

Reviews

A fascinating 'Appendix' (pp. 852–59) is a notably engrossing read, providing statistics on the age of each prime minister on first attaining the office, the dates of each successive ministry, detailed to the exact day, and the total time which each spent in the prime ministerial office. Details of spouses and offspring are also included in this section.

Sir Robert Walpole's record of 20 years and 314 days in prime ministerial office still, wholly predictably, stands, and is indeed highly likely to do so. Of the twentieth-century premiers, Andrew Bonar Law (209 days in 1922–23) and Sir Alec Douglas Home (362 days in 1963–64) were the only two premiers to serve in office for less than a year in the top job. Lady Thatcher's extremely lengthy 11 years and 209 days in office ('I want to go on and on and on', she once said!) was the lengthiest prime ministerial term of office since Lord Liverpool (14 years, 305 days) in 1812–27, before the passage of the First Reform Act in 1832. Lord Liverpool was aged just 42 years and 1 day when he first took up office, but Tony Blair and David Cameron were only a little older. By far the youngest of the lot, of course was William Pitt the Younger, aged just 24 years, 205 days, in 1783. It would have been interesting and helpful if the author had added the age of each PM at the time of his death. The oldest, in fact, was James Callaghan, 93 years and 10 months at the time of his death in 2005, but he was run close by Harold Macmillan and Sir Alec Douglas Home, both aged 92.

Some minor errors, inevitably, have crept into the text. Jennifer Longford, Frances Stevenson's daughter, was in fact born in October 1929, not 1927 (p. 553). Twice in fact (pp. 553 and 857), she is described as Lloyd George's natural daughter as if this were beyond challenge, but it is highly possible that she was the biological daughter of Colonel T. F. Tweed who had an intimate relationship with her mother at the very time of her conception. And James Callaghan became prime minister in April 1976, not 1978 (p. 858).

Given the format of the volume, and the constant necessity to compress and over-simplify the material, it is inevitable that some possible misjudgements have crept into the book. 'LG', we are told in no uncertain terms, 'took to ministerial life like a duck to water' (p. 555). In fact, he faced serious teething problems at both the Board of Trade and the Exchequer, although he eventually

achieved a great deal at both of course. The infamous Lloyd George Political Fund is described as 'a private fund entirely controlled by himself' (p. 565), but its control was, at least nominally, in fact vested in a group of trustees or scrutineers.

The chapter on Stanley Baldwin, too, contains some overstatements. Baldwin did not singlehandedly 'destroy one coalition government under Lloyd George' in 1922 (p. 592), although he did contribute to its downfall at the Carlton Club meeting. And it seems a gross exaggeration to claim that, had Baldwin not insisted on pursuing his annual vacation at Aix-les-Bains in the high summer of 1931, then the idea of forming a national government would 'probably' 'have been nipped in the bud' (pp. 592–93). And Baldwin's key role in bringing about the enforced abdication of King Edward VII in December 1936 is certainly underplayed at the end of the chapter (p. 594).

Again, Dick Leonard is rather harsh on the deceased Labour Party leader John Smith – 'He lacked Blair's charisma, and would not have gone nearly so far in reforming the Labour Party. ... Had he survived, the Tories might well have done rather better' in the general election of May 1997 (p. 793). But would

John Smith have colluded in rather underhand fashion with George W. Bush to take the country into the Iraqi War and lived to pay the price? Scarcely believable.

Although the reviewer might well cavil at the total lack of illustrative material in the book, it is an engrossing read, and the general standard of accuracy is very high indeed throughout. At £20 for a paperback edition, it is also very reasonably priced for a tome running to 881 pages which must have tested the skill of the bookbinders to its limits. The hardback edition, published in 2014, had a price tag of £140 and included photographs of the premiers. Leonard's survey generally lacks an analytical dimension, but it provides the best general account we have of the fifty-two men and one woman who have held the office of prime minister. As such, it is a considerable achievement, which should appeal to a wide readership. It will serve its purpose well for a long while, although a new Tory prime minister is being selected as I write these very words.

Dr J. Graham Jones was formerly Senior Archivist and Head of the Welsh Political Archive at the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth.

Saint or devil?

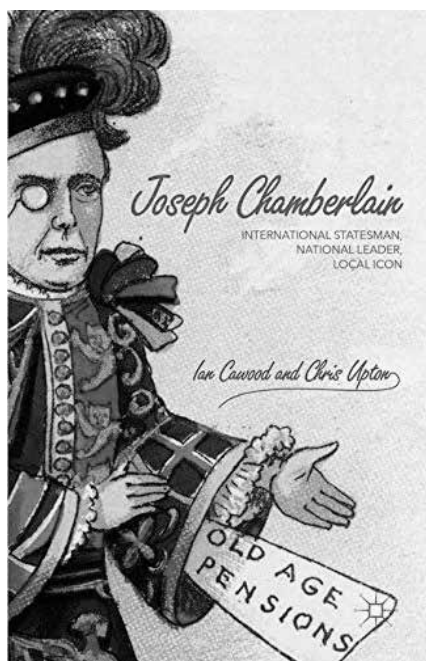
Ian Cawood and Chris Upton (eds.), *Joseph Chamberlain International Statesman, National Leader, Local Icon* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016)

Review by **Tony Little**

AT THE LAUNCH of this collection of essays in Portcullis House, Westminster, Ian Cawood arranged for spokesmen from the three major political parties to comment on the legacy of Joseph Chamberlain. Gisella Stuart, the Labour MP for Chamberlain's old Birmingham seat, spoke of the tradition by which she received orchids on her election in his memory. For the Conservatives, Lord Carrington spoke of Chamberlain's continuing influence on the organisation and philosophy of his party. But for the Liberal Democrats, Lord Beith drew a sharp distinction between Chamberlain's legacy of municipal reform in Birmingham, still an inspiration to many Liberals, and the destructive impact on both the Liberal and Conservative parties of

Chamberlain's ruthless crusading for his policies. No one else can equal his record of splitting two opposing major parties. Though he never led one of the great parties and never held a more important office than Colonial Secretary, it would be hard to find more than a handful of Victorian politicians better remembered.

Remembered but not necessarily revered. Ian Cawood quotes from Chamberlain's first biographer Alexander Macintosh that contemporaries were divided as to whether Joe was 'a saint or a devil' (p. 229). Even within this collection, Thomas Otte draws attention to his record of 'division and destruction' (p. 20), and the editors quote approvingly from Beatrice Potter (later Webb): 'no one trusts him, no one likes him, no one believes in him' (p. 205). Why?



Chamberlain was a self-made businessman, whose wealth derived from a screw manufacturing company, now part of GKN, and was a founding investor in Lloyds Bank. When his wealth was sufficient he began to play a part in Birmingham local government and in the campaign for state primary education. With colleagues, he pioneered mass membership party organisation both on a local and national basis. He exploited his local fame as mayor of Birmingham to become Liberal MP for the town in 1876 and was quickly elevated to Gladstone's second cabinet.

Here his promotion of extensive government intervention for the benefit of new, more working-class, voters elevated him to the most prominent radical. Splitting with Gladstone over devolution for Ireland, he became increasingly committed to imperialism, accepting office in a Tory–Liberal Unionist coalition government in 1895. His restless, inventive mind saw the opportunity to combine imperial ambition with the creation of a welfare state. Imperial tariff preference would knit together the empire and provide the funds for old age pensions. But the policy split the Tories and his campaign for it divided the nation, resulting in the Liberal landslide of 1905 and, for Chamberlain, the stroke that, in 1906, ended his career. Both his sons Austen and Neville led the Conservative Party and maintained effective control of Birmingham for their lifetimes. In the crisis of the Great Depression, the Chamberlainite Tory Party ended free trade.

The centenary of Chamberlain's death inspired a conference, partly sponsored by the Liberal Democrat History Group, held at Newman University in 2014, from which these essays derive. As the title suggests, the volume covers Chamberlain the imperialist, Chamberlain the national politician and Chamberlain's relations with his local base. It is supplemented by a preface from Lord Beith, a framing essay by his leading biographer, Peter Marsh,¹ a concluding assessment by Ian Cawood and a valuable extensive bibliography. No such collection can give comprehensive coverage of a whole life and this one gives little on the private man or on the political organiser, but it can hope to supplement the biographies by a focus on the indicative details and contexts a biographer, even one with as much space as Peter Marsh, cannot give. Perhaps, in due course, someone with Ian Cawood's understanding of the campaigning culture of the late Victorian period will present us with a good modern history of the National Liberal Federation.

A particularly valuable part of the book is the portrait painted of Chamberlain's personal relationships, with his colleagues, with his rivals and with his acolytes. These sketches humanise the idealised picture Garvin sought to create in the 'tombstone' biography. Roland Quinault presents a favourable reassessment of the relationship with Gladstone based on the undoubted courtesy shown in the correspondence between the two and the admiration of Chamberlain for Gladstone's many talents. But does he underestimate Chamberlain's impatience with the aging statesman on one side and Gladstone's dislike both of Chamberlain's less than gentlemanly political professionalism and Chamberlain's preference for expanding central government intervention in day to day lives?

The interrelationships with George Dixon, portrayed by one of his descendants, James Dixon, and Leonard Courtney, considered by Eleanor Tench, play up Chamberlain's warts rather than disguise them. Dixon was a fellow Brumagen, a fellow Liberal organiser and a fellow advocate for education but that did not prevent Chamberlain elbowing him aside when he became impatient to enter parliament. Like Chamberlain, Courtney was a radical from a middle-class background, with imperialist tendencies, who became a Liberal Unionist. He was an enthusiast for proportional representation, related by marriage to

Beatrice Webb and a friend of the Fawcetts. Yet Chamberlain helped thwart his efforts to become Speaker and thereafter the relationship between the two deteriorated progressively, breaking down completely over Courtney's opposition to the Boer War. Chamberlain had little tolerance for colleagues who had served their purpose or who were insufficiently subservient.

The story of Chamberlain and Birmingham's municipal socialism, or more properly municipal capitalism, has been widely celebrated. Joe's plan to take over the local gas and water companies to provide the funds to rebuild the city centre makes a best-practice case for businessmen in politics. Andy Vail has provided a valuable service in the essay outlining the subtleties of the Nonconformist theological context for the approach that Chamberlain and his council colleagues adopted; while Cawood and Upton's own essay draws attention to the vibrant, if not always thriving, regional satirical journals alternately damning and supporting 'King Joseph'. The depth of illustrative resources is one of the strengths of Cawood's work more generally and here the editors do not disappoint in the novelty of local cartoons to set against the almost clichéd inclusion of the same few *Punch* and *Vanity Fair* caricatures seen elsewhere. They analyse the way in which these squibs were produced and beg the question as to whether other regional centres might provide similar riches. They also point out the way in which the Birmingham cartoonists both migrated to national fame and anticipated in the local papers Joe's iconography of the national press.

Although treated first in the book, Chamberlain was only truly an international figure in the final part of his career when he rather surprisingly joined Lord Salisbury's government at the Colonial Office rather than in a senior domestic office. Thomas Otte gives a valuable, penetrating overview of Chamberlain's engagement with the wider world, which predates his assumption of cabinet office but I was more intrigued by the other contributions which give us two very different perspectives from inside colonies. Jackie Grobler discusses Chamberlain's visit to South Africa in the aftermath of the Boer War. Chamberlain's part in the instigation of the war has always been deliberately obscured and conclusions about his role marred by partisanship both at the time and subsequently. What makes Grobler's essay

of interest is its focus on Chamberlain's failure to understand the antipathy of the defeated leaders to the Colonial Secretary's 'conciliatory' efforts build a new dispensation that largely excluded the Boers. Tom Brooking gives a very different view in outlining Chamberlain's friendship with Richard Seddon and the way in which both domestic and imperial policies developed interactively between the colonies and the mother country. Seddon was an autodidactic mechanical engineer and later populist prime minister of New Zealand. He visited Britain in 1897, the year of Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, and the two men exchanged correspondence thereafter. Seddon was a pioneer in his own country for social security and an advocate for closer imperial relations, consequently an ally for Chamberlain over imperial preference, though unfortunately for Joe, in a minority even among the self-governing colonies.

As Oliver Betts makes clear, tariff reform was a tricky sell even for as charismatic a politician as Chamberlain. Chamberlain proposed imperial preference not only as a tool for fusing the empire together but also as the answer to the worries about the advance of Germany and America as industrial nations and the means to fund old age pensions. As usual, Chamberlain had spotted a salient question but the electorate overwhelmingly judged that he had chosen the wrong solution. His Liberal opponents bogged him down in arguments about the costs of everyday shopping – the Big vs the Small Loaf. If the losers from the policy were obvious and

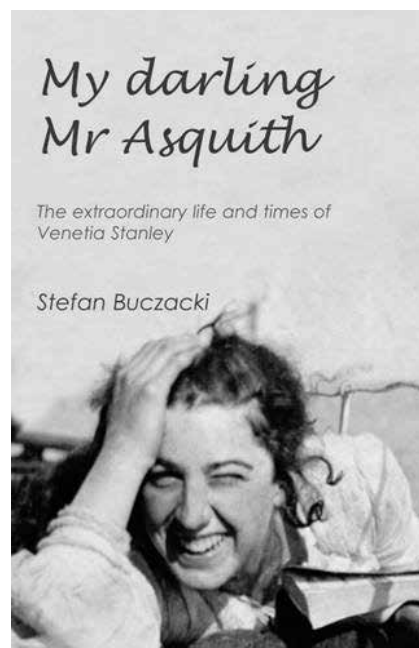
determined to vote against, it was harder to identify and motivate the potential winners. In echoes of the recent EU referendum, Betts utilises the evidence from Booth's survey to suggest that small British traders were less worried about the threats of imports from the Continent than the competition from foreign refugees lowering wage costs in their immediate neighbourhood.

Mrs May had an unexpectedly easy ride to the leadership of the Conservative Party but, in one of her few speeches as candidate, she highlighted Chamberlain as a political lodestar.² But was he a sensible choice – saint or devil? Undoubtedly, he was an effective organiser and manager. True, his objective was always the welfare of his fellow citizens. Agreed, he was innovative in extending the role of government. But, with his tendencies towards insubordination, egotism and disloyalty, he was not a team player. As Gladstone, Devonshire, Salisbury and Balfour all discovered, Chamberlain was unavoidable but insufferable. Ian Cawood and the late Chris Upton, have provided the inspiration for a realistic reassessment of Chamberlain's achievements and a deeper understanding of Victorian political culture which usefully supplements Cawood's work on the Liberal Unionists.

Tony Little is Chair of the Liberal Democrat History Group.

1 Peter Marsh, *Joseph Chamberlain, Entrepreneur in Politics* (Yale University Press, 1994).

2 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-37053114>.



and letters. He read and reread her letters to him (not available) and wrote 206 to her in 1915 alone. Buczacki claims he has identified letters of general and political interest not used by the Brocks and quotes from sixteenth such letters. None of them justifies his assertion. He includes, for example, more terrible poems, an explanation that Asquith cannot meet her because he has to see the Archbishop of York, and a reflection on seeing her on to a train.

Asquith wrote about his social activities, and commented on political events. He asked for her opinions on political appointments and revealed military secrets. Buczacki confirms the Brocks' analysis disposing of the canard that Asquith wrote many letters while in cabinet. He wrote fulsome and finally increasingly desperate declarations of his love for her: 'I love you with heart and soul'. She wrote on 11 May 1915 announcing that she was going to marry Edwin Montagu, a protégé of Asquith, who had proposed to Venetia several times from 1912 but had been rejected. Venetia described Montagu as an interesting companion, but ugly and unattractive.

The author reviews the overheated correspondence between Venetia and Violet Asquith (her best friend) to assess whether either or both had lesbian tendencies, and finds it highly unlikely. He follows the phallogocentric attitude of other commentators in pursuing the question of whether Venetia and Asquith had full sex. His case for saying it did not happen is much stronger than that of Judge Oliver Popplewell,

Asquith's obsession

Stefan Buczacki, *My Darling Mr Asquith: The extraordinary life and times of Venetia Stanley* (Cato & Clarke 2016)

Review by **Alan Mumford**

THE AUTHOR CLAIMS that Venetia Stanley 'has had a poor press' but his evidence for this is very thin. He claims that, almost without exception, every book touching on Venetia's life has concentrated on 'three years during which Asquith wrote around 600 intimate letters to her.' In fact, the letters read by Buczacki and the Brocks¹ began (in relatively anodyne form) in 1910 and ended in May 1915, and my calculation is

that there were 568. The author portrays Venetia as a woman of more substance than simply being the recipient of letters from Asquith, and devotes only 20 per cent of the book to that relationship. The book title is misleading.

Asquith was 60 in 1912 when he developed an obsessional love for Venetia, aged 25. Politically, the importance of this lies in the time and emotional energy he was expending in meetings