Andrew Bonar Law has had the misfortune to be remembered – if at all – as ‘the Unknown Prime Minister’. This was partly due to the brevity of his premiership – a mere 209 days – the shortest in modern times, but rather more to a bon mot attributed to Asquith, who attended his funeral in Westminster Abbey. The former Liberal Prime Minister, who
had treated Law with disdain throughout his lifetime, was heard to remark how fitting it was ‘that we should have buried the Unknown Prime Minister by the side of the Unknown Soldier’. This misfortune was compounded by Lord Blake, who chose it as the title of his highly praised biography (Robert Blake, *The Unknown Prime Minister*, 1955).

Law was a much more considerable figure than this epithet would suggest, leading the Conservative Party for ten years, playing a major role in the First World War and being responsible, as we saw in the previous chapter, for both the rise and fall of Lloyd George’s premiership. He might, just as appropriately, be recalled as the only Prime Minister to have been born abroad, as the first Presbyterian to hold the office, the first businessman, or even, as Roy Jenkins has suggested, the first ‘ordinary man’.

Bonar Law was born on 16 September 1858 in Kingston, New Brunswick, a small town later renamed Rexton. His father, the Rev. James Law, was a Northern Irish Presbyterian Minister, who spent 32 years ministering to his small, mainly Scottish immigrant, flock in what his son seems to have regarded in retrospect as a benighted Canadian backwater, before retiring to spend his last five years back in his native Ulster. The Rev. Law was a loving father, but was a manic depressive given to long periods of gloomy introspection punctuated by bursts of religious mania, and his household could hardly have been more austere. This was compounded by the death, at the age of 36, of his wife Elizabeth Kidston, leaving five small children, of whom the youngest, Andrew, was only two. It was she who had chosen Bonar as his second name, it having been the surname of another Presbyterian minister who had written a book about an eminent divine whom she much admired.

Throughout his life he was known as Bonar Law, and his family and few intimates addressed him as Bonar, but unlike Lloyd George he made no attempt to turn this into a hybrid surname for his family, and all his children were called plain Law. On the death of his mother, her spinster sister, Janet Kidston, came out to Canada from Glasgow to keep house for her brother-in-law and help bring up the children, four boys and a girl. This arrangement lasted for nine years, but – following the remarriage of the Rev. Law and his starting a new family – Janet returned to Scotland, taking the now 12-year-old with her to live near her wealthy cousins in Helensburgh, a prosperous town on the Clyde, 20 miles from Glasgow. James Law appears to have concluded that his youngest son would have better prospects in life in Scotland, and agreed to let him go.

The milieu that Bonar entered in Helensburgh resembled his father’s in several respects, notably strict Presbyterian beliefs and austere