

Lloyd George

Kenneth O. Morgan analyses the record – so far largely overlooked – of Lloyd George’s interest in France and French policy.

Lloyd George’s French Connection

THE CAREER OF David Lloyd George has inspired a multitude of historical studies of an immense range of themes and, indeed, of quality. Yet there is still an overall imbalance. In the vast majority of cases, authors focus on domestic politics, the launch of programmes of welfare reform, the triumphs of the People’s Budget and the comprehensive defeat of the House of Lords, labour issues, the settlement of the Irish question, the making and unmaking of coalitions, and the domestic affairs of Wales. Yet, remarkably, his concern with international affairs, save perhaps for the very specific episode of the Paris peace conference of 1919, has received comparatively less attention, despite Lloyd George’s massive legacy for the world today, as the contemporary frontiers of Europe amply demonstrate. For some years he was central to the making of world history. The distinguished Canadian scholar, Michael Fry, is one of the relatively few who have attempted a synoptic treatment, in his two-volume *Lloyd George and Foreign Policy*, and it is a major pioneering enterprise.¹

One theme that has attracted much historical interest is Lloyd George’s concern with Germany, from his highly influential visit to the Reich in 1908 to examine German schemes of national social insurance, through the First World War as prime minister, and its complex aftermath, down to his advocacy of a kind of appeasement culminating in his catastrophic visit to meet Hitler at Berchtesgaden in 1936.² In those twenty-two dramatic years, the full

range of Lloyd George’s inspired insights and tragic misjudgements are both on display. Yet to some extent this emphasis on his connections with Germany is misleading. It was in fact another European great power that claimed his attention and emotional sympathy for most of his career. This was his connection with France, and it is this centrally important, yet in some ways underestimated, theme on which I shall concentrate here. David Lloyd George was no insular isolationist, Little Englander or Welsh nationalist. He was, most times, the embodiment and the standard-bearer of the Entente Cordiale as few other British statesmen have been over the years, and which seems now currently totally forgotten.

There are several aspects to this, all of them of importance. First, Lloyd George had an abiding sympathy for the French revolutionary tradition from 1789 onwards. He felt that France was the most democratic country in Europe and a natural ally for Britain. He thus participated in the traditional Liberal admiration for France, from the days of Charles James Fox in the 1790s onwards. But, unlike many British liberals, he linked this with high personal regard for the talents of Napoleon Bonaparte. It was a reflection of his hero-worship of great men throughout the ages, demonstrated by his view of Julius Caesar, Oliver Cromwell, Abraham Lincoln and other dominant historical figures. In later life, during a busy visit to Paris, he went out of his way to take little Jennifer to the Invalides to see Napoleon’s tomb.



French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau (1841–1929) and British Prime Minister David Lloyd George (1863–1945) (Bain News Service, ca. 1919)

But his regard for France over other nations was visible from his earliest days. In the time of the Franco-Prussian war of 1870–1, the 8-year-old David can be found taking upon himself the role of the French radicals against the Prussian Junkers in his boyhood games.

Secondly, while he was not a great reader of novels, easily the one that had the most powerful impact on him was Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*. It contained, he said, more insight into social hardship and inequality than any other book he ever read. 'It gave you a vivid picture of the underside of life. All the wretched and sordid details of the troubles of

the poor – troubles that could be lessened.'³ By all accounts, his copy of Hugo's work in his private papers is heavily annotated. In later life, Alexandre Dumas' aroused similar enthusiasm, but that raised different themes. Hugo, by the way, was a hero for Welsh Liberals at this time, for his inspiring leadership of the International Peace Society, in which Henry Richard, MP for Merthyr, was an officeholder.

Third, France was by far his favourite holiday destination. He much enjoyed Antibes and Cannes (where he and Margaret celebrated a famous golden wedding anniversary in 1938). Favourite was always the Côte d'Azur and

Lloyd George's French Connection

especially Nice. Though the point can be exaggerated, Margaret seldom cared to stray far from her native Caernarfonshire, which left Lloyd George and male friends to enjoy looking at pretty French women making their slow way along the Promenade des Anglais.

Fourthly and most important, his sympathy for French people and culture was reinforced by the most important person in the last thirty years of his life, his secretary-cum-mistress, Frances Stevenson, brought in to tutor Megan Lloyd George in French shortly before the First World War. Frances was herself a quarter French and a further quarter francophone Belgian. She spoke French fluently and thus provided an insight into French culture which Lloyd George would otherwise never have gained. Frances's fluency in French was valuable for the prime minister at the Paris peace conference. In return, she rejoiced in Lloyd George's popularity in France and his easy relations with French people, unlike the stiff English with their suspicion of foreign languages, contrasting with the bilingual Welsh-speaking premier.⁴ All these factors, political, cultural and personal created an important nexus of sympathies.

This attachment to France as a nation showed itself very early in Lloyd George's political career. This emerged during the Fashoda crisis with France in the Sudan in 1898 when the British army (among them the youthful Winston Churchill) vanquished the local forces of the Mahdi at Omdurman. Lloyd George, at the age of 35, made a speech full of perceptive judgement.⁵ Britain should not quarrel with France, 'the only country in Europe with a democratic constitution'. On another imperial issue, Lloyd George had no complaint with the French sympathies with the Boers in the South African war in 1899, since he was equally opposed to the war himself.

Two separate major issues strengthened still further his sympathies for the French republic at this early stage. One was the eventual outcome of the Dreyfus case, when the reactionary military and anti-clerical classes – which

had claimed, on the basis of flagrant anti-Semitism, that Dreyfus had betrayed his country – were defeated by the massed forces of the French left, including Lloyd George's future partner, Georges Clemenceau. Secondly, there was the eventual disestablishment of the French Catholic Church, which afforded powerful encouragement to Welsh Nonconformists anxious to disestablish and disendow the *Eglwys Loegr*, the Church of England in Wales, finally to be achieved during the peace conference in 1919.

Lloyd George therefore came out very strongly in support of the Entente Cordiale with France in 1904. The various colonial difficulties in Africa and Asia he swept aside without criticism. In addition to his sympathy with French radical and revolutionary traditions, he also backed up France in its diplomatic tensions with Germany. His visit to Germany in 1908 made him fully aware of German hostility to French foreign policy ventures, including Morocco. His *War Memoirs* applaud Franco-ophile sentiments expressed by Liberals from Fox to Gladstone, and criticise the Franco-phobe inclinations of Liberal imperialists such as Rosebery, Grey – and also Asquith.⁶ Thus, during the Agadir crisis of 1911, he strongly backed the French position in Morocco and startled his radical allies by his stern warning to Germany. In August 1914, he was thought of as head of the cabinet's peace party, but his background made it highly improbable that he would not support the primacy of the Entente Cordiale, and his eventual strong commitment was no surprise.

He had previously held only domestic posts at the Board of Trade and the Treasury, but the coming of world war naturally gave him a wider range of contacts in many different areas. When he went to the Munitions ministry in May 1915 in the first wartime coalition, he came into close and frequent contact with his French counterpart, the trade union socialist, Albert Thomas. He listened with care to his advice on such technical areas as the production of mortars. Effectively, he was nationalising

the munitions industry. Thomas, an ally of Jean Jaurès, made Lloyd George a war socialist and an apostle of central corporate control, and he worked ever more closely with colleagues in the Entente as a result. He also met up with Aristide Briand, another leading figure on the centre-left and several times prime minister. He had been the architect of Church disestablishment before the war. Later, they had much collaboration during post-war diplomacy. One of the attractions for Lloyd George was that he believed that Briand, a native of Nantes, was from Brittany. Briand delighted his Welsh comrade at one time by referring to the pair of them as 'we two Bretons'. Lloyd George was also 'much taken' by a remark of Briand's that 'war was too important to be left to military men.'⁷

Lloyd George's major contacts with French leaders, military and political, were more important still. Marshal Foch became his favourite of all the generals. Talking to his deputy secretary of the cabinet, Thomas Jones, he compared his own dealings with Foch with General Ulysses Grant's relationship with Abraham Lincoln during the American civil war, a bond of total trust. One serious error of the British premier was switching leadership temporarily to General Nivelle after Verdun, apparently on the grounds that Nivelle was a Protestant, but that was remedied in good time. One major point for Lloyd George was that Foch was his main weapon not against the Germans, but against more serious opponents, the British commanders, Haig and Robertson. After complex manoeuvres, Lloyd George succeeded in getting Foch made commander in chief in a united command on the western front. He liked Foch: he was an efficient commander – and also he fulfilled Napoleon's quality of being a lucky general. Lloyd George and Foch had a strong relationship, though it was disturbed when Britain's prime minister delivered critical judgements of Haig in front of the French commanders, Foch and Joffre. Foch especially disapproved of this.

Lloyd George made an exceptionally strong impression when he visited Verdun after the

titanic battle there.⁸ Speaking in the crypt of the citadel, in an emotional atmosphere he toasted the French nation three times. He spoke of France as the rock on which the German attack broke. The audience found his speech inspirational, even though some of them found Lloyd George's Welsh accent a little hard to follow. Lloyd George left at least one physical legacy in the town of Verdun – the Rue Lloyd George, which still exists. More importantly, I see Lloyd George's visit to Verdun as the high point of the Entente Cordiale in its 100-year history.

Clemenceau and after

By far Lloyd George's closest French relationship was with Georges Clemenceau, the prime minister of France during and after the First World War. It was a much better relationship than is often thought. Their first meeting back in 1910 was not a success, the Frenchman believing that Lloyd George's knowledge of world events was sketchy. But thereafter they worked closely and well together – Lloyd George pays warm tribute to Clemenceau's power of leadership in his *War Memoirs*.⁹ Working with Clemenceau brought 'some of the most delightful memories'. He compared the latter very favourably with Poincaré, a stubborn Lorrainer and rabid nationalist. Of course, Poincaré and Clemenceau were bitter enemies, which helped relations between Lloyd George and the latter.

The two wartime prime ministers differed greatly in manner and temperament. Lloyd George was a master of ambiguity and seduction; it was said of him that 'he could charm a bird off a bough'. Clemenceau was far more belligerent and direct. He often settled quarrels with duels with sabre or pistol. He once defeated a political rival, Deschanel, in a sabre duel. Clemenceau shouted gleefully at his retreating opponent, 'J'avance, il recule,' followed by 'Monsieur is leaving us'. But Deschanel exacted terrible revenge later on when he defeated Clemenceau in the election

for the presidency in 1920. Clemenceau was also, far more so than Lloyd George, a man of culture and intellect. He was a close friend and patron of the great Impressionist artist, Monet, whose career he rescued in his later life. After his retirement in the early 1920s, he turned to write a thoughtful work on the life of Demosthenes.

Lloyd George and Clemenceau were similar in their approach to politics. Both were brilliant mavericks and casual in their associates. Both had dealings with the shady financier and arms manufacturer, Sir Basil Zaharoff. Clemenceau, like Lloyd George, began as a left-wing social reformer, working with socialists like Jaurès and Blum, though he became much more hostile to the trades unions later on as prime minister. During the war, each took his own path, and split his own party. Like Lloyd George in 1917–18, Clemenceau was a prime minister without a party. Each had close relations with the newspaper press. Lloyd George operated through friendly journalists and editors like Robert Donald and Lord Riddell, while Clemenceau owned his own newspapers as organs of opposition, writing the leading articles in a tiny bedroom in his house in Paris. Both scrambled out of financial scandals – Panama in Clemenceau’s case, Marconi in Lloyd George’s. And both had unorthodox relations with women. Clemenceau lived with a professor’s wife. He is supposed to have passed a pretty girl in the Champs Elysees and to have murmured ‘Oh, to be 70 again!’

Most notably, each liked the other’s country. Lloyd George had great affection for France, as noted earlier. Clemenceau lived in the United States as a young man. during the civil war, and, like Lloyd George, was a great admirer of Abraham Lincoln. Woodrow Wilson, the third member of the triumvirate at Versailles, was a southerner from Virginia and thus less sympathetic to Lincoln; Lloyd George thought Wilson to be far inferior to his presidential rival in 1912, Theodore Roosevelt. Clemenceau was a student of Mill, married an American woman (unsuccessfully) and was the one conference

leader at Paris who spoke both the main languages. Early in his career he was attacked for being too influenced by the English and was pursued with catcalls of ‘Ah yes’. Even so, their partnership across the channel worked well for the wartime years.

They were in close agreement over the big questions – such as unity of command on the western front and bringing the Americans into the war. Both were happy with Foch as chief commander and thought him a better general than Pétain. But the peace conference became increasingly difficult. Lloyd George observed later on ‘Well. We didn’t do too badly. After all, I was sitting between Napoleon and Jesus Christ’. The Welshman had the difficult task of not alienating Germany unduly and keeping control of arrangements over national frontiers and financial reparations. It was hard indeed to reconcile that with Clemenceau’s national desire to ensure that France would not be invaded again as in 1870 and 1914, and sought territorial guarantees against the possibility of further German aggression. Clemenceau sought to annex the Rhineland; but Lloyd George strongly disagreed, and wisely so.

The turning point in the peace conference came early on, when Lloyd George produced his famous Fontainebleau Memorandum in February 1919 proposing a moderate settlement with Germany over frontiers and reparations.¹⁰ Clemenceau sarcastically observed that it dealt only with issues which worried Britain such as freedom of the seas. Lloyd George retorted that was because his colleagues had no interest in naval power. Reparations, said Lloyd George, were like an indigestible meat pie – he liked the pie crust but disliked the meat beneath. As the peace negotiations went on, personal relations deteriorated. Clemenceau rejected Lloyd George’s remarkable proposal for cancelling all war debts (which was also supported by Maynard Keynes). Lloyd George for his part, felt that the Frenchman treated Britain with less respect than he did the mighty United States.

For all that, Lloyd George did see, as Wilson did not, the need for an international guarantee for the security of France. Anglo-French talks dragged on without anything tangible emerging. The closest the two countries came, after Clemenceau's fall from power, was at the conference at Cannes in January 1922 when Lloyd George appeared willing to offer France a 'treaty of guarantee' to protect its territory. There was, however, a serious ambiguity as to whether this rested on an American guarantee as well, which was unlikely given the mood of post-war isolationism in the States. Even so, it was a powerful gesture by the British prime minister, the first such territorial guarantee since the Peninsular War in the time of Napoleon. It could have been an historic gesture which would have breathed new life into the Entente Cordiale.

The Cannes treaty was negotiated with Lloyd George's good friend, the new French prime minister, Aristide Briand.¹¹ Apparently successful, it collapsed on a total triviality. Lloyd George chose to offer Briand a round of golf, a game which Briand had never played. To the uninformed eye of this writer, the Cannes course is not a difficult one, but Briand's golf ball found bunker after bunker, and the journalists revelled in his embarrassment. The French thought their prime minister was being ridiculed; a crisis sprang up in the Paris newspapers. Briand had to return hastily to the French Assembly where he was promptly voted out office. The opportunity for giving military substance to the Entente had lapsed and it never returned. Briand gave way to the bitterly nationalist Poincaré, and prospects of a working Anglo-French relationship collapsed. Lloyd George did not like Poincaré. He was, so he told the newspaper owner, Lord Riddell, 'a fool'. Clemenceau had told him that 'Poincaré' meant 'not square' in French. At the subsequent international conference in Genoa in May, on which Lloyd George had pinned his hopes for a broad European settlement, a variety of international figures, including Walter Rathenau, Lenin and President Warren Harding

worked to undermine the British premier's plans. Another obstacle was the ever-obstinate Poincaré, with his fierce nationalism and obdurate anti-socialism. He fiercely resisted Lloyd George's ideas over both German indemnities and the possible recognition of Bolshevik Russia. No viable concert of Europe would ever gain approval from that quarter.

After the peace conference in 1919, Lloyd George and Clemenceau diverged. The atmosphere between them had been poor ever since. In a prolonged dispute over Asia Minor, an enraged Clemenceau supposedly asked Lloyd George to choose between the sabre and the pistol to settle matters; wisely, the Welshman rejected both. There is nothing in Clemenceau's apartment in Paris to suggest that they ever knew each other. Their last meeting came in the summer of 1921 when Lloyd George was still in 10 Downing Street, on the brink of key negotiations with de Valera and the Irish republicans, whereas Clemenceau, no longer in office, was in Britain to receive an honorary degree in Oxford. Clemenceau angrily attacked Lloyd George for being an enemy of France. Lloyd George laughed and asked light-heartedly, 'Oh, is not that our traditional policy?'.¹² (11). The moral might be not to try leg-pulling with an angry Frenchman. Some time later, journalists asked Clemenceau why he liked going on holiday to La Vendée. He replied that there were no Lloyd Georges there – 'only Squirrels'. Yet, despite all these squalls, the years between 1916 and 1920 may reasonably be regarded as the high point of the Entente – certainly far better than relations between Churchill and de Gaulle in 1940 and 1945, let alone de Gaulle and Franklin Roosevelt.

Conclusion

After Lloyd George fell from power in 1922, his reputation, compared with that of Clemenceau, slumped. Clemenceau was honoured in France as 'Père la Victoire' and his statue erected in the Champs Elysées. Lloyd George's statue, by contrast, was not unveiled

Lloyd George's French Connection

in Parliament Square by Prince Charles until October 2007, even though professional historians, using L.G.'s private papers at the Beaverbrook library, finally released in 1957, had effectively restored much of his public reputation long ago. In the '30s, his view on foreign affairs, on both Germany and France had been erratic., culminating in his calamitous visit to Hitler in 1936 and his dubbing him 'the George Washington of Germany'.¹³ He criticised the weakness of Neville Chamberlain and the French premier, Edouard Daladier in the Munich agreement in 1938, which sacrificed Czechoslovakia – though he was no more enthusiastic towards the Czech leader Benes: 'that little swine Benes' and 'the jackal of Versailles' being two of his descriptions.¹⁴ In a wartime parliamentary debate in 1941, Lloyd George's unwise advocacy of a settlement with Germany led Churchill to deride him as 'old papa Pétain'. It was a great humiliation for Lloyd George now, compared with inspiring tribute to French heroism at Verdun. Pétain, who had in 1917 led the French army there in battle, was now seen as a fellow-travelling traitor. The glory of Verdun had been followed by the squalor of Vichy. Pétain dragged Lloyd George down with him.

There is little to say of the period after 1931. Lloyd George notoriously visited Hitler in 1936 but only visited France as a tourist, including to celebrate his golden wedding. Since his time, the Anglo-French Entente has not been noted for its cordiality, with President de Gaulle keeping Britain out of Europe for a decade, French attacks over the invasion of Iraq from Chirac and Dominique de Villepin, and finally the catastrophe of Brexit. At the present time, Britain has its most anti-French government for decades, while Frenchmen like President Macron and Michel Barnier have hardly been conciliatory themselves. Macron's gallant attempts to resolve the threat of war in the Ukraine in 2022 led a British cabinet minister to observe that here was a 'whiff of Munich' in the air. Perhaps after the resignation of the aptly named Lord Frost, matters

will become less glacial. We need to revert to the warmth and understanding of the best of the Lloyd George years., to move away from the sentimental illusion of a 'special relationship' with the United States, and to rebuild our most enduring alliance in war and peace, one which we have inadvertently lost – the Entente Cordiale.

Kenneth O. Morgan (Lord Morgan) is a historian and author, known especially for his writings on modern British history and politics and on Welsh history. His many books include Consensus and Disunity: The Lloyd George Coalition Government 1918–1922 (OUP, 1979). This article is based on a lecture given to the Lloyd George Society, Llandrinod Wells, 26 February 2022.

- 1 See especially Michael G. Fry, *Lloyd George and Foreign Policy*, vol. i (McGill-Queens University Press, 1977).
- 2 E.g., Kenneth O. Morgan, 'Lloyd George and Germany', *Ages of Reform* (Tauris, 2011), pp. 79–92.
- 3 Frances Stevenson (ed. A. J. P Taylor), *Lloyd George: A Diary* (Hutchinson, 1971), p. 31 (14 February 1915).
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 64 (5 October 1915).
- 5 Speech at Haworth, 24 Oct. 1898, quoted in John Grigg, *The Young Lloyd George* (Eyre Methuen, 1973), p. 222, fn. 2.
- 6 David Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, vol. i (Odhams, 1938), pp. 1 ff.
- 7 Stevenson, *Diary*, p. 118 (23 Oct. 1916).
- 8 See Ian Ousby, *The Road to Verdun* (Pimlico, 2003), p. 256.
- 9 Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, vol. ii, pp. 1602–9.
- 10 David Lloyd George, *The Truth about the Peace Treaties* (Gollancz, 1938), vol. i, p. 403ff.
- 11 Alfred Aubert, *Briand* (Chiron, 1924).
- 12 This is well described in David Robin Watson, *Georges Clemenceau* (Eyre Methuen, 1974), pp. 367–71.
- 13 *Daily Express*, 17 Sep. 1936. This article was written at the request of Lord Beaverbook.
- 14 A. J. Sylvester, *Life with Lloyd George: The diary of A. J. Sylvester 1931–45*, ed. Colin Cross (Macmillan, 1975), pp. 186ff.