

John Campbell

Born 1947. Biographer.

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1. Introduction



John Campbell.

The following introduction was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from Wikipedia at www.wikipedia.org.

John Campbell (born 1947) is a British political writer and biographer. He was educated at Charterhouse and the University of Edinburgh from where he gained a Ph.D. in politics in 1975.

His works include biographies of Lloyd George, F. E. Smith, Aneurin Bevan, Roy Jenkins, Edward Heath, and Margaret Thatcher, the last consisting of two volumes, *The Grocer's Daughter* (2000) and *The Iron Lady* (2003). A one-volume abridgment prepared by David Freeman (a historian of Britain teaching at California State University, Fullerton), entitled *The Iron Lady: Margaret Thatcher, From Grocer's Daughter to Prime Minister*, was published in 2009 and reissued in paperback in 2011. He was awarded the NCR Book Award for his biography of Heath in 1994.

He has also written, *If Love Were All ... the story of Frances Stevenson & David Lloyd George* (2006) and *Pistols At Dawn: Two Hundred Years of Political Rivalry from Pitt & Fox to Blair & Brown* (2009).

His most recent book is the official biography, *Roy Jenkins: A Well Rounded Life* (Jonathan Cape, March 2014), which was short-listed for the 2014 Samuel Johnson Prize and the 2014 Costa Biography Award, and won the Biography category in the 2014 Political Book Awards.

Campbell was consultant to the 2009 production of *Margaret*, a fictionalisation of Margaret Thatcher's fall from power produced as a TV film, and the 2012 cinema film *The Iron Lady*.



Meryl Streep's uncannily realistic portrayal of Margaret Thatcher in the film The Iron Lady.

2. Books

The following books were written by John Campbell. They are listed in chronological order of publication.

Lloyd George: The Goat in the Wilderness (1977)

F. E. Smith, 1st Earl of Birkenhead (1983)

Roy Jenkins: A Biography (1983)

Nye Bevan and the Mirage of British Socialism (1987)

The Experience of World War 2 (editor, 1989)

Edward Heath: A Biography (1993)

Margaret Thatcher: The Grocer's Daughter (2000)

Margaret Thatcher: The Iron Lady (2003)

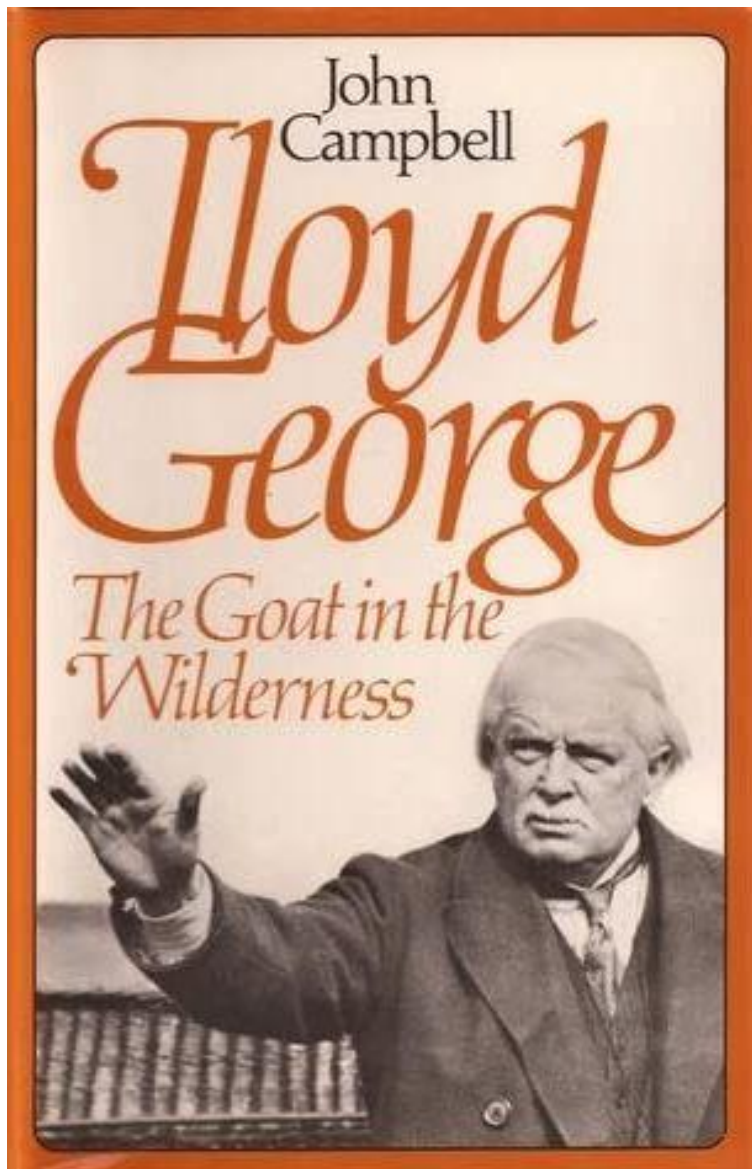
If Love Were All: The Story of Frances Stevenson and David Lloyd George (2006)

The Iron Lady: Margaret Thatcher, from Grocer's Daughter to Prime Minister (2009; paperback, 2011; ISBN 978-0-14-312087-2)

Pistols at Dawn: Two Hundred Years of Political Rivalry from Pitt and Fox to Blair and Brown (2009)

Roy Jenkins: A Well Rounded Life (2014)

3. Review: Lloyd George: The Goat in the Wilderness



The following review was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Reviews in History website at www.reviews.history.ac.uk. It was written by Adam Timmins in March 2015.

Campbell's first book covered the last ten years of Lloyd George's career following the downfall of the Coalition in 1922. Traditionally this has been seen as little more than a coda to his war-winning Premiership, with few examining it in much detail. But Campbell argued that the later years of Lloyd George would repay close study; 'the justification lies in the fact that Lloyd George was actually important in these years, and that a failure to appreciate his importance can lead to a serious misunderstanding of the character of inter-war politics' (LG, p. 2). One of things historians have

generally forgotten or failed to appreciate about a period – 1922–31 – that is generally seen as the age of Baldwin and MacDonald is that both men spent a lot of energy ensuring that Lloyd George was never able to return to power. Because he ‘never did return to office after 1922, it has been too easy for posterity to assume he could not have returned’ (LG, p. 3). Post hoc ergo propter hoc.

When the coalition fell in 1922, almost ‘no observer believed that he [Lloyd George] was out forever. Many from the King downwards recorded their expectation of a quick return.’ (LG, p. 30) But the problem was the Lloyd George was effectively a man without a party, having alienated both the Conservatives and the Liberals. Eventually he made his peace with Asquith, and the future of the Liberal party seemed reassured. The Liberals gained 158 seats in the 1923 general election; but it was a pyrrhic victory. They had finished third behind Labour, and ‘were now caught in the electoral trap from which they have never escaped’ (LG, p. 77). Furthermore, it was in the 1923 Parliament that ‘the identity of interest between the Conservatives and Labour in destroying the Liberals first became clear.’ (LG, p. 87) Campbell quotes a letter from Leo Amery to Stanley Baldwin; ‘It is in the interest of both of us [Conservatives and Labour] to clear the ground of the Liberal Party ... We may each hope to get the larger share of the carcass but meanwhile the great thing is to get the beast killed and on that we can be agreed’ (LG, p. 87). After Labour failed to secure an overall majority in the 1929 election, Baldwin resigned as PM, ‘rating the fear of being humiliated by Lloyd George higher than the possible advantage to be gained by letting the Liberals be seen to install socialism in office’ (LG, p. 242).

As well the combined efforts of the Conservatives and Labour, there were other factors which contributed to the decline of the Liberals as an electoral force. Between 1916 and 1926, the feud between ‘Asquith and Lloyd George destroyed the Liberal Party, and with it the chance of non-Socialist radicalism between the wars’ (LG, p. 156). One of the bones of contention between the two men had been the Lloyd George fund, and this continued to cause problems after Asquith’s death. The fund had arisen from Lloyd George’s war-time premiership, which had seen him effectively become a one-man party. One cannot perhaps have expected Lloyd George to ‘get rid of a resource which seemed to give him so much power’; but it was constantly used by opponents as a stick to beat him with, and in the end probably did him more harm than good (LG, p. 177).

Despite having been PM for six years, in the 1920s Lloyd George was not a backwards-looking politician; and a Liberal policy document published in 1928 (known as the Yellow Book due to its cover) ‘offered a prophetic vision of post-war society. Disregarded in its day, it was nevertheless the harbinger of a typically quiet British revolution’ (LG, p. 201). Herein lies

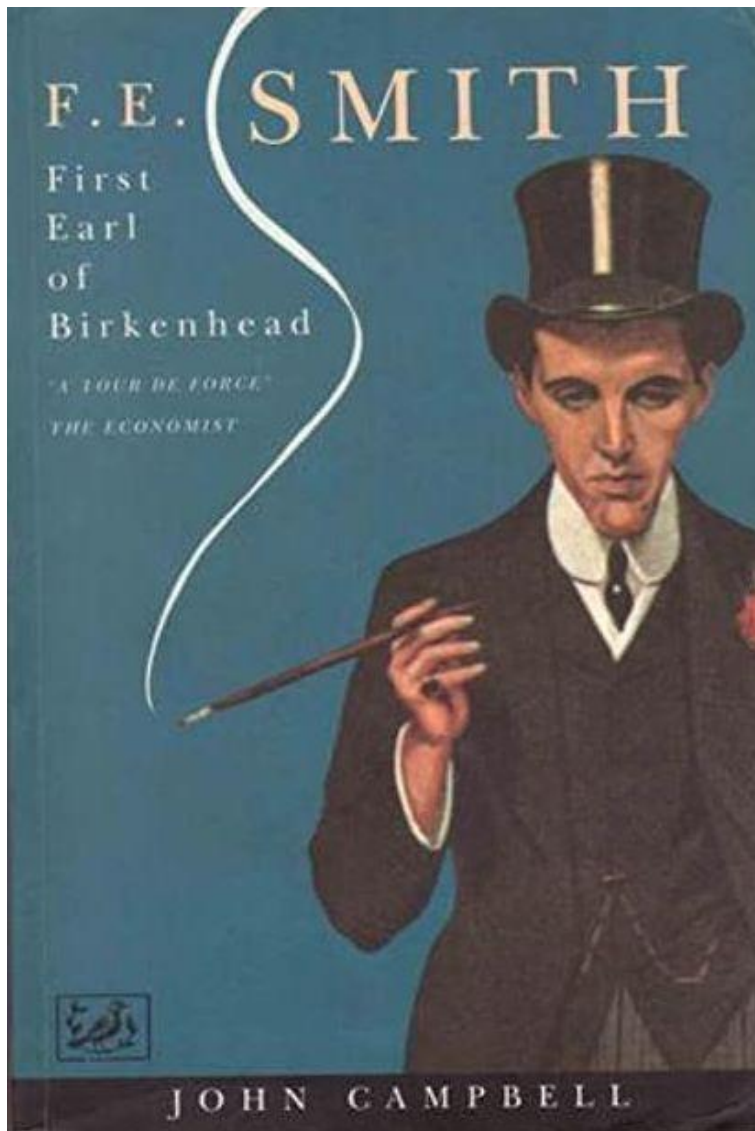
the true tragedy of the period covered by *The Goat in the Wilderness*; the waste of Lloyd George's talents, which were still in evidence. Prevented from making a comeback by a combination of circumstances and events, 'he had no chance to raise further monuments of real achievements to his name and to the countries benefit; he could only draw up policies on paper' (LG, p. 205).

In July 1931 Lloyd George stood 'closer to regaining office than at any other time between 1922 and 1940' (p. 293). There is extremely strong evidence to suggest that MacDonald was thinking of taking the Liberals into the coalition at this time (LG, p. 294). However, Lloyd George played for time, having little confidence in MacDonald; at the end of July, he had to have his prostate removed. By the time he had recovered, a National Government headed by MacDonald, Baldwin and Samuel had been formed. Lloyd George had no problem with Samuel joining the coalition government; but was strongly against the election which was then called. The Liberal Party split three ways; with Lloyd George's independent Liberals gaining just four seats.

One of the great counterfactuals of 20th century British politics is: what if Lloyd George had not have been taken ill in July 1931? His absence 'unbalanced the National Government, leaving it exposed to the Tory take-over which his deputy – a generally respected but second ranking figure – had not the political muscle to prevent' (LG, p. 308). Although there were sporadic calls for him to be added to the National Government throughout the 1930s, neither Baldwin nor Chamberlain would wear it: 'the Goat was condemned to the wilderness for the rest of his life' (LG, p. 311).

Although the jury is probably still out on Campbell's argument that Britain might have been better off if Lloyd George had been allowed back into the fold after 1922, it does show that he was still an important presence in British politics in the 1920s. Baldwin in particular appears to have been obsessed by him: in 1935 Baldwin recalled that his reason for calling an election on the issue of protection in 1923 had primarily been as a move against Lloyd George – 'I felt that it was the one issue which would pull the party together, including the Lloyd George malcontents. The Goat was in America ... I had information he was going Protectionist, and I had to get in quick ... [This] Dished the Goat, otherwise he would have got the party with Austen and F. E. and there would have been an end of the Tory party as we know it' (LG, p. 47).

4. Review: F. E. Smith, First Earl of Birkenhead



The following review was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Reviews in History website at www.reviews.history.ac.uk. It was written by Adam Timmins in March 2015.

Campbell's next project was a massive biography of F. E. Smith; a giant of politics in his time, but a largely forgotten figure in recent years. Campbell was keen to stress that Smith was a substantial figure in the first 30 years of British politics in the 20th century: history has generally taken note of his 'verbal brilliance, his exuberant high spirits and his reckless love of life'; but he was also an extremely talented lawyer: 'His meteoric success [at the bar] was not achieved by glamour, cheek and self-advertisement – such qualities do not impress solicitors – but by a real mastery of law and of the

art of advocacy equal to the very greatest of that golden age of legal giants' (FES, p. 114).

F. E. was elected to Parliament in the general election of 1906, which saw the Liberals dish out a famous drubbing to the Conservatives. But the result was advantageous for the new MP, as he had far more chance of establishing himself in a House of Commons which contained just 157 Unionists. His maiden speech was a barnstorming affair which lifted the demoralised Conservative spirits – according to Violet Asquith in the gallery, 'the Conservative rank and file shouted and roared in ecstasy, their leaders rolled about on the front bench in convulsions of amusement and delight' (FES, p. 152). This set the tone for Smith's contributions to that Parliament, over the next three years becoming the party's most effective speaker: 'Balfour was too sophisticated, Austen Chamberlain too pedestrian, Lansdowne and Curzon too remote ... F.E. alone commanded the power of rhetoric, combining force of argument with vivid extravagance of phrase fired by sheer love of battle, to trade threats and insults successfully with the enemy on platforms up and down the country' (FES, p. 188).

After an incongruous start to the war, in 1915 Smith became solicitor-general, and then six months later Attorney-General: with the latter post carrying a seat in the cabinet. In 1918 Lloyd-George offered F. E. the Woolsack; to accept would mean a permanent exit from the Commons, as well as the end of his career as a practising lawyer. And yet he had announced at age eight he wanted to be Lord Chancellor: it was 'an office normally reserved for one of the most learned, senior and dignified elder statesmen in the Cabinet. This grand climax to a career he was being offered at age 46' (FES, p. 458). F. E. was always a man in a hurry, and the alternative was to take a second-ranking job with a seat outside the cabinet.

When the news broke, *The Morning Post* (not *The Times*, as is sometimes stated) wrote that his appointment was 'carrying a joke too far'.

Yet Smith's spell as Lord Chancellor was undoubtedly a success. He discharged the major constitutional and judicial responsibilities of his role 'with a dignity beyond all criticism', while being determined to enjoy privileges that his office gave him (FES, p. 469). Moreover, he was now at the heart of the Government, 'in high office, with his best friends ... [who] seemed to have the world at their feet' (FES, p. 498) The Coalition would only last until 1922 however, and then it fell 'with a crash from which F. E.'s career never recovered' (FES, p. 499). In the run-up to the general election of 1922, there were many coalitionists who believed that the Tories should simply fall into line, as it couldn't do without them; 'but F. E. expressed it most candidly, most provocatively, and most frequently with his stinging tongue. It was F. E. who aroused the bitterest resentment

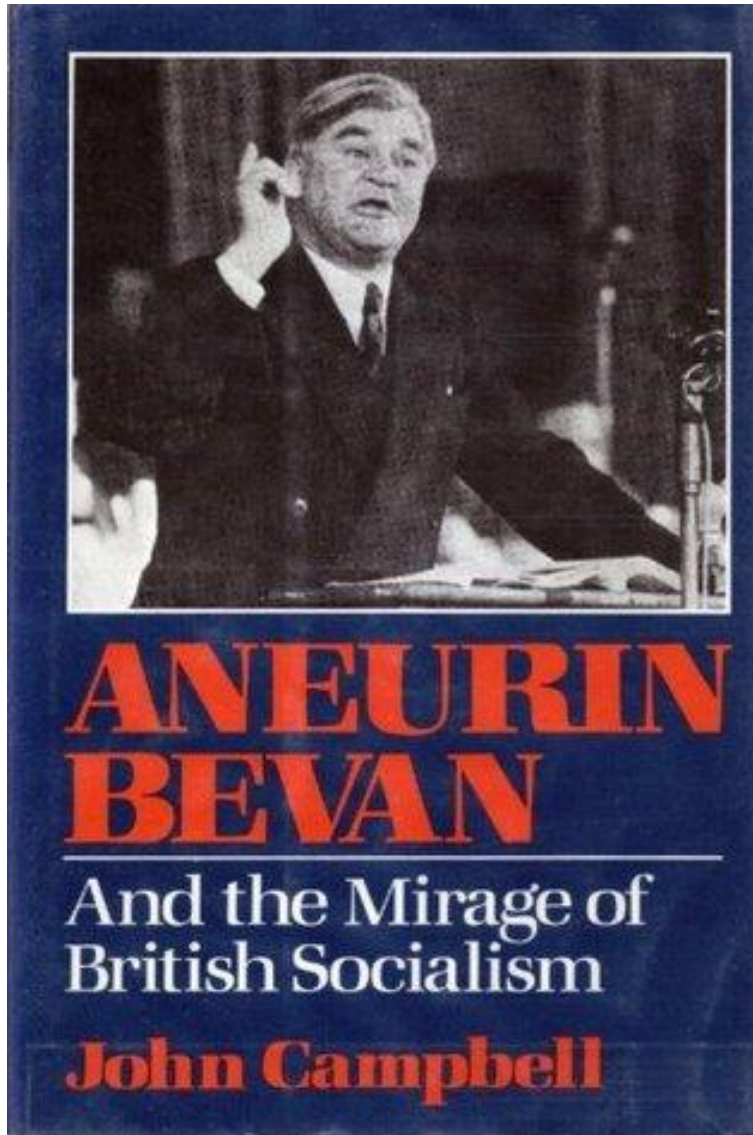
in the Tory party, and it was F. E. therefore who bears most of the responsibility for goading the party to its inevitable revenge' (FES, p. 601).

When the Conservatives returned to power in 1924, F. E. was given the India Office. By this time drink had begun to get the better of him. He had always been a heavy drinker; but whereas before the war 'all the stories of F. E.'s drinking were admiring ... After the war, as a response to the pressures of office, he drank more heavily than ever; and he began to show the effects as he had not done before' (FES, p. 712). Before 'tired and emotional' became the accepted euphemism for politicians being drunk, it was said that individuals had 'dined well'; and the phrase now began to be connected with F. E. regularly. But even if F. E. had been at the height of his powers, the 'truth is that the India Office in the 1920s was no place for a logical man... Only a woolly-minded man of vaguely benevolent Liberal sympathies – like Irwin or Baldwin or MacDonald – could preside over the gradual withdrawal of British rule with the necessary bland indifference to the irrationality and inconsistency of each succeeding constitutional arrangement. F. E. was not such a man' (FES, p. 762).

Despite devoting over 800 pages in trying to rehabilitate Smith as a key British political figure, ultimately I'm not sure Campbell succeeds. This is not to detract from the work as a biography: it is as readable as any of Campbell's other efforts, and the research that went into it is impressive – anyone who takes the trouble to ascertain whether it was foggy on the day of Michael Collins' funeral puts most of us to shame. And the book provides a great service in establishing and debunking the various myths that surround F. E.. Yet one is not quite persuaded that Smith made a huge contribution to the politics of the period. In a more recent work Boyd Hilton classed Smith as one of those 'maverick right-wing politicians ... who operated too far outside the consensus to be effective', which perhaps comes closer to summing Smith up than Campbell's entire volume.⁽¹⁾ The last word on Smith probably still belongs to Cynthia Asquith: 'he is a magnificent bounder, but I can't help liking him'.

5. Review: Nye Bevan and the Mirage of British Socialism

The following review was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Reviews in History website at www.reviews.history.ac.uk. It was written by Adam Timmins in March 2015.



Campbell's Bevan biography was originally entitled *Nye Bevan: The Mirage of British Socialism*, although when the book was reprinted in 1994 the subtitle was dropped in favour of *Nye Bevan: A Biography*. The original title accurately captures the flavour of the book though; 'the sad, even tragic, fact which the biographer has to face is that Bevan's life – the immense achievement of the National Health Service notwithstanding – was essentially a failure ... because his great gifts were essentially in thrall to an erroneous dogma' (NB, p. xii). Bevan's career must ultimately be judged as a failure not because he was betrayed by unworthy colleagues,

but because quite simply ‘the party and the electorate, including his own class, could not be persuaded, even by his own superb oratory, to share his vision’ (NB, p. xii).

Why did Campbell choose Bevan as his next subject? As he himself correctly points out, Michael Foot’s two-volume biography of Bevan is both an idealised biography and a transferred autobiography. This is not to say that Foot’s book is worthless; but there are certain aspects of Bevan’s character that Foot plays down, most notably the pragmatic and realistic side of Bevan’s nature. Campbell sets out to complement Foot’s two-volume biography. Yet while Nye Bevan is a perfectly competent piece of work, one gets the feeling that Campbell’s heart wasn’t entirely in it; or more likely perhaps, the conclusions he reached were somewhat disheartening to him. The writing in the book certainly lacks some of the sparkle of his previous and later work.

One of the ironies of Bevan’s political career is that during his relatively brief spell in power, he was a largely isolated figure: yet the moment he resigned he found himself at the head of a substantial movement within the party. Bevan’s resignation ‘opened a Pandora’s box of grievances, mutual suspicions, and genuine differences of political philosophy which, once released ... multiplied to create a deep division in the party which has never healed ... It marked a fatal watershed from which Labour’s once steady upward progress – admittedly already showing signs of faltering – went into steep and prolonged decline’ (NB, p. 253). But Bevan was never really a leader in the way his acolytes wanted; for one thing, he was committed to the Labour Party, and had no difficulty closing ranks at elections and other such occasions. In 1952 Bevan published *In Place of Fear* – ‘one of the most disillusioning books ever written by a prophet to whom so many ardent followers looked to for a way forward’ (NB, p. 264).

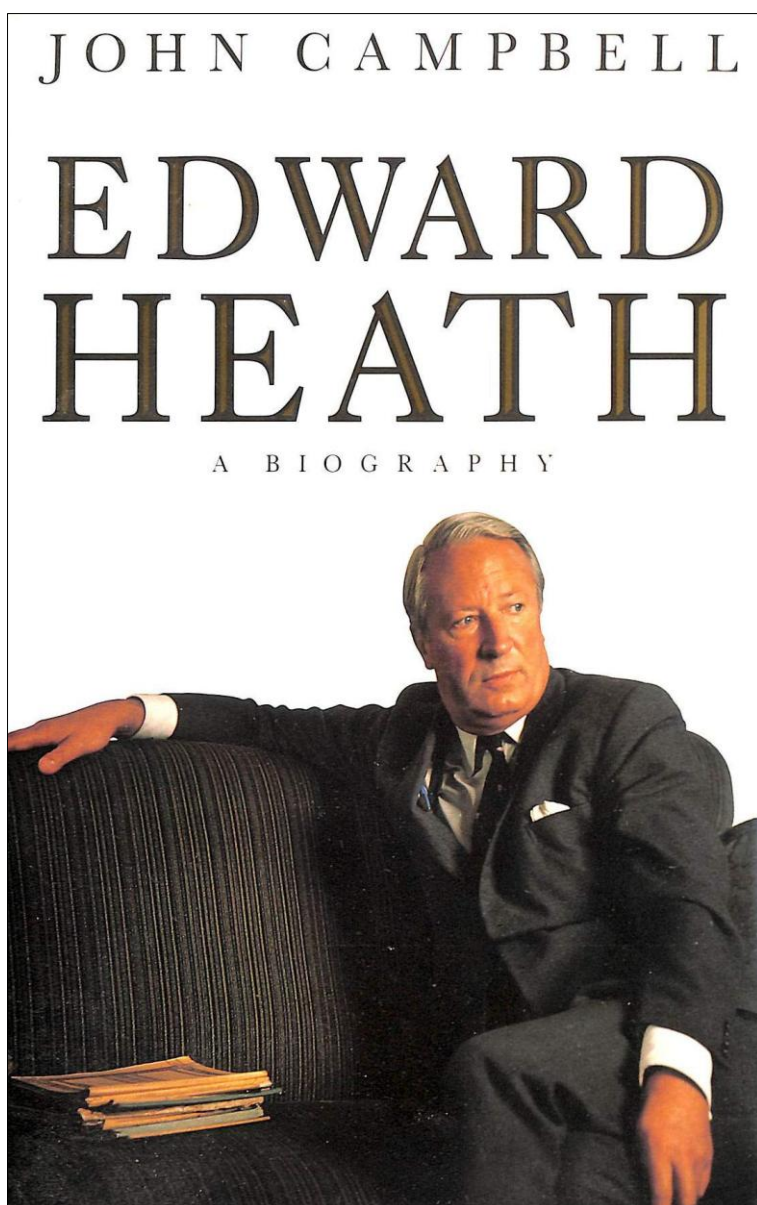
With regards to the Bevan/Gaitskell feud which ultimately split the Labour Party, Campbell concludes there was fault on both sides. . An important factor in the affair was that the Labour Party was essentially leaderless at the time; Attlee was in hospital, Bevan was dead, Dalton discredited, and Cripps had retired. The only one of the old ‘big five’ still active at the time was Morrison: ‘a long standing critic of the Health Service and an old enemy of Bevan [who] was strongly predisposed towards Gaitskell’ (NB, p. 250). Attlee later blamed Morrison for having ‘lost’ Bevan – but regardless of whose fault it was, the vacuum at the top of the Labour party that left the two rivals to confront each other without any restraining influence was a crucial factor in the disastrous outcome.

On the health charges themselves, both men had a certain amount of right on their side. Bevan was wrong to make charges a point of principle, as his case was weakened by his accepting prescription charges in 1949 –

however his supporters try to explain that away. Indeed, Gaitskell was forced to drop prescription charges in 1951 due to cabinet pressure; whereas hardly anyone got worked up over teeth and spectacles. On Gaitskell's side, 'charges against teeth and spectacles were a trifling and essentially irrelevant response' to the problem of health service spending (NB, p. 247). Not only that, but a case can be made that in fact health service spending was under control by 1951 – in 1955 the Guillebode Committee acquitted the NHS of the extravagance in this period that it had been accused of by Tories and Gaitskillites respectively. Clearly then, Gaitskell was out to provoke Bevan; but the latter's behaviour in response was appalling; undoubtedly at the crucial point Jennie Lee and Michael Foot pushed him back towards the brink after he had moved away from it (there is much in Attlee's famous aside regarding Bevan and Lee that 'he [Bevan] needed a sedative. He got an irritant').

The epilogue that Campbell provides to the book is a bleak one. The cause that Bevan fought for had been lost: 'he was a socialist of an old-fashioned sort, at once moralistic and mechanistic, which was out-dated in the cynical and opportunistic climate of the 1950s' (AB, p. 372). In some respects Attlee was fortunate in that he was able to retire before the consumer boom got into its stride: Bevan on the other hand, was overtaken by forces he did not understand while still an active politician, and died 'with the bitter knowledge that all he struggled for and believed inevitable had not, and now almost certainly would not, come to pass' (AB, p. 373). Not only that, but those who subsequently claimed the Bevanite mantle were pale imitations of the original at best – Michael Foot, entrusted by Jennie Lee to write a two volume biography of Bevan, marked his only spell in government by 'finding out what the leaders of the biggest trade unions wanted and giving it to them. Anything further from Bevan's understanding of socialism would be hard to imagine' (AB, p. 375).

6. Review: Edward Heath: a Biography



The following review was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the website of the Independent at www.independent.co.uk. It was written by Ben Pimlott, and was published in July 1993.

There has probably never been an occupant of Number 10 Downing Street quite so lamentably unsuccessful as Edward Heath. John Major, of course, offers hot competition. But even he has not yet equalled Heath's unique record. Do we need an 876-page biography of such a man? It is a mark of John Campbell's achievement study that by the end of his book the reader is deeply engaged in the purposes and ideals of this unlovable, unlucky yet perversely admirable man.

What makes Heath of special interest, regardless of what he did, is his background: apart from Bonar Law (briefly premier in the 1920s) he was

the first modern Tory leader not of conventional upper-class or aristocratic birth. His progress was that of an inter-war species that no longer exists: the scholarship boy who, through talent, grit, parental encouragement or inspired teaching, cuts a path into the Establishment. The cost, in those days, was a social and psychic isolation which in Heath's case took a particularly acute form. He was not unclubbable (allegedly in private he has a 'sense of fun'), but many people found him unapproachable, and he was apt 'to give the impression of regarding women as by definition frivolous'. Attempting to get through the rhinoceros hide that surrounds Heath's emotions, John Campbell admits defeat. 'It is not impossible that he is a latent or repressed homosexual,' he suggests with legal-minded prudence. 'The alternatives are that he is a repressed heterosexual or that he is simply asexual.'

A model (but lonely) sixth former, a model Balliol undergraduate, and a model officer in the war, Heath had all the qualifications to become a model Permanent Secretary. In fact, he was set on politics as a career, and by careful planning projected himself into a solid Tory seat in 1950, at the age of 34. In Parliament, he was part of a remarkable generation of non-top drawer Tories that included Iain Macleod, Reginald Maudling and Enoch Powell, none of whom, however, he much resembled. He was the tortoise of the group, whose steady ascent was nonetheless assured.

As a teenager, according to the author, Heath 'thought that breaking a school rule amounted to disloyalty'. The same ethic infused his term as an 'implacable and unforgiving' whip, a passage contemporaries did not forget: habits of obedience and fear, as well as of resentment, were not easily shed. Meanwhile, Heath's policy attitudes - consistently paternalistic, pro-postwar consensus and pro-intervention - were closely in tune with those of Harold Macmillan, whose devoted lieutenant he became.

The Macmillan era of tinsel prosperity was his launchpad, and he was shifted from one high profile economic portfolio to another. Yet, until the debacle of Alec Douglas-Home's premiership, he was not seen as a potential Leader. It was Harold Wilson who effectively acted as kingmaker, convincing the Conservative elders that if Labour's secret weapon was a clever grammar-school boy they needed one too. Yet in Parliament, Heath was easy prey: time and again Wilson was able to make merciless sport of an Opposition Leader who seemed ploddingly incapable of humour.

If Heath had lost for a second time in 1970, he would have been replaced by somebody more glamorous. Having won unexpectedly, he was given an exceptional opportunity - far greater than that of either Wilson in 1964 or Mrs Thatcher in 1979, both of whom took over at times of crisis. In 1970, the economy was in surplus, and offered a rare chance for an imaginative reform. Heath, moreover, had a strong team, including men who respected

his abilities and admired his attitudes. Yet somehow he managed to trap himself between his own economic beliefs (which differed little from those of the outgoing government) and the 'Selsdon Man' rhetoric which he had uneasily, and uncharacteristically, employed some time before the election. The outcome was a few half-hearted gestures in a rightward direction, swiftly abandoned in a series of 'U-turns' quite as spectacular as any of Wilson's.

Campbell fairly gives Heath credit, for the successful conclusion of the Common Market negotiations, leading to formal entry in 1973 (though it is virtually certain that Wilson would have done the same). Otherwise, it was a case of tossing away advantages and making rods for his own back. It was a singular feat for a former minister of labour, whom many trade union leaders continued to like and trust more than they ever did Wilson, both to antagonise the unions with an unenforceable Industrial Relations Act and to twice take on the miners (who were more moderate, as well as stronger, than they later became) and lose. As a result, the abiding memory of the Heath premiership is, as Campbell says, 'a conflated recollection of power cuts and flickering candlelight, and the hoarding of candles and the rediscovery of oil lamps'.

'Who Governs Britain?' was Heath's question in the February 1974 election. But by holding the unnecessary poll at all, he was giving one kind of answer: he had shown that he could no longer do so. Campbell gives a vivid if terrifying account of Downing Street life at this moment of national near-collapse. The picture is nicely rounded off with a description of Heath glumly swallowing oysters from Prunier's ('his favourite') as the election results came through.

Tory leaders are supposed to win elections: uniquely, Heath lost three out of the four he fought. In the circumstances his sense of betrayal when Mrs Thatcher took the crown seems misplaced. Such feelings, however, are seldom rational, and for the past 18 years the enmity between the two superficially similar former leaders has been one of the best-known feuds in politics. When Mrs Thatcher's own nemesis came, Mr Heath apparently 'made no secret of his delight'. In the present Parliament, his former usurper blissfully absent, he has flowered like a dehydrated cactus serendipitously rescued by an unexpected shower of rain.

During the Thatcher era, Heath gained a reputation, as Campbell says, as 'a political Cassandra - very largely right but not believed'. Today he is always worth listening to, and often more left-wing than the Labour leadership. He is seen as brave, principled, austere, a true Roman senator, in a party increasingly composed of time-serving plebs. He is probably regarded with more affection than at any previous time in his career. Yet after reading this judicious, generous and finely written book, one is still

left with the question (to adapt a remark Attlee made about Stafford Cripps): what made him such a political goose?



7. Review: The Grocer's Daughter

The following review was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Reviews in History website at www.reviews.history.ac.uk. It was written by Adam Timmins in March 2015.

Campbell's next biography would become his most famous work. The recent death of Margaret Thatcher has seen a slew of biographies published in its' wake – including the fabulously dire first volume of the authorised biography written by Charles Moore. But nothing has come close to troubling Campbell's effort of its status as the definitive life of Thatcher. In his recent study of her premiership, Richard Vinen opined that 'John Campbell's biography of Margaret Thatcher has probably taken us as close to understanding the woman as we are ever likely to get – perhaps closer than she (a person with little taste for introspection) ever got herself'.(5)

Campbell's principle task in *The Grocer's Daughter* was to unpick the mythical version of her rise to power that Thatcher herself had propagated. In his recent authorised biography of Thatcher, Charles Moore seems to have swallowed the idea that Thatcher was hugely influenced by her father whole. But Campbell argued their relationship was somewhat more complex. The iconography of 'the Grocer's Daughter' was the truth – but not the whole truth. It was 'in fact a supremely successful exercise in image management' (GD, p. 1). The picture Thatcher painted of her childhood and her relationship with her father was 'too idealised to be wholly true' – it is hard to reconcile the submissive and dutiful portrait of the young Thatcher that she painted in later life with the evidence that she was in fact a 'clever and strong willed' child (GD, p. 2). Thatcher seemed to have placed her father on a pedestal at the expense of her mother. A 1985 television interview provides the prime example of this. Thatcher wept as she recalled how her father had been deposed as an Alderman of Grantham Council, but avoided talking about her mother, portraying her as a mere second to her husband. Thatcher's inability 'to summon up a warm word about her mother, even when she is trying to do her justice, is fairly striking' (GD, p. 20).

Why then, did she idolise her father? Campbell puts it that she exaggerated her father's influence to divert attention from the ways in which she had abandoned it. Famously, she insisted that the most important lesson he taught her was to never go with the crowd; of course, the irony was that she prided herself on taking all her ideas from him. Her elevation of her father to mythical status was largely retrospective; once she had left home at 18 she saw very little of him for the rest of his life. Throughout her career she preferred the company of men older than herself – 'father figures to whom she would quite surprisingly defer, almost visibly suppressing her instinct to challenge and rebut ... Obviously Alfred Roberts was the archetype, the

idealised father she had now outgrown, but psychologically needed to replace' (GD, p. 87).

Moving from the personal to the political, the conclusion that Campbell reaches in *The Grocer's Daughter* is that there was nothing inevitable about the rise of Thatcher to the Premiership. After the event there is always a tendency to portray what happened as the only possible outcome. Yet Campbell always keeps in mind Trevor-Roper's famous dictum that history is what happened in the context of what might have happened. We might also recall here Sir Ronald Syme's remarks on the potential pitfalls of biography: 'undue insistence upon the character and exploits of a single person invests history with dramatic unity at the expense of truth' (6). But Campbell avoids this; he always keen to point out how events could have taken a different course. For instance, in March 1974 the odds on Thatcher becoming Conservative leader would almost have been impossible to calculate; one of the 'most extraordinary things about Mrs Thatcher's seizure of the Tory leadership is that scarcely anyone – colleague or commentator – saw her coming. Even after the event her victory was widely disparaged as a freak of fortune of which she was merely the lucky beneficiary' (GD, p. 260). If only Edward Du Cann could have been persuaded to stand; or if Willie Whitelaw had run in the first ballot; or if Heath had taken the campaign more seriously, the course of British political history might have been different. Enoch Powell summed up her accession to the top job as boiling down to the fact that 'she was opposite the spot on the roulette wheel at the right time, and she didn't funk it' (GD, p. 260). Similarly, if Callaghan had called an election in October 1978 he probably would have won, and Thatcher would have gone down in the history books alongside failed Conservative leaders such as Austen Chamberlain.

To continue with Powell's roulette metaphor though, even if this was the case, one has to be in the casino in the first place – and Thatcher had worked tremendously hard to gain entry. As Campbell puts it, reaching the top rung of British politics is not something that just 'happens' – 'it takes extraordinary single-mindedness and stamina to reach to topmost rung of British politics, and obsessive dedication to the job to the exclusion of other concerns like money, family, friendship and the pursuit of pleasure' (p. 260). One also needs a large help of luck to get to the top, and there is no doubt that at several key points in her career Thatcher was aided by the self-destruction of her adversaries – but she also made her own luck when she needed to, seizing 'chances from which others shrank, and exploiting their hesitation with ruthless certainty' (p. 261). For instance, in a bravura performance in the Commons in January 1975 she routed Denis Healey at the dispatch box; this demolition of Labour's chief bruiser made her look

like a leader-in-waiting, at the expense of her rivals on the front bench who looked inferior in contrast.

For the majority of her time shadowing Wilson and Callaghan, Thatcher was largely ineffective Leader of the Opposition. She woefully underperformed in the Commons, largely due to the fact that her speeches which went down well in the Home Counties died a death when repeated in the chamber. How then did she manage to triumph in 1979? It is a shade simplistic to simply point to the Winter of Discontent; but undoubtedly it played a huge part. The summer of 1978 marked the low point of her leadership; in May 1979 she entered Downing Street. In between, a series of pent-up pay demands exploded which destroyed James Callaghan's Labour government. In hindsight many commentators thought Labour ran the better campaign in 1979, with Thatcher's message being 'muffled and in retrospect surprisingly timid' (p. 443). There were also doubts over 'whether the British electorate, when it came to the point of the privacy of the voting booth, would really bring itself to vote for a woman Prime Minister' (IL, p. 1). But in the end, they did – as Callaghan famously opined, 'I suspect there is now such a sea-change [in what the public wants] – and it is for Mrs Thatcher' (GD, p. 443).



8. Review: The Iron Lady

The following review was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Reviews in History website at www.reviews.history.ac.uk. It was written by Adam Timmins in March 2015.

As her recent death has shown, Thatcher is a divisive figure – perhaps someone who hated the idea of consensus would have smiled at the fact no consensus about her 11 years as PM has yet emerge. As the various reactions to Thatcher’s recent death have made clear, she is still an extremely controversial figure. To some, she was ‘the dauntless warrior who curbed the unions, routed the wets, re-conquered the Falklands [and] rolled back the state ...’ (IL, p. 800). To others, she was a ‘narrow ideologue whose hard-faced policies legitimised greed, deliberately increased inequality ... starved the public services, wrecked the universities, prostituted public broadcasting and destroyed the nation’s sense of solidarity and civic pride’ (IL, p. 800). Ultimately, it is not a question of ‘proving’ one or the other – both are true. From a solely political point of view, perhaps the truth is that ‘she achieved much less than she and her admirers claim’ (IL, p. 800). Moreover, did she really inspire and drive the policies that have become branded as ‘Thatcherism’, or did she merely ride a global wave of technological revolution and anti-collectivism that would have impacted upon Britain whoever was in Number 10? The debates will go on.

One thing Thatcher always had on her side for the majority of her Premiership was luck; particularly as far as her opponents were concerned. Throughout her career, her adversaries played into her hands. She was fortunate to have faced two unelectable Labour leaders in Foot and Kinnock; ‘at the nadir of her popularity in her first term, General Galtieri saved her by invading the Falklands, while in her second term, the miners’ leader Arthur Scargill led the critical domestic challenge to her Premiership with crass ineptitude’ (IL, pp. 352–3). She was also fortunate that the SDP took votes away from Labour while at the same time never becoming a legitimate threat themselves. Indeed, one could go back to before she became PM and add Callaghan’s failure to call an election in the autumn of 1978.

The manner of her departure however, opened up divisions in the Conservative party which have still not healed; particularly with regards to Europe. Thatcher did not become anti-European until her third term; she had battled with Brussels in her first over the rebate, but always took British membership and participation in the EU as a given. Thatcher liked to model herself after Churchill: but the latter ‘voiced an emotional identity with Europe which was quite alien to Mrs Thatcher’s overwhelming deference to the United States’ (IL, p. 598). She never held any seminars or

strategic discussions over Europe like she did over other aspects of foreign policy: she simply assumed she knew what was right for Europe, and if the EC knew what was good for them they'd listen to her. Consequently she 'was always two steps behind events, unable to lead or even to participate fully, but only to react angrily to what others propose' (IL, p. 599).

The combination of circumstances that led to Thatcher's departure is surely one of the more extraordinary sequences of events in British political history. First came the community charge: nothing 'did more than the poll tax to precipitate Thatcher's downfall' (IL, p. 562). It combined her obstinacy with a 'hard-faced inegalitarianism', but most surprisingly, her political antennae failed her. Attacking Harold Wilson's Land Tax in 1965, Thatcher stated that any tax 'should be certain in its incidence, cheap and simple to collect.' (IL, p. 563) The poll tax was none of these. Then came her reshuffle of 1989, which she had decided on in order to break up what she saw as the Howe-Lawson axis. The way in which she did it was reminiscent of Macmillan's night of the long knives: it took moving 13 out of the 21 cabinet in order to do it. All in all, 'the 1989 reshuffle was a political shambles which antagonised practically all her colleagues and delighted only the opposition.' (IL, p. 617).

Thatcher continued to antagonise many in the party with her anti-European pronouncements, culminating in a House of Commons speech in which she famously stated 'no, no, no' to the idea of further integration of the European Community. It was this that led Geoffrey Howe to resign. But Lawson went before him: he told Thatcher that it was either him or Walters. After a series of meetings, the PM refused to sack Walters, so Lawson resigned. When he heard of the Chancellor's resignation, Walters realised his own position was now impossible, and resigned too – 'Thus, by sacrificing Lawson to try to keep Walters, Mrs Thatcher had ended up losing them both' (IL, p. 691).

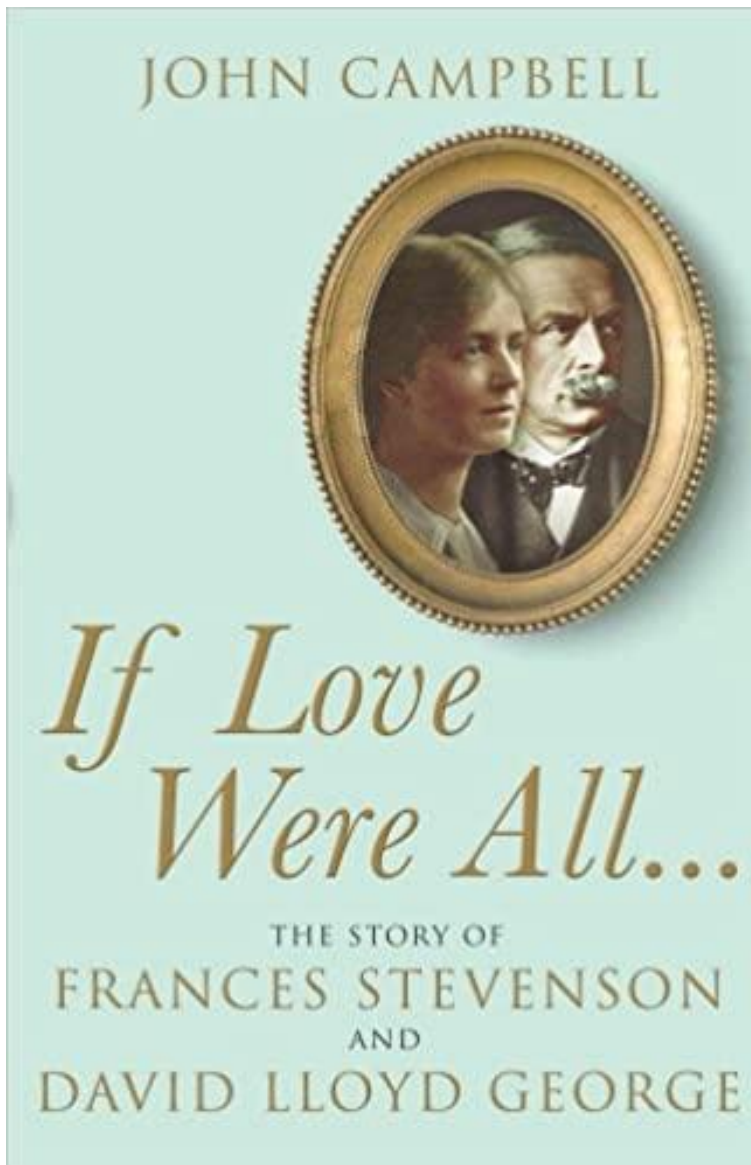
It is not simply hindsight to state that Thatcher should have voluntarily stepped down before she was pushed. Denis Thatcher had always thought that after the 1987 general election she wouldn't fight another one. Several people, including Lord Carrington and Kenneth Baker, tried to persuade her to step down in 1989 when she reached the tenth year of her Premiership. But she quite simply lived to work, and dreaded the thought of retirement. She had no real friends or interests outside of politics. The problem she – as indeed any leader who has been in power for a length of time faced – is that there were a sizable group of MPs in her own party who either knew their chance at being the Cabinet had gone and were aggrieved their talents had not been recognised; or realised their chance would never come while she was the helm.

Campbell prophesied that the BBC would have a hard time striking the right note dealing with Thatcher's death, and so it proved, with the corporation tripping over itself in its Top 40 show to explain why 'Ding Dong The Witch is Dead' had suddenly rocketed into the charts. Thatcher was not simply another PM; or even just the first female PM; but one of the 'most admired, most hated, most idolised, most vilified public figure of the second half of the twentieth century' (IL, pp. 800–1). Doubtless she and her policies will be debated for decades to come; perhaps the most we can say about her at this point is that 'she was a brilliantly combative, opportunist politician who, by a mixture of hard work, stamina, self-belief and uncanny instinct, bullied an awestruck country into doing things her way for more than a decade' (IL, pp. 800–1).



Margaret Thatcher with her husband Denis.

9. Review: If Love Were All ..



The following review was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the website of the Independent at www.independent.co.uk. It was written by Mark Bostridge and was published in September 2011.

A senior British politician, married and of humble origins, has an affair with his secretary. It sounds rather familiar, doesn't it? Only the politician in question is not John Prescott, but one of the presiding geniuses of 20th-century politics, the Welsh Wizard himself, David Lloyd George, whose sport of choice was golf rather than croquet. The woman with whom he conducted a 30-year relationship was Frances Stevenson, his "Pussy", who fell under Lloyd George's spell in 1912 when she was just 23 and he was 48, and finally married him in 1943, towards the end of his life, when the death of his wife freed him to make a commitment to her.

But then Frances Stevenson, who was introduced into the then chancellor of the exchequer's household as a private tutor to the Lloyd Georges' youngest daughter Megan, and eventually became the first woman to hold the post of principal private secretary to the Prime Minister, was clearly no Tracey Temple either. Stevenson's diary, which she kept intermittently during her years with Lloyd George, is an extraordinary document which, together with her surviving letters, presents an account of one of the most successful clandestine relationships of the modern age. For decades, one of the most famous, and for a time, most powerful men in the world shuttled to and fro between his wife and mistress, in what John Campbell rightly terms "a state of effective bigamy", without anyone - his servants, political opponents, the press, or members of his family, despite Megan's implacable hostility to the situation - blowing the whistle on him.

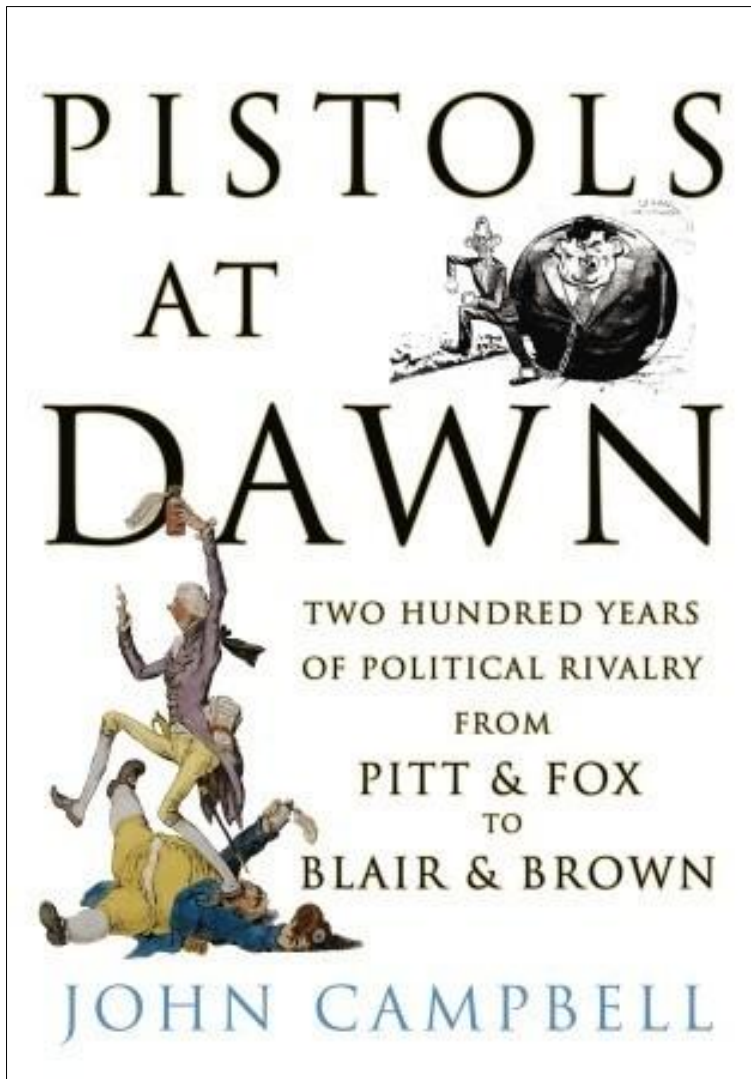
By the time of her death in 1972, Stevenson had already told the bare bones of her story in an autobiography, and had also collaborated with A J P Taylor on an edition of extracts from her diary. But it is only now that we are able to see the story of her love affair with Lloyd George in the round. The historian and biographer John Campbell - who commenced his distinguished career with a book on Lloyd George's wilderness years, between 1922 and 1931 - draws on a wide range of sources. He has, for instance, gone back to the manuscripts of Stevenson's and Lloyd George's writings, and restored passages previously unpublished. He uses family letters, and the diary of A J Sylvester, Lloyd George's sneaky private secretary after the First World War, who was always on hand to write up the more salacious aspects of his master's private life for his own future financial enrichment. He also exploits to good effect the surviving drafts of a Mills and Boon-type novel with a happy ending that Frances evidently wrote when she was feeling especially dejected at having sacrificed conventional family life to become a politician's mistress.

The result is a book that is by turns compulsively readable, deeply enlightening about the character of one of our greatest Prime Ministers, and fascinating, too, when one considers exactly what Lloyd George was able to get away with. Campbell works hard at solving one of the major conundrums of the Stevenson-Lloyd George ménage: was the baby daughter, Jennifer, born to Stevenson in 1929, Lloyd George's child, or was she the product of Frances's affair with J T Tweed, Lloyd George's campaign manager and an early prototype of today's political spin doctors? On balance, Campbell believes the baby was Lloyd George's, but makes it clear that neither the mother, nor the two putative fathers, were ever absolutely certain to whom Jennifer ultimately belonged. Stevenson always claimed to have adopted the child, and, even in her final years, never admitted openly that Jennifer was hers.

The dysfunctional Lloyd George family always managed to show a united face to the world, despite the domestic battles that raged behind closed doors. Lloyd George could never contemplate giving up wife or mistress. Both were essential to him. Maggie, his long suffering spouse, represented his roots in North Wales, while with Frances, who had been a school contemporary of his eldest daughter Mair, who died young, he formed a unique working partnership. The complications, which Campbell describes, of attempting to prevent the two women from bumping into one another in transit between the various Lloyd George homes, would have defeated a younger man, and sometimes descended into farce. Meanwhile, Lloyd George's interest in female flesh seems to have remained undiminished with age - farm girls, maids, typists, even his daughter-in-law Roberta, all succumbed. A J Sylvester saw him naked once, and described him as "born with the biggest organ I have ever seen".

Whether the disclosure of Lloyd George's prodigious sexual appetite, in the 60 years since his death, has dented his reputation, it's impossible to say. Lloyd George and Churchill were once acknowledged as the twin - and equal - giants of 20th-century British history. But, since then, Churchill has built up a good lead. What is certain, as this book shows and as A J Sylvester once commented, is that Lloyd George possessed a double endowment of every quality, both good and bad, compared with the ordinary man.

10. Review: Pistols at Dawn



The following review was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the website of the Financial Times at www.ft.com. It was written by Brian Groom in July 2009.

Politics, says John Campbell, is inescapably about power. “Ideas prosper only through the flawed men and women who champion them.” The British system has been rich in vivid enmities, as this study of 200 years of political rivalries from Charles James Fox v William Pitt to Tony Blair v Gordon Brown amply demonstrates.

If the idea seems a bit of gimmick for such a distinguished biographer, Campbell pulls it off by bringing to it the astute character analysis and narrative flair that marked his earlier biographies of Margaret Thatcher, Edward Heath and others.

The duel described in the title took place at 6am in September 1809 on London’s Putney Heath between Lord Castlereagh and George Canning—

remarkable for the fact that they were respectively secretary of state for war and foreign secretary, responsible for the conduct of the war against Napoleon. Castlereagh issued his challenge after discovering that his rival was plotting to have him kicked out of the government, the latest twist in a saga of machinations.

Four shots were fired and Canning was slightly wounded. Both resigned but later returned to high office. Duelling went out of fashion, and none of these other feuds was settled in such a manner. But it is the verbal and psychological battles – particularly those involving great figures such as Gladstone v Disraeli and Asquith v Lloyd George – that provide the fascination of this book.

The backdrop to it is the decline of the House of Commons from the cockpit of political theatre to near irrelevance as the media and the internet have usurped its function. Today's feuds are conducted in television studios or through poisonous unattributable briefings. Human nature has not changed, however.

It is not simply a matter of an adversarial system throwing up opposing champions of ideas. Six of the eight pairings depicted here were colleagues from the same party (the exceptions are Fox v Pitt and Gladstone v Disraeli, and in both cases they started off on the same side). In most of these examples, they started off as good colleagues jostling for the same prize, but their rivalry sharpened as they frustrated each other's ambitions. That in turn shaped their ideologies and the course of history.

One of the book's strengths is in analysing what time has done to the protagonists' reputations. Pitt easily won the political duel with Fox in their lifetimes. Prime minister for 19 years, he embodied the national resolve to beat Napoleon, enacted free trade principles and pointed the way to a less venal approach to public life. Fox, a lovable sensualist who reflected the hedonism of an earlier age, was condemned to opposition for most of his career and achieved little.

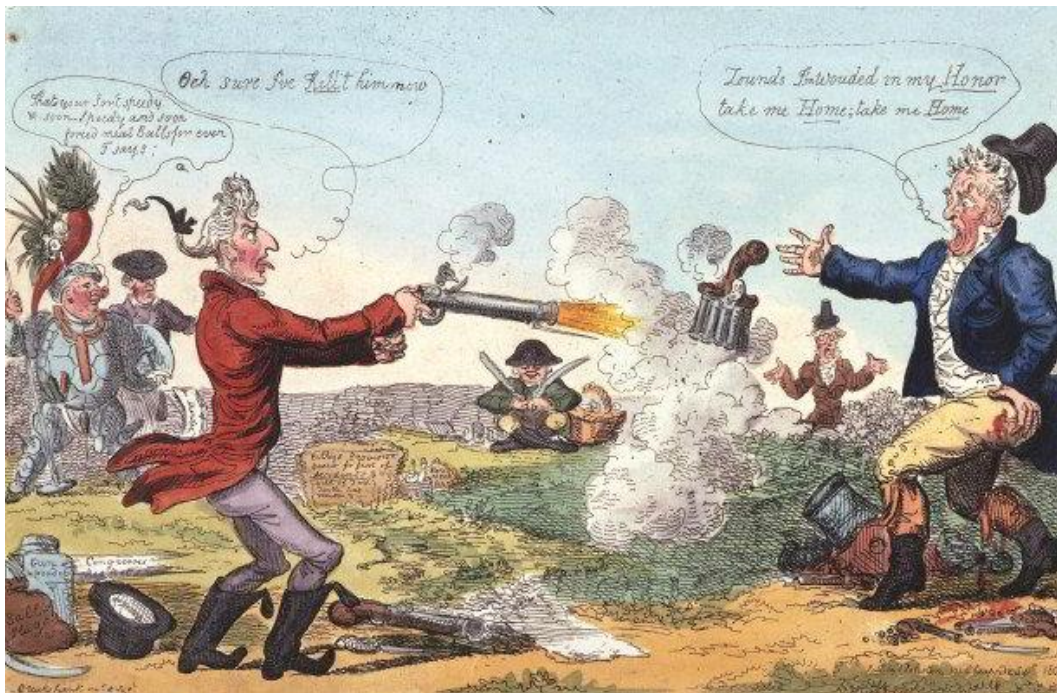
Yet, in his eloquent support for lost causes such as religious toleration, freedom of speech and parliamentary reform, Fox posthumously became a hero of Victorian liberalism. Now the wheel has come full circle, with William Hague's best-selling biography having raised Pitt again to a hero of our times. But is that the end of the matter?

William Gladstone, says Campbell, was a greater prime minister than Benjamin Disraeli and won two of the three elections they fought. He was the embodiment of Victorian financial orthodoxy, which lasted well into the 20th century. Yet Disraeli's "shrewd fusion of working-class patriotism with 'One-Nation' paternalism made the Tories the natural party of government for decades to come".

For years historical judgment favoured H. H. Asquith over David Lloyd George, but these days Asquith seems a “snobbish, post-Victorian amateur” while the Welshman “ranks second only to Churchill as a vivid charismatic leader touched with genius”. Hugh Gaitskell trounced Aneurin Bevan in their lifetimes but Bevan’s name lives on as the founder of the National Health Service. Harold Macmillan ran rings around R. A. Butler but is remembered as a “seedy conjuror”, while Rab is honoured for his educational reforms and reshaping the Tory party in the late 1940s.

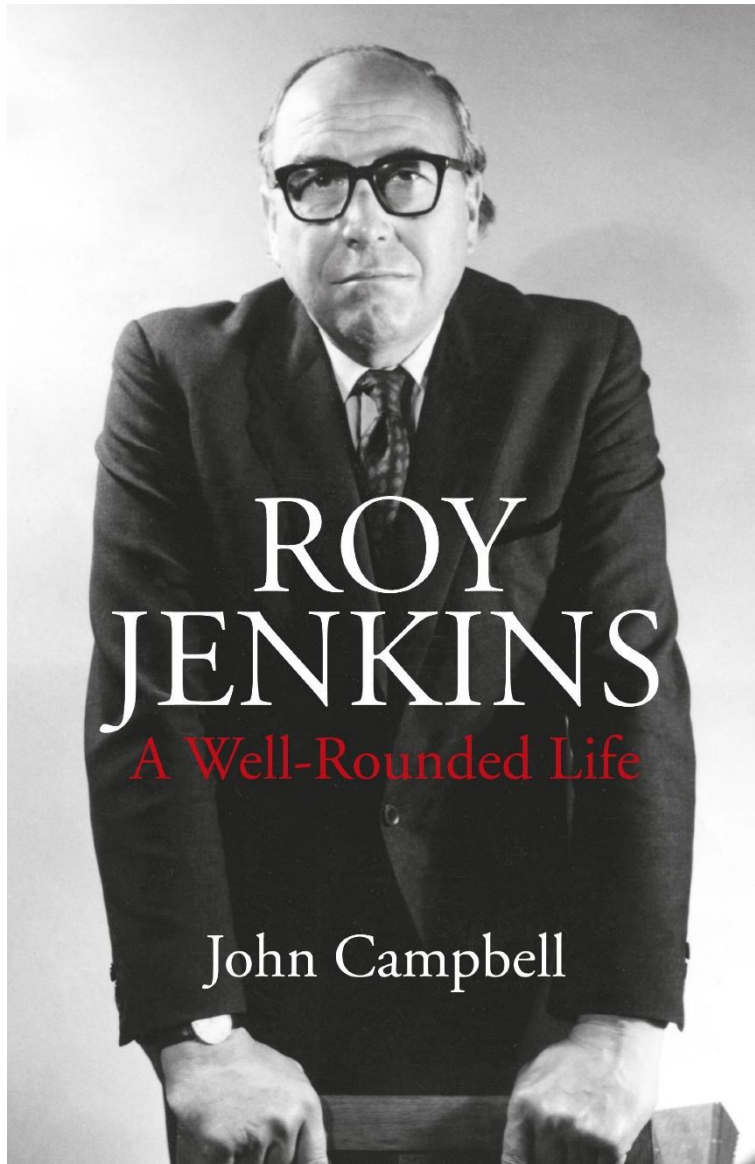
Campbell surely goes too far, though, in suggesting that Ted Heath “may yet have the last laugh” over Margaret Thatcher, because his taking Britain into Europe in 1973 will turn out as important as her transformation of the economy in 1979-80.

What about Blair and Brown? Blair won the duel by beating his friend to the Labour leadership in 1994 but, as Campbell rightly argues, the deal they made then “to try to share the spoils was a devil’s pact which ultimately did neither of them – nor the country – much good”.



Satirical depiction by Isaac Cruickshank of the 1809 Castlereagh Canning duel on Putney Heath.

11. Reviews: Roy Jenkins, a Well-Rounded Life



The following review was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the website of Prospect magazine at www.prospectmagazine.co.uk. It was written by Peter Mandelson in April 2014.

To do Roy Jenkins justice is a tough challenge for any biographer, but John Campbell has pulled it off. Justice does not mean hagiography. But Roy Jenkins was a complex, radical and courageous politician, unmatched in the 20th century, and he merits this long but very readable tome. Jenkins is firmly in the grade of “best prime ministers we never had” and had he not resigned as Labour’s deputy leader in 1972, over the original Europe referendum, he would almost certainly have become leader and prime

minister. He cultivated and received deep loyalty from his followers in the party and had a strong, ecumenical appeal beyond it. He may, as Barbara Castle once remarked, have found it difficult temperamentally to head the Labour Party but I am not so sure: for all his “high” living and academic snobbery he got on well with working people and the “old fashioned” sort of Labour activists. It was the oppositionist, “them and us” class warriors he could not stand.

Jenkins tended to retreat when the political atmosphere became intolerable. He found salvation in travel, in his prodigious authorship—he wrote more than 20 books, including bestsellers on Asquith, Gladstone and Churchill—and, of course, his famously energetic social life. But in between, he was a brilliant Home Secretary and Chancellor of the Exchequer in the 1960s, and again in the Home Office in the 70s. He was a wonderful Commons performer in his day, a good speechmaker on the stump and a compelling personality on radio and television before the onset of soundbites and photo-opportunities. Yes, he was sometimes insufferably immodest. But he had a lot to be immodest about.

He certainly had a charmed life. Born into Labour aristocracy as the son of a Welsh miner who became Clement Attlee’s close parliamentary aide, Jenkins was brought up as a pampered only child, taking every advantage of his parents’ devoted attention and good schooling. My mother was taken as a girl by her Labour cabinet minister father, Herbert Morrison, to stay with the Jenkinsees in their Pontypool home and recounted being pitted against this impossibly self-assured youngster. Campbell describes the young Jenkins as a “studious boy... unusually—indeed, obsessively—numerate.” It was just as well that Roy later found a wife in Jennifer, who was his equal in intellect and political judgement, meeting Roy’s needy and sometimes self-indulgent lifestyle while pursuing a satisfying professional life of her own.

Let me declare my bias. I am a strong pro-European, a closet liberal in Home Office matters and centrist in my politics, so inevitably I am a Roy Jenkins fan. I also hope my approach as a minister was similar to his, although daily social lunches washed down by a fine claret were, for good or ill, not a New Labour trait.

Which brings me to the interesting question: was Roy Jenkins the begetter of New Labour or did his “betrayal” nearly finish off the party before New Labour approached the drawing board?

The question arises because after he left parliament in 1976 to become, the following year, the first (and, I bet, not last) British President of the European Commission in Brussels, he quit Labour. This followed what he saw as the hard left’s takeover of the party and its subordination to trade union power. (The latter was an inevitable consequence of Labour’s—

including Jenkins's—fatal climbdown in reforming industrial relations and attempting to place the unions properly within the law.)

In deserting the party, Jenkins created further space for the left, which they occupied enthusiastically. In his Dimpleby lecture, a year before his return from Brussels in 1981, he set out the arguments for “breaking the mould” of two-party British politics and forging a new centrist political movement spearheaded by moderates like himself. This was not an attempt to de-ideologise politics. He saw himself as a progressive, a modern social democrat whose politics had not broadly changed since he first started battling against “tribal” leftism in the 1950s and early 60s. In those days he spoke out strongly in favour of Labour’s “paramount task” to “represent the whole of the leftward-thinking half of the country... and give that half some share of power.” Now, decades on, it was not the basic leftward thinking he rejected but the Labour Party’s credibility in advancing it. His lecture subsequently spurred the Gang of Three—Shirley Williams, David Owen and William Rodgers—to switch their own allegiance to a political alternative to Labour when the party voted to adopt policies of withdrawal from Europe, unilateral nuclear disarmament and the creation of a form of siege economy. The Social Democratic Party (SDP) was duly born in 1981 and, led by Jenkins, it quickly garnered support across the country.

It is convenient for the moderates who remained in the Labour Party, as I did myself, to argue that they were gravely weakened by this villainous exodus, and of course they were. Under pressure, moderates had already begun to move leftwards to “affirm” their Labour credentials and this made it harder for the party to respond creatively to Britain’s waning postwar settlement. It was Margaret Thatcher’s intellectual and electoral ascendancy that was driving change in this period, including in the Labour Party. But the formation of the SDP had a particularly galvanising effect on Labour because the SDP was succeeding in presenting itself as the more appealing alternative to Thatcher. If Labour did not pull itself together, and fast, it would face electoral oblivion. This was the argument deployed with force by the then leader, Neil Kinnock, and the long, hard fought battle to stop the Labour Party being replaced by the SDP, and subsequently by the SDP-Liberal Alliance, began in earnest. More than a decade later, this battle culminated in Tony Blair’s victory in 1997.

Of course many think that rather than the SDP replacing Labour, New Labour simply became the SDP. I do not object to this jibe because I think Labour should maximise its moderate centre ground support as the SDP did—as long as its appeal is based on progressive policies that are radical both economically and socially.

An equally interesting question is how, had he lived beyond January 2003, Jenkins would have judged the overall record of New Labour as a worthy

progressive successor to the SDP. Iraq apart (as Campbell shows, Jenkins had been suspicious of the use of force internationally ever since the “humiliation of Suez” in 1956), I think he would have broadly approved, with some important caveats.

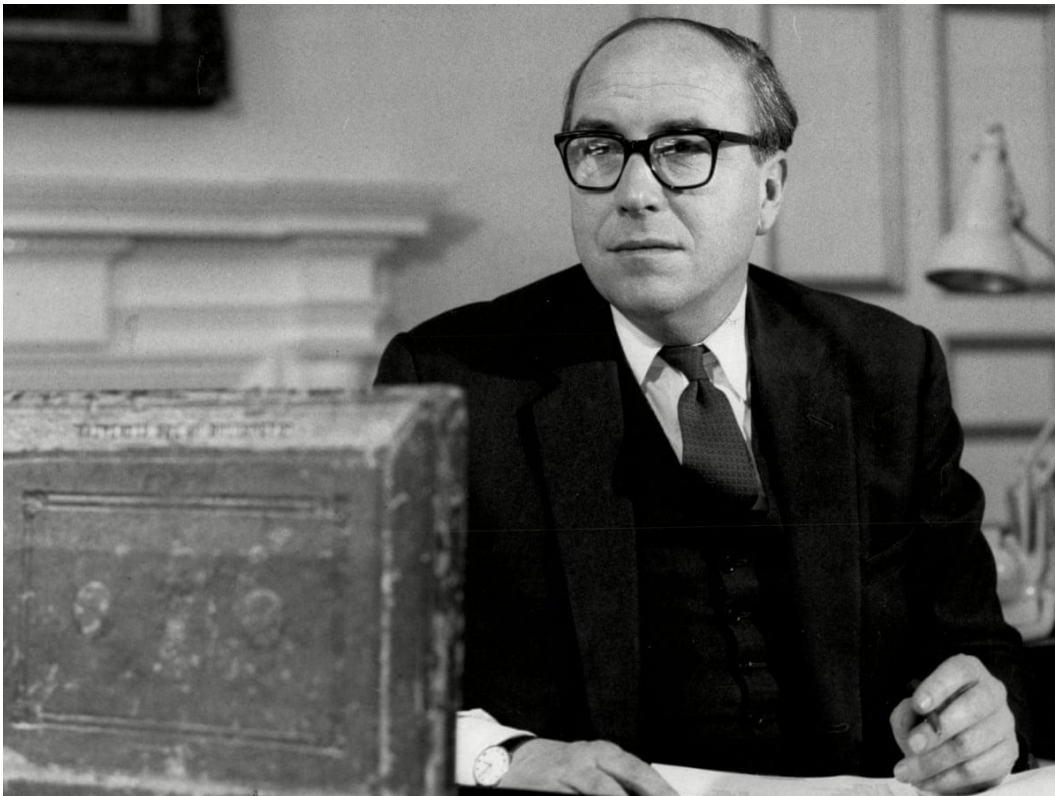
Economically, he admired the government’s performance, although he did not live to see the financial crisis. He told me he thought Gordon Brown was a good Chancellor. He might have taken his foot off the spending pedal a little earlier than Brown but Jenkins firmly believed in high quality public services and opposed their privatisation or market reform. He supported income re-distribution—his own Budgets did not spare the rich—and he believed the goal of a centre left party was to “lean against inequalities.”

Where he disagreed with New Labour was over the Treasury’s determined blocking of Britain’s entry to the European currency. As Commission President, Jenkins had overseen the design of the progenitor of Europe’s single currency and he had high hopes of Blair leading Britain in at the beginning of his premiership. Blair certainly favoured entry and Jenkins urged him to hold a referendum on the principle of joining while his political authority was still strong. But, facing stiff opposition from his key supporter, Rupert Murdoch, and his nemesis, Gordon Brown, Blair faltered and Jenkins’s disillusionment with him grew, as this book chronicles. (Nonetheless, Campbell writes that Jenkins “could not help liking [Blair] and remained determinedly unbitter” towards him.) I doubt Jenkins’s fervour for the single currency would have been dented by the eurozone’s later near-collapse. When it came to Europe, he was ever the optimist.

On Home Office matters, in the balance between prison security, punishment and rehabilitation, for example, and the rights of the accused, Jenkins was not an enthusiast for Jack Straw’s approach. He would have found it easier to live with both Charles Clarke’s and Alan Johnson’s later tenures. Jenkins was not soft on crime and he had been tough in introducing the Prevention of Terrorism Act in 1974. He also prepared the legislation in 1967 for the exclusion from Britain of the Kenyan Asians. Where he would have applauded Blair’s government was its introduction of strengthened rights and civil partnerships for homosexuals.

Jenkins was not gay himself except in the old-fashioned sense of that term (and despite his university liaison with his dashing Labour contemporary, Tony Crosland) but he pioneered the liberalisation of homosexuality in the 1960s, along with repeal of the obscenity laws and theatre censorship. His record was thoroughly damned for its “permissiveness” thereafter by the Conservative Party until David Cameron became leader and ushered his party reluctantly into the modern age.

Jenkins's biggest personal disappointment was not a matter of policy but the failure to bring about a permanent progressive alliance of Labour and the now fully merged Liberal Democrats, having again been encouraged by Blair's early enthusiasm for this project. Jenkins's contribution was to chair a commission on electoral reform but Blair neither implemented this nor brought about the wider realignment. The trouble for Jenkins was that he did not believe Blair ever properly tried. This is unfair: had the political cards been stacked differently—notably if Labour's majority in 1997 had been smaller—Labour would have looked more solicitously towards the Lib Dems, and vice versa, and Blair could have pushed the agenda more decisively. Perhaps on this topic Ed Miliband will choose to pick up where Tony Blair left off, should next year's general election result force him to do so. In which case Jenkins' big smile will beam down upon him in No 10.



Roy Jenkins when Home Secretary.

Which leads to a final question of whether, overall, Jenkins's political career was a success or a failure. Campbell argues that he lacked the "single-minded ambition" required to become prime minister, but endorses Jenkins's own judgement that his Home Office reforms in particular were "significant and worthwhile." As Home Secretary, the social revolution he drove and the balance he struck between order and liberty have come under pressure but not been fundamentally overturned. On Europe, yes, there is now widespread scepticism about the EU's institutions, but there may be a deeper underlying acceptance of it as the appropriate vehicle for Britain's

engagement with the modern world. And the New Labour tenets that Jenkins believed in—a mixed economy, strong public services, social mobility, and multilateralism abroad—may no longer be called New Labour but are not being seriously challenged in the party. All told, that is not a bad legacy for a man whose political career spanned nearly 50 years, with only eight of them in actual ministerial office.



The 'Gang of Four' who left Labour and in 1981 formed the new Social Democratic Party. From left: Bill Rogers, Shirley Williams, Roy Jenkins and David Owen.

Mad about the Roy: It's so easy to fall in love with the 'vair, vair' remarkable Roy Jenkins

The following review was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the website of the Daily Mail at www.dailymail.co.uk. It was written by Craig Brown in March 2014.

I still remember the moment I learnt to love Roy Jenkins. It was 23 years ago. He had written a review of a book about the history of croquet.

This grandee of British politics – former Chancellor of the Exchequer and Home Secretary, President of the European Commission, Chancellor of Oxford University, President of the Royal Society of Literature, and so on, and so forth – was reminiscing about his own experiences on the croquet lawn.

At one point he explained that he used to engage in solo games, ‘playing all four balls by myself, which at least avoided the tedium of waiting for others’. And then came this gem of a sentence: ‘The disadvantages were the difficulty of remembering what point in the course they had each reached, the curious fact that one’s loyalties became attached to red and

yellow, or less frequently to black and blue, which made it difficult to try equally hard with the unfavoured pair of balls, and at the end of the session the very limited satisfaction to be gained from victory over oneself.’

Who couldn't love such a man? Over the course of his long life, Roy Jenkins wrote 21 books, some of them very long indeed, as well as hundreds upon hundreds of articles and speeches, but I doubt he ever wrote a sentence that was sweeter, more beautifully judged, or more revealing. Of course, it displays many of the vices of which his critics disapproved – pomposity, competitiveness, and a sort of carefree self-indulgence – but these are disarmed by their corresponding virtues of playfulness, charm, curiosity and self-awareness.



An only child, Roy was loved and pampered by his doting parents.

Researching this authorised biography, John Campbell either overlooked or ignored that sentence, but for me it is the grain of sand that offers a glimpse of the vast, all-consuming world of Roy Jenkins.

But those wanting the full sandcastle, detailing his majestic political career, will be more than satisfied by this splendidly thorough biography. It stands

as a portrait not only of an individual but of a ruling class: Roy was, says Campbell, the embodiment of Britain's liberal establishment – 'that calmly (or complacently) superior elite' – in the second half of the 20th century.

Commentators have often expressed surprise that the son and grandson of South Wales miners could appear so effortlessly posh, but, in truth, Roy was born with a particular type of silver spoon in his mouth.

Yes, his father Arthur had been a miner, but he had also gone on to be an MP, Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Labour leader Clement Attlee and, briefly, a Government Minister. He was also a very cultured man, reading Russian classics in French translations, having gained a scholarship in his youth to study in Paris.

An only child, Roy was loved and pampered by his doting parents. The three of them called each other by nursery nicknames: his father was Jumbo, his mother was Pony, and Roy was Bunny. He was a happy child, and, on some level, remained a happy child for the rest of his life.

Roy always said that his own 'vair, vair' grand drawl – once accurately described as making John Gielgud sound like rough trade – was in fact just like his father's. Whether or not this was true, he seems to have grasped the mantle of superiority very young, styling himself 'Sir R.H. Jenkins, K.C.' at the tender age of 12. His taste for the high-life arrived shortly thereafter.



In 1945, Roy and Jennifer embarked on what biographer John Campbell describes as an 'extraordinarily successful 56-year marriage'.

On a train trip to London aged 15, he declared breakfast ‘very sound... the coffee on the GWR is always very good. There is never the least suspicion of skin about it. I dislike intensely coffee on which skin is prone to form’.

On the same visit, he went to see *Love On The Dole* (‘a very good play but... not particularly marked by its cheeriness’) and Madame Tussauds (‘I cannot say that it impressed me very much’). The food at the Strand Palace Hotel was, alas, only so-so.

‘The lunch is not nearly so good as the dinner is, although I have no doubt that they bear a very distinct relation to one another.’

His life as a student at Oxford was a good deal more *Brideshead Revisited* than *Love On The Dole*. His biographer has uncovered a gay love affair between Roy and his future Cabinet rival Tony Crosland. ‘I am very lonely for you, & longing to be with you again, darling,’ writes Tony. In a few decades’ time, will we be perusing the same sort of billet-doux between – eek! – Cameron and Pickles?

Roy met his future wife Jennifer at Oxford. ‘Roy came under the spell of the first nice girl he met,’ complained Tony to, of all people, Roy’s mum, ‘...I only learned of it accidentally from an outside source, and this I was not easily able either to forget or forgive.’

In 1945, Roy and Jennifer embarked on what Campbell describes as an ‘extraordinarily successful 56-year marriage’.

This seems to be overstating things: within a few years, Roy was, as Campbell puts it, ‘already seeking variety elsewhere’ since ‘like many driven men, Roy was highly sexed, Jennifer was not’.

His two longest relationships – they continued for 40 years – were with Caroline Gilmour (‘I pine for you in every way’) and Leslie Bonham Carter, the wives of his two best friends, who were themselves seeking variety elsewhere.

How did this make Jennifer feel? ‘Jennifer accepted it,’ writes Campbell, ‘though she never warmed to Caroline.’ It’s hard to avoid the suspicion that though the marriage may have been ‘extraordinarily successful’ for Roy, it was rather less comfortable for Jennifer. Just occasionally, Campbell’s affection for Roy spills over into PR.

Roy’s political rise – Aviation Minister, Home Secretary, Chancellor – was as smooth as silk, his income agreeably supplemented by endless offers from the City.

His Cabinet colleagues, grumpily sweating over their papers till the early hours, resented the way he always clocked off at seven, but, as Campbell points out, unlike them, he possessed a ‘remarkable ability to concentrate

intensely for short periods, absorb information and then take decisions quickly’.

After 1970, this liberal bon viveur felt increasingly out of place in an ever more illiberal and puritanical Labour Party, hell-bent on nationalisation. But he never let political rancour (a phrase he never bothered to avoid, even though he couldn’t pronounce his ‘R’s) get in the way of a good meal.

You shall know a man by his index; here, ‘Love of food 22-3, 518-19, 522-3’ is followed by ‘and restaurants, 100, 153-4, 517-18, 596-7, 635, 736’, and then ‘Love of wine, 25, 28-9, 159, 405, 518-19, 528, 587’.

At least no one could quibble with the notion that the marriage of Roy and fine wine was extraordinarily successful. They were made for each other. As Home Secretary, he would invariably share a bottle of claret with a friend over lunch, supplemented by a large aperitif and brandy with coffee.

And for special occasions, he would loosen his belt: over dinner with Barbara Castle in 1976, just before he left his Presidency of what he would have called Yerp, the pair of them polished off three bottles together. ‘She was very talkative,’ he observed, ‘slightly tipsy I think is the right word.’

Nor did his love of claret recognise geographical boundaries. In Ghana, he enjoyed a Haut Brion ’62 (‘ludicrously good’) and in Halifax, Nova Scotia, a Château Lafite (‘even if it was not the best year’).

But beneath the bon viveur lay a man of steel and also of stamina. Courage, too: covering the House of Commons in the late 1980s, I used to watch him as leader of the tiny SDP group delivering his orotund speeches while being heckled mercilessly from all sides, and though he was temperamentally unsuited to hit back, he stuck it out with a special kind of dignity.

He died a happy man (‘two eggs, please, lightly poached’ were his last words) and, by bringing about legislation to make life easier for women, black people, writers and homosexuals, left the world a happier place. Of how many other politicians could that ever be said?
