

REVIEWS



Led by Lions: MPs and Sons who Fell in the First World War
By Neil Thornton
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Neil Thornton's labour of love is a timely tribute to the 22 Members of Parliament who died during in the First World War, writes **Lord Lexden**

Both Houses have contributed to the commemoration of the centenary of the First World War by holding reflective debates on various aspects of that terrible conflict, and there are more to come in this final year. Brief reference tends to be made in them to Members and staff who enlisted. They should be better known so that fuller tribute can be paid to their bravery.

Just under a third of all MPs served during the war. The names of the 22 who died can be read on the war memorial in Westminster Hall and in the Commons Book of Remembrance. Nineteen of them are commemorated in the Commons chamber by heraldic shields.

But what kind of people were the 22 who died, and what did they do in defence of our country's freedom? *Led by Lions*, clearly a labour of love, provides short, illustrated profiles of each of them, drawn chiefly from press reports, the National Archives and regimental histories, along with equally valuable pieces on the 87 sons of MPs who were killed.

Twelve of the 22 MPs were Unionists (as Conservatives were known at this time), including an Ulster Unionist and an Independent Unionist. Seven were Liberals, and the remaining three Irish Nationalists, a poignant reminder of that party's commitment to the Allied cause.

The oldest of those who died was 56, the youngest 29. Three were awarded the Distinguished Service Order, one the Military Cross and another was recommended for a posthumous Victoria



Cross. Fifteen were killed in combat; the remainder died in a variety of circumstances away from the battlefield.

Without exception, those killed in battle had put themselves at the forefront of the fighting, often recklessly so. This is reflected in the book's title, repudiating the well-known slur on Britain's officer class promoted by the untrustworthy Alan Clark, whose once influential book on the war has now been firmly discredited.

Lt. Col. Lord Ninian Crichton-Stuart,

Unionist MP for Cardiff (much of which was owned by his family), rallied his troops during the Battle of Loos in 1915. "He stood up, showing himself to the waist above the parapet of the trench and called out, 'Steady men'. He was shot right through the forehead, death being instantaneous. He had stood there about two minutes."

Captain Tommy Agar-Robartes, Liberal MP for Bodmin, also died at Loos. A fellow officer described him as "one of the few men I've ever come across who appeared to



Above Neil Primrose with Lord Rosebery and Lord Dalmeny - 1913



Left David Cameron and then-Taoiseach Enda Kenny visit the grave of Irish MP Willie Redmond, who died in the First World War

Opposite Lord Haig's funeral procession passing the Houses of Parliament on the approach to Westminster Abbey - February 1928

be absolutely devoid of fear. Nobody ever saw him duck for a shell or take cover when bullets were flying around. His company would have followed him anywhere."

In Parliament he and another Liberal MP, Neil Primrose, son of Lord Rosebery, were known as "the inseparables." The famous F.E. Smith wrote that "you might well have been excused if you had written them off as exquisites, the triflers of a racecourse, or the leading members of a fashionable club." Both men were

transformed by war. Grief-stricken by his companion's death, Primrose was killed two years later during the conquest of Palestine, the British army's last cavalry campaign. (The relationship between them has been explored in a recent booklet by a lawyer, Martin Gibson.)

The Irish Nationalist MPs who died received high praise. Major Willie Redmond, brother of the Party's leader, refused to accept that in his fifties he was too old to fight. He insisted on

marching everywhere on foot with his men instead of riding ahead on horseback. He condemned those nationalists who thought that Britain's enemy was their friend. "If the Germans come here", he told his Clare constituents, "they will be our masters, and we will be at their mercy." His colleague, Tom Kettle, academic, poet and hardened drinker, agreed. "He hated the war, but was clear as to the duty of Irishmen under the circumstances". He died courageously at the Somme.

The youngest MP to die, aged 29, was Lt. William Gladstone, grandson of the great Liberal statesman. A clever, but shy man, he confessed to having "a great dread of falling short of expectation" created by the name he bore. Within a few weeks of arriving on the Western Front in March 1915 he was killed by a German sniper, a half-finished letter to his mother in his pocket. Criticism of the lavish scale of his funeral at Hawarden led to a blanket ban on the return of soldiers for burial at home.

One of the 22 who died turned out not to have been the pillar of respectability that he had seemed. Major Francis Bennett-Goldney of the Royal Army Service Corps, Independent Unionist MP for Canterbury and its long-serving Mayor, was fatally injured in July 1918 in a car accident in Brest. Valuable stolen documents were found among his papers. His savings had been boosted by the sale of silver cups belonging to his City.

He may well have profited too from the theft of the Irish crown jewels, a sensational scandal in 1907. At the time Bennett-Goldney held an appointment in the Irish Office of Arms which was responsible for the jewels, and was suspected of complicity in the unsolved crime, in which a group of gay men were prominently involved. War attracts scoundrels, as well as the virtuous.

The potted biographies of the MPs' sons who died, which are also included in this book, add greatly to its value. It is marred only slightly by some careless proof-reading and a number of factual errors. ❏



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