

to bring down Labour, but that it happened because Labour and the Liberals were not well-managed enough to cooperate. The 1924 Labour government fell over what was in reality an insignificant procedural matter, and the subsequent election was a disaster for both Labour and the Liberals.

Discussion

The first questioner asked whether animosity toward David Lloyd George had been a major factor in limiting Liberal influence. Williamson argued that Baldwin had had a strong dislike of Lloyd George, while Meadowcroft pointed out that MacDonald 'had no problem with Liberals' since he had never been opposed by them personally in his Leicester constituency. Williamson concluded that the Lloyd George aspect was important, 'but could have been overcome if the political dynamics had been different.'

Other questions focused on electoral reform. Did the Liberals only support it because it benefited them? And when did the Liberal Party first support reform? The answer to this from Williamson was that the Liberals had supported a move away from first-past-the-post from the late nineteenth century. This raised a further question: why hadn't they implemented it when they had had the power to do so? The answer, again from

Williamson, was that Lloyd George was ready to do so in 1917 but was persuaded not to by the Conservatives on the basis that changing the voting system was just going to be too difficult in wartime. Presumably, had Lloyd George

seen what was to become of the Liberals after the First World War, he would have acted rather differently.

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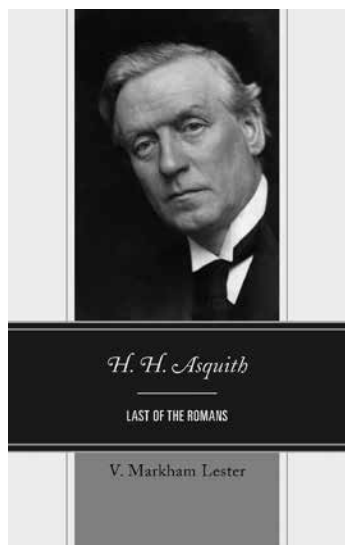
Asquith and his background

V. Markham Lester, *H. H. Asquith: Last of the Romans* (Lexington Books, 2019)

Review by **Katheryn Gallant**

ALTHOUGH H. H. Asquith was the longest-serving British prime minister between Lord Liverpool and Margaret Thatcher, he has not had many biographers. J. A. Spender and Cyril Asquith's two-volume biography, published in 1932 (four years after Asquith's death), verges on hagiography, as might be expected for a book written by (respectively) a friend and a son of the subject. Roy Jenkins' biography, published in 1964, although sympathetic to Asquith, has a far more spritely and accessible style. It was this book that first revealed to readers the existence of Asquith's letters to Venetia Stanley, which Jenkins extensively cited. This was despite the doubts of Asquith's devoted daughter,

Lady Violet Bonham Carter, who was reluctant to publish the excerpts from her father's letters to the young woman who had been Lady Violet's best friend during her youth, but nevertheless gave Jenkins permission to do so. Stephen Koss's biography, published in 1976, although shorter than the Spender/Asquith biography and the Jenkins biography, was perhaps the most scholarly until now. The Koss biography was more nuanced than Jenkins', but not as well-written. George H. Cassar's *Asquith as War Leader*, published in 1994, is an extremely helpful monograph on Asquith's governance during the First World War, but it is not a biography that covers Asquith's entire career. Colin Clifford's *The Asquiths*, published in 2002, is also



useful, but it is a family biography. V. Markham Lester, an American historian whose field of study is Britain of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (as Koss was and Cassar is), has now put his hat in the ring of Asquith's biographers. Since historiography has developed since Koss, Cassar, and Clifford first published their books, a new full-length biography of Asquith is long overdue.

What this biography is best at is its portrayal of Asquith's early life. '[T]he influence of the City of London School on Asquith has consistently been understated,' Lester writes. 'He entered the school with no record of particular distinction. Seven years later he left the school a worldly, confident, well-spoken, disciplined student of proven academic distinction ... He left London knowing much more of life than a schoolboy educated in the hothouse environment of Eton or Harrow. Decades later

when Asquith became a political leader advocating the 'new liberalism' of social responsibility, he had a distinct advantage over many other British leaders. They could call upon their Oxbridge classical educations, but unlike Asquith few could also bring to bear memories of Mother Sumner's Tuck-shop or the hanging of the Five Pirates gang' (p. 19).

Lester continues, '[s]ome historians downplay Oxford's influence on Asquith thinking, particularly the role of two of his most important teachers, Benjamin Jowett and T. H. Green. They argue that either Asquith had for the most part already formed many of his ideas and goals or his ability to integrate these two professors' rival views demonstrates that neither teacher had much influence. Yet Asquith's later professional and political career mirrors so much of Jowett's and Green's teachings. This could hardly be coincidental' (p. 23). While 'Jowett instilled in his students the potential of the possible' (*ibid.*), 'Green urged his students to lead lives of service, so that their fellow citizens could realize their own human potential' (p. 24).

Lester posits that 'the key to understanding Asquith is to understand his unshakeable belief in the classic virtues of rational thought, eloquence, and self-control' (p. 6). Lester takes the epithet often given to Asquith, 'the last of the Romans', seriously. Asquith's

youthful reading of Greek and Roman stoic philosophy while studying at the City of London School and Balliol College, Oxford, added to 'the evangelical influence as seeing all events as the will of God' that Asquith seems to have absorbed in his Congregationalist childhood, gave Asquith 'a fatalistic stoicism that would become his hallmark' (p. 25). Asquith's 'peculiar combination of pagan stoic philosophy and Christian belief in progress' helped him through 'some of the most difficult problems and challenges since the Napoleonic Wars: the constitutional crisis of the House of Lords, home rule for Ireland, women's suffrage, social reforms, and the challenges of the Great War' (p. 343).

'[I]f there is a consistent thread that runs through [Asquith's] life,' Lester writes, 'it was his desire to be a political leader who reflected classical ideals of virtue and character' (p. 7). 'Asquith's ability to control his emotions was largely made possible by the bifurcation of his personality,' Lester continues. 'There was the public persona – disciplined, hardworking, ambitious, no nonsense, sober, nonconformist, and rarely expressing emotion. Then there was the private man – fun loving, kind, not so sober, and romantic' (p. 146). This bifurcation of personality, in this reviewer's opinion, could have had disastrous results

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to Asquith's political career had Asquith been born a century later, with an inquisitive media and the influence of the #MeToo movement.

It is surprising that Lester barely mentions women's suffrage (four citations in the index). Not only does Lester neglect to include the Pankhursts or other prominent suffragettes in his biography, he also does not comment on the assassination attempt (via a thrown hatchet) on Asquith by the English suffragette Mary Leigh, which took place during Asquith's visit to Dublin in July 1912. (The hatchet did not reach its target: Irish Nationalist leader John Redmond, who was riding in the same carriage as Asquith, was slightly injured instead.)

Lester's treatment of Asquith's relationship with Venetia Stanley can best be described as guarded. It is as if Lester knew he had to touch on the topic of Asquith's letters to Venetia and his dependence on her, but Lester seems to be uncomfortable with the entire subject. Lester admits that '[it] can only be described as a romantic relationship' (p. 195) and that it 'evolved over the years into a deep attachment, if not love', but sees 'no historical significance in the question' of whether the Asquith/Venetia relationship became sexual. Lester writes that 'Michael and Eleanor Brock, editors of the Asquith correspondence

with Stanley, are convincing in their assessment that Asquith "never became Venetia's lover in the physical sense, and it is unlikely that he even wished for this"' (p. 147).

Lester mentions in passing Asquith's post-Venetia friendship with Hilda Harrison (Lester misspells the surname as 'Harrison') but does not bring up the rumours that Asquith may have been the biological father of Hilda's daughter (who would become the journalist Anne Symonds, grandmother of Carrie Johnson, wife of the current British prime minister, Boris Johnson). Nor does Lester write about the accusations that Asquith's behaviour towards young women would today be considered sexual harassment. Descriptions of Asquith's inappropriate behaviour towards young women can be found in recent books such as *Tangled Souls: Love and Scandal Among the Victorian Aristocracy* by Jane Dismore (The History Press, 2022) and *My Darling Mr Asquith: The extraordinary life and times of Venetia Stanley* by Stefan Buczacki (Cato & Clarke, 2016), which the *Journal of Liberal History* has reviewed (95, Spring 2017).

This book, although serviceably written at its best, is incomplete in its view of Asquith. It is a useful reference for the political events of Asquith's premiership. It also goes into some detail about Asquith's term as home

secretary between 1892 and 1895 and his career as a barrister, especially during the period 1895 to 1905, when Conservatives were in power. It was previously unheard of for a former cabinet minister 'to return to the private practice of law' (p. 81), but Asquith, not being from a wealthy family, had to earn his living in an era when MPs were unpaid. (It was in 1911, during Asquith's premiership, that MPs first received a salary of £400 a year.) The chapter on Asquith's career after he was manoeuvred out of 10 Downing Street in December 1916 seems to be a bit summarily written. However, Lester does not delve much into the private side of Asquith's bifurcated personality: an in-depth look into Asquith's private life might modify Lester's thesis about Asquith's stoicism. Lester might have profited from a thorough reading of women's history focusing on late Victorian and Edwardian Britain, as well as during the First World War. The chapters on Asquith in Lucille Iremonger's *The Fiery Chariot: A Study of British Prime Ministers and the Search for Love* (Secker & Warburg, 1970), although written over fifty years ago, would be a start for deciphering the Asquith enigma: I noticed that Iremonger's book is not cited in Lester's bibliography. The search for a comprehensive biography of Asquith that equals or surpasses

Jenkins' scintillating writing continues.

Katheryn Gallant, a graduate of California State University, Los

Angeles, is writing an alternative history novel that explores what might have happened had Asquith's letters to Venetia Stanley been published in 1915.

Liberalism and illiberalism

Francis Fukuyama, *Liberalism and Its Discontents*

(Profile Books, 2022)

Review by **William Wallace**

I HAD UNDERESTIMATED FUKUYAMA. I thought his first book, *The End of History*, was superficial. This book, his ninth, is clear, easy to read, short, and well grounded in recent philosophical and political debates on liberalism and illiberalism, primarily in the USA but also taking into account parallel debates and developments across Europe and beyond.

In 154 pages, he ranges from the founding ideas of liberalism in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries to contemporary intellectual and political conflicts. He notes the fault lines and hypocrisies in early expositions of liberalism, most strikingly in the Declaration of Independence's assertion that 'All men are created equal' while excluding women and slaves. 'The most fundamental principle of [classical] liberalism is one of tolerance' (p. 7). The most difficult values for classical liberalism to reconcile were liberty and equality. Limited government, the

rule of law, respect for the scientific method and reasoned argument provided the foundations for liberal democracy and for liberal societies' long-term economic growth.

Most of the book is devoted to the attacks on classical liberalism since 1945, from both right and left. Von Mises and Hayek, and their followers in the Chicago School and elsewhere, 'denigrated the role of the state in the economy' (p. 19); neoliberalism prioritised economic and personal freedom to a point where it became hostile to state action. Reductionist assumptions about individual motivation resting entirely on self-interest excluded the importance of community and solidarity. Rawls' concern for 'the sovereign self' omitted the dimension of 'public-spiritedness', concern for others in shared communities.

If liberals on the right responded to the fascist state by going too far towards libertarian anarchism, critics on the left took the idea of the sovereign self into an

ideology of identity and social oppression which left reasoned argument and tolerance behind. His summary of critical theory and its illiberal tenets is clear and persuasive; the insistence that liberal societies cloak informal structures of oppression fails to establish that alternative systems of government can better resolve such tensions. Marcuse, Foucault, Derrida and their followers have provided critiques of rationality that have undermined democratic and scientific debate and allowed for the emergence of conspiratorial theories about underlying power structures.

The illiberal right has in turn followed this critique of rationality, developing alternative conspiratorial theories on liberalism as hostile to nation, faith and community. Technological innovation, above all new media, have allowed non-evidential approaches to spread. 'Progressives and white

