

Ewan Lawry examines the life and achievements of Robert Offley Ashburton Crewe-Milnes, the Marquess of Crewe

The ‘Last of the Whig Statesmen’: The Marquess of Crewe

AT 2.15 P.M. on Wednesday 22 August 1945, the House of Lords paused to commemorate the late Marquess of Crewe. The three speakers, Lords Addison, Cranborne, and Samuel, representing the main parties, praised this ‘splendid example of a great English gentleman’, his remarkable career longevity, his ‘clarity of thought and expression’, his ‘inflexible sense of public duty’, and his ‘ripeness and soundness of judgement’.¹ Of this eulogising, it was Cranborne’s description of Crewe as ‘perhaps the last of the Whig statesmen’ that represents both the innate contradictions of this titan of Edwardian Liberal politics and the changing social and political order that he personified. His political career had begun under Gladstone in the 1880s and lasted for six decades, in which time he became an ‘invaluable counsellor’ in the reforming 1905–15 Liberal governments, a skilled manager of a hostile House of Lords, a moderating influence in cabinet, and a celebrated ambassador to France in the 1920s.² Called out of retirement in the 1930s, he returned to the forefront of Liberal politics when the party looked set to go extinct. If his official biographer cast him as a ‘radical’, supporting Irish home rule when many Whig peers were abandoning the Liberals in the 1880s, he can be more accurately seen as embodying the endurance of the

Whig tendency in Liberal politics into the early twentieth century.³ Fabulously wealthy, Crewe was a great social entertainer, preferring literary and country pursuits to the unsavoury business of making money and so, whilst sat at the apex of aristocratic society, he, like many of his peers, failed to economise as his gilded lifestyle became unviable and anachronistic. Nevertheless, he attained the eminent status of ‘elder statesman’, loyally serving the cause of Liberalism to the end, as a political and social order passed away. Though largely forgotten today, Crewe merits a restoration to the pantheon of Liberal history.

Early life

On 12 January 1858, Robert Offley Ashburton Milnes was born in fashionable Mayfair. He was the youngest child of the Conservative-turned-Liberal MP for Pontefract Richard Monckton Milnes, himself descended from Tory and Whig MPs for the same seat, and Annabella Hungerford, a daughter of the 2nd Baron Crewe and the product of a long line of Cheshire and Staffordshire Whig gentry. Monckton Milnes has been described as ‘the most attractive type of ameliorative reformer’ who supported enfranchising women and abolishing capital punishment, but his real distinction came as a great literary patron.⁴ The Milnes

household emerged as a centre of Victorian high society, with its patriarch's longstanding poetic and bibliophilic interests eliding with his penchant for entertaining and his political connections. He adopted, Henry Adams recorded, an 'affected social eccentricity, challenging ridicule with the indifference of one who knew himself to be the first wit in London', and masking his intelligence behind a 'Falstaffian masque and laugh of Silenus', such that he enjoyed the ear of many of the social and politics leaders of the day.⁵ All of which led, in 1863, to Monckton Milnes being raised to the peerage as the 1st Baron Houghton.

In this well-connected household, the future Marquess of Crewe and his two elder sisters enjoyed a 'uniformly happy' childhood, surrounded by a glittering social circle, developing their literary interests, and enjoying country sports with their maternal relations.⁶ In time, Robert inherited his parents' taste for expensive living and high society, his father's poor grasp of personal finance, love of books, and use of poetry as an emotional outlet, and developed his own sturdy reserve that was often mistaken for aloofness. Naturally bereft at his mother's sudden death in 1874, Robert went up to Trinity College, Cambridge a year later. But it was not until his graduation year, 1880, that his future direction began to emerge. That year, his engagement to Sibyl Marcia Graham, a daughter of Sir Frederick Graham of Netherby, was announced, thereby uniting an already well-connected young man with an even more impressive array of relations. Sibyl's grandfathers were former Home Secretary Sir James Graham, a Whig who served in Tory governments and ended as a Liberal, and the Whig 12th Duke of Somerset, whilst her siblings brought connections to the 5th Duke of Montrose, the Earl of Verulam, and the Baring family. Within a year, Robert and Sibyl were welcoming their first child, Annabel, followed by Richard in 1882, and twins, Celia and Helen, in 1884.



Crewe in 1895 (© National Portrait Gallery, London)

Entering politics

The huge network of contacts that had accrued to Robert through childhood and his marriage were the perfect springboard for a public career in an aristocrat-dominated political culture. In April 1883, he became private secretary to Lord Granville, the foreign secretary in Gladstone's second ministry, and, in 1884, was selected as Liberal candidate for Barnsley, the neighbouring seat to his father's old constituency of Pontefract. However, before Robert had the chance of

contesting an election, Lord Houghton died after a heart attack in August 1885, leaving Robert to inherit the family estate, the barony, and the seat in the House of Lords. This was, in hindsight, a move better fitting the new Lord Houghton's character. The more sedate House of Lords provided a less combative environment for one whose stammer induced 'prolonged moments' of silence while he 'fastidiously chose the correct word'.⁷ The result was that he came to be seen as a poor orator, with speeches that were later described as 'admirable in form', but 'marred' by delivery.⁸

Instead, the Lords opened the way to Houghton's advance toward the front rank of politics. The first step up the ladder came in January 1886, when Gladstone, forming his third ministry, made him a lord-in-waiting and a government whip. The collapse of the government within months due to the defeat of the first Irish Home Rule Bill left the split and bruised Liberal Party to limp into opposition. For Houghton, though, this too was an opportunity, as the resultant exodus of Whig peers and Liberal Unionists left him as one of the few remaining Liberal members of the Upper House. In this, Houghton sincerely shared Gladstone's commitment to creating a devolved establishment in Ireland, channeling the sympathies of his father, who had lamented the woes of that country in poetry and challenged injustices against its people in parliament.⁹ A fact which, after his brief withdrawal from public life due to the deaths of his wife in September 1887 and son in March 1890, stood him in good stead on his return to active politics. Amidst this personal tragedy, he busied himself by studying estate management, travelling, and publishing a poetry anthology, all while demonstrating his temperamental inability to console his grieving daughters.¹⁰ And, when the opportunity arose, Houghton returned to political life in late 1890, representing the Liberals in debates on public libraries legislation

and sitting on the railway rates select committee.¹¹

As one of the few remaining Liberal peers, Houghton was rewarded in August 1892 with the largely ceremonial post of lord lieutenant of Ireland in Gladstone's fourth ministry. He was well suited to this viceregal position, the press noted, as a 'progressive reformer' with the 'graces of style and ample means to do justice to the traditional hospitality of Dublin Castle'.¹² And, despite some initial controversies with Irish nationalist councillors in Dublin and Unionists in Belfast, Houghton quickly settled into his duties, playing to his strengths by lavishly entertaining, supporting good causes, and appearing at social and civic events.¹³ He remained in post under Lord Rosebery's premiership from March 1894, only departing when the government fell in June 1895, whereupon he underwent the elaborate 'undress' ceremony and was trooped out of Dublin.¹⁴

For these services, Houghton was compensated in the resignation honours by being created earl of Crewe, a homage to his childless maternal uncle, the 3rd Baron Crewe, who had died the year and bequeathed him the family's vast estates, Crewe Hall and Madeley Manor, and a London property.¹⁵ As a further mark of respect to his forebears, Houghton also adopted the surname 'Crewe-Milnes' by royal licence.¹⁶ Now a major landowner, the new earl returned from Ireland to administer his impressive inheritance, retaking his role as one of the leading figures in London society, and often speaking for the Liberals on major controversies and policy matters.¹⁷ In 1898, now aged 40, Crewe announced his engagement to the 17-year-old Lady Margaret ('Peggy') Primrose, the daughter of his colleague and old friends Lord Rosebery and Hannah de Rothschild. This second, intensely political, match began when, despite knowing one another for some time, they were seated together at a dinner held by

Liberal frontbencher Herbert Asquith.¹⁸ The announcement came at the coming out ball of Crewe's eldest daughter, who was just months younger than his new fiancé, and caused a stir, particularly with Peggy's grandmother, the Duchess of Cleveland, who objected to the age gap. Nevertheless, the new bride was determined, insisting that 'age does not affect affinity', whilst her delighted father told Queen Victoria that 'such marriages are often the happiest'.¹⁹ They were married on 10 April 1899 in Westminster Abbey, attracting the cream of British society and large crowds, who cheered especially loudly as the popular Rosebery and his daughter passed in their carriage.²⁰

The 'special confidant'

In 1901, the Crewes purchased and extensively remodelled Wharncliffe House in Mayfair, which, renamed Crewe House, became the centre of their intertwined political and social activities for the next three decades. As a venue for entertaining, the house enhanced Crewe's personal connections, which were essential to navigating the hostile political waters facing the Liberals when they returned to office in December 1905. By now, he had developed a sensitive political nous, advising Henry Campbell-Bannerman that, with their party on 'trial as an engine for securing social reforms', they should avoid complicating matters by precipitously reopening the Irish home rule debate.²¹ This advice was rewarded with the lord presidency of the council when Campbell-Bannerman formed his cabinet, the duties of which included chairing the Privy Council, having regular, formal contact with Crewe's friend, King Edward VII, and becoming a conduit for the conservative monarch's views to his ministers.²² Crewe's importance

was amplified though as, with only fifty Liberal peers, he was also tasked with supporting the elderly Lord Ripon in his duties as leader of the House of Lords, for which he was well prepared by those extensive social contacts with the far more numerous Conservatives.

Crewe was first called upon to exercise these links to ease the passage of the 1906 Education Bill, which sought to address Non-conformist grievances resulting from 1902 legislation. In December 1906, he hosted Liberal representatives (Asquith, and Augustine Birrell), the Tories (Arthur Balfour, Lords Lansdowne and Cawdor), and the Archbishop of Canterbury to negotiate the bill's ultimately unsuccessful passage through the Lords.²³ In early 1907, he joined a cabinet committee to investigate reforming the Lords' veto power, in which capacity he and Chancellor of the Exchequer Herbert Asquith drafted plans to restrict it to a single year and to resolve any disputes through a full meeting of the Commons and a delegation of 100 peers.²⁴ Though well received, the proposal was opposed by Campbell-Bannerman, who had his own ideas for constitutional reform.

Asquith's accession to the premiership on 5 April 1908 heralded further change, with Crewe, awarded the Garter in Campbell-Bannerman's resignation honours, moved to the Colonial Office and gradually assuming the ailing Lord Ripon's responsibilities as leader in the Lords and lord privy seal.²⁵ He continued to

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carry out an array of ceremonial duties, acting as minister-in-attendance during Edward VII's February 1909 trip to Germany, carrying the canopy at George V's coronation in June 1911, and becoming lord lieutenant of the County

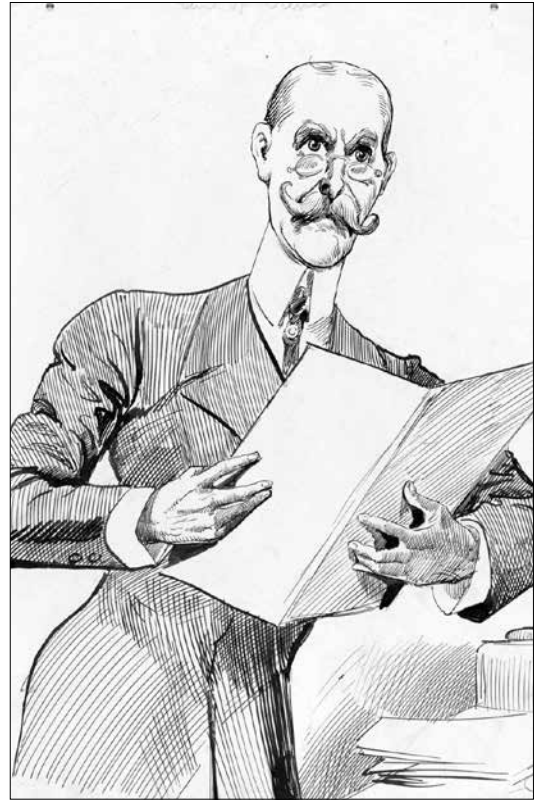
of London in 1912.²⁶ As colonial secretary, his primary duty was administering the world's largest colonial empire, which, in a domestically focused government, required only quiet and efficiency. More significant was his other, behind-the-scenes work across the breadth of government. In 1909, he joined the cabinet's finance committee, which sat for several hours a day discussing Lloyd George's People's Budget and, though having misgivings about the proposed measures, he dutifully geared up to taking it through the Lords.²⁷ Again, Crewe's social contacts helped to lubricate the budget's eventual passage, with him personally appealing to Liberal peers to attend, and, even then, it took a constitutional crisis and the Liberals scraping back into government in the inconclusive January 1910 general election for the budget to make progress.²⁸

Though the Lords relented on the budget in April 1910, the Liberals were now determined to curb their powers. Lacking a clear Commons majority for reform, Crewe, Asquith, Lloyd George, and Birrell met with Conservative leaders twenty-one times between June and November 1910 to find a settlement. When that failed, they concluded that a second election was required to break the deadlock.²⁹ To ensure that their reforms would pass, Crewe and Asquith extracted George V's commitment to a mass creation of Liberal peers to prevent any further obstruction.³⁰ In the end, the resulting general election, held in December 1910, was even less decisive than its predecessor, but the mass creation was unnecessary as, helped in large part by Crewe's personal connections, Conservative waverers were persuaded to abstain on the 1911 Parliament Bill.

In all of this, Crewe had earned the respect of the prime minister, Asquith, who remarked that he 'could do with less cleverness' in the cabinet and would prefer 'a few more Crewes and Greys'.³¹ This bond led Asquith to recognise Crewe as his 'special confidant' whose

judgement he could trust more than any other, whilst Lloyd George came to value his 'subtle mind' and sagacity.³² Publicly, Crewe could also be relied upon to make up for the barrenness of the Liberal front bench in the Lords, not only organising speakers for every debate, but personally representing the Foreign Office, the Board of Education, the Treasury, and his own Colonial Office, and providing cover when colleagues were absent.³³ Such an accumulation of responsibility inevitably began to tell when, after celebrating the birth of a son, another Richard, on 7 February 1911, a fire broke out at Crewe House. Nobody was injured but, just days later, Crewe collapsed at an official dinner and was ordered to take eight weeks' rest by his doctor.³⁴ At a pivotal time in the battle to get the Parliament Bill through the Lords, this was an unwelcome complication. Despite press criticism of Asquith for running his colleagues into the ground, Crewe was soon back at his desk.³⁵

These exertions were rewarded in the 1911 Coronation Honours with Crewe's elevation to a marquessate. An honour he more than earned by his pivotal role in organising the king's December 1911 Delhi Durbar. At the height of the constitutional crisis in September 1910, Crewe had been moved from the Colonial Office to become secretary of state for India. This made him one of the few office-holders to have visited that vast country, having attended Lord Curzon's viceregal durbar in 1902, and the forthcoming royal visit was now to be the first time that a sitting secretary of state had done so. Before departing, the cabinet, under pressure from Crewe and Asquith, acceded to the king's desire to make significant announcements during the ceremonies, agreeing to increase education spending, civil service and army pay, to reverse the partition of Bengal, and to transfer the capital of the Raj from Calcutta to Delhi.³⁶ As a result of Crewe's able management, the durbar was a triumph, crowned by his commissioning Sir Edwin



Crewe as cartoonists saw him (© National Portrait Gallery, London)

Lutyens to design a grand, imperial capital at New Delhi.

Back in London, the dependable Crewe had a role to play when the issue of Irish home rule returned to the agenda in 1912. Since the December 1910 general election, the government had relied on the votes of the Irish Parliamentary Party and, to honour this arrangement and fulfil their old ambitions, proposals were drafted in early 1912 to establish a devolved Irish administration. With Ulster Unionists gearing up to forcibly resist this move, and plans before cabinet in early February 1912 to exclude the province from the settlement, Crewe and Sir Edward Grey rallied Asquith and others to insist that the whole island of Ireland be included.³⁷ The Unionist backlash grew through 1912 as the third Irish Home Rule Bill made its way through parliament and, with Crewe joining Lords Haldane

and Morley to guide it through the Lords in January 1913, it was heavily defeated by the Tory-dominated Upper House. The same process was repeated later that year, with a similar heavy defeat in the Lords, but now, as per the 1911 Parliament Act, it required only that the Commons pass the bill for a third time for it to become law. The increasingly tense atmosphere, with the very real threat of civil war in Ireland, had a moderating effect on Crewe, who gradually accepted that Ulster would have to be excluded from the proposals, though he was still unwilling to do more than follow Asquith's lead.³⁸ Exclusion was finally accepted in late 1913, in part because Lloyd George, an advocate of this compromise, had hosted several key cabinet ministers, including Crewe, Asquith, Grey, and Haldane, for dinner at 11 Downing Street to urge them to settle the matter. From here, Crewe was part

of the committee tasked with drafting a White Paper to enable Ulster's exclusion from the legislation and, though illness in early 1914 kept him away from Westminster, the third Irish Home Rule Bill sailed through the Commons in May 1914.³⁹

The outbreak of the First World War in August 1914, which froze the Irish controversy for now, saw Crewe providing a moderating voice when a series of ministerial resignations threatened to split the government.⁴⁰ He joined Lloyd George in negotiating with the Bank of England to quell financial panic through emergency currency and exchange arrangements and, as India secretary, he was tasked with mobilising the Raj's vast resources to fuel the imperial war effort, as well as defending Britain's Middle Eastern interests. In this latter regard, he cautioned against alienating the Ottomans, particularly when it was proposed to breach Turkish neutrality to sink the German warships Goeben and Breslau.⁴¹ Already regularly consulted by Grey about foreign policy before the war, Crewe was also called on to manage the Foreign Office every six weeks while the foreign secretary took regular breaks to rest his failing eyes.⁴² Such an unusual arrangement reflected the high esteem with which he was held, which was further demonstrated in his being retained in cabinet as lord president of the council when the coalition government was formed with the Conservatives in May 1915. As one of Asquith's 'inner conclave', Crewe was instrumental in forming this new government, such that George Riddell counted him as one of the few who 'really mattered', whilst Charles Hobhouse regretted that he was one of the 'genuine Liberals' left in cabinet.⁴³

For a time, the coalition functioned well, helped in part by Crewe's ability to hold multiple roles at the same time and to reliably fulfil his brief. In August 1915, he was made chairman of a committee to investigate the need for conscription, which was a divisive issue

for Liberals, and, from 14 to 17 June 1916, he joined Bonar Law in leading the British delegation to the Allied Economic Conference in Paris.⁴⁴ A further duplication of ministerial roles came in August 1916 when Crewe was made president of the Board of Education, but he had hardly settled into this new role before Asquith was deposed in December and, loyal to the end, he joined Edward Grey in dutifully resigning too. Even then, Crewe remained active, as London County Council chairman from March 1917, as chancellor of Sheffield University, as leader of the Asquithian Liberals in the Lords, and, with limited social utility in wartime, allowing Crewe House to serve as headquarters for Lord Northcliffe's war propaganda department.⁴⁵

As with all strata of British society, the conflict touched Crewe personally as the casualty lists mounted. As early as November 1914, his son-in-law, Arthur O'Neill, a captain in the Life Guards was killed in action in Belgium, prompting Crewe to reflect that there was some consolation 'to know that he fell ... in a fine advance against the enemy'.⁴⁶ Further tragedy followed in 1917 when Crewe's brother-in-law, Neil Primrose, the Liberal MP for Wisbech, was also killed in the Third Battle of Gaza.⁴⁷ Faced with loss, Crewe once again turned to poetry, penning *A Harrow Grave in Flanders* in early 1915 to commemorate the Harrovian boys who had perished in that 'Benignant age'.⁴⁸ But, true to form, he largely repressed these emotions, giving a stirring expression of confidence after visiting the Western Front during the Paris Economic Conference in 1916, declaring that he had previously been confident of victory, now 'I am certain of it'.⁴⁹

The 'perfect Ambassador'

On 31 March 1922, the Crewes' eleven-year-old son, Richard, known by the courtesy title of Earl of Madeley, died suddenly after an

operation to resolve ongoing ear problems.⁵⁰ The couple never truly recovered from the blow, but Crewe, who had previously coped with personal tragedy through work, was soon offered an escape when, in October, the new Conservative foreign secretary, Lord Curzon, invited him to become ambassador to France. He was actually Curzon's third choice, with the outgoing ambassador jibing that 'nobody else suitable was to be found'.⁵¹ However, tipped for the role since

1918 by former ambassador Lord Bertie for his tact and experience, Crewe was clearly well suited to Britain's grandest ambassadorial posting, with Curzon particularly admiring his old friend's reticence and reserve – the complete absence in him of the facile, the florid, and the exuberant'.⁵² Likewise, Lady Crewe's renown as a society hostess was recognised to complement her husband's grand style in a role in which, it was believed, success would come through impressing Parisian society.⁵³ Crewe's acceptance can be traced to his grief, with George V expressing his hope that the role would bring 'fresh interest into your lives which have been so clouded with sorrow'.⁵⁴ The loss of a second son and heir understandably dampened any further political ambition for a 64-year-old who, after years of loyal service to the Liberal Party, could not now prevent its fragmentation. Since the Conservatives could clearly benefit by a rival party losing one of its leading figures, Crewe insisted that his acceptance remain secret during the November 1922 general election.⁵⁵ For Asquith, though not begrudging his trusted adviser the opportunity, Crewe's departure was 'a personal and political loss of the heaviest kind'.⁵⁶

As it was, the Crewes were a roaring success in Paris, becoming the 'most perfect Ambassador and Ambadress' in the eyes of senior diplomat Sir Eric Phipps.⁵⁷ He created

a favourable impression when presenting his credentials, in fluent French, to President Alexandre Millerand on 30 December 1922, before organising the embassy along lines that befitted the 'grand seigneur anglais'.⁵⁸ When many of Britain's greatest families were cutting back, Crewe leaned into aristocratic excess. He added his own servants to the embassy's large domestic staff, took his own car and purchased another, redecorated

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with family portraits, part of his voluminous library, large quantities of gold and silver plate, chinaware, and glassware, and had the footmen wear the Irish state liveries he had commissioned in the 1890s.⁵⁹

But, if such extravagance has led to Crewe's tenure being dismissed as 'stylish, if largely ornamental', there was a serious side to his work.⁶⁰ Just weeks after his arrival in Paris, French and Belgian troops occupied the Ruhr in retaliation for Germany's failure to keep up the reparations payments imposed since the end of the war. Though the French were anxious to obtain an Anglo-American security guarantee, British officialdom took a dim view of this apparent vindictiveness at a time when they were attempting to foster a European trade revival. A further complication was Curzon's barely concealed loathing for French prime minister Raymond Poincaré, against whom he poured invective in a series of increasingly irate letters to Crewe.⁶¹ Ambassadors had long since ceased to exercise an independent role in cultivating relations between their own and host countries, so Crewe's role was to calm the waters, maintain open lines of communication, and to exert a subtle influence to make French official opinion more amenable to British interests.

Despite two changes of government, Crewe held the ambassadorship until his voluntary retirement in 1928. He was one of several figures consulted by the terminally ill Bonar Law in January 1923 about who the king should invite to succeed him as prime minister, paving the way for Stanley Baldwin to enter Downing Street later that year against the prickly, grand Curzon.⁶² Crewe had, thus, inadvertently contributed to what came to be seen as a new constitutional precedent that a prime minister had to be drawn from the House of Commons. When Baldwin led the Conservatives back into government in November 1924, Phipps recalled that Crewe's role was 'considerably lightened' by the appointment of the Francophile Austen Chamberlain as foreign secretary.⁶³ Like Crewe, Chamberlain had had a long ministerial career, was naturally rigid and personally diffident, he was reliable and had spent years near the pinnacle of his party, but had not succeeded at the top. They got on well, with Chamberlain infamously confiding to Crewe what has come to be seen as a truism of interwar British policy towards the notion of 'collective security' and Europe: 'no British Government ever will or ever can risk the bones of a British Grenadier' in defence of the Polish Corridor.⁶⁴ In this, their views were not totally aligned, but Gaynor Johnson has shown how, with their collaboration culminating in the triumph of the Locarno treaties in December 1925, these two masterful practitioners of foreign policy were advancing British interests in tandem.⁶⁵ Locarno settled the thorny question of Western European security to the satisfaction of France, whilst kickstarting Germany's rehabilitation into the comity of nations. As far as any ambassador could in an age of rapid communications between governments and embassies, Crewe's time in France, the last in that extravagant, grandee style, was an undoubted success, prompting Chamberlain to reflect that he now

understood Asquith's statement that 'Crewe has the best judgment of all my colleagues'.⁶⁶

The 'veteran of them all'⁶⁷

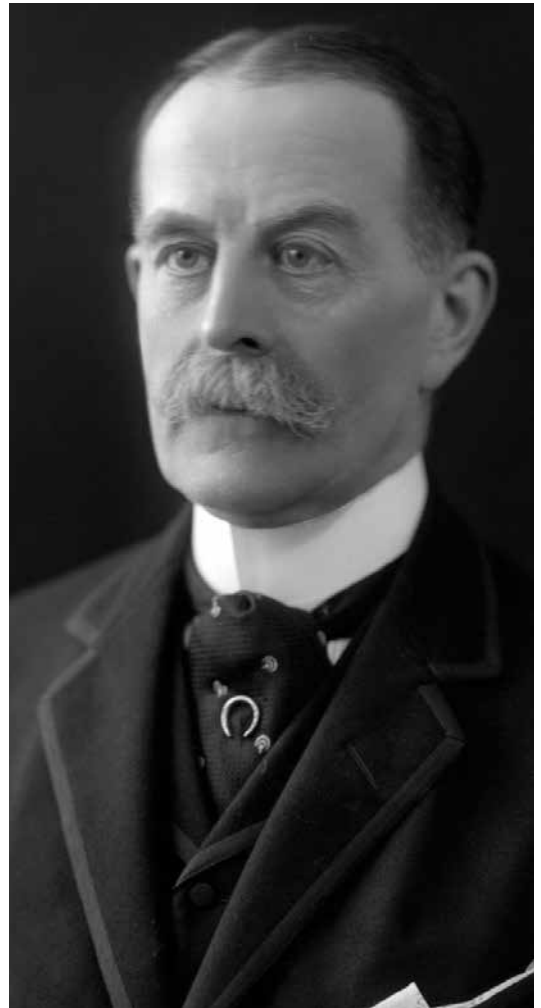
Returning home in mid-1928, the 70-year-old Crewe expected a peaceful retirement. Having been out of the political rat race for six years, he resisted Lord Grey's urgings to resume his leading role in the Lords, insisting on taking time to find his 'correct orientation'.⁶⁸ Ceremonial duties continued to occupy his time, including the lord lieutenancy, university chancellorship, and presidency of the Council for the Preservation of Rural England, as well as his other literary and sporting pursuits.⁶⁹ He marked the passing of his father-in-law, Lord Rosebery, in May 1929 by writing a multi-volume biography, which has been condemned as 'pedestrian', tactful 'to the point of vapidty', and managing to say 'nothing of interest' in 650 pages.⁷⁰ He had one more governmental service to perform, agreeing to join the National Government with his fellow Liberals in August 1931 as secretary of state for war, but he achieved little before retiring with other older ministers, including Austen Chamberlain, after three months to make way for younger colleagues.

The most significant change in this unquiet 'retirement' was the need to scale down the spendthrift lifestyle that had made him and his wife such fixtures of the London social scene. The growing tax burden, rising living costs (including for staff with more opportunities for alternative work), and financial mismanagement left many great families facing bankruptcy. Though Crewe, whose grandson described him as 'both extravagant and poorly advised', resolutely refused to discuss money, even he had to make concessions to reality. In 1936, he sold Crewe Hall to the Duchy of Lancaster and, in the following years, offloaded the bulk of his estates so that, by 1945, only 6,000 of the original

30,000 acres remained.⁷¹ Downsizing was relative, with the family retaining Madeley Manor, acquiring a smaller, more manageable country house, West Horsley Place, and, after selling Crewe House, buying Argyll House in Chelsea. Even then, the Crewes continued to lavishly entertain, opening the 1938 London Season by hosting 400 guests from the Liberal Social Circle and, his biographer recalled, holding dinners that were spectacles of 'almost historical interest, with the table laden with gold plate, and attended by several footmen'.⁷²

Despite slowing down and scaling back, circumstance forced Crewe back into the political fray as the decline of the Liberal Party demanded the return of one of its most reliable representatives. The party's withdrawal from the National Government in September 1932 in protest at the adoption of protectionist tariffs prompted Crewe to join Lords Reading and Grey of Fallodon in signing a public letter welcoming the move and reiterating the old Liberal commitment to free trade.⁷³ Before long, he was again addressing party meetings, rallying the faithful with cries of 'Liberal principles are immortal', assuring them that he was not 'in the least pessimistic', and joining calls for a more proportional voting system.⁷⁴ Less partisanly, he backed the government's efforts to extend provincial self-government in India and supported Austen Chamberlain and Lord Salisbury's abortive efforts to create a committee of ex-ministers to provide policy suggestions that 'restore[d] something like poise and balance to national policy'.⁷⁵ The Liberal battering in the November 1935 general election and the death of Lord Reading a month later left the party in a parlous state and, with a leadership vacancy in the Lords, Crewe agreed to support the new party leader, Sir Archibald Sinclair, to halt the decline.

Having achieved the hallowed status of 'elder statesman', Crewe was well placed to take up the Liberal standard when it was



Crewe in 1921 (© National Portrait Gallery, London)

flagging. His own prestige meant that he was one of those senior politicians, which included Austen Chamberlain, who were consulted by Stanley Baldwin during the Abdication Crisis in December 1936. And, in 1937, he acted as lord high constable at George VI's coronation and secured a peerage for the recently unseated Liberal leader Sir Herbert Samuel.⁷⁶ The major subject of the day, though, was foreign affairs. Ian Hunter has demonstrated how Sinclair led the party to oppose the government's efforts to appease Nazi Germany.⁷⁷ For his part, Crewe shared the horror of much of the political class at any suggestion

of another conflict, whilst abhorring the realities of Fascism in Europe. The weakening of the party machine left many Liberals charting their own course, with the likes of Lord Lothian championing a rapprochement with Germany, Herbert Samuel vocally supporting appeasement, Sinclair rallying those who recognised the real danger, and many others entirely bewildered. Crewe fell into this latter camp and, again called on to speak for the party on a full range of issues, came to regret 'this perpetual preoccupation with Foreign Affairs, with which the old Liberal principles are only concerned from time to time'.⁷⁸ This was clear in his speeches on all the major foreign policy questions, which were typically carefully worded, but smacked of indecision.⁷⁹ It is hard to determine a clear line of argument, beyond appeals to the old Liberal principles of international cooperation, now through the League of Nations, and restoring free trade. However, in hindsight, this suited the fragile and listless party, in which a wrong step could be fatal and, whilst Sinclair's role in keeping the flame of Liberalism alive cannot be understated, he required a brake to ensure that their colleagues could go along with him. In this, Crewe's inconclusive contributions acted as a glue, affirming incontestable principles without frightening the party horses by advocating drastic action against Hitler's Germany.

As events unfolded and vindicated those warning about Hitler's intentions, Crewe's attitude hardened. This steady shift reached fruition during the September 1938 Munich Crisis, when the Liberal leaders gathered to agree their line. Crewe and Sinclair agreed to sign a joint letter to *The Times* committing the party to backing the government if, in conjunction with France, it decided to resist a German attack on Czechoslovakia.⁸⁰ This was overtaken by events, but Crewe remained firm, afterwards ensuring that the wavering Herbert Samuel did not accept Neville Chamberlain's offer to join the cabinet and taking up

the cause of relief for refugees from Nazism.⁸¹ He again joined Sinclair in condemning Italy's invasion of Albania in April 1939 and, soon after, helped to establish the Air Raid Defence League to lobby for expanding Britain's anti-aircraft defences in preparation for war.⁸²

Though supporting the declaration of war to defend Polish independence in September 1939, Crewe saw the event as a source of regret.⁸³ This was clear in his May 1940 article for *The Fortnightly Review* on 'The Eclipse of Liberalism', in which he bitterly reflected that war 'smothers all the aspirations of Liberalism', inhibiting free trade, killing the young, and squandering the nation's wealth.⁸⁴ He privately conceded to Tory MP Brendan Bracken that 'the Liberal Party ... was dead' and that the Conservatives were now champions of the 'high cause of freedom' being assaulted by 'the Totalitarians of the Left'.⁸⁵ His commitment to Britain's victory, however, was never in doubt, as he reflected in a *Sunday Times* article, as 'in all the thousands of recorded years', the British empire had stood firm, 'risking its very existence, for the sake of principles without which life is not worth having'.⁸⁶ A sacrifice which he compared favourably, in multiple articles about the 'French Apostasy', to the Vichyite collaboration with the German occupation. His disgust at this 'small body of men, some disheartened soldiers, some second-rate politicians, and a group of voracious financiers', 'the moral invalids of Vichy', who were betraying a country he remembered fondly was palpable, whilst his belief that France 'will live again' was unwavering.⁸⁷

Now in his 80s, Crewe remained an 'effective leader' to his colleagues, exhibiting a vitality that caused Tory MP Henry Channon to remark that he was 'handsome and distinguished', with 'cheeks so red we wondered if they were painted'.⁸⁸ After briefly decamping to Madeley Manor to escape the Blitz, the Crewes were soon back in London, allegedly because Lady Crewe, 'an easy victim of

ennui', preferred to 'be bombed [rather] than bored'.⁸⁹ However, the sheen was coming off their gilded lives with age. Crewe felt a 'certain amount of discomfort' in the 'abnormally cold winter' of 1941–42, which he thought was the 'longest that my antique memory can recall', though taking reassurance that all classes seemed to be facing the war 'in the right spirit'.⁹⁰ He returned to speak regularly in the Lords; though, with the Liberals in Churchill's wartime coalition, there were fewer and fewer parliamentary demands on his time. Even then, Crewe plodded on, conceding to appoint Herbert Samuel as deputy leader in the Lords in mid-1941, until, in December 1944, he finally announced that, aged 87, it was time to retire.⁹¹

The 'service of good principles'

Crewe died on 20 June 1945 at West Horsley Place. He had first obtained office fifty-nine years before, when Gladstone was an active force in politics, and was outlived by a single colleague from those years.⁹² In the intervening time, he had become one of the leading Liberal voices in the country, serving in the great reforming governments of 1905–15, holding a succession of cabinet positions and fulfilling the underappreciated role of confidant and sage advisor to Asquith. His personal contacts with leading Conservatives had been invaluable to enabling that government to navigate the hostile House of Lords and, ultimately, to neuter it. Loyal to the end, he left government with Asquith in December 1916, but continued to serve the party, with the exception of his highly successful ambassadorship, until his death almost twenty years later. Reliable and respected, he fulfilled his brief as ambassador to France in the mid-1920s at a time of tense Anglo-French relations, working particularly closely with Austen Chamberlain to provide

stability to Europe by balancing French security anxieties with German rehabilitation.

Crewe's success in this regard was rooted in his long training as one of the leading society hosts of the day. A love of country sports and horse racing was matched with a literary flair and a capacity for work that provided outlets at times of strife, though to the detriment of his children. Having always lived a life of extravagance, one does not get the impression that Lord or Lady Crewe ever truly understood the need for economy, even when selling their property. In many ways, this character conforms with that which comes down to us from his grandson, Quentin, who depicts an uninspired, profligate, prudish snob, whose stiltedness made him distant from his family.⁹³ And yet, how should we marry this description, composed with the distance of time and a clear generational divide within the family, with the portrait drawn by his wife of a man with a 'happy sense of enjoyment, the love of a joke, a good story ... an intense optimism', and a cultured consciousness of the value of grandeur?⁹⁴ Certainly, Crewe could be infuriatingly slow in speech and thought, with Asquith lamenting on the golf course that he could recite the Lord's Prayer and the Apostle's Creed in the time that it took him to strike the ball.⁹⁵ This manifested in his political life,

Crewe succeeded because, in the right place at the right time, he was one of the few Liberal peers loyal to Gladstone and then to the party.

especially in the foreign policy debates of the 1930s, but he was also strikingly reliable and that time spent mulling over his words and views meant that, as Charles Hobhouse glowingly wrote, he 'never interven[ed] without effect, or [spoke] at unnecessary length'.⁹⁶ Likewise, what his grandson interpreted as a dearth of paternal warmth does not tally with a man for whom poetry, sedate though it may

have been, was an emotional outlet. He was, after all, a man of his time and he did respond to the tragedies in his personal life, but in ways that, whilst explicable, clearly did not help his loved ones.

Such contradictions ran through this long and varied life. And perhaps the greatest irony was that, whilst Crewe was a notoriously poor speaker, his public career revolved around precisely that. Called upon to address party meetings, hostile peers, Irish crowds, and foreign dignitaries, Crewe's speeches inspired humour, with Lord Rosebery, when his daughter Peggy was in labour, quipping that 'I hope her delivery will not be as slow as Crewe's'.⁹⁷ But that was the price of a public life which he embraced and from which he took personal satisfaction. Crewe succeeded because, in the right place at the right time, he was one of the few Liberal peers loyal to Gladstone and then to the party. He provided unquantifiable benefits to national and party life by being a good host and amiable company to the leading figures of the day at moments of supreme crisis, whilst becoming an unfailing source of sound, considered judgement, rising above factions and, in the 1920s, above even party considerations. As the last Liberal grandee of the party's heyday, a great society host, and a committed progressive reformer, Crewe truly lived up to the title of 'the last of the Whig statesmen'. Of this complicated, emotionally inhibited character, the most perceptive obituary concludes simply: it 'is difficult to say how much our political history owes to men who possess his qualities and devote them so whole-heartedly to the service of good principles'.⁹⁸ ■

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drops in.' I explained the illegality of 'treating' and rearranged things. I should have gone back later to check, but I didn't dare. I revisited those that were doing it my way to congratulate them and tell them how well they were doing.

We lost by 1,200 votes. That was amazingly good, considering everything. I don't think it came as a shock to headquarters. I had been sending rather depressed reports to Jeremy. Less than a week after the result, Donald was offered a peerage. I advised him to take it; he was not physically strong enough to fight

another election. Shortly afterwards, I was offered Ross and Cromarty, a winnable seat, but I was too scared of driving on icy roads to take it.

I saw Huddersfield through another election in 1966 with a candidate in whom I had no faith. We came third. I went back to teaching. ■

Beth Butler wrote these articles for *Third Age Matters* (now *u3a Matters*), the magazine of u3a (formerly the University of the Third Age), in 2014–18. She died in 2018. The articles are reprinted with the kind permission of *u3a Matters* and its former editor Francis Beckett.

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