REVIEW

Veronica Strong-Boag. *Liberal Hearts and Coronets: The Lives and Times of Ishbel Majoribanks Gordon and John Campbell Gordon, The Aberdeens*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015. Pp. 374. ISBN 9781442648272 (cloth), 9781442620027 (paper). \$70 (cloth), \$32.95 (paper).

The Scottish aristocrats, John Campbell Gordon (1847–1934) and Ishbel Marjoribanks Gordon (1857–1939), known as the Aberdeens, have attracted attention from the late nineteenth century because of their writing as well as their political and reform activities. Lady Aberdeen previously emerged as the more dominant, dynamic, and interesting of the pair, important for her leadership in the women’s movement and her political tactics. In an extensively researched and densely written book, Veronica Strong-Boag now re-examines the lives and times of the Aberdeens, emphasizing the partnership and shared principles that supported the domestic, imperial, and global undertakings of this privileged couple.

In an era when science challenged traditional religion, the Aberdeens drew strength from their evangelical and ecumenical faith. Another Scot, the theologian Henry Drummond, who is described by Strong-Boag as a charismatic, middle-class Glaswegian and a close friend of the Aberdeens, was very influential in providing an optimistic doctrine of Christ’s love. Strong-Boag analyzes how the message of social harmony inherent in Drummond’s evolutionary theology of care for others melded with the Liberal reform philosophy attractive to the Aberdeens. Whether dealing with domestic arrangements at the Haddo estate in Scotland, with Home Rule agitation in Ireland, or with politics and women’s organizations in Canada, the Aberdeens sought the way of reconciliation and

inclusion. The concept of social harmony was not intended to eliminate class distinctions. Secure in their assumption of class superiority, the Aberdeens found their work to be “all-important in giving meaning to life and justifying rank and privilege” (p. 126). With their ecumenical faith, however, they tried more directly to bridge the deep divide between Protestants and Roman Catholics in both Ireland and Canada.

Scottishness mattered for the Aberdeens. Although ethnicity is not an integrated theme in *Liberal Hearts and Coronets*, Strong-Boag frequently points out the significance of a Scottish identity for both John and Ishbel. John, the third son of the fifth Earl of Aberdeen, inherited the title in 1872 after the premature death of his older brothers. From birth, however, he drew strength from a powerful Scottish family lineage, which Strong-Boag traces. At Westminster he championed Scottish interests and Strong-Boag suggests that his transition to the Liberal party may have been easier in Scotland where it was not a radical choice. Family was also important for instilling in Ishbel a love for Scotland, along with Ireland, even before her marriage. In recognition of her mother’s family roots, Ishbel’s name was the Gaelic version of Isabel, her mother’s name. When Ishbel’s father, a wealthy London brewing magnate, bought a large Highland estate north of Inverness as a country property, Guisachan quickly became Ishbel’s favourite place. Strong-Boag describes how the Aberdeens shared a sentimental view of Celtic culture but also a practical interest in addressing both rural and urban poverty in Scotland. Ishbel’s enthusiasm for domestic handicraft revival was one remedy and another was emigration to Canada, where the Aberdeens visited Scottish settlers on their tours.

Strong-Boag’s analysis of class-based gender relations in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century British World is central to her interpretation of the Aberdeen partnership. In particular she draws upon the work of historians of masculinity to argue that John’s role has not been fairly

appraised. John possessed many desirable qualities most frequently attributed to the ‘good man’ of the rising middle class but he did not conform to the image of virile masculine authority often associated with challenges of Empire. At a time when the ‘new woman’ seemed to threaten the patriarchal structure of society, John’s personality, principles, and support of Ishbel easily led to charges of effeminacy and weakness. Significantly, Strong-Boag notes that “it is sometimes difficult to discern whether John or Ishbel took the first step in thought or action” (p. 5). Strong-Boag’s work may have been enhanced by a more in-depth analysis of the important but elusive issue of influence and emotion in the spousal relationship.

With its careful documentation and its consideration of recent historiography, *Liberal Hearts and Coronets* will appeal to historians interested not only in the Aberdeens but also in the changing political context and reform agendas of the society in which they lived.

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