

forgotten that he was also a real tennis champion. Robbins also defended Grey against criticism about not travelling or speaking foreign languages: pointing out that Grey was always at his desk, unlike modern foreign secretaries who 'travel all the time and do nothing'. Robbins stressed the importance of the influence on Grey of the historian and Anglican bishop Mandell Creighton, in particular his essay on the English national character and the sense of Grey being groomed as the embodiment of that character. In a cabinet with considerable Celtic influence, Grey was a very English figure and played up to the idea of the sensible Englishman. Professor Otte agreed with Professor Robbins about Grey's Englishness and stressed the influence of the imperialist and historian J. R. Seeley on Grey's generation – in particular the belief in the importance of British greatness and of Britain being different because it was a maritime power.

The symposium showed how vigorous the debate remains about Grey's policy and reputation. The overall impact of the contributions

might have left an open-minded audience member more sympathetic to Grey by the end of the day than at the start; however, he is destined to remain an elusive and controversial figure. It is unfortunate that the 1914 commemorations did not include more events of this nature, but it remains a considerable achievement to bring together such an impressive range of speakers for a one-day event. The organisers also deserve credit for making attendance free of charge and open to members of the public rather than restricted to policy-makers, parliamentarians and academics.

Podcasts of most of the papers given at the conference are available at: <https://audioboom.com/playlists/1265752-sir-edward-grey-and-the-outbreak-of-the-first-world-war-podcasts>

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REVIEWS

The view from Downing Street

Michael and Eleanor Brock (eds.), *Margot Asquith's Great War Diary 1914–1916: The View from Downing Street* (Oxford University Press, 2014)

Review by David Dutton

I CANNOT RECALL EVER having had such an entertaining and enjoyable hour's conversation with anyone before.' So wrote Sir Walter Runciman, father of the one-time Liberal cabinet minister of the same name, after a meeting in 1920 with Margot Asquith, second wife of H. H. Asquith, then still leader of the Liberal Party. She was, judged Runciman, 'a most likeable person, perfectly frank and, I think, taking into consideration her

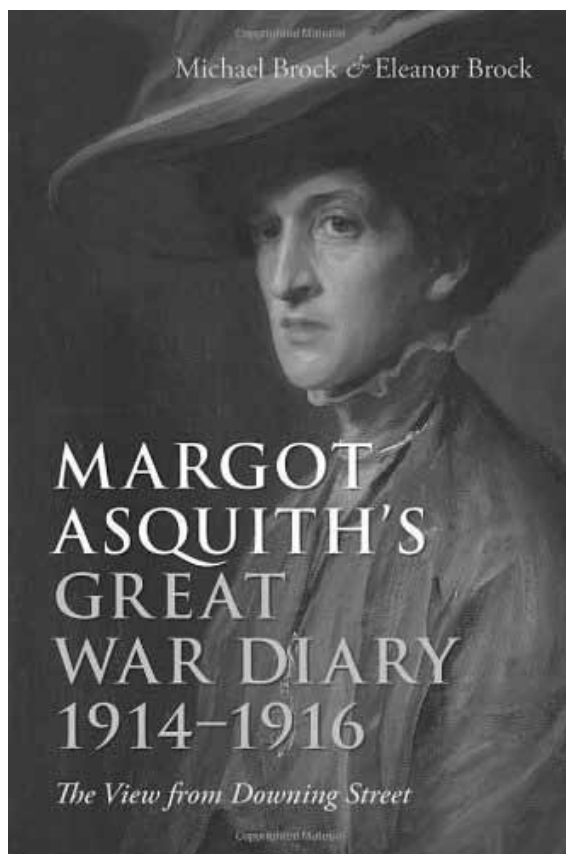
characteristics, much misjudged'.¹ Over the years that followed, Sir Walter would have cause to modify his opinions, not least when Margot wrote to suggest that he might finance the purchase of a new car for her personal use, as an alternative to her husband's Rolls Royce, and when in 1926 she suggested that Walter junior could become Liberal leader in succession to her husband and 'Prime Minister whenever he likes', providing father and son

were prepared to 'put up a quarter of a million'. Quite how this transaction was to be put into effect was not explained, but Sir Walter's assessment on this occasion of 'a clever incompetent person without any sense of proportion' does not seem wide of the mark.²

What had charmed Sir Walter in 1920 was a preview of the first volume of Margot's *Autobiography*, published later that year. She had, she admitted, 'been discreet about Downing Street'.³ Even so, what she did write offended many. 'People who write books ought to be shut up', suggested George V in evident perturbation at the prospect of Margot's forthcoming publication.⁴ The king's concerns appear to have been justified. He 'let fly about Margot', recorded Lord Curzon. 'He severely condemns Asquith for not reading and Crewe for reading and passing her scandalous chatter.'⁵ What His Majesty would have made of Margot's unexpurgated wartime diaries, edited now by Michael and Eleanor Brock, whose earlier collaboration made Asquith's revealing letters to his young confidante, Venetia Stanley, generally available, we can only surmise.

This book, covering the period between the outbreak of war and her husband's loss of office in December 1916, is certainly of more value to historians than the memoir published nearly a hundred years ago. It has the merit of immediacy, with no evidence that the author attempted to revise her contemporary judgments in the light of later reflection, though she did occasionally add marginal comments at a later date. Furthermore, the Brocks reveal the cavalier way in which Margot used her diary as an aide-memoire in the writing of her autobiography. But an uneasy question remains about the diary's worth as an historical source. Scholars who have worked on the Liberal Party's history in this period, even if they have not used the diaries themselves, will be familiar with Margot's style. Her letters, often scribbled in pencil, pepper the surviving private collections of her husband's political contemporaries. The diary is written in the same breathless manner, with passion as evident as punctuation is absent. Margot frequently employed underlining – one, two

The diary is written in the same breathless manner, with passion as evident as punctuation is absent. Margot frequently employed underlining – one, two or even three lines – to drive home her emphasis and sometimes her indignation.



or even three lines – to drive home her emphasis and sometimes her indignation. But no one can read her words in the belief that here was a sound and balanced observer of the political scene of which her marriage to Herbert (or Henry, as she invariably called him) Asquith made her an intimate witness. The Brocks' own assessment that she was 'an opinionated egotist, often inaccurate, the victim of flattery, and occasionally prone to fantasy' is difficult to dispute. But their further contention that such disadvantages are outweighed by her advantage – 'she was closer to the Prime Minister, and thus to the centre of events, than anyone else' – is more open to challenge, not least because she was so often mistaken in her assessments of her husband and his qualities (p. vii).

Most notably, Margot failed to appreciate the erosion of Asquith's position as a wartime leader, still less his inherent disqualifications for such a role. She clearly took a fairly dim view of the majority of her husband's political contemporaries, particularly – though not exclusively – those in the Conservative Party. Her dismissal of the Tory leader, Bonar Law, was especially brutal: 'He is cunning, cautious and shallow', judged Margot;

'very quick, hopelessly uneducated and naïf' (pp. 31–2). 'No cad that was ever bred could have made a viler speech' than Law's on the government's temporary resolution of the Irish problem in September 1914 (p. 38). His inclusion in the coalition government after May 1915 clearly pained her: 'I could not help watching Bonar Law, and feeling how tragic it was for Henry to see this third-rate man, who had called him "liar", "cheat", "fraud" – every name under Heaven – sitting quietly there, wondering which of his followers he would impose upon Henry' (p. 123). Indeed, Margot clearly held that the formation of the coalition involved the inclusion of a lesser breed inside the British government. 'What have we gained by having Lansdowne?' she asked herself, '(charming, courtly, elderly, barren person); Bonar Law? (provincial, ignorant, unreliable); Austen Chamberlain? (sticky and correct).'

In contrast to such political pygmies, Asquith's stature was, in Margot's eyes at least, almost heroic. 'Henry knocks all the others into a cocked hat', she wrote in November 1914. 'His calm, sweetness of temper, perfect judgment, sympathy, imagination and un-irritability have amazed me. I feel proud of being near so great a man' (p. 49). 'Henry was born for this war', she noted just over a year later (p. 222). And as late as the end of July 1916, she was convinced that 'Henry's position in the country and in the cabinet [was] stronger than it has ever been' (p. 273). The problem is that such assessments are a long way from those of many, perhaps the majority, of the prime minister's contemporaries and of subsequent historians. Margot's reaction to her husband's address to the parliamentary Liberal Party, explaining the formation of the first coalition, well illustrates the point. He 'made the most wonderful speech he ever made in his life', insisted the ever-loyal Margot. When he had finished, 'there was not a dry eye, he had not only melted but moved all his men to the core' (p. 125). Richard Holt, MP for Hexham, was among those who were less enthusiastic: 'The PM attended an impromptu meeting of Liberal members ... and alleged foreign affairs of an unrevealing character as his reason in a speech impressive

but not ultimately convincing.' Within days, Holt was writing of his suspicions of a 'dirty intrigue'.⁶

Such alternative opinions of Asquith cannot be ignored. Lady Tree's throwaway question to the prime minister – shrewd jibe or merely a joke – 'Do you take an interest in the war?' may have been extreme (p. c). But contemporary observers and later commentators have judged that Asquith, often befuddled by drink, probably failed to devote himself with sufficient energy to the national crisis and certainly did not convince others that he was doing so. Margot was no doubt sincere in her belief that her husband was irreplaceable. But there was also a financial dimension in her concern at the prospect of leaving Downing Street. World war had not curbed her notorious extravagance. 'If the Gov. is going to break', worried Margot, 'Where H., Puff, Eliz. and I would live ... I've never had less than 16 servants, sometimes more, and my secretary Miss Way' (p. 229). On another occasion she expressed the hope that, after the war, Asquith might be given Walmer Castle as a residence for life, together with a generous pension. 'He deserves everything the King can give him: of this there are not two opinions' (p. 100).

This book is full of minor gems, throwing light on the extraordinary domestic bubble within which the wartime premier operated, not least Margot's outrageous attempts to influence the conduct of many of her husband's ministers. Her narrative, however, does not always serve to clarify. The account of Asquith's final removal from Downing Street is particularly confusing. 'I have no time for anything! I can't write up my notes, so jump from date to date', she confessed, and there is mention of a separate volume, which has not survived, containing 'every fact of the crisis' (pp. 311, 297). The Brocks' editorial work is of a high quality, though one or two mistakes have crept in. Jacky Fisher resigned from the Admiralty in May 1915, not March, and it was Prussian, not Russian, militarism that Asquith condemned in his Guildhall speech in November 1914 (pp. 99, 302). More seriously, Gladstone's first Home Rule Bill met its fate in the Commons, not the Lords

as suggested. But, if we cannot necessarily accept Margot's self-assessment that she was 'a sort of political clairvoyant' (p. xlvi), there can be no doubt that the editors have provided us with a rollicking good read!

David Dutton's most recent book is Tales From the Baseline: a History of Dumfries Lawn Tennis Club (2014) – a new departure for a student of twentieth-century British politics.

- 1 Elshields Tower, papers of Sir Walter Runciman, Sir W. Runciman to W. Runciman, 28 April 1920.
- 2 Ibid., Sir W. Runciman to W. Runciman 6 November 1926.
- 3 Ibid., Sir W. Runciman to W. Runciman 28 April 1920.
- 4 H. Nicolson, *King George V* (London, 1952), p. 342.
- 5 K. Rose, *George V* (London, 1983), p. 376.
- 6 D. Dutton (ed.), *Odyssey of an Edwardian Liberal* (Gloucester, 1989), p. 38.

Assessing Edward Grey

Michael Waterhouse, *Edwardian Requiem: A Life of Sir*

Edward Grey (Biteback 2013)

Review by **Dr Chris Cooper**

THE HISTORICAL REPUTATION of Sir Edward Grey (1862–1933) stands remarkably high for a man whose efforts to maintain European peace as foreign secretary (1905–1916) failed in August 1914 with catastrophic consequences. Neville Chamberlain, whose similar efforts failed twenty-five years later, has not been afforded such a sympathetic hearing. Michael Waterhouse's biography of Britain's longest continuously serving foreign secretary reinforces the conventional view of Grey: he strove admirably to avert the seemingly unstoppable drift to war. He is depicted as 'a first-class Foreign Secretary' who 'prepared his country for the inevitable' (p. 375). While Grey was less flamboyant than Liberal contemporaries such as Winston Churchill and David Lloyd George, he is well remembered. The famous words he uttered after the House of Commons had in effect sanctioned Britain's entry into war, 'The lamps are going out all over Europe. We shall not see them lit again in our lifetime', have been grafted on to Britain's national consciousness. This was signified in August 2014, on the centenary of Britain's declaration of war, when the lights went out across the UK and candles were lit in their place.

With the last biography of Grey being published four decades ago, a fresh study taking account of historiographical developments and

drawing upon fresh sources would be most welcome. But this reviewer was disappointed. The book offers little beyond the existing knowledge of Grey. Many readers will understandably be interested in his political career and diplomacy. Yet fishing adventures and birdsong repeatedly interrupt the narrative of important events in European history. Grey's attachment to the country and wildlife should really have been dealt with separately and more briefly.

Edward Grey was drawn from Whig stock. His most famous ancestor was the second Earl Grey, prime minister when the 1832 Reform Act was passed. Grey entered parliament in 1885 and, after establishing himself on the imperialist wing of the party, he became Lord Rosebery's junior minister at the Foreign Office in 1892. Yet Waterhouse suggests that Grey was always a reluctant participant. He served in several governments only out of a sense of duty. Nonetheless, with the foreign secretary in the Lords, Grey explained the government's policy and answered questions in the elected chamber. He had, therefore, assumed an important role and he filled the post with distinction. It was in this capacity that he made his celebrated declaration in 1895, outlining British interests on the River Nile to deter French expansionism. Before the turn of the century William Harcourt, the

outgoing Liberal leader, described Grey as 'the young hope of the party' (p. 72).

Though embarrassing party leader, Henry Campbell-Bannerman, over his very public support for the Boer War, and being one of the 'Relugas Compact' conspirators, Grey's standing in the Liberal ranks ensured that he was offered the post of foreign secretary shortly before the party's election landslide of 1906. Grey accepted and retained the post until 1916. His tenure of the Foreign Office was characterised by closer relations with both France and Russia and a failure to achieve an understanding with Germany. After outstanding colonial disputes between Britain and France had been settled, Grey, who was given great latitude under both Campbell-Bannerman and Herbert Asquith, emerged as one of the foremost champions of the Anglo-French entente. Though he inherited this policy from his Conservative predecessor, he pursued it vigorously. He sanctioned formal military conversations with the French, thereby enhancing Britain's moral commitment to them whilst managing to cultivate crossbench support for his approach to foreign affairs.

Grey's previous dealings with German leaders bolstered his desire for an Anglo-French rapprochement. Convinced that 'morals do not count' in German diplomacy (p. 146), he refused to threaten a blossoming friendship with France for an agreement with Germany which might have proved worthless. He began warning the German ambassador about Britain's likely participation in a Franco-German war in defence of France as early as January 1906. During the Moroccan Crises of 1905–6 and 1911 Grey threw diplomatic support behind the French, thereby strengthening the entente. Linked to the Anglo-French accord was Grey's advocacy of closer relations with Russia, particularly granted the two powers' unresolved colonial issues. This was a formidable task, not least because many Liberals loathed the autocratic tsarist regime. Nonetheless, an entente was signed with Russia in 1907. Grey then attempted to reach an agreement with Germany. He was, however, thwarted in his attempts to slow the pace of German naval construction and refused to

Waterhouse is too ready to defend a man he clearly admires and is unwilling to mete out criticism.