

The Unofficial Side

Dr Michael Brock describes the Bodleian Library's acquisition of H. H. Asquith's personal papers

The official part of the collected papers of H. H. Asquith (Prime Minister 1908–16) were given to Balliol College in 1941, and in 1964 the college gave them to the Bodleian. Now, the literary trustees of the late Lord Bonham Carter, and Mrs Priscilla Hodgson, have combined to add the family's personal papers to the Library's holdings.

The new acquisition, which includes the diaries of Asquith's second wife, Margot, and his elder daughter, Violet, includes more light relief than is found in official papers. After Asquith's Romanes Lecture in June 1918, Margot produced a vignette of Ottoline Morrell in the Sheldonian 'with a vast hat, half hearse, half chandelier'. The fun is balanced by important political and governmental information in concentrated form. Asquith hated using the telephone. He wrote, as he spoke, with pithy, fluent mastery; and letter-writing was one of his main recreations.

The proportion of the material which has been published is nowhere very large. The collection contains a small group of letters from Asquith's first wife, Helen, who died of typhoid after only fourteen years of marriage. By contrast, more than 760 of his letters to Margot survive, extending from 1891 to 1927. In the official, two-volume biography, published only four years after his death, J. A. Spender and Cyril Asquith published no more than discreet extracts from either group. Much more personal information became available in 1964 in Roy Jenkins's *Life*, and with the publication eighteen years later of most of the Premier's let-

ters to Venetia Stanley in 1914 and 1915. But his letters in 1915–18 to Venetia's sister Sylvia (another generous gift to the Bodleian made a few years ago) remain almost entirely unpublished; and the third volume of selections from Violet Asquith's diaries, published in July 2000 and covering the years after the Second World War, reproduces, from more than two million words, no more than 150,000. Plans are in hand to publish selections from Margot's diaries – to reproduce them in their entirety would be impracticable.

The papers just acquired by the Bodleian contain many letters addressed to members of the Asquith family which are not within the copyright of the four donors. These will be much needed by historians striving for a synoptic view. Asquith tried to give his reticence posthumous effect. He did not conceal his attempts to impede even an intending biographer as sympathetic as J. A. Spender. Margot, by contrast, was happy to tell, and to retell, her tale; but she began to publish only after her husband's fall from power, by which time her resentments had distorted her memories and judgement. Some of the extracts from the diaries in her *Autobiography* (published in two volumes in 1920 and 1922) were freely adapted to heighten the drama of her narrative. Her book gives, for instance, no proper account of her fluctuating relations with Lloyd George during the years before 1916. What she published concealed the fact that in her prime she had been a careful (though intermittent) diarist. She had taken trouble over reproducing her husband's remarks, and he had corrected her detailed account

of the formation of Campbell-Bannerman's government at the end of 1905.

Diaries are always a difficult source to use; but historians owe much to the diarist's unquenchable vitality and urge to record the scene. After the Romanes Lecture 'a young man, a mixture of pedantry and impudence ... with a mincing air', asked Margot whether she 'knew Oxford'. She replied that she had known it since Jowett's time, but that she had not met other great men of that day such as 'Dizzy or Darwin. Instead of saying, as I *hoped* he might, "Surely you were too young?" he asked me "Why not?" This combination of mince and "sauce" revived me.' It did not take much to revive Margot into continuing with the record.

Michael Brock was Warden of Nuffield College 1978–88. Mrs Priscilla Hodgson has kindly allowed the reproduction here of extracts from the Asquith Papers

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Herbert and Margot Asquith in 1920 (Bodleian Library)

