

Rosebery – Statesman in Turmoil by Leo McKinstry. John Murray 2005.

This is a wonderful biography that reads like a novel at its best, of a subject whose life belongs to such a vanished era that it might almost be fiction.

Archibald Primrose, the 5th Earl of Rosebery, was a charismatic figure the principal facts of whose life seem almost incredible to a 21st century reader: a successful politician who led the Liberal party and became Prime Minister, he was also a renowned orator and writer, a collector of the finest art and the owner of a string of very successful racehorses. And behind this public façade he was the husband of a Jewess, Hannah de Rothschild, whom he adored but who left him a widower when she died prematurely of typhoid in 1890, and a man who struggled with loneliness, depression and allegations about his own sexual ambiguity.

Leo McKinstry's superb biography, the fulfilment of a fascination with his subject since the mid-1980s, takes the reader through the intricate twists and turns of Rosebery's gilded life, introducing a huge cast of characters of the period, some very famous like Gladstone and Disraeli others much less well known. The portrait is a deeply sympathetic one of a multi-faceted man who no-one seems ever to have fully known, and who possibly never truly knew himself. It is also a splendid re-telling of an extraordinary period in British history when, at the height of Empire, the political establishment in London seemed invincible.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh