-weakened Britain would have been well off in comparison' (pp. 88, 209). Just what the Kaiser's Europe would have looked like or what Britain's relationship with a German-dominated continent would have been is unclear. But few in 1914 relished such a prospect. More speculation occurs with parallels being drawn between British intervention in 1914 and the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. While tenuous similarities may be found between the expectations created through the Triple Entente before the First World War and Britain's recent relationship with the USA, there is enough interesting and original material in the study for superfluous claims to be avoided. Another moot point concerns whether

or not Ponsonby was a pacifist (p. 158). Marlor claims that he was not for peace at any price. But as a neutralist in 1914, an advocate of Britain's unilateral disarmament, active participant in the 'no more war' movement, founder of the Peace Pledge Union and chairman of War Resisters International, Ponsonby consistently displayed pacifist traits.

Whatever the rights and wrongs of British intervention or the practicalities of remaining aloof in 1914, a number of anti-war MPs found themselves castigated for their principled stance. Derided as a 'peace crank', Ponsonby was not the only Liberal MP de-selected by his constituency. During the war he was twice attacked and Trevelyan was condemned to be shot! Marlor shows that there was nothing easy about what Ponsonby and his fellow neutralists championed. Despite the unpopularity of their approach, they, along with some elements of the liberal press, provided a largely forgotten alternative reading to the grim days of July and August 1914. This is the chief value of Marlor's informative study.

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diehard imperialist opponent of the Irish nation – as witnessed respectively by his conversion to the home rule cause after switching loyalties from the Conservatives to the Liberals in 1904 and his later hostility to Irish republicanism. Bew argues, by contrast, that there was an essential consistency in Churchill's thinking and actions on Irish policy, one that combined genuine sympathy for Irish self-government with a belief that this must be within the framework of the United Kingdom and the British Empire.

He supported Irish home rule before the First World War because he was convinced that gaining Irish goodwill through a concession of self-government would make Britain stronger by making Ireland a contented member of the English-speaking world. At the same time, he was opposed to coercing Ulster into a home rule Ireland, and one of the first members of Asquith's cabinet to argue in favour of special treatment for the predominantly protestant counties in the north of Ireland. In the aftermath of the Easter Rising of 1916, Churchill, by now out of office, encouraged the ultimately unsuccessful attempts to achieve agreement home rule settlement between Redmond and Carson, the leaders of Irish nationalism and unionism.

Yet as war secretary in Lloyd George's coalition government from 1919, Churchill was a hawk in the cabinet, during the war of independence, proposing in 1920 the creation of the Auxiliary Division of the Royal Irish Constabulary (Auxies) who became notorious for their use of reprisals against the Irish

Churchill's attitude to Ireland

Paul Bew, *Churchill and Ireland* (Oxford University Press, 2016)

Review by Dr Iain Sharpe

GIVEN THE SHEER range and number of thematic studies of aspects of Winston Churchill's career that have been published in recent years, it is surprising that his relationship with Ireland and the Irish has not had more attention. While Churchill's name is not bound up with Irish affairs in the way that Gladstone's is, nonetheless he and Ireland played significant roles in one another's histories. With the exception of his final premierships, each of his periods in office coincided with defining moments in the relationship between Britain and Ireland – from the crisis over the third home rule bill before the First World War to the controversy over Irish neutrality in the Second.

So it is welcome that a historian should decide to tackle this subject, and

even more so that it should be Paul Bew. A crossbench peer, Bew has already made a distinguished contribution to the study of Irish history through his many publications. He has also been an adviser to the Bloody Sunday Commission and to David Trimble during the peace process negotiations. Perhaps these varied roles and his own apparent political sympathies (at once left-wing and unionist) make him better placed than most to bring out the nuances and paradoxes of Churchill's engagement with Irish affairs. Certainly this is neither hagiography nor hatchet job.

There have been two essential criticisms of Churchill's attitude towards Ireland – either that he was an opportunist who took whatever view best suited his career at the time or that he was a