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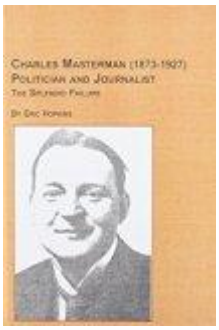
Eric Hopkins. *Charles Masterman (1873-1927), Politician and Journalist: The Splendid Failure.* Lewiston, NY: The Edward Mellen Press, 1999. x + 300 pp. $119.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7734-7986-9.



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On Politics and Journalism: The Splendid Failure

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In the introduction to his recent book on newspaper politics in the Early Republic, Jeffrey Pasley comments wearily that "Political and cultural historians have often used newspapers as sources, but they have rarely done justice to the press as a historical phenomenon in itself."[1] Pasley's comment comes to mind when reading Eric Hopkins' biography of Charles Frederick Gurney Masterman (1873-1927), a British journalist of national stature and Liberal Party politician. Hopkins, a well-known social historian, who has written extensively on the British working classes during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries,[2] presents a detailed and well contextualized account of Masterman's social background, personal life and political career. However, the journalistic aspects of his career, although presented throughout the book, are left dangling: they lack the rich background information and detailed analysis that otherwise accompany the narrative.

This uneven treatment of Masterman's career is the result of the questions Hopkins set out to answer in his study. For students of Edwardian Britain, Masterman is not an unknown figure waiting to be re-discovered: he published several books, and is considered a typical Edwardian Liberal intellectual and reformer; he took a decisive part in framing and implementing the Liberal government's reforms of the pre-War years; and during the First World War he built and put to work the first propaganda corps, from which the Ministry of Information grew.[3] Against the backdrop of this brilliant career, Masterman was very much a political failure, occupying a Parliamentary seat for only nine years and winning elections only five times over two decades (which saw successive political crises, with numerous general- and by-elections), plunging from a Cabinet post to poverty, and from the promise of great intellect to a life of alcohol and drugs. Such an intriguing figure called for a scholarly biography to replace the existing biography written by Masterman's wife, which slighted many personal aspects of his life.

Hopkins, armed with the Masterman papers, made available only recently, wanted to figure them out.[4]

Charles Masterman was, as Hopkins describes him, "a highly complex man," whose "sad and moving story" resulted not only from political misjudgment or the decline of the Liberal party. Hopkins' conclusion is that he was "a brilliant and talented man whose temperament was perhaps his own worst enemy" (p. ix). To understand this highly intellectual but deeply emotional man, Hopkins pursues a detailed--almost overbearingly so--biography, that attempts to unravel, along side his journalistic and political careers, his psychological history. He thus dwells on his upbringing and family background, and emphasizes his recurrent attacks of clinical depression, his rather unusual family life, his apparently non-abusive homosexual-pedophilic tendency, and his abuse of alcohol and drugs.

Masterman, born in 1873, had a strict and evangelical upbringing. He won a scholarship to Christ's College, where he read literature, politics and religion ("Moral Science"), earning two Firsts (1895, 1896). As a student he grew closer to New Liberalism (with its typical interest in the plight of the urban poor) and Christian Socialism. In hope of becoming close to working class people and affecting their lives culturally and spiritually (which he eventually felt he could not realize), Masterman lived for eight years (1900-1908) in South London, two of them in a settlement-like apartment in Albany Dwellings.

His growing interest in social reform and support for the Liberal party led him after graduation to contribute articles to several Liberal papers and to a Christian Social Union journal. Masterman also toyed at the time with the idea of establishing, with several friends, a weekly penny paper advocating Christian Socialism, but they were unable to come up with the necessary funds. Early in 1903 his journalistic career received a substantial boost, when he became the literary editor of the *Daily News*. Masterman continued to serve in this capacity after he became a Member of Parliament, while contributing also to other Liberal papers. Hopkins fails to mention that all the papers he wrote for were part of the thriving Liberal journalism of the time, and that the *Daily News* was probably the most important Liberal daily, with a large, national circulation.[5] Nor does he make it clear how active Masterman remained in journalism after he was promoted to a governmental position. For the six years he performed government work (beginning in 1908), all Hopkins mentions is that by 1912, "[a]ccording to one authority on the period" Masterman was one of Lloyd George's two "closest journalistic lieutenants [that] were paid public relations assistants cranking out columns of hand-outs for newspapers and writing speeches" (p. 114). Nothing more.

Unfortunately little is said about his journalism, except when discussing his two volumes of collected essays (and several other of his ten published books). Hopkins describes Masterman's journalistic writing as rather literary but very readable, exhibiting considerable skill, great lucidity and belonging to "the higher form of journalism, urbane, erudite, with a stylish turn of phrase" (pp. 49-50). In his more descriptive articles he drew largely upon his South London experience, describing with a vivid, non-sentimental style the life in working-class neighborhoods. As a publicist he discussed a variety of topics, but he always returned to what Hopkins refers to as "Mastermanland" (p. 74): "the deserted countryside, the state of the poor, unemployment, housing, slum children, and urban living conditions generally" (p. 66). His writings represented the social thought and interests of the New Liberalism, concentrating on the need to ameliorate the state of the urban poor, but they lacked any practical aspect, such as a discussion of economic matters or of possible solutions. Instead, he emphasized over and over again the need for spiritual regeneration, or "moral advancement" (p. 203). Like other Christian Socialists (and Edwardian Liberal intellectuals in

general, as Samuel Hynes argues), he was "strong on the evils of industrial capitalism, but less forthcoming on how to cure those evils" (p. 50).[6]

Masterman's journalistic career seems to have given the starting push to his political life. Hopkins notes, although in vague manner, that by 1903 his *Daily News* career made him well-enough known that he was asked to stand for Parliament on behalf of the Liberal Party. He eventually won in the general landslide elections of January 1906, which established the Liberals as the party in power. Hopkins neglects to contextualize the journalist-politician phenomena. It is worthwhile to point out, however, that Masterman was one of several Liberal-party journalists (as well as writers and academics) who had entered the House of Commons at the time. For many of them, work on the editorial staff of a London, or large provincial daily was "quite a common entree into politics".[7]

Masterman's rise in politics was swift. Between 1908 and 1913 he filled a series government positions under Winston Churchill and Lloyd George. He helped Lloyd George with shaping, and particularly with passing, the most crucial budgetary and reform Acts implemented by the pre-War Liberal government. The most important of these was the National Insurance Act (1911) - the first national scheme for health and unemployment insurance. For three years (1912-1915) he played a decisive role in implementing the act, first in establishing the new national health organization, and then in overseeing its operation. This was an immense task, "perhaps the greatest positive achievement of his entire political career" (p. 122), in which he invested all his time and energy. Although the Liberal health scheme is considered by present-day historians as "a corner-stone of the modern welfare state" (p. 109), it attracted wide-spread opposition, from both Conservatives and working class people (who resented its compulsory nature). Owing to his seminal role in passing the act and implementing it, all of this criticism was directed personally at him, both in Parliament and in the press, particularly by the Northcliffe papers. These venomous attacks, some personal in character, may well have contributed to the beginning of his political downfall. In February 1914, he was promoted to the Cabinet as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, but since he lost three elections in one year and was unable to secure a seat in Parliament, he was compelled to resign by early 1915. Materman's health problems, political misjudgment on his part and his inaptitude in nurturing constituencies, a complex political situation in the party, and eventually the decline of the Liberal party were the primary causes of his repeated failures, which went on until 1923. Nevertheless, one cannot ignore the role of the press, since attacks on him and on the Insurance System appeared from 1911 on, and well into the War years. Unfortunately for the journalism historian, Hopkins neglects to develop this topic or to evaluate the impact of such attacks on Masterman's political career.

Shortly after the war broke out, Masterman was put in charge of a new propaganda department (known as Wellington House). Once again Masterman was to employ his excellent organizational skills, as he put to use his familiarity with the leading journalistic and literary elite of the country, in building a new organization and assembling an impressive staff. As the excellent results of this department were kept secret, while many leading newspaper editors were resentful of its privileged publishing activities, further criticism of Masterman was again in the press. His idealistic drive helped him stay in this capacity until the end of the war in November 1918, despite continuous reductions in salary and reorganizations, which unfairly reduced his responsibility to only a section of the propaganda machinery he himself built. An advisory committee, consisting of Lord Northcliffe and other press lords, was at least partially responsible for these changes. Furthermore, he did so while giving up his own journalistic writing, which would have re-established his ca-

reer and promised better earnings and freedom. Tragically, and due largely to his cold relations at this time with Lloyd George, his contribution to the war efforts were largely forgotten, and the only honors he received were from the Belgian government.

In 1919 he returned to journalism. He wrote again for Liberal newspapers, including ***The Nation***, for which he wrote a weekly column on Parliamentary proceedings from 1923 until near his death. But with "Liberalism becoming something of a dying creed" (p. 179), and it becoming harder for freelance writers to get published in the post-war period (a statement Hopkins does not explain), Masterman was unable to rebuild his journalistic career. Poor physical and mental health, exasperated by recurrent disappointments and constant worry over his diminishing income, led him to excessive drinking and "self-medications" (addiction to drugs), which made it harder for him to write and worsened his already serious financial problems.

Masterman finally returned to Parliament in 1923. Once again he was instrumental in shaping and passing an important bill--Wheatley's Housing Bill, probably the greatest achievement of the first Labour government. Although a Liberal MP, his strong support for the government led some to claim that he was in essence "leading the Labour Party" (p. 218). Unfortunately, this Parliament ended abruptly after less than a year with the resignation of the first Labour Government (October 1924). In the ensuing election Masterman lost his seat, never to return to politics again, and dying three years later.

Three aspects of Masterman's life are of interest to (mass) communication historians: his newspaper writing; the press treatment of his political career; and his contribution to British propaganda during World War I. As already mentioned, many questions regarding the first two issues are left unanswered, nor does Hopkins break new ground on the third topic. Masterman's journalism is examined for its content and style, but since Hopkins read only the reprinted articles, it remains unclear how representative these collected essays were of his work. Neither is it clear how extensive his journalistic writing was, how much of it was publicist and how much descriptive. Likewise, more could have been said about the way he was represented in the attacking press, as well as its possible impact on leading politicians and on public opinion; nothing, it should be added, is mentioned regarding positive coverage of his governmental work in Liberal newspapers. The dynamic relations between journalism and politics are barely discussed, while the journalistic developments in early twentieth century Britain, such as the shifting dominance, around 1910, from the Liberal press to the Conservative press, are left completely out of the study.[8] Similarly, names of newspapers, publishers and editors are presented with almost no comment.

All this stands in contrast with the political and social background that are well-woven into the chronological narrative of Masterman's life. Thus, the book is clearly of little value in understanding British journalism, except perhaps for a survey of New Liberalism thought, in which case it does not go much beyond Samuel Hynes' thesis. While the book present a picture of late-Victorian and Edwardian England through a fascinating life story, and makes for pleasant reading, the overly detailed and somewhat repetitive description of his personal life, do not make this book recommended for class reading in social or political history. Nevertheless, it will serve well any scholarly research on Edwardian politics. Notwithstanding its weaknesses, Hopkins has presented a full, well indexed and authoritative biography of an important figure, a "brilliant and remarkable individual," who although not forgotten, had not been, until the publication of this volume, "accorded his proper place in history".[9]

A final comment on price and setting: although a hard cover book, and taking into account

that it is aimed exclusively for library purchase, the publisher's price of $119.95 (and even $95.96 after discount) seems unreasonably high for the rather short book that it is. The 300 pages are not even single-spaced in the manner of most books, and although providing for comfortable reading, they could have easily been set into a much slimmer, and cheaper, volume.

Notes

[1]. Jeffrey L. Pasley, ***"The Tyranny of Printers": Newspaper Politics in the Early Republic*** (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), p. 2.

[2]. Eric Hopkins is the author of several well known books, among them ***A social History of the English Working Classes, 1815-1945*** (London: Edward Arnold, 1979); ***The Rise and Decline of the English Working Classes, 1918-1990: A Social History*** (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991); ***Childhood Transformed: Working Class Children in Nineteenth Century England*** (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993); and his most recent study: ***Industrialization and Society: A Social history, 1830-1951*** (London: Routledge).

[3]. Masterman's best known book was ***The Condition of England*** (1909), "a mine for quotations among historians of the period" (E. J. Feuchtwanger, ***Democracy and Empire: Britain, 1965-1914*** (The New History of England, 9), (London: Edward Arnold, 1985), p. 371); a critical study of Masterman's writing as typical of the "Edwardian mood" is found in Samuel Hynes, ***The Edwardian Turn of Mind*** (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), Chp. III, esp. pp. 57-73; a recent study of the least known aspect of Masterman's career, his contribution to the British propaganda during the Great War, is found in Peter Buitenhuis, ***The Great War of Words: British, American, and Canadian Propaganda and Fiction, 1914-1933*** (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1987), passim. Masterman is also mentioned in numerous other studies of early twentieth-century England.

[4]. Lucy Masterman, ***C. F. G. Masterman*** (London: Cassells, 1939). According to the publisher's announcement, the Masterman papers, housed at the University of Birmingham Library (where Prof. Hopkins had taught for many years and is now a Senior Honorary Research Fellow, and a Fellow of the Institute for Advanced Research in the Arts and Social Sciences) have only recently been made available. Masterman's wife, who apparently compiled most of the papers, died in 1977, at age 92 (p. 257).

[5]. J. O. Baylen, "The British Press, 1861-1918", in Dennis Griffith (ed.) ***The Encyclopedia of the British Press, 1422-1992*** (New York: Mcmillan, 1992), pp. 34, 39.

[6]. Hynes, ***The Edwardian Turn of Mind***, pp. 56-57.

[7]. Alan J. Lee, ***The Origins of the Popular Press in England, 1855-1914*** (London: Croom Helm, 1976), p. 198; Feuchtwanger, ***Democracy and Empire***, p. 276.

[8]. For a recent survey of British journalism during this period, see Baylen, "The British Press, 1861-1918".

[9]. Buitenhuis, ***The Great War of Words***, p. 12.

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