

ashamed, since he sustains manly reticence and never gives anything away: he fulfils the British ideal by being both artist and man of affairs. The question is one of gain and loss. More novels like *Corridors of Power*, and the novelist must be admired more and loved less. A novel that shuts more doors than it opens can, when it has the weight and majesty of a Snow behind it, do more harm to the progress of the form than one dares think of. T. S. Eliot talks of the Chinese Wall of Milton's blank verse, impressive, authoritative and calculated to stem the free development of the more human and more flexible medium of the Jacobean; the Snovian novel might be such a wall.

STILL, A GREAT FICTIONAL TRADITION is more or less fulfilled: no stream of consciousness, no symbolism, no surrealism, no word-play; neat set scenes, even chapter-headings. Mr. Wilson has chapter-headings, too, as well as a Dickensian interlude called "The Old Woman's Story." In the age of Boulez both are content with the technique of Brahms. Both are at the height of their reputation. Mr. Wilson will soon take J. B. Priestley's place, though Lord Snow will remain himself, creator of the most massive *roman fleuve* of the century. I think both are prized, and will continue to be prized, for the skill and integrity with which they have illuminated contemporary society and uncovered some of the forces which drive it. Whether this is the true function of the novel is a matter for debate. Some of us may prefer to see the advance of the art of fiction in other, less publicised, corners, where what endures in man is more important than what changes in society, and the wrestling with new techniques means nothing more than an attempt to probe deeper into the essence of the human personality. But we must remain grateful for the architectonic power that both Wilson and Snow exhibit, their ability to modify our way of looking at life and give shape to our inchoate visions of it. That we recognise the existence of a Snovian world and a Wilsonic world is the best testimonial to their importance. They are ornaments of the contemporary novel of the middle way.

## Pillar of Society

Asquith. By ROY JENKINS. *Collins*, 45s.

IN A BRILLIANT pre-1914 essay on Asquith, published after 1914 in *Pillars of Society*, A. G. Gardiner compared Asquith with Pitt the Younger. Pitt lived for posterity as "the pilot who weathered the storm," the storm of a European convulsion. "Mr. Asquith will be remem-

bered as the captain who weathered the storm at home." Both men stood out with "a certain simplicity and aloofness"; neither man was driven by a "fine frenzy" or was engulfed by a "tide of hot compassion." Pitt's limitations became fully apparent when his temperament and policies were contrasted with those of Fox. In the case of Asquith, Gardiner found his main symbol of contrast in a statesman of a previous generation, Gladstone, who believed, unlike Asquith, that he was "a vehicle of Sinaitic revelation."

The familiar contrast drawn at a later date between Asquith and Lloyd George was missing. Indeed, it needed the experience of war as much as the vicissitudes of politics to bring it out, after Asquith had been forced to face the hosts of Germany rather than the hosts of Ulster. In the light of that experience, Lloyd George's very different personal qualities commanded increasing interest. By 1916 Edwin Montagu, Asquith's close friend, was pressing for a more effective union of Lloyd George's "fertile, ever-working imagination and constructive power," and Asquith's "incomparable capacity for mastering a particular case at once, detecting the vital considerations, discarding the bad arguments, and giving a clear and right decision." Yet what Montagu thought of as complementary qualities were thought of by others as essentially antagonistic. Asquith and Lloyd George polarised opinion. This was the case of Pitt and Fox with a difference, for it was Asquith who never held office again after 1916.

No one who was not alive at the time remembers Asquith as the pilot who weathered any storm. Most readers of Gardiner, indeed, would turn first to his essay on Lloyd George with its flashing tribute to his "dynamic energy" and its haunting question "Where will his pragmatism lead him?" At best Asquith figures as "the last of the Romans," the title of one of Mr. Jenkins' last chapters; at worst he is clearly, if misleadingly, labelled "wait and see." Politely Gardiner had noted his "dislike of anticipating the future." "You cannot get him to look into the middle of next week. He takes the situation as it presents itself, and deals with it honestly and plainly." Less politely but just as incisively G. K. Chesterton expressed the same thought in a 1905 paradox. "We know, I say, what Mr. Shaw will be saying thirty years hence. But is there anyone so darkly read in stars and oracles that he will dare to predict what Mr. Asquith will be saying thirty years hence?"

Mr. Jenkins' lucid, fascinating and highly readable biography is a landmark in the historiography of Asquith for two reasons. First, it is a book written about Asquith by someone who did not know him, who was not drawn

into the argument of 1916, who cannot remember what Haldane said to Grey or was told on the side what Northcliffe said to Lloyd George. In consequence, for Mr. Jenkins Asquith becomes a true historical figure. This shift in the biographer's experience necessarily carries with it shifts of emphasis and even of assessment. It also involves occupational hazards since many of the people who knew Asquith or without knowing him took sides for or against him are still alive, either feeding the old passions or checking the old contentions. Friends, relatives, admirers and opponents leap into the arena, and if the main spotlight is on the correspondence columns of the newspapers it also plays on some of the reviews. "Lloyd George knew my father" carries with it more meaning than "Asquith knew my father," but there are enough Asquithians around, including the outstanding one who can say "Asquith was my father," to judge a new biographer severely.

ON THE WHOLE Mr. Jenkins emerges unscathed from this kind of critical scrutiny. He is more than fair to Asquith without going anywhere near idolising him. He extols Asquith's intellectual gifts, and seeks to do full justice to him even when there is a thick cloud of sur-

living discontent surrounding his actions. As a sensitive biographer, he never mistakes good public relations for good judgment or the semblance of conservatism for its reality. Yet he goes much further than this in positive terms. In face of Labour historians he minimises Featherstone; in face of Irish historians he disposes of Casement in a page; in face of what he calls the Beaverbrook historians he methodically re-examines all the "facts" of 1916, including the "ambiguous communications," and often reaches quite different conclusions. He pays tribute to Asquith's achievements before 1914, some, though not all, of which secured "the maximum of radical result" while entailing the "minimum of conservative opposition." He points to Asquith's qualities as a war-time Prime Minister, and defends him from many of the charges made against him then and since. Not least, he shows how in 1918 and the immediate post-war years Asquith retained his "sanity" and "finesse," as John Masefield put it, when many of his contemporaries were losing theirs.

Mr. Jenkins adorns this narrative with many appropriate compliments, both from Asquith and his friends. The Liberal Chief Whip, for example, writes in 1910 of how "under that modest, unassuming, almost shy nature—so

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often mistaken for coldness—the Prime Minister has a softness of character which attaches men to him humanly as firmly as his great intellectual gifts compel their admiration.” George V gave him his complete trust during the most difficult periods of the War and when Asquith fell from power wrote that this was “a great blow” to him. When the War ended and with it Asquith’s defeat at the general election, there must have been at least limited comfort in Augustine Birrell’s remark, “You surely are better out of it for the time than watching Lloyd George lead apes to Hell.”

Comments of this kind are supplemented from more private sources, particularly the vivacious descriptions of people and events written by Margot Asquith, and, perforce very selectively, the quite remarkable spate of letters Asquith wrote to Venetia Stanley, later Mrs. Edwin Montagu, between 1912 and 1916, a running commentary on politics from the inside. Indeed by carefully and sympathetically treating Asquith’s private life, Mr. Jenkins illuminates his public life in much the same way, though not as fully, as Kenneth Young recently illuminated that of Balfour. He points to Asquith’s refusal to be too serious about politics, to the “easy-going” side of his nature—as important as the power of his intellect, to his delight in golf and bridge, to the wide range of his reading, which in itself placed as big a gulf between himself and Lloyd George as Gladstone’s reading had done between him and Joseph Chamberlain. He shows how at moments of crisis personal and political problems often converged, affecting both his mood and his decisions. The events leading up to the formation of the forced Coalition Government in 1915, for instance, coincided with the end of Asquith’s epistolary relationship with Venetia Stanley. And when it came to the bigger crisis of 1916 Asquith’s tactics depended on a personal estimate of Balfour which proved to be utterly unreliable. At a very early stage of his life, when he was making “a sure thrust to fame,” the death of his first wife occurred at a time when both his pattern of existence and his outlook on life were changing sharply. There was potential tension, if not strain, in the logic of what was happening.

Acute perception of inter-relationships of this order is one of Mr. Jenkins’ sources of strength as a biographer. The second reason why his biography is a landmark in the historiography of Asquith is that it is written from the standpoint of a politician, moving in a world of power and understanding the terms by which power is acquired and exercised and the reasons why it is lost. Many of the best touches in this book—some of them ought to have been more than touches—are concerned with Asquith’s

skills and limitations as a politician and a parliamentarian.

His first speech in Parliament in 1887, we are told, was distinguished by its “front bench style.” “Asquith succeeded in assuming that the interest of a statement lay in the fact that he was making it, and not merely in its own inherent wisdom.” In relation both to his work as Home Secretary and his later career as Prime Minister, Mr. Jenkins notes with a degree of understatement Asquith’s persistent tendency to be “a little too concerned with ‘Athenaeum opinion’ and not sufficiently concerned with a more general and less urbane public.” When war broke out in 1914, there was an ominous ring in Asquith’s introspection:

“I have never before been a popular character with the ‘man in the street’ and in all this dark and dangerous business it gives me scant pleasure.”

On questions of relationships within the Cabinet, doubtless Mr. Jenkins will be better equipped as a politician when he writes his next political biography. He is already shrewd enough, however, to note that perhaps the best way for a minister to irritate his chief is stubbornly to advocate a policy which the Prime Minister would half like to follow, but knows he cannot, and to do it by always threatening resignation, while never carrying the threat into effect. There is also an element of personal *cri de cœur* in his two terse sentences:

“Politicians exist to exercise influence. Unless they believe that they can do so beneficially they have no *raison d’être*.”

Such asides are much to the point. It would be possible, however, to penetrate far more searchingly than Mr. Jenkins does the surface of political events which provides him with the guiding lines of his biography. Given the historiographical significance of his biography, it fails in some respects to “place” Asquith in relation to what went before him or what has followed since. It is far too diffident also in summing up or for that matter in cataloguing other people’s summaries. There are the briefest of pauses in Mr. Jenkins’ narrative when he has led Asquith into office, into war and into retirement, but there is no final assessment. For this reason essays like those of Gardiner are still worth reading not as glosses on Mr. Jenkins’ book but to some extent as basic sources. It is Gardiner, not Jenkins, for example, who quotes Joseph Chamberlain’s comment on Asquith during the protectionist campaign of 1903—“he talks like a barrister from a brief.”

IN SOME RESPECTS the contrast between Chamberlain and Asquith is more revealing than that

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between Gladstone and Asquith or even that between Asquith and Lloyd George (with whom Chamberlain was often compared). Chamberlain's sense of "grass roots" policies, his candour about issues and strategies, his willingness to shift direction, and his powerful feeling that there was a direction in politics introduced new elements into English political life before the advent of the Labour Party. With the rise of the Labour Party "grass roots" politics developed in a different way and with a different sense of direction. Asquith seems outside all this, and since Mr. Jenkins spends relatively little time describing "ordinary" people's reactions to him, even ordinary Liberals' reactions or the reactions of the Liberal press, we seldom perceive clearly the "image" people outside the Athenaeum had of him. Although there are a few references to relationships between the "*laissez-faire*" Liberals and "collectivists"—and a few fascinating paragraphs about "Whig" attitudes and Asquith's distaste for money-making—there is no analysis of the "new Liberalism," no discussion of such issues as land politics on which Lloyd George, had he been able, would have fought the general election of 1915, no exploration of the provincial Liberalism which Mr. Jenkins implies was far less important a force in shaping his political career than his birth in Yorkshire might at first sight suggest. There is a whiff of Whiggery about the story which makes Morley, the little Yorkshire town where it all began, seem right off the map. Balliol is on the map more prominently than East Fife. The modern reader is left with the lingering impression that there was far more that Asquith, for all his distinction, did not know than what he knew, and that when it came to the national war-time crisis what Asquith did not know was more important than what he did know.

A different biographer may bring some of this out, for Mr. Jenkins, sensitive though he is to the personal qualities of Asquith as a pillar of society, is less sensitive to the dilemmas and disputes of 20th-century liberalism and less convincing in his general approach to war-time political exigencies. Curiously enough, despite his political stance, he seems also less urgently preoccupied with many of the problems, including Ireland, which Asquith with all his gifts failed to settle. He emphasises rightly and at times scathingly the stupidity and the irresponsibility of Asquith's Conservative opponents and the dangerous influence of sections of the press, but he does not dwell on the weaknesses in Asquith's own position.

A woman acquaintance of Gardiner once told him that Asquith had three great virtues. "He has no egotism, no jealousy, and no vanity."

These were all negative virtues. Gardiner himself added, "He yields a place in the sun to all who can do the work that needs to be done, and envies no man the plaudits of the crowd." When something more than negative virtues were needed Asquith found it difficult to supply them, and although both he and Lloyd George ended their lives in political "failure," it was Lloyd George who figured the more prominently not only in the war-time story but even in the powerless Liberal epilogue.

*Asa Briggs*

## Representation of Life

**Story of a Life.** By KONSTANTIN PAUSTOVSKY.  
*Harvill Press, 25s.*

**S**TORY OF A LIFE opens with a death. "I was in my last year at school in Kiev when the telegram came saying that my father was dying." The author then goes on to describe, in the most direct manner, how he at once set off to see his father, who was marooned in a farmhouse on an island in the middle of the flooded Ros River. In the townlet nearest to the farm he tries to find a driver who will dare to take him across the river; at his Aunt Dosia's request he also tries to find a priest to accompany him, though he knows that his father is a freethinker. ("She believed in absolution, though not in any other rites of the Church.") None of the Orthodox priests will risk the journey, but he eventually manages to find a Roman Catholic priest who is prepared to do so, as well as an old, ironic Jewish driver, Bregman, who will "take on the devil himself." After some struggle and danger, they get across the river.

My father could not speak. He was dying of cancer of the throat.

All night I sat beside him. Everyone else slept. The rain stopped. Outside the window the stars burned gloomily. The river roared louder and louder. Its waters were rising fast....

In the middle of the night my father stirred and opened his eyes. He tried to put his arms around my neck, but could not do it; he said in a whistling whisper:

"I'm afraid... your lack of character... will destroy you."

The father dies later that night, and an old man, Nechipor, who lives nearby, is brought in to say psalms over the corpse. While Nechipor reads the psalms he picks at the melting wax of the candles with dirty fingernails, and sometimes falls asleep on his feet; then he gives a snore, wakes up, and goes on muttering inaudibly. From time to time he breaks off to have a smoke on the porch and to tell "simple