

'Jimmy'

The career of James de Rothschild, MP

James Armand Edmond de Rothschild, known universally as 'Jimmy', was by any reckoning the most exotic figure to sit on the Liberal benches in the years of the party's decline. Fabulously rich, as much French as British, a leading figure in the Zionist movement, a devotee of horseracing and a major art collector, his appearance was striking. In 1919 his left eye had been knocked out by a stray golf ball struck by the Duc de Gramont.¹ He habitually wore a monocle in his weak right eye and dressed in top hat, frock coat and stiff collar.

Rothschild is remembered today chiefly for the key role he played with his father, Baron Edmond de Rothschild (1845–1934) in promoting the Jewish settlement of Israel. There is a biography of father and son by the well-known historian, Simon Schama, celebrating their contribution to the Zionist movement. Rothschild also appears in the various studies of the family as one of its more colourful characters. There are also a number of books on his art collections. About his political career in the Liberal Party next to nothing has been published.

Rothschild was one of the very small band of survivors who managed to hold on to their seats in the years of Liberal collapse. He sat as MP for the Isle of Ely from 1929–45, winning three elections before finally going under in the 1945 Labour landslide. While his Zionist activity took front stage and his public profile in the party was low key, Rothschild was nevertheless very much part of the small group of wealthy and aristocratic grandees who ran the party at this time. He also had the distinction of being the last Liberal to be appointed to government office. On 22 March 1945 he was appointed as Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Supply in Churchill's wartime coalition. His ministerial career was short-lived. On 23 May 1945 the Liberals and Labour withdrew from the coalition and Rothschild resigned.²

Rothschild was born on 1 December 1878. His father Edmond was the youngest son of Baron James Rothschild of Paris (1792–1868), the most brilliant of the great banking dynasty. With his elder brothers,

Alphonse and Gustave, Edmond inherited control of the Paris house. James's mother was another Rothschild, Adelaide of Frankfurt. James's already ample inheritance was increased still further in 1922 by a legacy from his eccentric unmarried Aunt Alice of Vienna, of whom he was the principal heir. This included the stupendous, seventy-room Waddesdon Manor in Buckinghamshire.³

He followed a classic French education at the *Lycée Louis le Grand* by reading English at Trinity College, Cambridge where he distinguished himself by winning the Harkness Prize for an essay on 'Shakespeare and His Day'.⁴ After 1905 he worked at the Rothschild Bank in Paris but found this unsatisfying. Giving no notice and taking great pains to evade any attempt by his family to dissuade him, he left for Australia without money or cheque-book. He lived there incognito for eighteen months, working on a ranch and experiencing what it was like not to be a Rothschild. In the end he was traced, and with some reluctance, returned to France.⁵ In 1913 he married an Anglo-Sephardi, Dorothy Pinto, seventeen years his junior. He enlisted in the French Army in 1914 and served on the Western Front. Following an accident early in 1915 he had a prolonged convalescence. He arranged his secondment to Allenby's Army in Palestine in 1918, serving as a major in the 39th Fusiliers. He joined the British Military Mission and helped to organise the Jewish Legion.⁶ In 1919 he was naturalised as British.⁷

Rothschild's father, Baron Edmond, had dedicated himself and his fortune to the cause of the Jewish homeland in Palestine from 1882 and became its leading sponsor, working closely with Chaim Weizmann. In 1913, convinced, incorrectly as it turned out, that he was dying, Baron Edmond began to hand over this role to James. In June 1914 James became president of a management committee set up to promote Weizmann's pet project of a Jewish University. During the First World War he was heavily involved in the Zionist work in Britain leading up to the Balfour Declaration of November 1917,

working in harness with Weizmann and Herbert Samuel. It was James who led the celebrations of the Declaration held at the Hippodrome in Manchester, cradle of British Zionism. He was President of the Palestine Jewish Colonisation Association (PICA) from its foundation in 1924 until it was dissolved on his death.

Rothschild's Liberal activity began late, towards the end of the 1920s when he was fifty years old. He had family connections to the Liberal Party elite. His second cousin, Hannah (1851–90) had been the wife of the Liberal Prime Minister, Lord Rosebery. Margaret, their daughter, was the wife of the Earl of Crewe, Liberal Leader in the House of Lords from 1908–22 and again from 1936–44. No doubt, as a Jew and a Zionist, Rothschild found the Liberals a more congenial home than the Conservative Party. Although several Rothschilds had sat as Conservative MPs and there were a number of staunch Tory Zionists – notably Balfour and Leo Amery – there were also vocal anti-Semites in the Conservative Party.⁸ The Liberal Party had a long record of defending the rights of the Jewish community and, under the leadership of Lloyd George, Herbert Samuel and Archibald Sinclair, was decidedly pro-Zionist. It seems highly likely that Herbert Samuel, who resumed activity in the party in 1927 and who had worked with Rothschild in the Zionist cause for many years, played a part in persuading him to stand for Parliament.

The association of the Liberal Party with Zionism and the Jewish Community, especially marked in the 1930s, is an interesting and unexplored area. Jews were prominent in the leadership of the party. In addition to Samuel (leader 1931–35) and Rothschild, Lord Reading (Rufus Isaacs) led the party in the Lords (1931–35). The Liberals also retained significant Jewish support in the East End of London into the 1930s, helping them to win seats in Whitechapel and Bethnal Green. Harry Nathan and Barnett Janner, both Jews, sat as Liberal MPs in the early 1930s, later defecting to the Labour Party.⁹

Rothschild was MP for the Isle of Ely from 1929 to 1945, when it provided one of the handful of Conservative gains



at that general election. The Isle of Ely and its pre-1918 predecessor, the Wisbech division of Cambridgeshire, was a seat the Liberals could normally expect to win, albeit by smallish majorities. In the 1920s it remained a Liberal–Conservative marginal with Labour making only limited inroads with about 15% of the vote. The seat went Tory in the Liberal debacle of 1924, but it was no surprise when Rothschild regained it with a majority of 2,483 (6.8%) in a three-cornered fight in 1929, a much better year for the party. The fact that he held it at the following two general elections owed much to the absence of a Tory candidate in 1931 and of a Labour candidate in 1935. In 1931, as the only ‘National’ candidate, Rothschild romped home with a majority of 13,849 (43%) over an independent. In 1935 he scraped in by only 699 votes (2.0%) in a straight fight with a Tory. However it is some tribute to Jimmy’s wide appeal that a Rothschild could be elected thanks to the votes of Labour supporters.¹⁰

The key to the Liberal predominance in the constituency was its strongly agricultural character. Before 1918 the rural areas had provided the bulk of the Liberal vote in Wisbech, while the towns of Wisbech and Ely were considered to be strongly Conservative.¹¹ In 1921 55% of male workers in the Isle of Ely were occupied in agriculture, the fourth highest proportion in the country. The Liberals were particularly successful in such

heavily agricultural seats in the 1920s.¹² There was also a substantial nonconformist vote, including a concentration of Primitive Methodists amongst the smallholders in the Wisbech area. Presumably much of this vote went to Rothschild despite his being a Jew and his associations with horse-racing.¹³

By 1945 rising support for Labour had eclipsed the Liberal tradition even in the Isle of Ely. The Labour candidate won nearly 35% of the vote in the general election and Rothschild trailed in third with just 25%. The Conservatives won, though with considerably less than their 1935 vote. Thereafter the Liberals largely disappeared from the scene until Clement Freud’s by-election victory in 1973.¹⁴

In the 1929–31 parliament Rothschild was in the vanguard of critics of Lloyd George’s strategy of negotiating an agreed programme with the minority Labour Government in return for continued Liberal support. This ranged him alongside the future Liberal Nationals.¹⁵ In autumn 1930 he dined weekly with two other dissidents, Leslie Hore-Belisha and Geoffrey Shakespeare, at Quaglino’s restaurant to arrange concerted tactics. He spoke against Lloyd George at the marathon meeting of the Liberal Parliamentary Party on 24 March 1931 when thirty-three MPs supported Lloyd George and seventeen voted for withdrawing support from Labour.¹⁶ In May 1931 the



Waddesdon Manor

rebel group, now joined by Ernest Brown, took their case to the National Liberal Federation conference held at Buxton. Hore-Belisha led the attack. Rothschild spoke second, 'but the audience of two thousand delegates were getting impatient, and when he exceeded his time, they became more restive still'. The rebels were out-manoeuvred and overwhelmingly defeated.¹⁷ However when the party split later in the year Rothschild declined to join Simon's Liberal National camp. The reasons for his decision to stick with the Samuelite Liberals are unknown but his lack of ambition for ministerial office and personal loyalty to Samuel no doubt played a part.¹⁸

Rothschild's parliamentary career was conscientious if unspectacular. Although a mediocre speaker, he spoke on a number of issues, especially colonial affairs and anything affecting the farming interests of his constituents – even on one occasion, government support for the bacon industry. He also worked hard in 1932 – but without much success – to obtain imperial preference tariff rights for Palestine products.¹⁹ He was also centrally involved in the debates on Palestine and Jewish matters in the later 1930s and during the war. In her diaries, Blanche ("Baffy") Dugdale, Balfour's niece and a fervent Zionist, described the prudence and ease with which he moved behind the scenes; for example:

1941: 2 May – 'I went to see Jimmie de Rothschild to ask him to speak (in debate on setting up Jewish home guard in Palestine). He looked more than ever like a guttering candle in the shadows of his library ... At first Jimmie said that on no account would he speak, no Jew should speak on such a subject. But I persevered and gradually he calmed

down, though not before he told me that I had lived so long among Jews that I was taking a Jewish point of view, and could not see things in proportion. Surely the oddest remark from him to me ... He then half-apologised and (though Jimmie is too great a gentleman ever to be rude) asked what exactly had to be done vis-à-vis the Government. Then he asked to speak to Lord Moyne [Colonial Secretary 1941–42], who is evidently a great friend of his ...'²⁰

Rothschild's finest moment was the speech he made in December 1942 on the destruction of the Jews in Poland by Nazism. 'Chips' Channon recorded the scene:

An extraordinary assembly today in the august Mother of Parliaments. It was sublime. Anthony (Eden) read out a statement regarding the extermination of the Jews in east Europe, whereupon Jimmy de Rothschild rose, and with immense dignity, and his voice vibrating with emotion, spoke for five minutes in moving tones on the plight of these peoples. There were tears in his eyes, and I feared that he might break down; the House caught his spirit and was deeply moved. Somebody suggested that we stand in silence to pay our respects to those suffering peoples, and the House as a whole rose, and stood for a few frozen seconds. It was a fine moment, and my back tingled.²¹

Rothschild had been in the forefront of efforts to help Jews persecuted by the Nazis. From 1936 he was a member of the Council for German Jewry.²²

During the leadership of Samuel until 1935, and of Sir Archibald Sinclair from 1935–45, Rothschild was one of the mainstays of the party and a member of its inner circle. His substantial financial contributions helped to keep the cash-strapped party afloat.²³ Like most other Liberal ministers appointed to the Churchill Coalition, his selection seems to have owed a lot to his moving in the same upper-class social and political circles as the Prime Minister, a fact which rankled with those party stalwarts who were passed over.²⁴ Although he loyally accepted the Liberal decision to withdraw from the Coalition in May 1945, his personal friendship and admiration for Churchill is clear from his letter of resignation:

My dear Prime Minister,

I hope you will not mind my writing to

tell you how much I regret the political axe which has removed me from your side. It has been for me a wonderful privilege to serve under you, even for such a short time; it was a mighty honour and one of the greatest joys of my life to be a member of your Government on VE day. May I thank you for this in all sincerity.

Let me add, my dear Winston, that you will always find me, not only your grateful admirer, but ever your devoted and affectionate friend.

Jimmy.²⁵

His resignation and defeat at the general election a few weeks later seem to have ended his active Liberal career. He died on 7 May 1957.

James de Rothschild was the most extraordinary of the wealthy aristocrats who played a key part in keeping the Liberal Party going in the 1930s. Schama describes him as '... a complex and fascinating figure, superficially austere, even forbidding in manner, with something of the unbending patrician rectitude of his father ... an erect, very proud aristocratic persona with a fine sense of humour ... his moods could change without warning from engaging geniality to a much more dour and unapproachable demeanour'.²⁶ Although his major political achievements lay elsewhere, in the foundation of the state of Israel, he also made a distinguished contribution to the survival of independent Liberalism.

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1 Rothschild's health was frail although he lived to the age of 79. He had many abdominal operations. He was also accident-prone. Apart from the golfing accident, he was regularly thrown from his horse, was trapped under a lorry on the Western Front in 1915 and had a serious car accident in 1941.

2 Excluding Gwilym Lloyd George, en route to the Conservatives, who remained a minister in Churchill's caretaker government.

3 This legacy seems to have caused some ill-feeling in the Rothschild family, as James's Aunt Alice had indicated that Waddesdon would go to the British side of the family, but then changed her will in James's favour shortly after a visit he paid to her. It was said that he had hastened to tell her as soon as he became a British citizen; E. de Rothschild *A Gilt-Edged Life - Memoirs* (1998), p. 22.

4 Rothschild maintained his academic interests in later life, publishing an important work on Ro-

mance languages: Mary Williams and James A. de Rothschild (editors) *A Miscellany of Studies in Romance Languages and Literatures presented to Leon E. Kastner Professor of French Language and Literature in the University of Manchester* (Cambridge, Heffer (1932)).

- 5 S. Schama, *Two Rothschilds and the Land of Israel* (1978), p. 188.
- 6 Ibid. pp. 209 and 252.
- 7 Ibid. p. 267.
- 8 Although it has to be admitted that casual anti-Semitism was to be found in all the parties at this time; see R. Griffiths, *Fellow Travellers of the Right* (1980), pp. 59-84. Griffiths points out that there was a great deal of 'parlour anti-Semitism' between the wars from which none of the parties was immune; *ibid* p. 65.
- 9 See H. M. Hyde, *Strong for Service – the Life of Lord Nathan of Churt* (1968); E. Janner, *Barnett Janner - A Personal Portrait* (1984),
- 10 There are various anecdotes about Rothschild's popularity with Labour MPs, e.g. Aneurin Bevan; F. Morton, *The Rothschilds*.
- 11 H. Pelling, *The Social Geography of British Elections 1885-1910* (1967), p. 96.
- 12 M. Kinneer, *The British Voter - An Atlas and Survey Since 1885* (1968), pp. 119-20; C. Cook, *The Age of Realignment - Electoral Politics in Britain 1922-1929* (1975), p. 116.
- 13 On the other hand Rothschild may have picked up some of the local 'turf' vote. In neighbouring

Newmarket it was said that wealth and an interest in racing were requirements for a successful Liberal candidate. See Pelling, *op cit*, p. 96, and *Journal of Liberal Democrat History* 26 (Spring 2000), p. 21.

- 14 Liberals took 20% of the votes in 1950 and 11% in 1964, but did not contest the other general elections of the period. Freud held the redrawn seat until 1987.
- 15 The others included Leslie Hore-Belisha, Geoffrey Shakespeare and Ernest Brown.
- 16 Sir Geoffrey Shakespeare, *Let Candles Be Brought In* (1949), pp. 133-34. Sir Henry Morris Jones, *Doctor in the Whips' Room* (1955), p. 84, describing the March meeting, records that 'James Rothschild [was] amusing. He always sat in a chair within our circle and just in front of the Chairman. His silk hat well tilted over the back of his head, he read his contribution to the debate with deliberation and weight.' Perhaps he sat where he did because of his poor eyesight.
- 17 Shakespeare, *op cit*, p.135.
- 18 However, his loyalty to Samuel took a hard blow in 1937 when the former High Commissioner made a speech in the Lords accepting the need for Jewish immigration controls (which he himself had imposed) and the restriction of land settlement – a speech which has not done much to endear his memory to Zionist history; Schama, *op cit*, p. 377 n9.
- 19 N. Smart, *The Diaries and Letters of Robert Bernays 1932-1939* (1996), p. 12. Bernays, a fellow Liberal MP, wrote that 'Rothschild

... though a bad speaker himself, is a good judge of others'.

- 20 Ibid pp. 183-84.
- 21 R Rhodes James (ed.), *Chips – the Diaries of Sir Henry Channon* (1967), p. 247, entry for 17/12/42. The remarkable impact of the speech was confirmed by Lloyd George's assistant, A. J. Sylvester, in his diary: 'Disregarding all the rules of procedure and, in a voice that was full of emotion, he made a speech thanking the Foreign Secretary. During the whole of this time, the House was as silent as the grave. The atmosphere was extraordinary. Although every word uttered by de Rothschild was out of order, not even the Speaker stopped him ... Members of the House then stood in silence. At lunch I asked LG if he had ever seen anything similar to it. "Never in my experience," he replied ... Speaking of de Rothschild's speech, LG said it was really an intonation, such as you get in a synagogue.' A. J. Sylvester, *Life with Lloyd George* (ed Colin Cross), p. 308.
- 22 E. de Rothschild, *op cit*, p. 87.
- 23 Roy Douglas *A History of the Liberal Party* (1970).
- 24 According to Sir Percy Harris, it was due to his membership of the exclusive Tory-Liberal dining club; *The Other Club, Forty Years In and Out of Parliament* (1947).
- 25 Churchill Archive at Churchill College, Cambridge CHAR 20/20741. I am grateful to Ian Hunter for drawing my attention to this document.
- 26 Ibid p. 197.

Liberal cheer Mr Churchill

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Crewe, preceded the unveiling of the portrait.

Sir Archibald Sinclair, Lord Simon and Mr Ernest Brown were among those present.

In his speech at the unveiling Lord Crewe recalled that in the Middle Ages, 'When people believed in magic', it was the custom to fashion a wax image of one's enemy and to stick pins into it in the hope of inflicting some bodily ailment upon him.

'It seems possible', said Lord Crewe, 'that some historically-minded members of the Luftwaffe may have supposed that if they could deface the Prime Minister's portrait with a bomb he would suffer physically, and would be seen an emaciated and hollowed-cheeked figure addressing a distracted House of Commons in tones of desperation'.

'If that were their calculation, they failed here as they have failed elsewhere and as they are going to fail until the end of the War.'

The above speech is reprinted with the kind permission of Curtis Brown.

The final quest for Liberal reunion, 1943-46

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- 7 These papers were originally part of Sir Archibald Sinclair's political papers found at his old shooting lodge, Dalnawillan, in Caithness. The papers have now been deposited with the rest of the Thurso archive at Churchill College, Cambridge.
- 8 'Liberal Reunion – 1943' memo to Sinclair from the Dingle Foot papers (DEFT 1/3) Churchill College, Cambridge.
- 9 'Liberal Reunion – 1943' memo to Sinclair from the Dingle Foot papers (DEFT 1/3) Churchill College, Cambridge.
- 10 'Liberal Reunion – 1943' memo to Sinclair from the Dingle Foot papers (DEFT 1/3) Churchill College, Cambridge.
- 11 'Liberal Reunion – 1943' memo to Sinclair from the Dingle Foot papers (DEFT 1/3) Churchill College, Cambridge.
- 12 Sinclair to Sir Geoffrey Mander 6 December 1945, Thurso Papers
- 13 Letter from Samuel to Montrose, 17 May 1946, Thurso Papers.
- 14 Letter from Sinclair to Samuel, 20 May 1946, Thurso Papers.
- 15 Letter from Samuel to Sinclair 24 May 1946, Thurso Papers.
- 16 Memo written by Herbert Brechin, Secretary of the Scottish Liberal National Association, June 28 1946.
- 17 Letter from Fothergill to Mabane, 23 July 1946, Thurso Papers
- 18 Lady Louise Glen-Coats was an outstanding example of the tough and independent breed of

women who did so much to keep the Liberal Party a viable entity during its electoral low points in the twenty years after 1935. She was originally selected to fight the winnable seat of Orkney & Shetland but stood aside to allow Jo Grimond his chance to stand in 1945.

- 19 Letter from Fothergill to Sinclair, 8 August, 1946, Thurso Papers
- 20 Letter from Violet Bonham Carter to Sinclair, 11 August 1946, Thurso Papers. There is some evidence in the surviving papers that Fothergill and Bonham Carter underestimated Glen-Coats' skills and that, as she wrote to Sinclair on 8 August, 'I am not under any delusion as to the type of person I am up against in the leaders of the opposite camp'.
- 21 Letter from Fothergill to Glen-Coats, 23 July 1946, Thurso Papers.
- 22 Letter from Mabane to Fothergill, 23 October 1946, Thurso Papers
- 23 Letter from Fothergill to Mabane, 24 October 1946, Thurso Papers
- 24 This was a battle that the leadership were having to fight on two fronts: as well as the talks with the Liberal Nationals a group of Liberal candidates was talking directly to a group of Tory reformers led by Peter Thorneycroft about a possible direct merger with the Conservatives. This went as far as the publication of a joint document, *Design for Freedom*, and led to a statement from Liberal headquarters in November 1946 denying rumours of any pact with the Conservatives.