

## Book Review

*Peace, Reform and Liberation: A History of Liberal Politics in Britain 1679-2011.* Edited by Robert Ingham and Duncan Brack. London: Biteback Publishing. 2011. pp. xviii+414 £30. ISBN 978-1-84954-043-8.

Simon Mackley\*

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It is no mean feat to produce a complete history of any political party, let alone one which lays claim to being the oldest in the world. As such, Robert Ingham and Duncan Brack deserve credit for producing this work, a narrative history tracing liberal politics in Britain from its Whig beginnings to its present-day experience of coalition government. *Peace, Reform and Liberation* certainly meets the editors' stated goal of producing a 'comprehensive but accessible' account of events in the party's past (p. xiii). However, one is nonetheless left with the impression that an opportunity to produce a full history of British liberalism has been missed.

The choice of title is an unusual one, being a play on the Gladstonian slogan of 'peace, retrenchment and reform', and it is indicative of the sense of continuity emphasised throughout the book, despite its many contributors. The positive nature of the title also reflects the political leanings of many of the volume's authors: Brack worked until recently as a special adviser to Chris Huhne, while many of the other contributors have political backgrounds with the Liberal Democrats. The book is no work of propaganda, however: the chapters are of a good standard and the contributions by party members offer a refreshing counterbalance to the more academic chapters, even if the latter do still tend to be the strongest of the collection.

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\* Simon Mackley will finish his MA in History in 2012 at the University of Sheffield. You can reach him at semackley1@sheffield.ac.uk.

The result is a sympathetic yet balanced account of the Liberal Party's history.

Mark Pack and Stephen Farrell present the reader with a traditional account of the Liberal Party's origins, examining the history and development of Whig thought from the Glorious Revolution to the Great Reform Act. David Brown goes on to explore how the processes of faction and coalition brought about the party's slow emergence as a somewhat coherent force. The narrative then turns to the 'Liberal Heyday' (p. 77), with Tony Little presenting the era as one in which the Liberal coalition came together under Lord Palmerston and dominated British politics before crumbling in the face of the home rule crisis.

Noting that the period after the 1886 election is often seen as entailing the 'decline and fall' of the Victorian Liberal Party (p. 115), Eugenio Biagini and Ingham shift the focus somewhat away from the high politics of the party's history, instead exploring the philosophical and organisational developments that prepared the way for the New Liberalism of the twentieth century. Any lingering notions the reader might have of the New Liberalism as a false dawn are thoroughly rejected in the subsequent chapter by Martin Pugh: while acknowledging the limitations of the New Liberal reforms, Pugh nonetheless argues that they brought about the emergence of a 'Liberal state' (p. 156) and that prior to the outbreak of war the Liberal Party looked set to retain its dominant position in British politics. This line of thought is advanced further by David Dutton, who, while emphasising the need for a synthesis of the various explanations for the 1914–1929 Liberal decline, places a great deal of emphasis on the harmful impacts of the Liberal leadership's failures and divisions.

The following three chapters explore the decline, survival and recovery of the Liberal Party. Jamie Reynolds and Ian Hunter cover the 1929–1955 nadir of Liberal fortunes while Ingham examines the Liberal revival and the rise of community politics. Mark Cole goes on to track the Liberals in the age of co-operation, culminating in their 1988 merger with the Social Democrats.

Brack then covers the entire history of the Liberal Democrats from their formation up until the general election of 2010. Brack's account is surprisingly critical of Charles Kennedy's leadership and places a great deal of focus upon Nick Clegg's attempts to move the party rightward prior to the election: the narrative therefore makes the formation of the coalition government appear a natural continua-

tion of the party's history, an interpretation likely to prove contentious with many on the Left.

The Liberal Democrat's first year in coalition is itself examined in Philip Cowley and Martin Ryder's concluding chapter, although compared with the preceding chapters their brief account forms something of an anti-climax. While Cowley and Ryder provide a useful synthesis of the negotiations on the coalition agreement, their account of the party's first year in government is surprisingly lacking in detail over issues such as the controversy surrounding the voting referendum campaign. Their conclusions also have an air of prematurity about them and one cannot help but feel that the book's wider narrative might have been better served had it concluded at the 2010 election.

Additionally, a useful examination by Sarah Whitehead and Brack of how the Liberal Party's organisation evolved over the decades is contained within the appendices of the book, coming to the particularly intriguing conclusion that the recent organisational success of the Liberal Democrats owes much to the structural inheritance of the SDP.

This book presents a clear and flowing narrative of the party's history, yet it undoubtedly suffers from its equation of liberal politics with the activities of the Liberal Party and the Liberal Democrats. The focus is at all times upon official liberalism, with the result that splinter groups such as the Liberal Nationals and liberal developments outside of the party emerge as almost ghost-like entities, flitting in and out of the narrative but never fully engaged with. Similarly, a greater focus upon liberal opinion would have provided a welcome counterbalance to the high-political focus of many of the chapters, which often give the impression of the party having operated in a vacuum.

*Peace, Reform and Liberation* will serve as a highly useful account for anyone seeking to familiarise themselves with the history of the Liberal Party. However, the challenge of producing a complete history of liberal politics in Britain remains sadly unmet.