

Climbing the Bookshelves

Shirley Williams

London: Virago, 2009, £20

Tom Easton

I learned of this autobiography through catching the husky tones of Baroness Williams reading from its closing chapter on Radio 4. She was warning of the dangers of being ruled by privileged young career politicians who 'know no life outside politics'. Had I been too harsh in my earlier judgements of the female member of the Gang of Four, I wondered? Who could possibly quibble with that reasonable-sounding voice when the Foreign Secretary appears barely old enough to vote?

But then I read *Climbing the Bookshelves* by the former Labour Cabinet minister who helped launch the short-lived SDP in 1981. Sure enough the wise words I'd heard on the BBC were there. But so was her description of how as a 21-year-old Oxford student the then Shirley Catlin was funded by the US government to take the Young Atlantic Leaders trip around America. Then, while subsequently enjoying a Fulbright Fellowship in the US, 'I received a telegram summoning me back to England for a selection conference for the Harwich constituency,' she recalls. Not only that, but when she stepped off the ship bringing her back to a British political career in November 1952 'a journalist from the Daily Mirror was waiting for me on the dock at Southampton, and he offered me a job on the spot for the sensational salary of £14 a week.' Ah, nothing like 'real life' as an apprenticeship for government back in those good old days when broad experience counted for so much more than today.

Is it that she didn't measure her own political beginnings against today's bright young things who 'know no life outside politics' and reflect on the similarities? Or is it that she hopes her readers will forget her own well-lubricated passage into politics before reading the wise words of her concluding criticism? Reading the rest of the book the same question recurred. Who is she fooling – herself or her readers? I find it hard to tell: so much of it reads like *Mary Poppins* meets *Adrian Mole*.

For example, she describes how she travels with a largely American group of Aspen Institute people to meet the Shah of Iran whose 'father had occupied the throne in a bloodless military coup'. Wasn't there just a bit more to the CIA's Operation Ajax than that, Shirley?

Or this. When arriving for the well-trailed and hugely publicised meeting with fellow Gang members Roy Jenkins and William Rodgers at David Owen's Limehouse home in 1981 to publish their joint declaration, she says: 'I had failed to appreciate the media interest in the latest phase of our venture.'

This, remember, is not some publicity naif. She is the person who slipped straight back from America into a *Mirror* job, and then when she was asked to resign from that, promptly plopped into another one with the *Financial Times*. This is the woman who after losing her Labour seat in 1979 was gently interviewed by Robin Day, 'an old friend from our Oxford university days', and had been interviewed regularly on radio and TV long before becoming an MP in 1964. Had she really 'failed to appreciate the media interest in the latest phase' of the setting up of a new party that would for two general elections split opposition to Margaret Thatcher's Conservatives?

Evacuated by her parents to the United States in the Second World War, Williams has been criss-crossing the Atlantic ever since. Within days of her 1979 election defeat she was offered a Harvard fellowship; her second marriage was to the American political academic Richard Neustadt who had spent time discreetly monitoring Hugh Gaitskell's Labour Party for the JFK White House; and even as an SDP politician briefly in the Commons and then in the Lords, she was regularly back among the liberal East Coast fraternity.

But readers looking for insight into the US/UK relationship from someone so well positioned will be disappointed, as they will be in seeking any sharp observations on British politics. Those who remember the Callaghan government and the rise of Thatcher may recall Williams and other Labour right-wing ministers vociferously rushing to the defence of one of their number, Reg Prentice, faced with deselection. Prentice subsequently switched parties – probably the highest ranking Labour figure ever to defect to the Tories – but he doesn't rate a mention in these memoirs.

There are lots of similar gaps. There's nothing, for instance on the union block vote that kept the Labour right in charge of the party for much of the Cold War, and only passing references to important figures. David Sainsbury, for example, was a key funder of the Fabian Society for which Williams worked as general secretary and was the SDP treasurer, but he merits only one passing reference.

She recounts the tensions between the Gang of Four and tells us that 'the high tide of the SDP' was reached inside its first year. But there is little to explain why she helped continue its life for two subsequent general elections. If Williams shared the sharp perception of her old friend Brian Walden that the divisive power of the SDP was vital to the maintenance of NATO and the

Atlantic relationship (*Lobster 31*), her memoirs reveal no such indication.

What we do get is a fair bit on her love life – Peter Parker, Bernard Williams, Anthony King and then Neustadt – and pen portraits of some of her contemporaries. If that's what publishers of autobiographies of politicians think their readers want, it'd be unfair to be harsh on her. But one is still left disappointed. She was a key figure in the post-war British political world – perhaps the leading woman in a half-century of our history behind Thatcher and Barbara Castle. Was there no more to her than this?