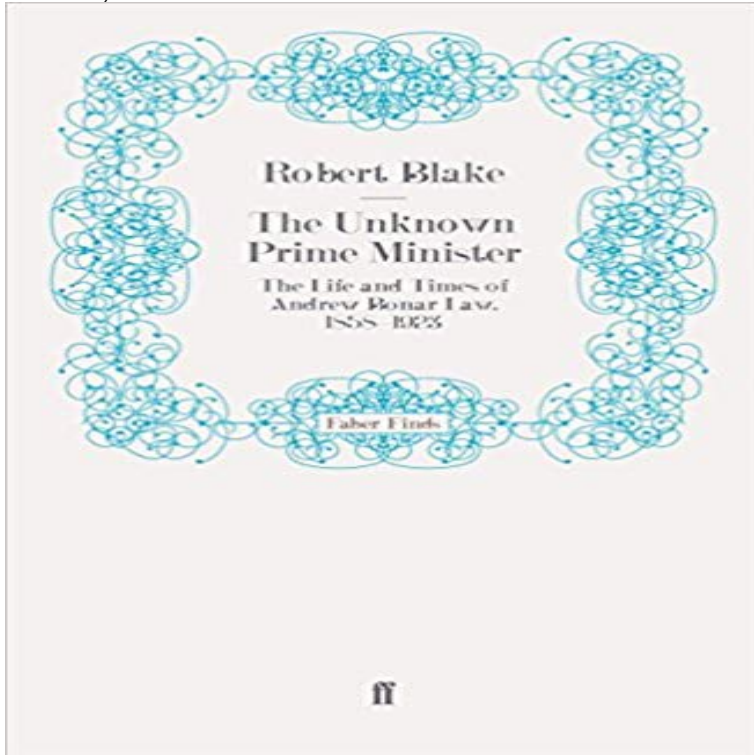


The Unknown Prime Minister: The Life and Times of Andrew Bonar Law, 1858–1923



In his preface Robert Blake writes, The title of this book is taken from a remark attributed to Asquith after he had attended Bonar Law's funeral in Westminster Abbey. It is fitting, he is reputed to have said, that we should have buried the Unknown Prime Minister by the side of the Unknown Soldier. I have used this phrase, not because I consider that Asquith's remark was either just or true, but because, however unfairly, it has come to be the verdict of most people today. Even in his own lifetime Bonar Law's origins, career, character, and the reasons for his success acquired something of an aura of mystery which the passage of time has done nothing to remove. It is my hope that this book may dispel that erroneous impression. It does. Neither flamboyant nor possessed of the statesmanship of Lloyd George or Winston Churchill, Bonar Law nevertheless was a remarkably successful politician, especially a party politician. Before his brief Premiership in 1922-23, he had been the Leader of the Conservative Party for eleven years from 1911 and in that time had played a vital part in almost every political issue. During the 1914-18 war his role was crucial. It was his decision which brought about the first coalition of 1915 and the exclusion of Winston Churchill from the Admiralty. He was largely responsible for the withdrawal from the Dardanelles and the overthrow of Asquith in 1916. It was his support that allowed Lloyd George to become Prime Minister and it was the withdrawal of that support that led to the end of the Coalition Government in 1922. The fact that the Conservative Party survived the chaotic war years, unlike the Liberal Party, and survived with an outlook sufficiently enlightened to cope not inadequately with the problems of the post-war era, was the achievement of Bonar Law more than any other single person. By nature melancholy, this disposition was aggravated by personal

tragedy: first his wife died and then his two elder sons were killed in 1917. For all that he remained someone who inspired affection in such otherwise diverse characters as Lloyd George, F. E. Smith (Lord Birkenhead), John Maynard Keynes, Edward Carson and Lord Beaverbrook.

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