

KEEPER OF

Dr J. Graham Jones

looks at the life and career of Albert James Sylvester CBE (1889–1989), the champion shorthand typist who became Principal Private Secretary to David Lloyd George from 1923 until his death in March 1945. The first ever shorthand-writer to take notes of the proceedings of a Cabinet committee, Sylvester gained the trust of Lloyd George and served him for over two decades, running his private office, acting as his eyes and ears at Westminster and playing the role of go-between him and his mistress, Frances Stevenson.



F SECRETS

Albert James Sylvester was born at Harlaston, Staffordshire, on 24 November 1889, the son of a tenant farmer of relatively modest means. He attended Guild Street School, Burton-on-Trent, where he became conversant with the basic elements of Pitman's shorthand, and then, compelled to abandon his full-time education at the age of fourteen, secured employment as a clerk at Charrington's brewery. During this period, aided by the unstinting support of his two sisters, he attained champion speeds in both shorthand and typing and gained qualifications as a teacher of these subjects.

In 1910, like so many of his generation, Sylvester moved to London to seek his fortune, and held a variety of jobs including a position as the compiler of the official record of the proceedings of the House of Lords. He was a member of the British 'speed-writing' (fast typewriting) team that competed at Olympia in 1910 and 1911 and, having spent a short period in India and Burma, established his own business as a freelance shorthand-writer based at Chancery Lane in the heart of the metropolis.

The outbreak of the First World War saw Sylvester undertake some temporary work for the Admiralty. He soon became a stenographer in the office of M. P. A. Hankey (later Lord Hankey), at the time Secre-

tary to the Committee of Imperial Defence, and was in December 1915 the first ever shorthand-writer to take notes of the proceedings of a Cabinet committee. This was a truly pioneering task as previously no written record of discussions taken at Cabinet level had been kept. When Lloyd George succeeded Asquith as Prime Minister in December 1916, the secretariat to the Committee of Imperial Defence at once became the War Cabinet secretariat. (There had previously been no Cabinet secretariat at all.) Rejected for military service on account of his official position, Sylvester now became Hankey's private secretary. When hostilities ceased, he at once became a high-grade career civil servant sharing the status of university graduates who had entered the civil service through competitive examination. Lloyd George by now knew him well and had grown to trust him.

In 1918 Sylvester was awarded the OBE and in 1920 the CBE. In 1921 he left Hankey to serve as Lloyd George's private secretary, based at 10 Downing Street. He had by then long experience of working alongside the Prime Minister's personal staff, which included Thomas Jones and J. T. Davies, both Welshmen and both established civil servants. All three knew of the continuing secret relationship between Lloyd George and Frances Stevenson which had existed since 1913, but

few others then shared the secret. It was during this year – 1921 – that Sylvester found himself privy to the intricate and highly confidential negotiations that eventually led to the celebrated Anglo-Irish treaty.

The following autumn Lloyd George fell from power (permanently as it so happened), and initially Sylvester remained at 10 Downing Street as a member of the secretariat of his successor as prime minister, the Conservative leader Andrew Bonar Law. During this brief interlude he retained his responsibility for matters relating to church patronage. In the autumn of 1923, however, as Lloyd George prepared to depart on a potentially lengthy speaking tour of the United States and Canada, to be accompanied by Dame Margaret and their daughter Megan, the need for a responsible, devoted and hard-working personal secretary was pressing. Frances Stevenson could not now possibly accompany Lloyd George as she had done in his days of power. At a stroke Sylvester was enlisted from the Cabinet secretariat and became Lloyd George's private secretary for the rest of his days.

Sylvester was probably glad to rejoin his old chief. As the sole member of Lloyd George's entourage to have remained, he would have felt out of place at 10 Downing Street under Bonar Law and Baldwin. His background was

**Sylvester and
Lloyd George
at the Genoa
Conference, 1922**

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highly unorthodox and he shared little rapport with the ex-public school, Oxbridge-educated élite which then dominated the higher ranks of the civil service. He insisted that LG pay him a one-off lump sum of £4,500 as compensation for forfeited civil service pension rights and demanded the substantial annual salary of £1,000. In 1926 this was further increased to £1,500, although in the exceptionally difficult economic circumstances of the summer of 1931 he had to accept a pay cut of 10 per cent.

From the outset Sylvester's duties were onerous and wide-ranging. First and foremost he was responsible for the day-to-day running of Lloyd George's London office, which at one time had a staff of more than twenty, including numerous researchers, shorthand typists and messengers. He also dealt, often on his own initiative, with his employer's massive postbag at a time when Lloyd George probably received more letters and telegrams than any other British politician. He acted, too, as LG's press officer and often handled many of the cases that came from Lloyd George's constituency, Caernarfon Boroughs. He made the practical arrangements for Lloyd George's numerous trips both within the United Kingdom and overseas.

As the 1930s ran their course, and his employer grew less and less inclined to make the tiring return journey from his Churt home to Westminster, Sylvester acted increasingly as his 'eyes and ears' in the House of Commons, even occupying his own seat in the officials' box beneath the public gallery. When political and diplomatic crises arose, he furnished Lloyd George with notably detailed memoranda that outlined the course of events as they unfolded. (These analyses, preserved among the Lloyd George Papers at the House of Lords, are a valuable resource for students of the inter-war years.) At the same time Sylvester was personally responsible for undertaking much of the research

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amongst original sources in preparation for the writing of the *War Memoirs* and for interviewing many former ministers of the crown and public servants. Many of these tasks were much facilitated by his fluent shorthand.

Sylvester was also responsible for making the arrangements for a large number of trips and voyages abroad during the 1920s and 1930s. There was regular motor-ing across Europe, there were cruises in the Mediterranean in a hired yacht, there were visits to Ceylon in 1931 and to South America. Lloyd George invariably insisted on luxurious arrangements for himself, his family, his guests and his servants. Poor Sylvester was always on the receiving end of his imperious employer's demands, at a mere whim, for a sudden departure, for a lightning reversal of well-laid plans (to go perhaps east rather than west), and to receive detailed news reports at every stage of the journey. These were the demands of an ageing autocrat whose whim was his command.

Although the relationship between Sylvester and Frances Stevenson was inevitably fraught with tension and unease from the outset, when Lloyd George was struck down by serious illness at the height of the political and constitutional crisis of the summer of 1931, it was he who was charged to telephone Frances with news of LG's condition whenever possible. He even succeeded in arranging a secret meeting between the two lovers on 4 August, only six days after Lloyd George's major surgery. In November he accompanied his employer on a recuperative voyage to Ceylon, when he was again entrusted with posting LG's letters to Frances and secretly buying presents for her and her little daughter Jennifer, who had been born in October 1929.

Sylvester inevitably became fully involved in Lloyd George's 'New Deal' campaign, launched in January 1935, and its propaganda body, the Council of Action for Peace and Reconstruction. The

following autumn – September 1936 – he was one of the small party that accompanied Lloyd George (the other members were his two politician children Gwilym and Megan, Thomas Jones CH, his doctor Lord Dawson of Penn, and the interpreter Dr T. P. Conwell-Evans) on his famous visit to Hitler at Berchtesgaden. The course of the visit and the discussions have been chronicled many times over. 'L. G.', wrote Sylvester, 'returned to the Grand Hotel in a state of great elation. It was clear to us all that he had been tremendously impressed by Hitler and to me, at all events, it seemed that he was spell-bound by Hitler's astonishing personality and manner. "He is indeed a great man", were his first words in describing Hitler. "Fuehrer is the proper name for him, for he is a born leader ... yes, a statesman".'

It was on this occasion that Sylvester took the famous film which underlined the cordiality of Hitler's welcome to Lloyd George, with the latter positively revelling in the warmth of the reception accorded him. Much of the film is also devoted to the extensive miles of motorway and other public works at the time under construction in Hitler's Germany. Sylvester also took a number of fascinating photographs, and a further film, probably taken by Major Gwilym Lloyd-George, showed a totally uninhibited Sylvester taking close-up shots of Hitler and Ribbentrop, placing his personal camera almost in their faces. For the duration of this historic trip, Sylvester, a committed photographer, had been entrusted with the custody of Lloyd George's new toy, a home movie camera. Sylvester was no respecter of persons, and the film taken by Gwilym shows him moving Hitler about from place to place, barking orders at him (to the utter amazement of SS guards and ministers alike) as he methodically shot his sequences to produce a striking film which had the added novelty of colour.'

During November 1936 Sylvester again accompanied Lloyd

George on a vacation to Jamaica, and in January 1938 he went to Antibes for the celebration of Lloyd George and Dame Margaret's golden wedding anniversary. He remained a first-hand witness to the strange, highly ambivalent, triangular relationship between Lloyd George, Frances and Dame Margaret. It is probably true that by this time Dame Margaret generally felt some relief at being saved from the onerous task of supporting and caring for a highly demanding, increasingly difficult, rapidly ageing seventy-five year-old man.

By the late 1930s Lloyd George had become ever more reluctant to leave his Churt estate. Sylvester provided him with a steady stream of reliable information on the course of political life and often prepared detailed memoranda or reports on key issues and events. Both Gwilym and Megan Lloyd George remained in the House of Commons representing Welsh constituencies, and also acted as sources of inside information for their father.

Sylvester's supporting role was of immense importance in the relationship between LG and Frances. He knew all the leading actors in the drama and kept their secrets. It was he who was responsible for co-ordinating the arrival of Dame Margaret and the Lloyd George children through the front door of their Surrey home – Bron-y-de, Churt – and the simultaneous departure of Frances through the back entrance. A similar bizarre course of events had happened at 11 and later 10 Downing Street almost a generation earlier. Sylvester was indeed the only individual who spanned both sides of Lloyd George's complex personal and family life. It is to his credit that he remained on good terms with each member of Lloyd George's immediate family while at the same time generally preserving the peace with Frances – at least until after Lloyd George's death.

He was also to play a vital role in the preparation and writing of the mammoth *War Memoirs*.

Together with another secretary Malcolm Thomson (who years later was to write the 'official biography' of Lloyd George, in collaboration with Frances), Sylvester, with extraordinary diligence and patience, located the necessary source materials, facts and figures demanded constantly by Lloyd George. He personally saw to it that the substantial archive of official papers retained (unofficially) by Lloyd George was competently collated and indexed by two clerks in the employ of the Cabinet Office. As the Second World War loomed, he provided Lloyd George with detailed memoranda outlining the diplomatic moves of the summer and early autumn of 1939. Once war had broken out in September, Sylvester remained LG's eyes and ears at Westminster and Whitehall, regularly preparing detailed reports on the course of political life in the face of his employer's reluctance to venture far from his home. As Lloyd George, panic-stricken by the activities of the Nazi bombers, retreated to his second home at Criccieth in north Wales, Sylvester bombarded him with a regular avalanche of alarmist reports designed deliberately to exaggerate the array of difficulties facing Churchill's government, in the hope that they might persuade LG to return to London to participate actively in the course of political debate. But to no avail: Lloyd George preferred to devote his now rapidly dwindling energies to the construction of air-raid shelters at Criccieth. Westminster politics held but little appeal.²

It was again Sylvester who was responsible for informing Lloyd George of the deterioration in the health of his wife Dame Margaret in the early days of 1941, and he, too, accompanied by Lord Dawson of Penn, made the long journey to Criccieth in appalling weather to attend the funeral. He was fully sensitive to the manifold tensions and frictions within the Lloyd George family, eventually serving as Lloyd George's best man when, at long last, he

married Frances Stevenson at a civil ceremony at Guildford Registry Office in October 1943. Sylvester had even pleaded with Lloyd George's youngest daughter Megan to accept the union for the sake of her father's happiness in his twilight years, but to no avail. Loyally, he remained in LG's employ until the end, long after it was to his personal advantage to do so.

He accompanied Lloyd George and Frances on their return to Criccieth in September 1944, and, having failed to secure a 'walkover' for his employer in the Caernarfon Boroughs at the next general election (widely expected to take place at the conclusion of hostilities), he set in motion the chain of events which eventually led to Lloyd George's acceptance of an earldom on 1 January 1945. So well known was he in the constituency that some local Liberal activists pressed for Sylvester's nomination for the impending vacancy in the Boroughs, but he was not adopted.³ It is very likely that his lack of Welsh roots and associations militated against his prospects of selection.

When Lloyd George died on 23 March 1945, Sylvester, now fifty-five years of age, suddenly found himself unemployed for the first time in his life. His first subsequent employment was on the staff of Lord Beaverbrook at the *Daily Express* on a three-year contract. During 1948–49 he served as an unpaid assistant to the then Liberal Party leader Clement Davies, whilst actively seeking another post. During the immediate post-war period he also made use of his copious diary material to piece together the semi-biographical volume *The Real Lloyd George*, published by Cassell and Co. during the autumn of 1947. The book's rather sensational title was not reflected in its contents. Much of it consisted of trivia. The main feature of historical interest was the revealing account of Lloyd George's second meeting with Hitler in 1936. Otherwise, some observers were nonplussed at the picture of Lloyd George that emerged compellingly from

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Sylvester in old age, as pictured on the cover of *Life with Lloyd George*

the book's pages. In his old age, Sylvester's employer had become a soured, autocratic and rather peevish old man. The proposal at about this time that Sylvester should be knighted in recognition of his distinguished role as Lloyd George's principal private secretary came to nothing, apparently squashed by Prime Minister Clement Attlee.

At this time Sylvester was rather licking his wounds at the somewhat abrupt, perhaps unexpected, end of his three-year contract, in the previous September, with Express Newspapers and his old ally Lord Beaverbrook, who now spent most of his time in Canada and the West Indies and who seemed to have given up on his British interests. Many of Beaverbrook's old associates were thus compelled to seek new outlets for their time and abilities. In preparation for such an eventuality Sylvester had purchased, during the Second World War, a substantial piece of agricultural land in Wiltshire. (He never told Lloyd George of his purchase, fearing a jealous backlash.) In 1949 he then made a conscious decision to leave political life and turn to active

farming. This he continued to do for the four decades of life which still remained to him, although during the 1970s advancing old age and its attendant infirmities compelled him to let the major farm at Chippenham to a tenant, while still, however, continuing to run his own smallholding almost until the end.

Material considerations had compelled Sylvester to follow this path. He certainly savoured political life and felt a heartfelt commitment to the Liberal Party. Hence his unpaid stint as assistant to Clement Davies in 1948–49 and his subsequent wish to continue serving the party in some paid capacity. But, although Clement Davies and the party's chief whip Frank Byers struggled valiantly to create a paid position for Sylvester, their efforts floundered on the party's abysmal lack of resources. Sylvester, sorely dejected that the Liberal Party appeared either unwilling or unable to make use of his administrative acumen, approached an array of contacts in political and public life, even within Buckingham Palace, but to no avail. At sixty years of age, he was consid-

ered unemployable. Thus he and his wife Evelyn sold their home at Putney, London and moved to Chippenham in Wiltshire.

His new role as a farmer pleased Sylvester and his wife Evelyn enormously. They began to grow extensive crops and to sell eggs on a substantial scale. They spent much of 1950 constructing modest farm buildings and grew to savour the delights of rural life. But Sylvester retained his interest in Lloyd George and in contemporary political developments.

In February 1962 his wife Evelyn, whom he had married in 1917, died after a long period of ill health and several lengthy stays in hospital. Although he felt her loss deeply, he bravely soldiered on alone. Within a month of her death he himself suffered a major heart attack, but made a remarkably good recovery. In January 1966, when he was seventy-six years of age, a suspected seizure deprived him of the use of his left arm. Re-learning to make full use of his beloved manual typewriter proved an uphill struggle, but he displayed a remarkable resilience. Surgery followed twice in 1967. 'I live a very busy life', he wrote to a friend three years later, 'alone with my memories of the one I loved dearly: I appreciate solitude: work is my middle name: I have to work, I have no pension.'⁴ By this time advancing years had compelled him to stand down as a JP for Wiltshire; he had been appointed in 1953 and then elected by his fellow magistrates to be their chairman in 1962. These positions had involved him in an array of judicial and administrative tasks throughout the county.

In May 1975 there appeared *Life with Lloyd George: the Diary of A. J. Sylvester, 1931–45*, meticulously edited by Sylvester's friend Colin Cross. The book was certainly much more revealing than *The Real Lloyd George* back in 1947, but was not in any sense sensational or likely to cause offence. Members of the Lloyd George family greeted with relief what they regarded as a much-needed corrective to the view

of Lloyd George propounded by Frances in her memoirs published in 1967 and in her diaries which had seen the light of day, edited by A. J. P. Taylor, in 1971. Both of these works, they felt, had presented a somewhat sugary, romanticised, idealised view of the author's relationship with Lloyd George and had shied away from discussing the many skeletons in the family cupboard, not least the affairs in which both actors had engaged. With the publication of Sylvester's volume, Dame Margaret Lloyd George, they felt convinced, had now been restored to her rightful place in history.

Sylvester survived for another fourteen years. His plan to publish a full-length autobiography, upon which he was actively engaged almost to the end of his long life, sadly never came to fruition. During the last years of his life he still typed on the same old upright Underwood typewriter which he had used in the Cabinet Office back in 1914, more than seventy years earlier. His interest in Lloyd George never diminished, and he derived a particular pleasure from the three volumes of biography written by his friend the late John Grigg. He delighted, too, in his 'appearance' in the notable television series *The Life and Times of Lloyd George*, broadcast by the BBC in 1981, a drama which attracted a huge audience and was highly acclaimed – as indeed had been the television film *The Very Private Secretary*, shown by the BBC in 1974. Sylvester, in extreme old age, had indeed become something of a celebrity and a household name throughout the land. In December 1982, now aged ninety-three, he participated extensively in a BBC Radio 4 profile of his life and career, *Principal Private Secretary*. Other broadcasts followed.

In other ways, too, Sylvester came to prominence. Forced to retire from the bench upon attaining the mandatory retirement age of seventy-five at the end of 1964, he turned to ballroom dancing as a new hobby and challenge. His home soon sported an array of

cups and medals which he had won, and eventually, at the grand old age of eighty-six, he secured a place in the *Guinness Book of Records* as the oldest competitive ballroom dancer in the world. At the age of eighty-seven, in 1977, he won with his partner the top amateur award for ballroom dancing, the 'Alex Moore'. All these achievements bore witness to a quite extraordinary intellectual and physical energy and vitality. At the same time he continued his farming and other outdoor pursuits as far as his health and energy allowed.

Declining health and loneliness, together with an element of hypochondria and self-pity, to some extent marred his last years when he was prone to exaggerate his health problems. Yet on good days he was still capable of writing long, cheerful letters and entertaining guests on a fairly lavish scale. He could still cook impressive meals and was an unfailingly engaging conversationalist with sparkling reminiscences. He eventually lived to within a month of his hundredth birthday. Only in his last weeks did his positive attitude abandon him; hospital visitors were generally warmly greeted. His death on 27 October 1989 robbed students of Lloyd George and his times of a wholly unique source of dependable information and anecdotal evidence.

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- 1 National Library of Wales (NLW), A. J. Sylvester Papers C77, William Lloyd-George to Sylvester, 30 March 1977.
- 2 See J. Graham Jones, 'A Lloyd George letter', *National Library of Wales Journal*, vol. XXXII, no. 1 (Summer 2001), 95–101; A. J. P. Taylor (ed.), *My Darling Pussy: the Letters of Lloyd George and Frances Stevenson, 1913–41* (London, 1975), 230–35.
- 3 On this theme, see J. Graham Jones, 'The Earl Lloyd-George of Dwyfor, A. J. Sylvester and the Caernarfon Boroughs vacancy of 1945', *Transactions of the Caernarfonshire Historical Society* 61 (2000), 111–33.

- 4 NLW, A. J. Sylvester Papers file C96, Sylvester to Guy [], 18 January 1969 (copy).

A note on sources

Much of the material on which this article is based is derived from the A. J. Sylvester Papers purchased by the National Library of Wales in 1990. Useful, too, is the smaller group of Frances Stevenson Family papers purchased by the National Library in 2000 and the massive archive of Lloyd George Papers in the custody of the Parliamentary Archive at the Record Office at the House of Lords. The seven Lloyd George archives at the Welsh Political Archive at the NLW are conveniently described in J. Graham Jones, *Lloyd George Papers at the National Library of Wales and Other Repositories* (Aberystwyth: the National Library of Wales, 2001). Sylvester's own books *The Real Lloyd George* (London, 1947) and Colin Cross (ed.), *Life with Lloyd George: the Diary of A. J. Sylvester, 1931–45* (London, 1975) are essential reading. Also helpful are Thomas Jones, *Lloyd George* (London, 1951); Frances Lloyd George, *The Years that are Past* (London, 1967); Peter Rowland, *Lloyd George* (London, 1975), probably the best single-volume biography of Lloyd George; A. J. P. Taylor (ed.), *My Darling Pussy: the Letters of Lloyd George and Frances Stevenson, 1913–41* (London, 1975); Mervyn Jones, *A Radical Life: the Biography of Megan Lloyd George, 1902–66* (London, 1991); Ruth Longford, *Frances, Countess Lloyd George: More than a Mistress* (London, 1996); and W. R. P. George, *88 Not Out: an Autobiography* (Pen-y-groes, 2001). A characteristically stimulating essay is Kenneth O. Morgan, 'Lloyd George and the historians', *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion* 1971, pp. 55–75. Obituaries to A. J. Sylvester were published in *The Times*, 28 October 1989, the *Daily Telegraph*, 30 October 1989, *The Guardian*, 30 October 1989, and *The Independent*, 30 October 1989.

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