

LIBERAL LION

**JO GRIMOND:
A POLITICAL LIFE**

PETER BARBERIS

I.B. TAURIS

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Preface and Acknowledgements

'READ NO HISTORY, NOTHING but biography, for that is life without theory,' the principal character was famously advised by his father in one of Disraeli's novels.¹ At the same time, it is sometimes said that good biography makes bad history. Much no doubt depends upon what kind of biography and what kind of history. What is offered here is essentially a political biography, albeit one that presents the 'whole man' inasmuch as is necessary to understand the public persona. And Jo Grimond always maintained that there was more to life than politics; he was the proverbial 'rounded man'. He also thought that too little history is written by those who lived it.² That has its problems. Proximity engenders vividness, the genius of 'time, place and spirit' that can be lost with distance. On the other hand, it can destroy perspective, so engendering distortion. We are all creatures of our age, politicians no less. Their deeds, triumphs and disappointments, their ideas and the influence of those ideas upon the people around them – all are played out within the contemporary zeitgeist. Timeless as some politicians may seem to a passing generation and to whatever extent they may indeed help shape the times within which they live, they are, inevitably, creatures of their age. So this book is in effect a life and times of Jo Grimond.

Jo Grimond never held ministerial office. That for a decade he led a political party which boasted only a handful of MPs and with little prospect of power may suggest that he never rose to the political 'officer class'. Some commentators have seen him as 'attractive but lightweight'.³ Yet office is not all. Nor is naked power. Jo Grimond had neither but he had great influence, perhaps more than he realised. By his charisma, his personal qualities and in the clarity of the creed he espoused, he inspired a generation and more of people – outside as well as within his own party, non-partisans no less than political activists.⁴ He gave politics a good name; he seemed to stride beyond the grubby footholes of political intrigue and

manoeuvrings. Ideas were his primary stock in trade – many of them, proffered in speeches, books, pamphlets, varied journalism and broadcasting as well as in personal discourse. There is thus a lot of Jo Grimond in the public domain even though he kept no diary and was not a vigorous correspondent.

I did not know Jo Grimond personally. It may therefore be thought something of a false familiarity that textual references are generally to 'Jo', a form that seems only to have emerged publicly during his party leadership years, though one that he used well before the war. In conversations I have had with those who did know him, and in many written accounts, 'Jo' seems quite the natural form. The affections of the constituents that he represented formally for over thirty years and whose cause he continued to champion for a decade thereafter are remarkable, even ten years after his death. Few MPs indeed are the subject of a formal event, replete with commemorative booklet, organised by the local constituency to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of their election to parliament – especially after an interval of nearly two decades since last they represented the constituency.⁵ And when, at a meeting of the Liberal Democrat History Group, members present were invited to cast votes for the best party Liberal/Liberal Democrat/SDP leader of the twentieth century, Jo topped the poll, ahead of the three sometime premiers who tied for second place – Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, H.H. Asquith and David Lloyd George.⁶ So much for office! We must not be misty eyed. People pass, personal recollections fade. What this volume seeks to do is to set Jo Grimond's political career in its wider context; to assess his achievements and influence – not only within and upon his party but also the wider body politic and upon the creed he espoused: liberalism.

I was well into my research for this volume when I learnt that Michael McManus's offering was in the pipeline.⁷ I have proceeded independently, withholding my perusal of his efforts until my own work was close to completion. While the subject is recognisably the same, it will be apparent that I have given rather different emphasis to some of the events in Jo Grimond's career. I see his politics as having been within a distinctly liberal tradition; and I spend some time in the opening and closing chapters examining certain aspects of that tradition. That is not to deny the changes of inflection and sometimes of real substance in his position down the years; rather to assert that he was and remained a liberal.

In writing this book, I have accumulated many debts. First and foremost, I pay tribute to my friend and colleague Peter Joyce. Originally it was to be his book, but when he set it aside, before having really started, he kindly furnished me with the texts of hundreds of Jo Grimond's speeches, together with other miscellaneous material. In addition, he read and commented upon my manuscript, as did Norman Litherland. Johnny Grimond was accommodating in giving me his time and in dealing with a succession of requests for information. I should like to record a special note of thanks to Michael Meadowcroft for his help, encouragement

and hospitality; and to Jo's former secretary, Catherine Fisher. I acknowledge the generous help given by Orkney photographer Charles Tait in connection with some of the photographs.

Many other people have given their assistance, either in granting me interviews or in replying to my requests for information, in directing me towards further sources and in many other ways, great or small: Joyce Arram; Lord Avebury (Eric Lubbock); Diane Baptie; Claire Batty; Kenneth Beck; Rt Hon Alan Beith MP; Rt Hon Tony Benn; Lord (Robert) Blake; Duncan Brack; Frances Carlisle; Joanne Clement-Davies; Lisa Cole; Harry Cowie; Iain Dale; Steve Davies; Jenny Deans; Edwin and Margaret Eunson; David Dimpleby; Alison Fraser; Lord (Sir Ian) Gilmour; Lord (Tony) Greaves; Professor Stephen Haseler; Lord (Emlyn) Hooson; Lord (Sir Geoffrey) Howe; Claire Jamieson; John Graham Jones; Professor Grant Jordan; Rt Hon Gerald Kaufman MP; Dick Leonard; Rachel Lloyd; Sheena Macdonald; Ian Maciver; Norris McWhirter; Lucy McCann; John McHugh; David Mackie; Lord (George) Mackie; Margeorie Mekie; Gerry and Nora Meyer; Judith Moore; Ann Murphy; Nigel Nicolson; Lien O'Neill; Allen Packwood; John Pardoe; Christine Parker; David Partner; Lord (John) Patten; Annie Pinder; Sarah Preihs; Sir Adam Ridley; Jackie Robertson; Eoin Scott; Dr Arthur Seldon; Lord (David) Shutt; Ian Simpson; Sir Cyril Smith; Lord (Sir Trevor) Smith; Lord (Sir David) Steel; Rt Hon Jeremy Thorpe; Rt Hon Jim Wallace MSP; George Watson; Edward Wheeler; Ben Whitaker; Ruth Williams.

Needless to say, in making these acknowledgements I intend in no way to implicate anyone else for errors of fact, quirks of interpretation or matters of judgement, for which I bear sole responsibility.

Part I

LAMPLIGHT

Chapter I

FIRST LIGHT

JOSEPH (JO) GRIMOND WAS the third and youngest child of Joseph and Lydia Grimond. He was born on Tuesday 29 July 1913 in St Andrews, East Fifeshire. By no means the prisoner of his provenance, he never lost his bearings. He received most of his formal education in England and, from early adulthood, there was little in his pattern of speech that would betray his origins. Among other things, a career in Parliament spanning more than forty years necessitated his maintaining living quarters in or around London, no doubt bringing a certain thinning of the Celtic blood. For nearly all his life, though, he retained a home base in Scotland. He was proud to be Scottish, though by no means uncritical of his countryfolk, whom he once described as ‘the most politically incompetent people in Western Europe’, capable of obtaining and then throwing away a winning position.¹ His consistent and sustained support for home rule – he didn’t like the term devolution – survived the vicissitudes of popularity and prospect.² Without ever lapsing into crude nationalism, he helped to keep the home-rule flag flying when there was little wind to stir the air; and later, as others sought to salvage their harvest from amidst the storms of Westminster politics, he kept his nerve, counselling against any settlement that would sell short either cause or country.

At the same time he brought a sense of proportion and a leavening of humour, sometimes accompanied by an insouciance and, on other occasions, an impishness that could be mistaken for a lack of sincerity in certain of the causes he espoused. He often delighted in the spectacle of ripples from the proverbial stones that he had cast. Certainly he was a more complex character than first appearance would suggest. And in the case of home rule, further complication lay in the objections of many of his constituents.

For over thirty years, he represented in the House of Commons the people of Orkney and Shetland, ensuring that a myriad of local and other ‘special’ issues

got an airing on the stage of national (i.e. British) politics. Above all, he retained an abiding affection for his beloved St Andrews. His last book – published in 1992, a year before his death – was an elegantly penned guided tour of the famous town. There is an air of wistfulness in his descriptions of the buildings, the people and of the community in which he grew up. Characteristically, he acknowledged the inevitability, indeed desirability, of change while noting that not all changes had been for the better – a reflection of his (mature) political credo and of his outlook on life in general. He complained bitterly about a hideous hotel erected during the 1980s on the former railway station adjacent to the old golf course.³

Jo's father, Joseph Bowman Grimond, was a Dundee jute manufacturer born in Broughty Ferry on 8 July 1875.⁴ An only child, he had taken over the business founded by his grandfather Joseph (Jo's great grandfather) who came from Blairgowrie, at the foot of the Scottish Highlands. In so doing, Joseph had brought his brother into partnership. It was thus under the names of the two brothers, J. and A.D. Grimond, that the firm continued to trade. They did so from the Bowbridge works, founded by great grandfather Joseph in Thistle Street, Dundee. The nineteenth century was the heyday of the industry, feeding as it did the growth and prosperity of the Scottish east-coast town that came to account for some ninety per cent of the jute manufactured in the UK. Many of the larger merchants of the nineteenth century bought the raw yarn and commissioned the cloth, building factories that embraced more or less the entire production process of spinning, weaving, dyeing and finishing.

Jute manufacture began in earnest in Dundee from the early 1830s, quickly becoming the town's major industry. J. and A.D. Grimond was neither the first nor the largest jute firm. But the family held its place as one of the powerful Dundee jute dynasties of the nineteenth century.⁵ Standing in a site covering over thirty acres, the Bowbridge mill was 'a great Kremlin-like range of buildings magnificently constructed of dressed stone'.⁶ Despite cyclical downturns, the business contributed to and in turn thrived upon Dundee's general prosperity. During the third quarter of the nineteenth century, its population grew more rapidly than that of any other town or city in Scotland except Glasgow, almost doubling in thirty years to reach 165,000 by 1881.⁷ The jute industry profited from wars in the Crimea, in America (civil war) and elsewhere, notably the Franco-Prussian War, the Boer War and, later, the First World War. In truth, these fillips provided only temporary deliverance from the downward trend that had become increasingly evident from the 1870s. Cheaper labour and production processes in India together with perhaps a lack of flexibility among the Dundee manufacturers heralded long-term decline.⁸

Notwithstanding a brief upturn after the First World War, the jute industry was never to regain its former glory. Jo's father resisted when, in the mid 1920s, a buyout was proposed; but other shareholders outvoted him. Whatever his misgivings, it was in no sense the trap door to financial ruin. For when he died in

February 1929, his personal estate was valued at £192,446, some £12m at today's prices.⁹ Given the state of the industry, the buyout was a blessing in disguise – not only for his father, but also for Jo himself who in due course might otherwise have been obliged to take the reins. That it was a blessing and that the transaction was part of a merger boom the like of which has from time to time been a feature of British industry did nothing to prevent Jo, in later years, from deriding the episode as an example of 'bigger means better'.¹⁰ It is difficult to say to what extent the experience helped to foster the classic liberal preference for small and medium-sized enterprises in an openly competitive market. More likely it served to strengthen a disposition already well formed.

During the 1860s, great grandfather Joseph Grimond had developed a 'jute palace' at Kerbat House, later renamed Carbet Castle.¹¹ This was typical of the way in which middle-class manufacturers there and elsewhere began to enjoy the fruits of their enterprise. As such, the residence was situated on the outskirts of Dundee, set apart from the rapidly expanding working-class quarters of the town. It was here in Dundee that Jo's father met his future wife, (Helen) Lydia Richardson. The Richardsons were a Birkenhead family but Helen's brother, Foster Richardson, had moved to Dundee to work for J. and A.D. Grimond. The brothers-in-law maintained a close friendship, winning the 1924 (tennis) Calcutta Cup Foursomes. Jo's parents were married in Oxton, near Birkenhead, on 14 August 1898. As middle-class families gravitated to the outskirts of the larger towns and cities, so they also sought refuge in satellite towns. Thus the Grimonds took a property in St Andrews.

To describe St Andrews as a satellite of Dundee or of anywhere else is of course misleading. Although only fragments remain of its medieval cathedral, the university dates from the early fifteenth century and it claims the most famous and venerated golf course in the world. Since 1124 the town has enjoyed royal burgh status, though the population of some 12,000 is little more than it was in the 1920s. Set between the sea and a generous open hinterland, St Andrews was and remains a compact, predominantly middle-class Scottish town. Here the Grimonds took up residence, first in St Mary's Road, then in No. 8 Abbotsford Crescent – Jo's birthplace. A five-storey Georgian house of generous proportions (including basement), the property formed part of a concave terrace no more than a golf drive and pitch away from the first tee on the famous Old Course. The Grimonds rented their home from William Carmichael McIntosh, a marine biology professor who owned most of the terrace. His bequest to the university was later converted into accommodation for students, now McIntosh Hall, the remaining houses being similarly adapted but known as Abbotsford Hall. Abbotsford Crescent remained a Grimond residence until the late 1940s when Lydia moved elsewhere in the town, to No. 22 Hepburn Gardens.

There was a political connection to 8 Abbotsford Crescent, albeit a tenuous one. Previous occupants had included Sir Robert (Tom) Boothby of Edinburgh, whose

son, Robert, was later to claim fame as a Conservative MP for East Aberdeenshire (1924–1958) and sometime confidant of Winston Churchill, not to mention a long-standing affair with Lady Dorothy, wife of prime minister Harold Macmillan. But there was little politics in Jo's early years at Abbotsford Crescent. Like many of the Scottish textile manufacturers of the period, his father played little part in local affairs. He was not by nature gregarious, preferring the company of his family and close friends. Until the enforced relinquishment of his business interests, he made the daily journey between St Andrews and Dundee – fifteen miles there and back again, taking advantage of a very good east coast train service. The family unit was tight, though in no way insular. Sport and outdoor recreation were highly valued. Both parents played golf to a good standard, encouraging likewise all three children. It was a stable, secure and in many ways comfortable environment, though not, as is sometimes supposed, one of patrician descent. Jo was quick to correct interviewer Keith Kyle on that point, claiming that the Grimonds were 'lower upper' rather than 'upper class'.¹²

The nurture of 'values' and a sense of individual responsibility featured strongly. Jo and his two sisters were taught to be 'good citizens'. The family attended church: religion was a cloak worn loosely but willingly. On one occasion later in life he described himself as a renegade from the Church of Scotland for whom the Sabbath meant something.¹³ There was some confusion as to his familial religious connections, which were in fact with the Episcopal (Anglican) Church.¹⁴ In any event Jo's own church attendances as an adult were irregular, though he remained a firm believer who regretted the decline of religion in society and occasionally preached at the local parish church near his adopted home in Orkney.

Family holidays were taken in the south of England and, following his father's enforced retirement, in France – no doubt nurturing Jo's later penchant for foreign travel. Occasionally, life could be serious, though for the most part it was 'open textured'. There were few of the highly charged, heart-searching dinner table discussions that characterised some of the more overtly politicised families of the chattering classes. Yet there is no doubt about the Grimonds' party leanings. Down to the 1920s, the Liberals remained the natural party of the manufacturers, especially in the north of England, Wales and Scotland, though the Conservatives had, from at least the 1870s, made increasing inroads. He traced his family's liberal affiliations back to his great great grandfather, who had been one of those newly enfranchised under the Whigs' Great Reform Act of 1832 and for whom Jo possessed a certificate endorsing the vote cast.¹⁵

Jo enjoyed a happy upbringing at Abbotsford Crescent, along with his parents, two sisters and never fewer than four house servants.¹⁶ He received more attention than might otherwise have been the case, on account of the fact that his sisters, Gwyn and Nancie, were his elders by fourteen and eleven years respectively. Gwyn left the family home in 1919 to marry Billy Corbett, whose father, Archibald

Cameron Corbett, had been the Liberal MP for Glasgow Tradeston from 1885 until his elevation to the peerage in 1911 as the 1st Baron Rowallan.¹⁷ Billy later achieved fame as Chief Scout and as Governor of Tasmania, by then the 2nd Baron Rowallan. Jo got on well with him, as he did with Willie Black, his other brother-in-law.¹⁸

All three Grimond children were active in pursuit of sporting and other outdoor activities, enthusiasms developed more from their mother than from their father. Jo was an accomplished golfer, good cricketer and competent tennis player. In this sphere, though, he was outshone by his elder siblings who excelled at golf and, especially, at tennis. The two sisters were four times winners of the Scottish ladies' doubles; Gwyn won the Scottish ladies' and mixed doubles championships. They both played at Wimbledon. Jo maintained close contact with his sisters, spending most of his late childhood and adult Christmases at family gatherings in Rowallan Castle, near Kilmarnock until they died in the 1970s – Gwyn in 1971, her husband six years later. He also continued to make regular visits to Teasses, a commodious mansion in Fife, the home of Nancie and Willie Black.

After attending a local school in St Andrews, Jo was sent to Gibbs School, 134 Sloane Street, London SW1. Under the headship of Mr C.H. Gibbs, the school was 'inspected and recognised as efficient by the Board of Education'.¹⁹ It was the only school that he ever enjoyed.²⁰ But it provided only brief respite, the prelude to a far less agreeable experience. For after only one term with Mr Gibbs and for reasons that remain unclear, Jo's parents moved him to Evelyn's, a preparatory boarding school in Middlesex about which, in later years, he made noticeably brief and elliptical reference.²¹ Clearly he was unhappy, if not desolate, under the yoke of a regime in which privacy was rare. It came as a relief to arrive at Eton.

Jo was the first of his family to go to Eton. He did so not as a Colleger but as an Oppidan – that is, a full fee-paying pupil. As such, he was given his own room from the start, a privilege extended to Collegers only from their second year. Indeed there was probably more privacy for boys at Eton than at any other public school during the interwar years.²² Like other Oppidans of his time, Jo was pitched into a house among boys of different ages. He was thus able to extend his horizons. So long as he remained a Lower Boy, though, he was denied 'social' access to other houses. He was subsequently to become a house captain, taking the mantle from William Douglas-Home, younger brother of future premier Alec and himself to become a renowned playwright. The two were to remain lifelong friends. William Home described Jo as a 'large, cheerful and untidy boy'.²³ Many years later, they were joined by broadcaster and cricket commentator Brian Johnston, another Eton contemporary, to record for the BBC television series *Reunion*, a programme featuring groups of three people who had been together at school. Unscripted and with little prompting from chairman Brian Redhead, the three old boys ranged widely for thirty minutes, agreeing that Eton was 'the best trade union in the world'.²⁴ Future diplomat Con O'Neill was another contemporary with whom Jo became friendly towards the end of his days at

Eton, as was Jasper Ridley. Both friendships were sustained, that of Ridley being especially close, though tragically aborted by war. As his fag, Jo had one Anthony Fisher, future founder member of the Institute of Economic Affairs with which he was later to become associated.²⁵

Eton was and is quite simply the most famous school in the world. During Jo's time there (1926–1932) it accounted for over one sixth of all MPs in the House of Commons – to be more precise, 106 MPs (seventeen per cent) of the parliament elected in 1931. If its grip was later to relax, it has never lost its pre-eminence. When Jo entered Parliament he was one of 84 Old Etonians, some thirteen per cent of the MPs elected in 1950.²⁶ At the beginning of Jo's last parliament as a member of the House of Commons (1979), there were 51 Old Etonians, eight per cent of the total.²⁷ By now the only other non-Conservative was the Labour MP Tam Dalyell, one of Jo's stoutest adversaries in the devolution debates of the 1970s. Eton during the interwar years was described by Michael Astor, one of Jo's near contemporaries, as 'a microcosm of the outside world, harbouring among its twelve hundred boys young men of nearly every description: scholars, laggards, toughs and aesthetes, gentlemen and cads, Roman Catholics, Jews, even Hindus and one Buddhist'.²⁸ A microcosm it cannot have been, though pluralist it probably was. Astor was one among a galaxy of luminaries who overlapped there with Jo. In addition to those already mentioned – and representing many walks of life – may be named Bernard Fergusson (Lord Ballantrae), future governor of New Zealand; the philosopher A.J. (Freddie) Ayer; secret agent Nicholas Elliott; the traitor Guy Burgess; and Giles Alington, who became an historian and Oxford tutor. The latter was the son of Dr C.A. Alington, the headmaster of Eton throughout Jo's time – an imposing figure and renowned scholar. But it was other more immediate figures of authority who claimed Jo's admiration – notably his first housemaster Geoffrey Headlam; and history tutor Robert Birley who, among other things, helped to organise occupational centres in Slough to relieve unemployment.²⁹ But it was the Provost, M.R. (Monty) James, who stood out for Jo as the most impressive man he ever met – in force of personality, if not in the magnitude of his achievements, more redoubtable than either Churchill or de Gaulle.³⁰ With due discount for the enchantment of hindsight, there is no doubt that James and the many other characters – indeed the whole Eton experience – constituted a vital formative influence.

Jo made his contribution to Eton. He joined a number of societies, among them the Political Society. Figures from the world of public affairs, national and international, were by tradition invited to address its meetings. As a rule, discussions were relaxed and by no means narrowly political in focus. So, in his role as President of the Political Society, Jo was upping the stakes in inviting Mahatma Gandhi. It was a slightly risqué venture. In and out of detention and deeply involved as the Indian leader was in delicate negotiations with the British government, the authorities at Eton were nervous but had been presented with

a fait accompli by their enfant terrible of the moment. It was the autumn of 1931 and Gandhi was on a two-month tour of England. In the event, his talk to the Political Society passed without incident, though he seems not to have made a particularly favourable impression. Jo was also one of the Eton Society, known as Pop, membership of which conferred certain privileges in attire such as the wearing of multi-coloured waistcoats. It was a self-selecting and self-regulating group of boys with its own 'anti-establishment' mores. During his final term at Eton, Jo was the president of Pop. It was an honour cherished perhaps as much as any he was to earn in his life, reflecting as it did the acclaim of his contemporaries. Presaging the measured irreverence that was to become a trademark, he wrote in the magazine *Change* that 'its [Pop's] very excellence lies in the fact that it is open to every danger and could never have originated in the brain of a schoolmaster'.³¹

From Eton, Jo went up to Oxford. The transition was not quite automatic. He briefly toyed with the possibility of joining a company that would have taken him to Buenos Aires. Still, to Oxford he went – to Balliol College, one of the older and most prestigious colleges. He arrived in the autumn of 1932 as a Brackenbury scholar, a distinction earned following fiercely competitive examinations taken during his final term at Eton. Eight of these scholarships were available, each tenable for four years to the value (in 1932) of £80 per annum.³² Jo's scholarship was for History. There were other foundations, so that Jo was one among some fifty Balliol scholars. They were the elite of the undergraduate elite, followed by exhibitioners – thirty or so at Balliol during Jo's time. The remainder of the undergraduate population were 'commoners' who, together with fellows and all others, formed a college community of approximately 275 during the 1930s. It was a relatively cosmopolitan community – more so than any of the other Oxford (or Cambridge) colleges of its day.

Balliol was founded late in the thirteenth century by John Balliol of Barnard Castle, County Durham. During the 1930s, it remained to some extent under the shadow of the legendary Benjamin Jowett, master of the college from 1870 until his death in 1893. Jowett's immediate influence had been immense, his legacy powerful and long lasting. A man of the cloth, he nevertheless held that really great men were never clergymen, a fact that he ascribed to the incompatibility of creative genius with the constraints of received creed.³³ Jowett's steadfast religion acted upon and through the medium of the everyday world. He sought less to leave his imprint on the church than to nurture men of secular public affairs. Religion, higher morality and personal character were among the central elements, spliced to the pronounced virtues of leadership, duty and public service. Under his tutelage, the former heavily disciplined regime in the college gave way to a more relaxed one in which liberal, even radical, thinking was encouraged. At the same time there came to be a greater emphasis upon collegiality, embracing closer relationships between fellows and students.

Successive generations of Balliol products bear testimony to Jowett's legacy. Three twentieth-century premiers were Balliol men: H.H. Asquith, Harold Macmillan and Edward Heath. Other post-Second World War political figures include John Boyd-Carpenter, Henry Brooke, Peter Brooke, Ian Gilmour, Denis Healey, Roy Jenkins, Frank Longford, Chris Patten, Nicholas Ridley and Frank Soskice – all cabinet ministers. With such alumni, not to mention many senior civil servants, Balliol has retained a tradition of public service unsurpassed by any other Oxbridge college. But it was during and immediately following Jowett's mastership that the imprint was strongest. It left its mark on leading pre-First World War and inter-war figures such as Lord Curzon, Alfred (Lord) Milner and Leo Amery, each in their different ways associated with the higher administration of the empire. In particular, it was the Liberal generations of H.H. Asquith, Sir Edward Grey and Herbert Samuel that marked the meridian of Balliol influence in 'high politics'. Aably supported at the official level by Balliol products such as William Beveridge, these emissaries brought to flower in the immediate pre-1914 decade a tranche of social welfare and related reforms unsurpassed by any Liberal or, arguably, other government in modern British history. Theirs were not the only hands on the tiller. Non-Balliol, non-Oxbridge – indeed non-university – people, such as David Lloyd George and Winston Churchill, played key roles. Moreover it is difficult to know to what extent the college experience of the Balliol men themselves contributed to their deeds in office, though for some, like Asquith, it was a definitive influence.³⁴ There is little doubt that Balliol bore at least some influence. And among the most notable Balliol figures was the liberal philosopher T.H. Green. Green's influence upon liberalism and upon wider affairs has sometimes been exaggerated, perhaps inflated by an element of mythology.³⁵ Still he was and remains significant; it will be useful therefore to outline the main tenets of his thought. They constitute a vital ingredient in the intellectual soil from which Jo Grimond's brand of liberalism was to flower.

During a relatively short life, Thomas Hill Green (1836–1882) made his contribution to the liberal cause at both the intellectual and the practical levels. As one of Jowett's former students at the college, he remained until his death a Balliol fellow, inspiring his own loyal band of followers including Bernard Bosanquet and R.L. Nettleship. In the world of practical affairs he was a Liberal councillor on Oxford Town Council. But it is in the medium of ideas that Green was best known and is now best remembered. Here he helped to redefine and modernise the liberal credo. In so doing, he drew upon streams of thought that were unconventional to the purpose for which he employed them. Yet his touchstone remained unambiguously liberal.

Early and mid nineteenth-century liberalism had been shaped by a belief in the maximum freedom from constraint compatible with social order, including freedom of expression, religious worship and political association; with the inviolability of the individual; with free trade and economic exchange largely

unfettered, save on the altar of high morality or national security. The role of the state was to be minimal, taxation sparing. In fact, successive governments of the period – even and especially Whig/Liberal governments – had permitted exceptions, so fuelling the growth of state activity. Force of circumstance and sheer pragmatism played their parts – precepts by no means foreign to the liberal temper. Implicitly, sometimes explicitly, there was an element of utilitarian calculus. State intervention could be justified if it enhanced the general good – crudely defined by some Benthamite utilitarians as the aggregate ‘cost benefit’ of pleasure over pain. Tory-style paternalism was placed at a heavy discount, though liberals were also sensitive to the need for social and cultural ‘glue’. The individual, though, was the measure of all things – the discernor of his or her own interests, of what constituted pleasure or pain. That at least was to be the working assumption, notwithstanding the fact that the individual may misjudge those interests, perhaps for want of education or moral vitality. Thus liberal thinkers and men of practical affairs such as John Stuart Mill and William Gladstone gave expression to the need for improvement and ‘moral uplift’, especially though by no means exclusively among the lower orders. Such injunctions were born of sincere conviction.

Green struck hard against the ethic of utilitarianism that intellectualised man as ‘a bundle of tastes... passive to the real activity of his spirit’.³⁶ So long as people remained slaves to such tastes or appetites, true freedom would elude. Drawing from the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (in some ways an unusual source for an English liberal), Green saw that the human mind impresses its own stamp upon all that it apprehends.³⁷ There is a distinction between natural and moral agency – and between the ‘good’ or ‘desirable’ as distinct from the ‘desired’.³⁸ And there is a further distinction between instinctive and ‘self-directed’ actions. The former are almost gut impulses – involuntary, unthinking, non-deliberative. Self-directed actions are, by contrast, the products of deliberation – that higher plane of morality in which we ‘place ourselves outside our sensations and distinguish ourselves from our desires’.³⁹ Thus there are two (at least two) selves – the immediate, passion driven self; and the more reflective, more elevated moral self. In the warp and weft of day-to-day affairs, the latter, while remaining full of potential, is typically subjugated to the former, especially among those classes that are denied the luxury of good living. Yet we cannot be truly free until the moral self is brought fully into play – or, as Green put it, until we achieve the ‘reconciliation of will and reason’.⁴⁰ In seeking reconciliation, Green drew upon an even more unlikely source – the German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel. Hegel had shown how, by a process of ‘dialectic’, one set of ideas could be pitched against and ‘reconciled’ with another to form a new synthesis. The synthesis marked a more elevated stage. Successive such stages thus held the promise of progress towards an ideal endgame, so to speak. Now the ‘true moral self’ would prevail in harmony with all other ‘true moral selves’. In a broad sense, the state would

be the incarnation of this harmony – though for Hegel the state implied not quite what we would mean by that term today, being more the ‘society of societies’. At any rate, the state was to be at once the facilitator and the embodiment of the ‘good life’.

In associating with such ideas – and against the empiricist tradition of British liberalism – it is easy to see why Green and his disciples became known as the Oxford Idealists. He gave many hostages to fortune. The metaphysical grounding of his thought was a source of irritation to some liberals who were otherwise in broad agreement with the practical implications of his ideas. Jo was an empiricist.⁴¹ He was dismissive of what he called ‘the import of Hegelian nonsense’ into British philosophy,⁴² though some modern scholars have claimed compatibility.⁴³ Many of the Idealists’ notions were indeed rooted in holistic conceptions that stuck in the craw of some contemporary liberals, though Jo was often inclined toward a wide-angle perspective. Other critics have baulked at the explicit ‘broad church’ Christianity – the lashings of theology found in the writings of Green.⁴⁴ Again, Jo was often reluctant to invoke the scriptures, while making increasing reference to Christian values when, later in his career, he became worried about possible threats to the social fabric.

No less contentious among liberals was Green’s notion of ‘positive’ as distinct from ‘negative’ liberty, famously criticised by Isaiah Berlin on the ground that it was a confused formula that could be used to justify acts of oppression if employed by a tyrant.⁴⁵ Yet it was precisely this redefinition of liberty that provided the cornerstone for the new liberalism of the late nineteenth century – enabling that true freedom in which, for Green, man ‘has power to act according to his will’;⁴⁶ or, as he asserted elsewhere, ‘the liberation of the powers of all men equally for contributions to a common good’.⁴⁷ Here the state has a role in ‘empowering’ the citizen; to equip the citizen to be a good, or at any rate a better, citizen – ideas that remained central to Jo Grimond’s brand of liberalism throughout his career. Green asserted the imperative of freedom *from* restraint (negative liberty), while acknowledging its insufficiency, indeed irrelevance, to those entrapped by poverty. As Hobhouse put it: ‘freedom without equality is noble in sound and squalid in result.’⁴⁸ In a genuflection to egalitarianism or inclusivity (to use a modern term), Green himself had declared: ‘there can be no true right to property of a kind which debar[s] one class of men from such free exercise altogether.’⁴⁹ The state must act, not simply to help satisfy immediate material needs but to set a ‘high’ tone – not merely to reflect but to set the pace as ‘the flywheel of society’, to borrow Bosanquet’s famous phrase.

Green’s metaphysics and his espousal of a more active state have been the source of much confusion. He has been seen as having appropriated elements of traditional conservatism, while remaining consistent with a liberal form of socialism.⁵⁰ As a ‘moral regenerationist’ he retained a doughty individualism, while as a moral reformist he gave hostage to a tentative collectivism more boldly

asserted by some of his followers.⁵¹ He may well have been an inspiration for some of the early ethical socialists, though much turns upon what is meant by socialism.⁵² But it was liberalism that he sought to refocus, if not to refashion; and it was to the liberal conscience that he spoke.⁵³ Notions of community and good citizenship were to enrich not subjugate the individual. Early and classical liberal concerns for freedom of expression, association and pursuit of interests were to be upheld. The state could and should set an example; it could encourage and provide the conditions conducive to moral elevation – but it could not *make* people better citizens. Virtue was an interior condition, albeit one with a social dimension. And where the state did intervene in practical affairs, it should do so within the skein of market capitalism and the canon of individual responsibility.

A good deal of Green's thought permeated the spirit if not necessarily the letter of Jo Grimond's liberalism throughout his political life. He did not swallow Green whole: he was too much of an independent spirit for that. His writings and speeches provide few references, though he certainly lamented the fact that Green and his fellow idealist F.H. Bradley had been despised or forgotten.⁵⁴ Many of Green's writings are dense, hardly popular fare; it was to the more immediate cadences of J.S. Mill's *On Liberty* that Jo would turn at the high tide of his career as providing the sheet anchor for a liberal conscience.⁵⁵ Moreover, he stood in the traditions of other liberals such as Ramsay Muir and Elliott Dodds, as well as Green and Mill.⁵⁶ In any case, Jo was an ideas man rather than a political philosopher or theorist. Yet, detached from their metaphysical bearings, the central tenets of Green's philosophy intersect with more of the ideas espoused by Jo throughout his career than do those of any other classic liberal thinker. The progressive stamp and moral touchstones; a belief in the 'good life', by no means assured and to be the product of free will not administrative fiat; the sense of community born of active citizenship; the notion of civil and political society consisting in 'free institutions' in relationship with but at some distance from the state; of a state that set standards but which could not and should not try to make its citizens more moral; of a public interest and a general will rooted in reason as the source of sovereignty – all these elements of the Green legacy provide a useful point of reference in understanding the liberalism of Jo Grimond.⁵⁷ Neither at Oxford nor at any other stage did Jo experience a Damascene conversion. Rather, the ideas of T.H. Green and Green's disciples exerted a more subtle influence through a kind of 'intellectual osmosis'.

Something of the spirit of T.H. Green still lingered at Balliol throughout the 1930s.⁵⁸ At that time, A.D. (Sandy) Lindsay was master of the college. Though a socialist, he certainly endorsed the tradition of public service, the 'good life' and the reverence for community. He had written a highly favourable essay about Green, later adapted as the introduction to Green's *Lectures on Political Obligation*.⁵⁹ Ironically, Lindsay had entertained Mahatma Gandhi at Balliol for a fortnight during the Indian leader's tour of England in 1931 – the same

visit during which Jo had brought him to speak at Eton. He later came to wider attention as the 'popular front', anti-appeasement candidate in the Oxford City by-election of October 1938. The local Liberal and Labour associations supported his candidature as he stood in opposition to the 'Chamberlainite' Conservative Quintin Hogg (Lord Hailsham) – unsuccessfully as it happened. As master of Balliol, Lindsay adopted the practice of seeing regularly and in pairs all first-year undergraduates. Closer to most of the students was F.F. Urquhart, the dean of Balliol upon Jo's arrival and fondly remembered as one who 'spread through the college a feeling of good-will'.⁶⁰ Among Jo's tutors were the historians Vivian Galbraith and Humphrey Sumner, together with the economists William Allen and Alexander Rodger, the latter succeeding Urquhart as dean. Others included the philosophers Charles Morris and John Fulton, later to find fame as chairman of a committee that produced one of the most famous reports on the civil service. In the university at large, big names abounded, including the young A.J. Ayer and professorial gladiators such as G.D.H. Cole, Sir Arthur Salter, J.R.R. Tolkien and R.G. Collingwood. Jo never attended Collingwood's lectures, but he later cited the esteemed historian's autobiography as his choice for the 'book in my life' series in the *Spectator*.⁶¹

On the whole, Jo appreciated the educational experience he had at Oxford, reflecting that 'of its sort it was good'.⁶² In making this somewhat backhanded compliment, he was pitching Oxford – and other seats of higher learning – against the backcloth of his own ideas of a university. He acknowledged Oxford's excellence as a mind-stretching experience. It exposed him to ideas, creeds and belief systems from which he had hitherto been largely insulated. He regretted, though, that there had not been a more practical focus; that there had been a gulf between what had been taught and the world in which most people lived. He extolled a university education that was both liberal and vocational.⁶³ But he came increasingly to feel that the vocational was driving out the liberal. He did not want education to become narrowly technical or a training ground for the professions or for bureaucrats. His idea of a university was closer to that of John Henry Newman, upholding the cultivation of the intellect, the independent pursuit of knowledge linked to public service and the realm of the spiritual. Even in his own day, the virtues of what he called 'a good training in... moral philosophy' were found wanting in the university curriculum, a deficiency partly made good by the college system.⁶⁴ The college was the jewel in the crown – not just the tutors but also the fellow students.

At Oxford, Jo quickly made new friends and strengthened existing bonds. His old chum Jasper Ridley (affectionately known as 'Bubbles') joined him from Eton having won a classical scholarship. So too did Guy Branch and Con O'Neill. Other Eton contemporaries went to different colleges – William Home to New College, John Paton and Lionel Brett to Magdalen. At Balliol, Jo now enjoyed the luxury of two rooms to himself, and entertained freely. Former Eton pal Bernard

Fergusson expressed mild envy at his host's 'civilised, easy way of life', noting that he tired 'not only the sun but the moon with talking'.⁶⁵ His activities were by no means confined to the college. Indeed during his final year he moved out of college and took lodgings in No. 21 Beaumont Street along with Ridley, Brett, Mark Pilkington and John Pope-Hennessy.⁶⁶ A little further along the street, at No. 9, lived other contemporaries, including Mickey Burn and Jeremy Hutchinson.

The predominantly Balliol (and ex-Eton) contingent in Beaumont Street seems to have achieved something of a cult status among contemporaries. Perhaps in partial recoil from the culture of the college, there was, according to one close observer, 'an absence of worldly ambition' among the Beaumont Street set, members of which were 'heavily touched by the politics which Bloomsbury had neglected'.⁶⁷ Its members were serious, hard working but never solemn. There were distinct mores – a counter-culture in which 'it would scarcely have been possible... to be prominent in the union.'⁶⁸ There was a demand for 'emotional integrity',⁶⁹ though it was not an homogenous group or any kind of 'total society'. Rather, it was a group of individuals among whom Jo was by no means the most luminous, being described by Lionel Brett as a shy man of 'infinite good sense and lazy charm'.⁷⁰ Jo maintained other friendships. During vacations there were foreign excursions – to Spain, Switzerland (where Urquhart had a chalet), France and Germany. The latter visit, made with Con O'Neill in 1934, coincided with Hitler's 'night of the long knives' – the infamous murder of SA (Sturmabteilung) leaders that took place on 30 June. The incident no doubt reinforced Jo's antipathy to totalitarian regimes. It was probably also a factor in the resignation of O'Neill from his position at the British Embassy in Berlin four years later, following Chamberlain's betrayal of the Sudetan Czechs at the Munich conference in September 1938.

For a term, Jo edited the Oxford student magazine *Isis* – or *The Isis*, as it was titled down to the 1950s.⁷¹ He did so without the assistance or remission from studies that would be the lot of many of his successors. He reckoned to have done the job badly – probably a false modesty. With appropriate light humour, a later edition of the magazine described how 'day after day, dressed as Siegfried or Wotan and fondling his lion cub, he would stalk into the *Isis* office and give a twist to the manifold rack on which the sub-editors were stretched together...'⁷²

Jo took his studies seriously. Although his was a History scholarship he began reading the closely related papers in Modern Greats. He went on to take a first in PPE – one of the fourteen (ten per cent of the total) to do so from that school in the summer of 1935. Among the examiners that year were future top civil servant John Maud and Roy Harrod, biographer of J.M. Keynes.

Jo did not join the Oxford Union – surprisingly for one who was to become so prominent in the world of politics though, as noted above, understandable as a member of the Beaumont Street group. It was never a source of regret, though there may have been an element of post-hoc rationalisation. He held the Union

partly responsible for encouraging a 'spurious intimacy' and superficiality that he came increasingly to see as one of the less welcome features of the modern age.⁷³ He was interested in politics and it was while at Oxford that he set his future sights. In his memoirs he makes the terse comment: 'I decided that I would be a politician and a Liberal politician at that'.⁷⁴

To nail one's colours to the Liberal mast in the 1930s was to make a particular kind of statement. The last Liberal administration had been replaced by a wartime coalition in 1915. Never again was the party to form a government, its fate sealed by the steady rise of the Labour Party. The trauma of war, the assault on the liberal conscience followed by the rupture between Asquith and Lloyd George had hastened followers into two camps, each with their own structure and parliamentary whips. With only brief respite during the general election of December 1923, Liberal ranks remained divided for most of the 1920s, splitting three ways for a time after the fall of the second Labour government in 1931 with the 'official' Liberals of Herbert Samuel, the independent Liberals of Lloyd George and Sir John Simon's National Liberals. The latter grew increasingly close to the Conservatives under whose umbrella they effectively operated long before they formally merged after the Second World War. Under the now unified leadership of Herbert Samuel, the Liberals put up only 161 candidates in the general election of 1935, securing a mere twenty seats.

Such was the state of Liberal party politics into which Jo was to pitch himself. He thus did so knowing that he was forfeiting any realistic possibility of ever holding an office of state. Edward Heath, a near contemporary at Balliol, acknowledged the virtues of the Liberals' commitment to an open society and to social and economic freedom but judged that 'it was already clear... that they were a spent force in British politics and that nothing practical could be achieved by supporting them.'⁷⁵ With the latter sentiment Jo would profoundly disagree. His career was to be the living expression of the thesis that a ministerial box is by no means the *sine qua non* to achievement in politics and public life. Besides, his family were Liberals and it was within the bosom of Liberal politics that he was to become more deeply and inexorably drawn.

Chapter 2

INTO PARLIAMENT

JO GRIMOND DID NOT rush headlong into the cauldron of party politics. Nor did he stay on the extra year at Oxford for which his Brackenbury foundation was available. Instead he chose to seek admission to the bar. A call to the bar was, and to some extent remains, an entrée to many walks of life, even for those who do not pursue long-term careers as lawyers. The cut and thrust of the adversarial system has often been an invaluable experience, allowing would-be politicians to develop their debating skills. When Jo entered Parliament, no fewer than 86 MPs were barristers.¹ Along with his friend Jasper Ridley, he was admitted on 21 October 1935 to the Middle Temple, one of the four Inns of Court.² He did so as a Harmsworth Scholar, an endowment afforded by press baron Lord Rothermere in memory of his father, Alfred Harmsworth, who had been a member of Middle Temple. In years to come, Jo's nomination papers for parliamentary elections described him as 'barrister at law', even when he was an established MP. He might have gone to the Scottish bar but found unattractive the requirement to spend three further years at university. While admiring many aspects of the English legal system, he derided much of its pomp, ceremony and cant. More than that, he remained critical of its exclusivity – more effective than a trade union closed shop, he later claimed.³ In particular, he felt uneasy about the opaqueness, about the convolutions of some of its procedures, the inequities and the financial extortions.

For all his misgivings, Jo stuck to his task. Although not making a permanent career, he later dismissed any suggestion that he had not taken his legal training seriously, insisting that he simply felt unsuited to the work.⁴ Having passed his examinations and eaten the requisite number of dinners (three per year), he was called to the bar in January 1937. He had by this time spent six enjoyable months in a solicitor's office in Ludgate Circus before going into chambers led by Freddie Van den Berg KC, where Quintin Hogg had become a member.⁵ Here he was

a pupil to Mr Alchin. A little later, he became a marshal to Mr Justice Lewis, a circuit judge. He lodged for a time along with John Hogg plus former Eton and Oxford friend William Douglas-Home. They had rooms at 35 South Eton Place in Belgravia, a house kept by T.L. Crisp and his wife, Gertrude. When Jo later left to get married, his place was taken by another Eton and Oxford contemporary, Brian Johnston, who described Crisp as 'the perfect gentleman's gentleman', his wife as 'an absolute saint and a perfect cook'.⁶

Even while doing his legal training, politics remained in focus. Soon after he left Oxford, prime minister Stanley Baldwin called a general election, having succeeded the ailing Ramsay MacDonald in June 1935. The National/Coalition government that he inherited was largely Conservative; under his premiership it became overwhelmingly so. Sensing a favourable wind, the avuncular Baldwin sought to press home his advantage. In the general election of November 1935, the Conservatives swept the board, returning 432 MPs to Labour's 154. Having fought at least a nominally united campaign, the Liberals were routed. Fielding candidates in only 161 constituencies, their total vote of 1.4 million was lower than at any time since the turn of the century, even allowing for the smaller franchise pre-1918. The party's efforts yielded twenty seats. If there had been any residual hopes about the Liberals' prospects of office, they can have lingered no longer. The *Manchester Guardian* was polite in its observation that 'though its numbers are small it has good debating power' while acknowledging that 'the election raises serious problems of stocktaking and revision which need to be faced with realism'.⁷

During the election, Jo directed his efforts to the cause of Arthur Irvine, whom he had met at Oxford. Irvine had recently been called to the bar at Middle Temple, having taken an appointment as secretary to Lord Hewart, Lord Chief Justice of England. Hewart's book *The New Despotism*, published in 1929, had struck a chord with many Liberals, raging as it did against the advance of executive power. In seeking election in Western Aberdeenshire and Kincardine, Irvine was contesting a constituency then held by a Conservative (C.M. Barclay-Harvey) but which had returned Liberals on and off down the years. It was Jo's first active encounter at the hustings, his role being to 'warm up' the audience in readiness for the main speaker. It was not a gratifying experience. He was slightly star-struck at the accomplished oratory of his mentor who was only four years his senior. In time he, too, would learn how to handle a live audience, though it did not come easily. Despite Jo's assistance – and that of the intrepid Dr Mary Esslemont – Irvine's bid was to no avail. He later entered Parliament – but as a Labour MP, not a Liberal.

It was through his private life that Jo now became more fully drawn into the citadel of Liberal politics. He had started seeing Laura Bonham Carter whose parents were both well placed at the high table of party affairs – Sir Maurice

Bonham Carter and Lady Violet, daughter of H.H. Asquith. A student of T.H. Green at Balliol College, Asquith was one of Jo's political heroes. As a twentieth-century premier, Asquith's tenure in Downing Street was to remain unsurpassed in duration until that of Harold Wilson in the 1970s and, for uninterrupted tenure, until that of Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s. If Green's ideas provided the intellectual backdrop for his (and Asquith's) political philosophy, then it was Asquith for whom Jo held a torch as the model politician, paying full homage to his achievements in office. But he was no less impressed by the personal qualities of one who 'carried on the Gladstone tradition of politics as a heroic and endless engagement in trying to translate moral attitude into practice and raise the standards of aesthetic and intellectual as well as economic life'.⁸ Summing up the assets of the last man to lead his party into government he said:

He had political imagination. He believed in the power and responsibility of politicians. He held to the tradition that politics is more than administration: more than office: more than a career: that it is an education as well as the management of life in all its aspects. The public service is a service to the public and not an opportunity to manipulate their affairs.⁹

With these words, written in the 1970s, Jo was no doubt striking a note of party and of family allegiance. He was also expressing his own view of politics and of some of the qualities by which he too would hope to be remembered. Pleased he would have been with the epitaph, offered nearly a decade after his death, as 'perhaps the last British politician cast in the Asquithian mould'.¹⁰ He certainly had some of the 'tranquil consciousness of effortless superiority' – Asquith's famous description of Balliol man. Things often came easily for him – perhaps too much so at times, leading to an alleged lack of 'hunger'.

The Bonham Carters were a family with long-standing Liberal connections in their own right.¹¹ A Balliol man like his political master, Sir Maurice Bonham Carter ('Bongie') had been private secretary to the illustrious premier between 1910 and 1916, from which vantage point he met Violet, Asquith's only daughter. Maurice and Violet were married in 1915. They had four children – two sons, two daughters of whom Laura was the second, born on 13 October 1918. The two boys were younger: Mark (born 1922) later to become a Liberal MP, and Raymond (born 1929).

Lady Violet was one of the most famous 'belle politiciques' of her age – some mark of distinction for one who never became an MP. Twice she stood for Parliament, twice she was defeated before being raised to the peerage in 1964 at the age of 77 as Baroness Asquith of Yarnbury. She enjoyed a long-standing, platonic relationship with Winston Churchill, begun in 1906 and maintained until his death in 1965.¹² A fearless champion of her father's cause, she went to endless lengths to defend his reputation in the face of critics, Liberal or otherwise. In so doing

she helped to keep alive the Asquith-Lloyd George schism long after the central protagonists had left the scene. While never holding any high office of state, she had a distinguished record of public service – as a member of the executive of the League of Nations Union; as a governor of the BBC during the Second World War; as vice chairman of the United Europe Movement in 1947; and as president of the Royal Institute of International Affairs (1964–1969). Within the Liberal Party she was twice president of the Women’s Liberal Federation (1923–1925 and 1939–1945) and, between 1945 and 1947, was president of the Liberal Party Organisation. In his memoirs, Jo observed that ‘in spite of or probably because of her sophistication she was curiously innocent,’ a trait he saw also in his own mother.¹³ Undoubtedly, Lady Violet was an influence upon Jo, both directly and through her daughter. She gave no quarter in pursuit of the causes she upheld – above all that of liberalism. Yet she was attentive to her children. In February 1920, and with Laura not yet 18 months old, she wrote, with biblical overtones: ‘what does it profit a woman to gain even to save the whole world if she lose her own child.’¹⁴ Such would be the touchstone for her daughter, no less redoubtable if less conspicuous to the wider public in an age when women were making their mark in slightly greater numbers than before.

Both the Asquiths and the Bonham Carters had loose connections with Jo’s part of the world back in Scotland. For many years, until his defeat in the ‘coupon’ election of December 1918, H.H. Asquith had represented the constituency of East Fife, adjacent to St Andrews. ‘Bongie’ spent some of his time in Scotland – summers at Beaufort Castle, the home of Lord Lovat in Beauly, Invernesshire; and at other times, visits to Dalnawillan in Caithness, the home of Sir Archibald and Marigold Sinclair. Since 1922, Sinclair had been the local MP for Caithness and Sutherland, a seat he was to hold for twenty-three years. Under the free trade banner he had followed the Samuelite Liberals into opposition in 1932, resigning from his briefly held portfolio as secretary of state for Scotland.¹⁵ Then, when Samuel lost his seat three years later, Sinclair assumed the party leadership. For ten years (1935–1945) he held the reins.¹⁶ In particular, he became an increasingly vocal opponent of the policy of appeasement, a passion shared by Lady Violet and, of course, Winston Churchill under whom he had served as second-in-command of the Royal Scots Fusiliers during the Great War and in whose cabinet he held office as secretary of state for air for much of the Second World War.¹⁷ It was in the early stages of Sinclair’s party leadership that he first entertained Jo, Laura and others among their circle of friends. Jo had already experienced the Sinclairs’ hospitality at a grouse shoot on the Caithness moors before he had met Laura. And it was upon leaving the lodge at Dalnawillan that they decided to get engaged, which they did in November 1937.

Laura was barely eighteen when first she met Jo. Their engagement followed within the year. Despite the Scottish excursions, their courtship was based mainly in London and the south of England – partly at the Bonham Carters’ country



1. 'The church of the House of Commons': Jo and Laura outside St Margaret's, Westminster, on their wedding day, May 1938.

retreat in the village of Stockton in the Wylde valley, near the Salisbury plain; and, more commonly, in the family residence of 40 Gloucester Square.¹⁸ The latter provided an easy facility for regular companionship, being not far from Jo's lodgings in South Eaton Place. Lady Violet approved of her prospective son-in-law. Upon the engagement she wrote in her diary: 'Of all the young men who have loved her in the last 18 months (and there have been many and various) I like him far the best – so I am overjoyed.'¹⁹ But she added: 'My only regret is her youth (just 19). I hoped she would go on "shaking a loose leg" (as Father called it) for many years more – and I shall hate losing her so soon.'²⁰ Certainly Laura was at the hub of 'society'. Among the beaux who competed for her attention was Philip Toynbee. They had met in 1933 when she was fifteen, he seventeen.²¹ Another was Donald Maclean, a connection that was to resonate when, many years later, he declared himself as a Soviet spy. Maclean's father, Sir Donald Maclean, had taken temporary leadership of the Liberals in the House of Commons from February 1919 until Asquith's return to Parliament the following year. A close friend of the Bonham Carters, Sir Donald was godfather to Laura's younger brother Mark.

Jo and Laura were married on Tuesday 31 May 1938 at St Margaret's, Westminster, the church of the House of Commons since the early seventeenth century. Jo had been inclined to arrange it for the morning that he might return to chambers in the afternoon, but Laura had the contrary and decisive vote!²² The ceremony was performed by Canon J.O. Hannay, assisted by the Rev. R.B. Parker. Jasper Ridley was the best man – a compliment Jo returned the following year when his long-standing friend married Laura's elder sister, Cressida. Those present in the congregation were a veritable cross-section of the 'good and the great'.²³ In addition to close members of the family there were, among the Liberal cognoscenti,

the Sinclairs, Viscount and Viscountess Samuel, Viscount and Viscountess Esher and Arthur Irvine. Conservative families were well represented too, including Lord David Cecil, Mr and Mrs John Boyd-Carpenter, Victor Cazalet, the Hon Alfred Lyttelton, Mrs Winston Churchill and Mrs Quintin Hogg. The socialist cause was less in evidence, though among the guests was Nigel Nicolson, himself to become a Conservative MP but whose father Harold was a diplomat and sometime Labour National MP who later joined the Labour Party. The presence of so many notables undoubtedly owed far more to the Bonham Carters than to the Grimonds. But some of Jo's past connections included his Oxford contemporary Guy Branch and his old Eton housemaster Geoffrey Headlam. The reception was held at Hyde Park Gardens. The happy couple began their honeymoon at The Elms, Rottingdean, lent for the purpose by Reuters correspondent and subsequent proprietor Sir Roderick Jones, before leaving for the south of France.

It proved to be a durable marriage. In public, harmony usually prevailed. For the most part it was a natural harmony, though each could be the other's most stringent if constructive critic – especially Laura of Jo. Upon celebrating their golden wedding anniversary, she observed to one of the guests how remarkable it was that two cantankerous people had managed to live together for so long. She went on to add: 'Perhaps it's because he is deaf and I won't listen'.²⁴ Deafness did begin to overtake Jo – but that came much later. From the first, both he and Laura maintained their identities as two strong, independent-minded individuals. It was in some ways an unlikely chemistry – he almost congenitally untidy, she notoriously unpunctual. Yet they were each able always to raise the flag to the trumpet call: untidiness never meant indifference, nor unpunctuality a lost opportunity. It was a marriage of minds as well as of hearts. And both minds (and hearts) were united in one cause – that of liberalism.

There were to be four children from the marriage: Andrew, born in 1939; Grizelda (1942); Johnny (1946); and Magnus (1959). Laura followed her mother in attending first and foremost to her family. During her early married years, she rarely caught the wider public eye. Instead she provided a secure enclave that was to be a source of strength for Jo. More positively, if initially from behind the scenes, she gave him throughout his political career much practical, 'hands-on' assistance. She was an additional, unofficial agent, prominent in running the constituency when Jo was away, especially during his years as party leader. She was a source of inspiration, part of his political conscience on issues such as heritage, devolution, decolonisation, defence, women's rights and the plight of the deprived. In time she would see more daylight in the vista of public affairs – as a parliamentary candidate, as a magistrate, a local councillor and, in her mother's footsteps, as president of the Women's Liberal Federation. Increasingly she took the platform in her own right. She bore many of Violet's characteristics. While lacking the last ounce of grandeur, she was nevertheless an effective public speaker. She brought passion and intensity to the issues that she held dear,