

Reviews

responsibilities in life' (p. 247, 1 May 1917).

The deftly drawn pen-portraits of eminent public figures are a joy to read too. Harmsworth is clearly a fan of the former Liberal Prime Minister Lord Rosebery, now a respected political elder statesman, whose speeches continue to enthral the Lords: 'He has all the gifts of great oratory – a fine presence, beautiful voice, action, passion, language' (p. 44, 24 November 1909). Just days later Asquith was described thus: 'With his fresh massive clean shaven face and fine white hair, Asquith suggests to me at times a Pilgrim Father. Then again I think of him as Oliver Cromwell whom he grows to resemble more and more every day – without the warts. The highest office and responsibility have "made" Asquith. Until recently he was undervalued even by his own side in politics' (p. 46, 2 December 1909).

There are also many revealing references to various members of the British royal family. King George V, opening parliament in February 1912 on his return from the triumphal tour of the Indian sub-continent: 'The King husky but audible, but sunburned after his Indian tour' (p. 111, 14 February 1912). Harmsworth was much impressed by Edward, Prince of Wales, 'He is surely the most attractive Prince we have had for centuries – small, very fair and quite boyish in spite of his twenty five years. I see him furtively peeping at his notes during the dinner and too much absorbed for conversation. When his time comes, he makes just the nervous little speech that goes down best with an English audience, without a trace of the guttural accent which is father has and was that much more strongly marked in the case of Edward VII' (p. 294, 30 May 1919).

Predictably, references and delightful cameo portraits of Lloyd George,

the central political figure of these frenzied years, abound throughout the text. There is a fascinating depiction of the launch of Lloyd George's revived Land Campaign at Bishop's Stortford in Hertfordshire in the heart of rural England in the autumn of 1913: 'A vast meeting – a sea of pink bald people – a delirious reception for Ll.-G. and an atmosphere that thickens momentarily. Ll.-G. Speaks for 2 hours and twenty minutes' (pp. 149–50, 11 October 1913). Harmsworth relished taking breakfast with the engaging Lloyd George family (including Dame Margaret and their elder daughter Olwen, the latter clad in her nurse's uniform) at 11 Downing Street in the middle of the war: 'It is a simple domestic party, each of us fetching his or her fish, or bacon and eggs from a side table. Ll.-G. is as brisk at this hour as most other people are when the world is well-aired and hums a cheerful stave as he moves to and from the side-table' (p. 226, 20 June 1916). One of the last such discussions follows the fateful Carlton Club meeting in the autumn of 1922 following which the prime minister tendered his resignation to King George V. At a meeting of coalition Liberal MPs which followed, 'Ll.-G. is quiet but remarkably cheerful and he breaks into merry laughter more than once during the long discussion that ensues. What is to be done now?' (p. 339, 19 October 1922).

This superb work is crowned by immensely full and helpful footnotes, clearly the result of intense, painstaking research (even detective) work, and a very full index. It is an important source enabling the rigorous scholarly reassessment of the social and political culture of the age of Asquith and Lloyd George.

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the world of professional agents engaged in voter registration, electioneering and the political, social and educational activities of local political parties. Those 'grimy engineers', as they were described in 1909, served below decks under charming gold-braided officers walking on the bridge and navigating the party's course. These 'hidden workers' became a vital link between the politics of Westminster and grassroots activism in the constituencies.

Rix's investigation of party agents' professional associations, party publications, extant regional organisational records, local newspapers and election manuals illuminates three main themes: firstly, the gradual, partial and uneven professionalisation and emergent status of full-time party agents; secondly, the nature of party activity at the grassroots; and thirdly, the complex and shifting interconnections between politics at the national level and in the local context. What emerges is a subtle, judiciously judged and nuanced sense of how party agents became crucial intermediaries between politicians and voters: an essential feature of the mass electoral culture that gradually moved towards full democracy in the early twentieth century.

Importantly, Rix shows that the professionalisation of party agents was not synonymous with the 'nationalisation' of politics – an interpretative link prominent in the existing historical literature. While professional bodies, such as the National Association of Liberal Secretaries and Agents (NALSA) and the National Society of Conservative

Agents at work

Kathryn Rix, *Parties, Agents and Electoral Culture in England 1880–1910* (Boydell Press, 2016)

Reviewed by **Angus Hawkins**

KATHRYN RIX'S AUTHORITY, original and well-written study of full-time party agents between 1880 and 1910 is to be warmly

welcomed. A model of archival research, it demonstrates the value of thorough scholarship in correcting conventional easy generalisations. Rix brings to light

Agents (NSCA), were formed in the 1880s and 1890s, local issues continued to play a critical part in constituency contests. The choice of parliamentary candidates remained a matter for the local party chairman and local party notables. Candidates' campaign speeches, while referring to 'national' issues, were primarily shaped by constituency concerns and the need to affirm a direct association with the electors. Nor was the professionalisation of party agents necessarily a trigger for the far greater centralisation of party organisation. Agents used centrally produced election literature – yet this supplemented, rather than displaced, locally produced pamphlets, leaflets and posters. Central party organisation could advise and guide, but not dictate or coerce. For differing reasons both local associations, resisting what they saw as interference, and central party organisers, resenting unwelcome local

demands for financial support, often felt ambivalent about closer dependent relations.

By consulting journals and county biographical dictionaries Rix explores the background of nearly 200 party agents. To a great extent they came from working-class or lower-middle-class origins. Moreover, though being deeply immersed in the affairs of the local community, many full-time agents moved around the country during the course of their careers. So was effective practice spread throughout the regions, as well as through membership of professional associations. Agents fulfilled a crucial function in the registration of electors. In an important corrective, Rix shows that Conservative agents did not deliberately keep the number of registered voters low for partisan purposes, as has often been suggested. Nor did Conservative agents neglect political education in pursuing party allegiance as solely a

function of convivial sociability: 'beer, billiards and "baccy"'. Liberal agents, meanwhile, sought to counter perceptions of party affiliation as solely a matter of high-minded, prim, temperance-abiding moral earnestness. Conservatives could be serious and Liberals could have fun. Both Conservative and Liberal agents sought to foster party loyalty through political instruction and inclusive sociability.

For anyone seeking an understanding of how grassroots political activism operated and of the down-to-earth practicalities of winning political contests in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century England, Rix's study is essential reading.

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