

Ripping yarns, penetrating tales!

A Very English Scandal

Sex, Lies and a Murder Plot at the Heart of the Establishment

John Preston

London: Viking/Penguin, 2016, 340 pages, illustrations, index;
hardback, around £12.

It's nearly forty years since the Liberal MP Jeremy Thorpe and several unlikely 'associates' were on trial at the Old Bailey for conspiring to murder Thorpe's lover, Norman Scott. To the astonishment of most of the country, at the end of the trial it was acquittals all round. Thorpe, however, never returned to political public life: the combination of attempted murder and homosexuality was terminally toxic.

There were several books on the case published at the time and then in 1996 came *Rinkagate*,¹ written by Simon Freeman and Barrie Penrose (Penrose was one half of the 'Pencourt' duo that originally broke the story, the other being Roger Courtiour). Now, twenty years later and nearly forty years after the actual events, we have a further volume to add to the bibliography.

This passage of time must have resulted in considerably more information coming to light and Thorpe's death in 2014 allows the writer to report much more than he could while the principal was still alive. Here, surely, is the definitive work. Well, uh, not so. There is nothing new in this book and Preston has not even taken advantage of the new and important material in Michael Bloch's recent 600-page Thorpe biography,² despite mentioning it in the Acknowledgements. (I'm thinking particularly of Bloch documenting Thorpe's very active and – remembering this was when homosexuality was a criminal offence – reckless sex life.)

1 Simon Freeman & Barrie Penrose, *Rinkagate: The Rise and Fall of Jeremy Thorpe* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996)

2 Michael Bloch, *Jeremy Thorpe* (London: Little, Brown, 2014)

There's also a lot of material that he has left out. Let's take but one example, that of Jack Straw, former president of the National Union of Students, who at the time was working as a 'special adviser' to Barbara Castle, the Social Security minister. Harold Wilson, the PM, wanted to see Norman Scott's social security file, probably in an attempt to clarify Scott's relationship with Thorpe, and asked Castle to obtain it. This was a highly irregular request and Castle declined to it herself. Instead, she delegated the task to Straw who willingly obliged.

When they later found out about this 'Pencourt' (Penrose and Courtiour) suggested that Castle and Straw had acted improperly in connection with Norman Scott's social security papers. Alarmed by the exposure of his role, and alarmed, too, by the possibility of further 'sensitive' material being uncovered and publicised by the two journalists,³ Straw did what any reasonable professional politician would do and sought government funding for legal action to shut down 'Pencourt'. It is unclear what happened next but the investigation certainly wasn't shut down.

Preston isn't very good on the psychology of Thorpe and the reader gets a rather confusing portrait of the subject. Bloch is far better; but then he is covering the whole of Thorpe's life – and in great detail.

The decision to murder: Preston presents this as the inevitable result of Scott's vexing behaviour over many years; almost as if it would be how anyone would react given the same circumstances. Bloch, on the other hand, eschews simple solutions and cheap psychology and presents instead a multi-faceted portrayal of Thorpe's character and hints that such behaviour was latent. Indeed, it is suggested by Bloch that

³ One of the major worries for the Establishment at the time was Lord Snowdon (Tony Armstrong-Jones) being dragged into the scandal. Norman Scott had mentioned a 'Tony' at a pre-trial hearing in Minehead and how Thorpe and he had stopped off at 'Tony's house' in Dulwich on route to Thorpe's mother.

Snowdon was never far away from gay rumours and jokes at his expense. A popular one told after his engagement to Princess Margaret was this. The Palace informed Tony it was May 1. He didn't know whether this was the day he was getting married or his new title.

Thorpe may have 'previous' here and could have been responsible for the disappearance at sea of one of his lovers, Henry Upton, in 1957 ('No man has ever taken but one step in to crime').

Preston does not supply any notes or sources in the book. The nearest we get is the Acknowledgements where he mentions some eighty or so persons by name and over a dozen books. But what came from where we know not.

While reading this I frequently thought I was reading a novel, a 'popular' novel, a novelette even. Narrative flow seemed more important to Preston than anything else; but then we read on the back flap of the dust jacket that he is the author of four novels. Perhaps he should have aimed for a *roman à clef* rather than a straight recounting? Anyone wanting to study the subject should give this work a miss and go straight to *Rinkagate* and Michael Bloch's biography.

I forget who this quote is attributed to, but it was said of the eighteenth century antiquarian Richard Warner that while his histories were 'useful' it was plain that 'he had left his subjects as he had found them'. This applies equally to Preston. Thus one wonders why Viking/Penguin thought this work worth publishing as our author has left the subject exactly as he found it.

Anthony Frewin