

# THE REAL LLOYD

In 1947, Lloyd George's former private secretary, A. J. Sylvester, published *The Real Lloyd George*, an insider's look at Lloyd George as he really was. Although much of the contents of the book were pedestrian, it still remains an important addition to the huge Lloyd George bibliography, if only because of its author's closeness to his subject from 1923 until his death twenty-two years later, and his habit of keeping a full diary of the events which he observed at first hand.

**Dr J. Graham Jones** discusses the classic semi-biographical work, and assesses its impact and reactions to its contents and influence.



A. J. Sylvester and Lloyd George.

**A**lbert James Sylvester (1889–1989) experienced a quite unique life and career.<sup>1</sup> Born at Harlaston, Staffordshire, the son of a tenant farmer of very modest means, he was compelled by family poverty to leave school at just fourteen years of

age and secured employment as a clerk at Charrington's brewery.

During these years he attended evening classes in shorthand and typing, gained professional qualifications in these subjects and attained champion speeds in both skills. He then migrated to London in 1910, eventually setting

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up his own business as a freelance shorthand writer at Chancery Lane, before, early in the First World War, securing a position as a stenographer (shorthand writer) in the office of M. P. A. Hankey (later Lord Hankey), who was at the time Secretary to the Committee of Imperial Defence and thus at the heart of the Allied war campaign. This auspicious move was to launch Sylvester on his professional career. He became the first man ever to take shorthand notes of the proceedings of a cabinet meeting – a truly pioneering task.

In 1916 he became Hankey's private secretary, and in 1921 took up a similar position in the employ of David Lloyd George, then Prime Minister of the post-war coalition government. Although he initially remained at 10 Downing Street when his employer fell from power in the autumn of 1922, a year later Sylvester gladly rejoined his 'old chief' as Principal Private Secretary (a title upon which he himself insisted), remaining in this position for more than two decades until Lloyd George's death in March 1945.

In this privileged position his duties were necessarily wide-ranging, onerous and demanding. He ran Lloyd George's London office at Thames House, Westminster (which sometimes employed a staff of more than twenty individuals), he dealt, often on his own initiative, with his employer's massive postbag, he acted as LG's press officer and responded to most of the requests and demands which came from his constituency

of Caernarfon Boroughs. He also made the practical arrangements for Lloyd George's numerous trips overseas, and, increasingly as the 1930s ran their course, he was regularly in attendance at Westminster, acting as his employer's 'eyes and ears' in the House of Commons. Sylvester was also much involved in the research and preparation of the mammoth *War Memoirs* which occupied so much of Lloyd George's time during the long 1930s. He undertook some of the research himself, arranged for the classification of the massive archive of official and private papers which Lloyd George had accumulated, and conducted often lengthy interviews with many former ministers of the crown. Sylvester was also heavily implicated in his employer's complex, bizarre personal and family life, becoming closely involved with almost all members of the sprawling Lloyd George family, spanning three generations, and experiencing an especially delicate relationship with Frances Stevenson, LG's secretary, mistress and eventually (from October 1943) his second wife.

A. J. Sylvester remained loyally in Lloyd George's employ until the very end, long after it was to his personal advantage to remain in the position. After Lloyd George had married Frances, Sylvester often felt uncomfortable, even embarrassed, at the new situation which had arisen. Yet, when he displayed any inclination to depart for a new career, both Lloyd George and Frances, clearly considering him nigh-

on indispensable, begged him to remain in post. This was especially true during the autumn of 1944 after Lloyd George and Frances had returned to live in their new North Wales home, Ty Newydd, Llanystumdwy. Sylvester soon began to resent staying on indefinitely in this remote area and threatened to return to the south-east, feeling that he had been badly treated by his employers – who implored him to remain in their service:

Frances assured me that things would be all right for me later. (All she did was to double cross me, and she did NOTHING.) In this controversy LG himself said not a word to me: neither I to him. The whole attitude and atmosphere was: He must not be bothered about things like this<sup>2</sup>

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Lloyd George died at Ty Newydd on 26 March 1945. Sylvester, who had been present at the deathbed scene, suddenly found himself out of a job for the first time in his life, at fifty-five years of age. Within days of her husband's death, Frances told him in no uncertain terms that she had resolved to dispense with his services. The man who had been considered indispensable as long as Lloyd George lived was now, it seemed, suddenly dispensable. Any aspirations which Sylvester might reasonably have entertained that he might have been kept on to collaborate with the Dowager Countess (as she had now become) in perpetuating LG's good name and memory, and in working on the massive and

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important archive of papers left by him, had been cruelly and finally dashed. It should be noted, however, that he was given three years' salary, a substantial sum, in lieu of notice, and that he also inherited the sum of £1,000 under the terms of Lloyd George's will.

Sylvester's first subsequent employment after Lloyd George's death was on the staff of Lord Beaverbrook at the *Daily Express* on a three-year contract. From his earliest forays into British public life during World War One, Sylvester had been an instinctive, compulsive note-taker, a practice naturally much facilitated by his fluent shorthand. He wrote especially detailed notes on the seminal events which he witnessed, and at times he took to keeping a diary, albeit spasmodically. Many of those around him, especially the eminent newspaper proprietor Lord Riddell, impressed upon him that he should record in detail everything that Lloyd George did or said. The result was that certainly from 1931 onwards Sylvester went to great pains to chronicle his famous employer's doings and sayings. It became his regular pattern late at night to keep his diary in his meticulous Pitman's shorthand, partly to achieve speed, partly for security reasons. By the time of Lloyd George's death Sylvester's diaries were an immensely detailed, perceptive source of quite unique information about the former Prime Minister and his family, intermingled with much very personal material.

Once Lloyd George had died, Sylvester immediately began to make use of his run of diaries and the more modest archive of correspondence and papers which he had carefully squirreled away to pen a semi-biographical volume about his former employer with a view to immediate publication. He laboured away with extraordinary speed and diligence so that a typescript draft of the projected volume, provisionally entitled 'The Real Lloyd George', had been completed by May 1946. The original text

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ran to more than 200,000 words. A diary which its compiler had originally intended to be a private record was now to be made available to the public at large. Although Sylvester was himself a competent and accurate typist, his voluminous text was retyped by Alex McLachlan of St Leonards, Sussex, who made use of economy spacing so that it might be published as a single volume by Cassell & Co. the following year. Sylvester was himself a little unhappy with the proposed title 'The Real Lloyd George', fearing that it 'might possibly produce the idea that the book contains an attack which it does not'. Rather, he proposed 'Lloyd George as I Knew Him', 'The Lloyd George I Knew', or 'Lloyd George – a Close Up'. The publishers, however, preferred to stick with the original title.

As the publishers began to make arrangements for the publication of the volume, Sylvester forwarded a copy of the typescript to his employer Lord Beaverbrook in the hope that the press magnate might adhere to his previous half-promise that extracts might be published in the *Sunday Express* prior to the volume's appearance: 'The mere possibility of such a book has been kept secret. The reason is that I have competitors, and I mean to be first in the market.' He wrote to Beaverbrook:

In dealing with my late Chief nothing whatever has been said to belittle his great reputation, still less to attack him. There is nothing 'catty' in this book. He is shown as the greatest man I have known; a Genius, but, like us all, with weaknesses, and is therefore intensely human. An endeavour has been made to show him in all his moods. This has been done by reciting incidents and leaving them to produce their own effect.<sup>4</sup>

At about the same time copies were despatched to a number of literary agents in the United States in the hope of securing

simultaneous publication on both sides of the Atlantic. The text was, however, generally badly received by readers in the USA: 'The book is an intimate, gossipy record of political anecdotes and small talk centering around Lloyd George ... We don't believe there would be a large enough market for it to justify publication by us.'; 'The author intrudes himself into every situation, thus making them seem more trivial than they may actually have been.'; 'We old people may know of Lloyd George, but he is only a name to a great many and a name in not too good odor [*sic*] at that'.<sup>5</sup> It was quite clear that the idea of simultaneous publication on both sides of the Atlantic was a non-starter.

A little later Sylvester approached a number of editors of British newspapers requesting them to publish lengthy extracts from *The Real Lloyd George* as a series to whet the appetite of the post-war British public prior to the book's subsequent appearance as a monograph. The proposal was sympathetically considered, but eventually rejected, by the *Evening Standard* and the *Sunday Express*. As paper was in notably short supply during this period of severe austerity in the late 1940s, editors tended to shy away from entering into such a commitment, arguing the necessity of focusing on current affairs rather than material with a strong historical or personal slant – like the book in question. The author was especially hurt by the refusal of the *Sunday Express*, owned by his employer, to serialise the work: 'It grieves me a little that, after your kindness to me, it is not possible for some space to be found in your papers for something about L.G. to whom I know you were so personally attached. I am, too, in a personal dilemma, because my agents will obviously attempt to get this serialised elsewhere. What am I to do?'<sup>6</sup>

Within days his prophecy had come to fruition when he was informed by his literary agents that the first British serial rights of the volume had been purchased

by the *Sunday Dispatch* for £500.<sup>7</sup> Arrangements were then finalised for extensive extracts to be published in the *Dispatch* at the beginning of 1947 several months before its appearance as a monograph. Some publicity was also given to its publication as a book before the end of the same year.<sup>8</sup> ‘You must have worked very hard on it’, wrote Dr Thomas Jones CH, the former Deputy Secretary to the Cabinet, who was at the time also writing a full biography of Lloyd George, ‘& it is sure to meet with great success. For myself my pace is that of a septuagenarian & a slow one at that’. ‘I am waiting for your Life’, responded an appreciative Sylvester, ‘for you can give the Celtic touch, with your knowledge and experience of the subject which no other can excel’.<sup>9</sup>

As the *Sunday Dispatch* proudly announced its intention to publish extracts from the book beginning on 2 February 1947, Sylvester wrote reassuringly to Lady Megan Lloyd George, youngest daughter of the subject of his volume, still the Liberal MP for Anglesey, who was especially sensitive to her father’s reputation, memory and good name:

It is not a life. It is a portrait of the greatest and most remarkable man I have ever known, with all or rather some of his strength and some of his weaknesses. This I have done by way of relating events and leaving the reader to make up his own mind. It is intimate and dignified, and there is no ‘dirt’ in it.<sup>10</sup>

The *Dispatch* predictably gave the work maximum publicity, pointing to its unique originality and frankness and drawing attention to some of the more dramatic chapter headings:

- THE WOMAN WHO BOSSED LLOYD GEORGE
- LLOYD GEORGE AND HITLER
- LLOYD GEORGE’S MARRIAGE TO HIS

- SECRETARY AT THE AGE OF 80
- THE DIFFICULTY OVER LLOYD GEORGE’S TITLE

Outspoken extracts from the book were given advance currency:

Lloyd George gained a reputation as a great organiser. In some ways that reputation was justified, but in others it was far from justified. The plain unvarnished truth is, left alone he was a most unholy muddler. Left to himself he could not even dress without upsetting everything in the room and losing half of his clothing. Give him an important document and the next moment he had lost it. That did not trouble him. Someone could search for it.

And again:

Domineering as he was, there was one person who bossed him. She was the one woman who could and did put Lloyd George in his place. She was no respecter of the dignity of Cabinet rank or Premiership. To her, Lloyd George was just a spoiled child who needed correction and got it. Once he entered his private apartments at No. 10 he had to reckon with her.<sup>11</sup>

This was a reference to LG’s housekeeper, Miss Sarah Jones, who had served the family loyally for decades. The article about her – ‘The woman who bossed Lloyd George’ – was the second in the series, published on 9 February 1947, and provoked protests from the good lady herself (by then in the employ of Lady Megan Lloyd George at Brynawelon) whom Sylvester was then obliged to attempt to pacify: ‘I have nothing but the greatest admiration for Miss Sarah Jones, and have always said so, and have expressed that admiration in everything that I have written.’<sup>12</sup>

On the whole the extracts published in the *Sunday Dispatch* during the early months of 1947

were well received and increased admiration for Sylvester. Some critics vocally protested that Lloyd George should be judged by his many achievements rather than by his more dubious personal and family life: ‘I cannot see that your book can serve any other purpose than to grieve the relatives & friends of Lloyd George’.<sup>13</sup> This was, however, very much a minority viewpoint. Generally the articles which saw the light of day in the *Dispatch* whetted the appetite for the publication of the entire volume, which was scheduled to appear on 25 September.

The final published work ran to 322 pages and contained twenty-four chapters, some of them very brief, and nine photographs. It sold for eighteen shillings. The opening passages set the tone of the volume:

That David Lloyd George was a genius, few even among his most bitter enemies will deny. He had all the strength of genius, but like others equally gifted, he had weaknesses. In presenting this picture of David Lloyd George, let me say at the outset, he had no greater admirer or more loyal servant than I. But, my admiration and loyalty did not blind me during the thirty years that I was in almost daily contact with him as secretary and confidant, to the weaknesses in his make-up.

A strange complex character this Welshman, to my mind the greatest Parliamentarian since Pitt.

Dominating, impulsive, masterful, emotional to a degree, yet often peevish and childish, a man possessed of unbounded moral courage but strangely lacking in physical courage, a leader, great in conception, but in some ways lacking the power of execution and follow through; in big things a man of action and instant decision, but in smaller things, slow and hesitant. To him small matters were a bore and unworthy of his consideration. They could be left to others while he devoted his attention to the direction or conception of policy.

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Full of audacity and daring, a great showman, confident of his own judgment, in many things vain, able to sway the crowd even in the teeth of the most bitter opposition. Keen student of 'mob psychology', Lloyd George suffered from an inferiority complex, which in later life may possibly have accounted for his soured outlook, his suspicions and jealousies.

Throughout his life he preached democracy, but in his own life he practised autocracy. No greater autocrat than Lloyd George ever lived, yet he failed completely to realise he was an autocrat, just as he failed to realise that he had become soured and embittered.<sup>14</sup>

Generally, 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 which was genuinely informative and broke new ground. Otherwise, some observers were non-plussed at the picture of Lloyd George which emerged compellingly from a perusal of the book's pages. In his old age Sylvester's employer had become a soured, autocratic and peevish old man. Far from being the great organiser of social security after 1906 and the architect of victory of 1916–18, he had degenerated into an absolute muddler, constantly losing letters and frequently changing his mind at a mere whim, scarcely capable of even dressing himself without knocking things over and losing his clothes.<sup>15</sup> The following passage is fairly typical:

In his last years spent at Churt, he one day made up his mind that he would open all letters addressed to him and gave instructions that none was to be opened by the staff. The result was that a few letters were opened, but the vast majority remained sealed up. He would push some in his jacket pocket until it was so full that it could not contain another one,

then the contents of the pocket would be transferred to a drawer or desk and forgotten. Other letters, some opened, some not, would be dropped or left lying about in one room or another until the fit to dictate a reply to one or another of the opened letters seized him.<sup>16</sup>

In the first page of the last chapter, Sylvester wrote:

Whether presiding over an allied conference; or handling potatoes or apples at Churt; or whether just looking at his pigs or with his dogs, wherever that personality went newspaper men always found in him good copy. As the years rolled on, however, it was disappointing to find him using his great gifts in such petty ways. L. G. became sour. This, together with his intense jealousy of the 'other fellow', were more responsible than anything else for his never returning to power, and for his attitude in the last war.

As the war developed, he quarrelled or cold-shouldered one after another who did not agree with him, and became a very lonely figure. He had favoured a peace by negotiation in the early days of the war, as some others like him had also done. But the others, realising that was quite impossible of attainment, threw their energies into the national effort.<sup>17</sup>

The volume immediately attracted a great deal of attention, some of it complimentary. 'Much of the real Lloyd George is undoubtedly there', claimed the *Manchester Guardian*, 'What one fails to find is the whole Lloyd George. ... Undoubtedly it is when dealing with Lloyd George's defects, which he does fully, sometimes even harshly, that he gets close to the real Lloyd George'.<sup>18</sup> 'Mr Sylvester valiantly asserts the greatness of his master's genius', responded the *Daily Telegraph*, 'but all he succeeds in showing us comes very close to being a catalogue of his littleness. ... Many of the incidents related

are pointless and without significance, the anecdotes without wit.'<sup>19</sup> Writing in the *News Chronicle*, A. J. Cummings dismissed the volume not only as 'incomplete' but also as 'a superficial and somewhat distorted characterisation of a great man in which his peccadilloes are made to take on a solemn and exaggerated importance'.<sup>20</sup> Sylvester's own postbag predictably contained more fulsome communications.<sup>21</sup> Dr Thomas Jones, who was at the time himself writing a single-volume biography of Lloyd George (a work which eventually appeared in 1951), wrote to Sylvester, 'So long as interest is taken in L.G., your book will be indispensable to an intimate understanding of his character'. In reply, Sylvester explained that the volume had been prepared hastily, mainly between December 1945 and May 1946, usually written during weekends and late at night.<sup>22</sup> The book predictably sold quickly and was out of print within weeks of publication. A reprint was at the time impossible because of the extreme shortage of paper during the immediate post-war years.

There was inevitably a great deal of speculation over how Frances, the Dowager Countess Lloyd-George, would react to the publication and revelations of *The Real Lloyd George*. There had inevitably been some latent friction and antagonism between Frances and Sylvester ever since he had re-entered Lloyd George's employ in the autumn of 1923, imperiously demanding to be called 'Principal Private Secretary' (a title which implied a position somehow superior to hers), and insisting on a substantial pay hike and generous compensation for forfeited civil service pension rights. Aware of Sylvester's many virtues and loyalty to LG, she grudgingly accepted the situation, but remained rather peeved.<sup>23</sup> Since working for Lloyd George was a task at best fraught with difficulties, problems and tensions, the two collaborated reasonably well for rather more than three decades. Interviewed in 1984

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when he was ninety-five years of age, Sylvester recalled, 'Frances and I were colleagues for over thirty years. We worked together and never had any quarrel or disagreement of any kind. You had to work together in order to deal with a man like Lloyd George. He could have a filthy temper.'<sup>24</sup>

Beneath the surface, however, the relationship between them was far from harmonious. In her heart of hearts, Frances, although aware of Sylvester's strengths and usefulness, considered him to be vain, over-ambitious and touchy. Behind his back she would always laugh at him and his voice which had a strong nasal twang overlaying a marked Staffordshire accent and his tendency to rub his hands together rather subserviently which made him appear, in her view, a modern day Uriah Heep. Sylvester in turn accused Frances of being prim, stiff, and intent only on providing comfort for Lloyd George and personal self-seeking.

Once Lloyd George had died and Frances had rather unceremoniously dispensed with Sylvester's services just days later, the latent antagonism between them burst out into the open. When the articles derived from *The Real Lloyd George* were published in the *Sunday Dispatch* in the opening weeks of 1947, Frances's postbag contained a number of highly indignant letters: 'I am merely writing to say how furiously indignant I feel towards Mr Sylvester for his vulgar article on LG in the current *Weekly Dispatch*. It will be disliked by thousands & I really cannot think what *possessed* him. ... It always hurts when a faithful dog turns & bites his master.'<sup>25</sup> Another correspondent wrote to express his 'disgust at reading the extracts in the *Sunday Dispatch* from Mr. Sylvester's book and my utter disapproval of that newspaper in printing such rubbish'. Warming to his theme, he went on:

He was always a good friend to Mr Sylvester who would not dare to write as he does were David Lloyd George still with

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us and I can only put it down to a desire to get some money by writing sensational nonsense. To suggest that your husband was so friendly with Hitler is really a vile libel on a great British patriot and Mr Sylvester seems to forget entirely 1914-1918. The name of Lloyd George will live as long as this country has a history; his unworthy ex-Secretary and his wretched book will soon be forgotten.'<sup>27</sup>

There was particular annoyance at Sylvester's accounts of Lloyd George's visits to Hitler at Berchtesgaden in 1936 and his suggestion of LG's strong pro-Nazi sympathies at that time.

Frances, who had inherited her husband's massive archive of private and official papers at his death, had felt uneasy when she had read in the 'Books to Come' column of the *Times Literary Supplement* during January 1947 that Sylvester's book on Lloyd George was to appear that year, and instructed her solicitors to write to the author. 'No rights of Frances under LG's will have in any way been contravened' was Sylvester's dusty response.<sup>28</sup> She herself bit her tongue until the publication of the article on LG's visit to Hitler, a piece which provoked her to write to Charles Eade, editor of the *Sunday Dispatch*, a letter which was duly published in the paper the following Sunday:

Mr Sylvester, by exaggerating certain incidents, and ignoring others, presents a distorted view of events, as indeed he does of my husband himself. To give two instances, where I could cite many: he does not mention the fact that my husband took Hitler to task for his treatment of the Jews and attempted to influence him on that matter; nor does he mention the fact that my husband did not conceal from Hitler his opinion of Germany's action in breaking the naval clauses of the Treaty of Versailles. Mr Sylvester prefers to present a picture which would lead one

to imagine that my husband whole-heartedly approved and admired the Nazi policy and activities, which is the reverse of the truth.'<sup>29</sup>

Sylvester responded to this attack simply by stating, 'My account was written from day to day in Germany and is accurate'.<sup>30</sup> Generally Frances was, and indeed remained, highly upset by Sylvester's portrayal of her late husband which, she felt, focused unduly on his petty domestic failings and the awkward traits in his personality and tended to play down his undoubted charm, humour and many inspiring qualities.<sup>31</sup> On the whole, however, the alleged defects in Lloyd George's character revealed to the world in *The Real Lloyd George* were relatively innocuous, and the volume did not reveal a great deal about LG's secret personal double life. Its tone reflected a heartfelt indignation on the part of its author that he had not been asked either to write, or at least to collaborate in, the writing of Lloyd George's 'official biography' which was then being prepared by Malcolm Thomson.

In turn, one of the reasons for Frances's annoyance was that Sylvester's book had appeared before Thomson's. In press columns she condemned *The Real Lloyd George* as 'a most unfortunate and regrettable book'.<sup>32</sup> Even before the volume had appeared in book form, the extracts published in the *Sunday Dispatch* at the beginning of the year had provoked Frances to write to the paper condemning them as 'beneath contempt and beneath comment', while Sylvester was, she wrote, typical of 'a man who, after his master is dead, betrays intimate, if inaccurate details of his private life'.<sup>33</sup> In April Sylvester wrote to E. P. Evans, formerly Lloyd George's loyal political agent in the Caer-marfon Boroughs:

As for the Dowager, it seems she is a little annoyed. Of course! Because I have come out first. She made the initial mistake in

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1945 in not keeping her word with me. After LG's death she invited me to help in the writing of his Life. An eminent historian was to be chosen from a selected list. She was to write suggesting terms to me. At her invitation I actually started up negotiations with the Literary Agent. Only after many weeks did I hear that she had made other and different arrangements, and that I was to play no part.

She does not realize what a mistake she made. LG's great achievements will not live by merely building him up as a good and godly old man. He wasn't anyhow. Read my Boswellian account of him when the book is out, and then I shall welcome your reactions.<sup>34</sup>

Even when she penned her autobiography years later in the mid-1960s, Frances recalled *The Real Lloyd George* as 'a mean and unlovely book'. As it was her opinion that Lloyd George had made ample provision for Sylvester, 'It was not necessary for him to get money in that way'.<sup>35</sup> She had dismissed Sylvester from her employment shortly after Lloyd George's death, and there was little contact and no reconciliation between them thereafter. In conversations and in his correspondence Sylvester was apt to dismiss Frances as 'the Dowager'. He knew very well that she was often very short of money after 1945. Hence her decision to sell the massive archive of Lloyd George's papers to her near neighbour Lord Beaverbrook in 1948–49. Sylvester took pride in stories that, having searched high and low for mementos and souvenirs of her late husband, she banged on Beaverbrook's front door begging him to buy them. It was said that she even offered him her husband's empty wallet!<sup>36</sup>

Other members of the Lloyd George family were, however, much more conciliatory. Dick Lloyd-George, the second earl, who had been completely excluded from his father's last will and testament and was thus

planning to contest the will on the grounds that Frances had exercised undue influence over her ailing husband, fulsomely applauded *The Real Lloyd George* in a lengthy letter published in the *Sunday Dispatch* following the appearance of extracts from the book:

Mr Sylvester I have known for over thirty years, and no more loyal, efficient and hard-working private secretary could any Minister wish to have. Knowing his methods and his careful note-taking, I can vouch for the accuracy of everything you have printed.

To put it mildly, my father was, as Mr Sylvester says, 'a very difficult man'. You could never pin him down to anything, whether to a decision or an opinion – he was as slippery as an eel, more particularly during the last twenty-five years of his life. That is why this story of his wobbling about retiring from the House of Commons and accepting a peerage makes such extraordinary reading to those who knew the old Radical in the heyday of his great powers.<sup>37</sup>

Within months poor Dick had been forced to file for bankruptcy. Dick's son Owen, too, wrote appreciatively to Sylvester on reading the full text of the book in October:

I am truly glad that you took upon yourself the undoubtedly difficult task of producing an intimate picture of Taid [Grandad] for had you not done so I am sure that all of us who knew him and loved him, would have been the losers thereby in no small measure. The illustrations are so well chosen and I think the one of Taid standing on the bank above the [river] Dwyfor is quite remarkable.

I feel I must say that you have handled the family side of it with infinite tact and consideration, particularly in view of the current scope for treading on toes (!), and I cannot see personally what anyone can find fault with,

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though I gather that Frances is not inclined to fall in with this opinion. I am so glad that your book has appeared before any other less authoritative work, of which I suppose there will be a few in due course.<sup>38</sup>

'I understand that the Dowager [Frances] is annoyed that my book is out before hers', replied Sylvester, 'but I have found no one who blames me for that! As a boxer you will appreciate the importance of getting in the first blow!'<sup>39</sup>

*The Real Lloyd George* was by far the most successful book published by Cassell and Co. for many years. Within months of publication copies were no longer available, and Sylvester felt some frustration that the acute shortage of paper supplies experienced during the immediate post-war years, and problems with bookbinding, meant that the publishers failed to produce a second edition. But he was gratified by the generally fulsome reviews published in an array of newspapers and journals and by the substantial appreciative postbag which came in. Frances's opinions were very much a minority viewpoint.<sup>40</sup> Most members of the Lloyd George family, estranged from the Dowager Countess since LG's death, were pleased that Sylvester's volume had appeared before the so-called 'official biography', which was being written by Thomson, who had been chosen for the task by Frances personally, granted full access to the Lloyd George papers in her custody and worked with her full co-operation and support. His biography was not destined to appear until 1948.

In the wake of the publication of *The Real Lloyd George*, it was mooted that Sylvester might then be knighted in recognition of his long role as Lloyd George's principal private secretary. Among Frances's papers is a draft of a letter from Lloyd George to Churchill, probably written in December 1944 (shortly before LG was awarded an earldom) which includes the following

sentence: 'There has been on my conscience an earnest desire to obtain a knighthood, and that is for Sylvester, who has served me so devotedly for over twenty years'.<sup>41</sup> This approach evidently came to nothing; competition for knighthoods was especially strong during the war years, and Churchill generally felt that such an award required a particularly good reason. Nor was his successor, the Labour premier Clement Attlee, a close personal friend of Lady Megan Lloyd George, more accommodating. As he wrote to her in September 1948, 'I gather this has been considered before but was not approved; it was considered that his C.B.E. was an adequate recognition. I should like to know how you feel about the whole matter – in particular about his book about your father – which I do not think was very good.'<sup>42</sup> Attlee, clearly, did not like Sylvester personally, did not like his politics, and was not an admirer of his biography of Lloyd George. Sylvester did not let the matter rest there. During the 1950s he again initiated several attempts to secure a knighthood, using his links with Gwilym Lloyd-George, who again held cabinet office under Churchill and Eden, but once again without success.<sup>43</sup>

The year 1948 eventually saw the publication of the 'official biography' of Lloyd George by Malcolm Thomson. After LG's death Frances had given long and serious consideration to the choice of a biographer who was to enjoy full access to her papers and her assistance. (At the same time she was also anxious to set up a Lloyd George museum at Llanystumdwy to house the many 'freedoms' and other memorabilia which he had bequeathed to her.) Her choice of biographer fell on Thomson, an old acquaintance whom she liked and who had worked alongside her as one of the team of researchers responsible for preparing the *War Memoirs*. Thomson, born in 1885, had served as a Baptist army chaplain from 1917 until 1920, and had

earned his living as one of LG's team of secretaries from 1925 until 1940. He was, as a result, fully familiar with the extensive Lloyd George archives. In a rather lengthy, gushing introduction which she contributed to the volume, Frances wrote:

I make no apology for having asked him to write my husband's Life. He can claim that he has an intimate knowledge of his subject, first in London in the compilation of various books dealing with schemes for Social Reform; and later, while the *Memoirs* were being written, at Churt. He had the rare privilege of talking with L.G. day in and day out, of hearing from his own lips stories of the varied incidents of his life, of studying his character at first-hand, of gaining L.G.'s confidence over the work with which he was entrusted. I have an instruction from L.G. that if anything happened to him before the *Memoirs* were completed they were to be finished by Malcolm Thomson and myself.<sup>44</sup>

In his author's preface, Thomson claimed that he had won his spurs through working 'most of the time' as Lloyd George's 'literary secretary' from 1925 until 1940.<sup>45</sup> Sylvester was predictably incensed at the lavish claims made by Frances and Thomson, roundly condemning them to Dr Thomas Jones as 'poppycock. ... When it was once mooted L.G. got wild at the mere thought that HE should require a "Literary Secretary"! ... Between them [Thomson and Frances] they have presented to the public the L. G. the Dowager wanted to produce. That is scarcely the great dynamic figure you and I knew so well, and, with it all, thought so much of.'<sup>46</sup> He regretted that Frances had not commissioned an eminent historian to prepare a full-length biography of Lloyd George, a project in which he would gladly have participated.<sup>47</sup> At this time he 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 seemed to have given up on his British interests. Subsequently Sylvester worked for about a year – 1949–50 – as an unpaid assistant to Liberal Party leader Clement Davies before resolving to retire to Wiltshire to farm for the rest of his days.

Although much of the contents of *The Real Lloyd George* was pedestrian, it still remains an important addition to the huge Lloyd George bibliography, if only because of its author's closeness to his subject from 1923 until his death twenty-two years later, and his habit of keeping a full diary of the events which he observed at first hand. Although Lloyd George was a wily operator, Sylvester was privy to most of his thoughts and viewed his actions at close quarters. The book contained significant new information on, especially, the second LG visit to Hitler at Berchtesgaden in the autumn of 1936 and includes other fascinating side-lights and snippets of information. In 1975, Sylvester was to publish *Life with Lloyd George: the Diary of A. J. Sylvester, 1931–45* which comprised extensive extracts from his diaries, carefully edited by his friend Colin Cross who also contributed a valuable introduction to the book. The second volume was potentially more revealing and fuller than the guarded account given to the world in 1947. Even so, much fascinating material was excluded from both volumes, partly for reasons of space, partly in the name of discretion. The original full typescript texts of the diaries among the A. J. Sylvester Papers purchased by the National Library of Wales in 1990 are certainly worth consultation by the historian who can still unearth a mass of new information from this important source.

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## THE REAL LLOYD GEORGE

*Archive at the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth.*

- 1 A helpful, brief account of A. J. Sylvester's life and career is now available in John Grigg's article in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Vol. 53 (Oxford, 2004), pp. 566–67. See also J. Graham Jones, 'Keeper of Secrets', *Journal of Liberal History* 44 (Autumn 2004), pp. 24–29. A much fuller account by the same author will appear in the *National Library of Wales Journal* during 2006. There is also much helpful material in Colin Cross (ed.), *Life with Lloyd George: the Diary of A. J. Sylvester, 1931–45* (London, 1975), pp. 11–18 (introduction to the volume).
- 2 National Library of Wales (hereafter NLW), A. J. Sylvester Papers A57, diary entry for 31 October 1944. When he came to edit his diaries for publication in the early 1970s, Sylvester still felt bitter about Frances's failure to keep her promise to him in 1945: 'She did nothing to keep this promise!' (Cross (ed.), *Life with Lloyd George*, p. 333).
- 3 NLW, A. J. Sylvester Papers, file D6, Sylvester to 'Miss Thomson', 17 May 1946 (copy).
- 4 *Ibid.*, memorandum from Sylvester to Lord Beaverbrook, 15 May 1946. ('Confidential. Personal') (copy).
- 5 See the American readers' reports preserved *ibid.*
- 6 *Ibid.*, memorandum from Sylvester to Lord Beaverbrook, 26 July 1946. ('Confidential and Personal') (copy).
- 7 *Ibid.*, Sylvester to Miss Christine Campbell Thomson, 6 August 1946 (copy).
- 8 See e.g. the *Times Literary Supplement*, 21 December 1946.
- 9 NLW, A. J. Sylvester Papers, file D6, Thomas Jones to AJS, 23 December 1946; AJS to TJ, 29 December 1946 (copy).
- 10 *Ibid.*, Sylvester to Lady Megan Lloyd George, 20 January 1947 (copy).
- 11 *Sunday Dispatch*, 26 January 1947. These provisional chapter headings were not all retained in the final published volume.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 9 February 1947, p. 4; NLW, A. J. Sylvester Papers, file D6, Rev. R. G. Hughes, Portmadoc, to AJS, 17 February 1947, and AJS to RGH, 21 February 1947 (copy).
- 13 NLW, A. J. Sylvester Papers, Kathleen Harvey, South Shields, to AJS, 1 February 1947.
- 14 A. J. Sylvester, *The Real Lloyd George* (London, 1947), pp. 1–2.
- 15 See Sylvester's obituary in the *Daily Telegraph*, 30 October 1989, and Kenneth O. Morgan, 'Lloyd George and the historians', *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion* 1971, pp. 70–71.
- 16 Sylvester, *The Real Lloyd George*, p. 43.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 293.
- 18 *Manchester Guardian*, 2 October 1947.
- 19 *Daily Telegraph*, 26 September 1947.
- 20 *News Chronicle*, 25 September 1947.
- 21 See NLW, A. J. Sylvester Papers, file D6.
- 22 *Ibid.*, Thomas Jones to Sylvester, 18 September 1947; Sylvester to Jones, 18 September 1947 (copy).
- 23 See Ruth Longford, *Frances, Countess Lloyd George: More than a Mistress* (Leominster, 1996), p. 82.
- 24 *Wiltshire Scene*, 5 October 1984.
- 25 Longford, *op. cit.*, pp. 158–59.
- 26 NLW, Frances Stevenson Family Papers, file FCG2/17, Constance Miles, Guildford, to Frances Lloyd-George, 4 February 1947.
- 27 *Ibid.*, John P. Smart, Birmingham, to Frances Lloyd-George, 23 February 1947.
- 28 NLW, A. J. Sylvester Papers, file D6, J. E. Morris, Solicitor, Lincolns Inn, London WC2, to AJS, 17 January 1947; AJS to JEM, 20 January 1947 (copy).
- 29 *Ibid.*, Frances Lloyd-George to Charles Eade, [February 1947]. The letter was published in the *Sunday Dispatch*, 18 February 1947.
- 30 Cited in Longford, *op. cit.*, p. 172.
- 31 *Ibid.*
- 32 NLW, A. J. Sylvester Papers, file D6, Sylvester to Owen Lloyd-George (son of Richard, the second earl), 8 November 1947 ('Private') (copy); Sylvester to Lord Beaverbrook, 21 October 1947 (copy).
- 33 *Sunday Dispatch*, 18 February 1947. Letters sent to Frances concerning the publication of *The Real Lloyd George* and the serialisation of extracts in the *Sunday Dispatch* are preserved in NLW, Frances Stevenson Family Papers, file FCG2/17.
- 34 NLW, A. J. Sylvester Papers, file D6, AJS to E. P. Evans, 3 April 1947 ('Private and Confidential') (copy).
- 35 Frances Lloyd George, *The Years that are Past*, p. 213. Lloyd George had in fact left Sylvester the sum of £1,000 in his will in 1945. There is a copy of the will in the NLW, Frances Stevenson Family Papers, file FB1/1.
- 36 See Sylvester's obituary in *The Independent*, 30 October 1989.
- 37 *Sunday Dispatch*, 16 March 1947.
- 38 NLW, A. J. Sylvester Papers, file D6, Owen L-G to AJS, 19 October 1947.
- 39 *Ibid.*, AJS to Owen L-G, 8 November 1947 (copy).
- 40 *Ibid.*, memorandum from Sylvester to Lord Beaverbrook, 21 October 1947 ('Private and Confidential') (copy).
- 41 Cited in Longford, *op. cit.*, p. 159.
- 42 NLW MS 20,475C, no. 3165, Clement Attlee to Lady Megan Lloyd George, 4 September 1948 ('Confidential').
- 43 NLW MS 23,668E, ff. 174–76, AJS to Gwilym Lloyd-George, 22 January 1953 ('Private and Confidential').
- 44 Malcolm Thomson, *David Lloyd George: the Official Biography* (London, 1948), p. 9.
- 45 *Ibid.*, p. 32.
- 46 NLW, A. J. Sylvester Papers, file C94, Sylvester to Dr Thomas Jones CH, 4 January 1949 ('Personal') (copy).
- 47 *Ibid.*, Sylvester to E. P. Evans, 3 April 1949 ('Personal') (copy).

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## Gladstone's library under threat

by York Membery

Just about every modern US president established a grand library in their honour upon leaving office. However, the only such institution in Britain – the prime ministerial library founded by the Liberal leader and four-time premier William Gladstone – is under threat unless £500,000 can be found to undertake vital conservation work.

The St Deiniol's archive, in Hawarden, North Wales, houses one of the country's most important collections of books, dating back to the nineteenth century and beyond, and is the United Kingdom's foremost residential library. But unless essential

maintenance work is undertaken on the roof of the century-old library, the collection of some 250,000 historic and theological books, many of which are irreplaceable, could be put at risk. The cost of repairs and refurbishment is estimated at £1.3 million and while around half the money has been raised as a result of Lottery Heritage Fund and other grants, the library still faces a £500,000 shortfall.

This year therefore saw the public launch of the 'Gladstone Project' in a bid to raise the necessary money and safeguard the historic library for the nation. Charles Gladstone, the great-