Today's younger generation of political philosophers are left with a broad and contested agenda to address. ■

William Wallace (Lord Wallace of Saltaire) is a member of the *Journal of Liberal History*'s editorial board. He has taught at Manchester University, Oxford and the LSE, and has researched and published on British foreign policy, national identity and European international politics. He is currently Liberal Democrat Cabinet Office spokesman in the Lords.

Inside Asquith's cabinet

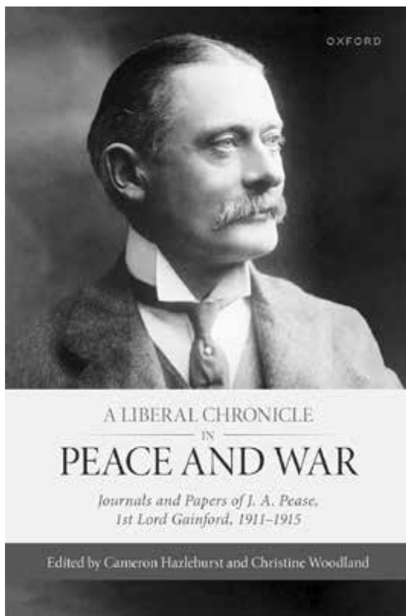
Cameron Hazlehurst and Christine Woodland (eds), *A Liberal Chronicle in Peace and War: Journals and Papers of J. A. Pease, 1st Lord Gainford, 1911–1915* (Oxford University Press, 2023)

Review by David Dutton

Until the passage of the Public Records Act (1967), which introduced the so-called Thirty-Year Rule, the most recent British government documents available for public inspection were those relating to the Edwardian era and the opening years of the First World War. This period proved an inevitable magnet for young researchers and graduate students (I joined their ranks in the early 1970s) as they prepared their dissertations and theses. It did not take them long to realise that their quest to understand the decision-making processes at the top of the British government were severely hampered by the absence of minutes of meetings of the cabinet. Such proceedings were regarded as so secret that no written record was taken or permitted, a convention not changed until the start of Lloyd George's premiership in December 1916. The only account available to posterity was the series of letters that the prime minister was constitutionally bound to write to keep the monarch informed of what had been discussed at individual meetings. This correspondence – at least that generated during the premiership of Herbert Asquith – displays a brevity and lack of detail strongly suggesting that the less the king was told the better for all concerned.

The gap in the available historical record inevitably sent scholars off in new directions, with the private papers of government ministers and, if they were kept, their diaries, offering the most tempting possibilities. But the survival, location and accessibility of such documentation was often uncertain. One historian contributed more than any other to the quest to find out more. As a young doctoral student, the Australian Cameron Hazlehurst, struck by the narrow range of sources cited by those scholars who had thus far published works on Edwardian Britain and the First World War, embarked on a mission to locate the surviving private papers of all those who had sat in Asquith's cabinet. In partnership with the archivist Christine Woodland, this project broadened out and there can be no student of British politics in the first half of the twentieth century who has not benefited from the resulting *A Guide to the Papers of British Cabinet Ministers 1900–1951,* published by the Royal Historical Society (1974), and the revised second edition of this work, with its scope extended to 1964 (1996).

In the meantime, Hazlehurst's own research project bore fruit with the publication in 1971 of *Politicians at War*. The fact that, half a century on, this book remains the best study we have of high politics in the first months of the First World War is testament to the enduring quality of its research and analysis. One of Hazlehurst's early archival discoveries was a large collection of papers belonging to J. A. Pease, 1st Baron Gainford. The collection included fifteen volumes of diaries, the most important of which offered a continuous narrative of Asquith's government from his accession to the premiership until the formation of a coalition in May 1915. Though Hazlehurst and Woodland began work on Pease's papers in 1968 and hoped to publish an edition of the diaries in the late 1970s, events got in the way and a first volume covering the period 1908–10 did not appear until 1994. While Woodland held several positions in archive management, Hazlehurst divided his career between academia and posts in the Australian



government, including National Campaign Director for AIDS Information and Communication. Now, nearly three decades on from the publication of their first volume, the editors have brought their project to a triumphant conclusion.

Joseph ('Jack') Pease probably requires a word of introduction. In a cabinet of undoubted political luminaries, he is easily overlooked. After two years as the government's chief whip, which he did not enjoy, Pease was appointed Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster in 1910, where he had responsibility for the government's ill-fated franchise legislation, before moving to the Board of Education in October 1911, where he remained until the reorganisation necessitated by coalition in May 1915. The editors offer no overblown assessment of Pease's intrinsic significance. Indeed, it is difficult to improve upon their own words: 'The truth is that Pease was an unexciting, amiable, modest, late Gladstonian Liberal, who entered politics because he thought he should, and stayed when his career choices were reduced by misfortune.' (p. 5) Even Asquith, ranking his ministers for the amusement of his young confidante Venetia Stanley, placed Pease in the bottom group, albeit ahead of such figures as McKinnon Wood, Beauchamp, Emmott and Lucas. With a possible vacancy emerging for the chief secretaryship of Ireland – 'for the time being a backwater' – the prime minister judged it 'a fit place in wh. to put a solid 2nd rate man like Jack Pease'.

The diary, however, is more important than the man. We now know that at least half a dozen other government ministers of this time kept political journals. They were lucky to get away with it – at least to the extent that creating these private records involved taking notes in the course of cabinet meetings, a misdemeanour for which 'Loulou' Harcourt was firmly, if ultimately ineffectually, reprimanded by the prime minister. As Asquith later explained in parliament, 'the essence of the whole thing was mutual confidence, and not only that, but absolute secrecy'. Any private notes represented a 'breach of that unwritten rule'. Pease's jottings at cabinet seem to have escaped censure, possibly because of his inconspicuous seating place at the cabinet table. The resulting diary is, from the historian's point of view, probably the most important of the lot – fuller than those of Simon and Hobhouse; far less self-serving than Harcourt's; and, because of Pease's intimacy with the prime minister, better informed than any other.

Why, though, was the diary kept? It has few claims to stylistic or literary elegance. Its grammar and syntax are erratic; punctuation seems to be regarded as an optional extra. It gives every impression of having been hurriedly written (and seldom later embellished or improved), the work of a man keen to put something on paper while his memory of events was still fresh. This is not an example of the diary as safety valve – a minister letting off steam after a demanding day at his office, in cabinet meetings and on the government front bench in parliament. Still less does Pease seek to use his diary to exaggerate his role in the government's affairs, though a sense of satisfaction at a job well done is sometimes apparent. Some of its shorter entries are almost cryptic in tone and do not suggest that the diary was ever meant to be read by others. Any suggestion that Pease sought, like the later Labour diarist Dick Crossman, to produce a text to illuminate the realities of British government and administration would be absurd. The diary only makes sense, as the editors suggest, as an aide-memoire for the author's personal use, to which he could refer as necessary. It would have been of some value in the preparation of the volume of memoirs upon which, in later life, Pease embarked but which he never completed.

But the diary itself is not the sum total of this book's importance. The editorial work is of the highest quality. Hazlehurst and Woodland modestly suggest that 'in giving some guidance to the vast (and at times recondite) scholarly literature that throws light on the situations that confronted Pease and his

colleagues, we hope to provide the basis of a comprehensive appreciation of Asquith's Liberal government in peace and war' (p. vii). Most readers will in fact be staggered by the diligence with which individuals have been identified, events explained and illuminated, and relevant secondary literature located, recorded and often engaged with. A couple of examples must suffice as illustration, but only a full reading of the text can capture the depth of scholarship on display. To provide further information on a dispute over teachers' pay in Swansea in 1911, the editors point to a contemporary issue of *The Tablet* and a 1975 M.Ed. thesis from University College, Swansea. When Asquith records a particularly egregious blunder on Pease's part in a game of bridge, the reader is referred for clarification to a no doubt definitive tract on the laws and principles of the game, published in 1916! These examples are in themselves trivial and individual readers will find information and enlightenment according to their specific interests. I was struck by passages dealing with Pease's attitude towards the guarantee of Belgian neutrality, the importance or otherwise for Britain's declaration of war of the letter of support sent by Bonar Law and Lansdowne to the prime minister, and Pease's description of Asquith's assessment of Grey's handling of the war crisis and of Asquith's state of mind after the formation of the 1915 coalition.

But the overall picture is important. The diary, the interwoven material from Pease's correspondence and a large range of other primary sources, the immensely useful bibliographical references, combined with the editors' meticulous checking of facts and dates make this as comprehensive and reliable an account of the doings of government and parliament in the last years of peace and the first months of war that we have or are ever likely to have. Events are presented as they happened in the kaleidoscopic political life of a government minister, without the rearrangement, prioritisation and (inevitable) distortion created by history and its practitioners. This book is a truly impressive achievement. ■

After over forty years writing books and articles on twentieth-century British politics, David Dutton has more time in retirement to pursue other interests. His latest book, *Game, Set and Championship: A History of the South of Scotland Tennis Championships* was published in 2023.

Help Liberal history!

The Liberal Democrat History Group undertakes a wide range of activities – publishing this *Journal* and our Liberal history books and booklets, organising regular speaker meetings, maintaining the Liberal history website and providing assistance with research.

We'd like to do more, but our activities are limited by the number of people involved in running the Group. We would be enormously grateful for help with:

- Improving our website.
- Helping with our presence at Liberal Democrat conferences.
- Organising our meeting programme.
- Commissioning articles, and locating pictures, for the *Journal of Liberal History*

If you'd like to be involved in any of these activities, or anything else, contact the Editor, **Duncan Brack** (journal@liberalhistory.org.uk) – we would love to hear from you.