

**Lord Lexden**

Conservative peer and historian

**An impressive blend of fact and fiction, Robert Harris' account of the love affair between Herbert Asquith and Venetia Stanley reveals her to be one of the most consequential women in British history**

## Precipice

By **Robert Harris**  
 Publisher **Hutchinson Heinemann**

In 1912, Herbert Asquith, a married man with several children who had become a much-admired prime minister four years earlier, fell deeply in love at the age of 59. The object of his adoration, Venetia Stanley, was 24.

Her rich aristocratic Liberal family owned two country estates where Asquith and his wife Margot, a formidable person with a very sharp tongue, had long been regular guests. The family strongly disapproved of Venetia's sudden, passionate love affair. The independent-minded young woman defied them, just as she was ultimately to defy her lover in order to strike out on her own in the world.

She was good-looking, though not stunningly beautiful. For Asquith she had two added attractions: a lively mind and a love of English literature, in which he was extremely well-versed. Quotations from famous authors sprang readily to both of them.

They wrote to each other incessantly, assisted by an extremely efficient postal

system which provided 12 deliveries a day in London. She carefully preserved 560 letters from

the infatuated prime minister. Robert Harris draws on them extensively, making this book a significant contribution to history by revealing the frailties as well as the strengths of the man who led Britain at the start of the First World War 110 years ago.

Asquith destroyed all the letters she wrote to him. Harris supplies the deficiency by constructing substitutes. Fact and fiction are blended impressively, a characteristic feature of all his 15 other outstanding novels.

Was there much sex? Some who have read Asquith's

letters carefully say there was none at all. Harris argues that "it strains credibility to suggest that the affair was not, at least in some sense, physical". There are veiled comments and hints in Asquith's letters which point

passionate presentation of the case for the Gallipoli campaign, which turned out to be a total disaster, costing 110,000 lives. If the prime minister had listened and brought his incisive mind to bear on



Venetia Stanley



Herbert Asquith

**"They wrote to each other incessantly"**

strongly to that. Harris develops them without sensationalising. "A novelist has a freedom a historian lacks."

During 1914 and 1915, in which this book is set, Asquith became totally dependent on her. He laid out his life in full, sending accounts of what was happening in the cabinet and the armed forces after the outbreak of war. He enclosed in his letters top-secret telegrams and details of troop dispositions in flagrant breach of the Official Secrets Act, which his own government had passed.

Harris notes two occasions on which he wrote her letters during meetings of ministers and military chiefs. He missed Winston Churchill's

the plan, it would probably have been turned down. It is an interesting hypothesis.

The burden of sustaining her lover in such circumstances proved too great for Venetia Stanley. In May 1915 she set off for the Western Front to work as a nurse, and announced her engagement to Edwin Montagu, a junior cabinet minister, who was a homosexual and purportedly one of the ugliest men in London. It was her bid for freedom. "To my dying day," Asquith told her, "that will be the most bitter memory of my life."

Harris shows that her love affair made her "one of the most consequential women in British political history". This beautiful book describes how it happened. 📖

