

THE LONG SHADOW

SIR EDWARD GREY AND LIBERALISM

To the historically conscious at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the name of Sir Edward Grey encapsulates a range of often barely understood impressions of Britain's past. It conjures up images of the long recession, of the glorious Edwardian summer drawing to a thunderous close, of the moment when 'the lamps [were] going out all over Europe'.¹ Grey's tenure of the Foreign Office remains contested, but for now his critics dominate the field. More, he seems to stand for the failings of the upper-class amateurs who made up the Edwardian political class. To the wider public he is portrayed as 'a b***dy awful Foreign Secretary',² a frock-coated 'donkey' who, through incompetence and obstinacy, plunged Britain into war, leaving it then to the brass-hatted asses to lead the British army onto Flanders' fields.³ **Professor T. G. Otte** examines Grey's record in the run-up to war.



HADOW OF WAR

LIBERAL FOREIGN POLICY BEFORE 1914

IT IS ONE of the many ironic twists of modern British politics – and of the history of the Liberal Party more especially – that Grey’s historical persona is largely the product of David Lloyd George’s poisonous pen. His wartime memoirs – self-serving and dishonest by any standard – were meant to settle old scores and to cement his own leadership credentials, and to that end the reputations of Asquith and Grey had to be eviscerated on the altar which the Welsh idol had erected for himself. Lloyd George dismissed Grey as more ignorant of foreign affairs than any other cabinet minister, and suggested that his ‘personality was distinctly one of the elements that contributed to the great catastrophe’ because he was ‘not made for prompt action’.⁴ It is little wonder that Margot Asquith should have wished to dance on Lloyd George’s grave. As for Grey, he was too refined and too reserved for any such display of emotion. And here, perhaps, lies part of the explanation for Grey’s low political reputation. His aloof personality and his own reluctance to refute Lloyd George, reinforced by his increasing blindness and compounded by family tragedies, left him an easy target. Indeed, ‘neither [Grey’s] admirers nor his critics know quite what they should say about him.’⁵

Grey’s low reputation stands in sharp contrast to the high esteem in which he was held throughout his long public career. His political longevity, indeed, is remarkable.

First elected for Berwick-upon-Tweed in 1885 – not natural Liberal territory then, Percy influence and the Anglican clergy usually ranged against him – he continued to represent the seat in parliament for the next thirty-one years.⁶ For exactly eleven of these he was foreign secretary, irreplaceable if not always irreproachable. Grey, in fact, remains the longest, continually serving occupant of the office since the creation of the Foreign Office in 1782. Palmerston and Salisbury held its seals for longer overall – fourteen years and nine months in Palmerston’s case and thirteen years, seven months in Salisbury’s – but the former occupied the post three times and the latter four times. Amongst twentieth-century foreign secretaries, Antony Eden comes close with ten years and three months, yet he, too, took the Foreign Office on three occasions. But Grey was also vital to the inner workings of the last Liberal government as an essential connecting tube between different sections of the party. This role and the position which he occupied in the Liberal ideological spectrum make him a useful prism through which to study the variegated nature of Edwardian Liberalism, its fault lines and problems. Even so, it is on his stewardship of foreign affairs, and the degree to which he succeeded or failed in tackling its many challenges, that his reputation rests.

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Sir Edward Grey
(1862–1933) in
1914

Grey’s social background set him somewhat apart from the bulk of the 1905 administration. He was one of a handful of aristocrats – Crewe, Harcourt and, later, Churchill being others – amongst men mostly middle class by descent, profession or habits. Birrell and Haldane or McKenna and Morley, and indeed Asquith, were more representative of the *embourgeoisement* of the Liberal Party at Westminster and in the country at large. Grey’s pedigree, however, was unquestionably Liberal. His family, the border Greys, was perhaps better known for its military and naval exploits – his great-great-grandfather, the 1st Earl Grey, was ‘No Flint Grey’ of North American fame, and his great-grandfather, the 1st Baronet, had been Nelson’s flag captain on HMS *Victory* – or its ecclesiastical eminence – his great-grand-uncle was the Bishop of Hereford and through his paternal grandmother he was descended from two further bishops (Lichfield and London), and there was also a Wilberforce connection as well as, more curiously, one with Cardinal Manning.

But amongst the many admirals and generals, the scattering of clergymen, and the odd colonial governor, the Northumberland Greys had also achieved a certain political prominence in recent years. They had produced one prime minister, his great-grand-uncle, the 2nd Earl, one of the stars in Liberal firmament since 1832,

and his grandfather, Sir George Grey, three-times home secretary ('Prime Minister for Home Affairs') and one of the mainstays of Liberal cabinets from 1839 until 1866. From him, '[c]areful in action and moderate in speech';⁷ Edward Grey inherited a strong patrician sense of public service. But he was also descended from the Whitbreads, the Bedfordshire brewers and Liberal politicians; and he was connected to the Whig cousinhood, albeit in its more recent extension. The Baring earls of Northbrook were relatives, as were the earls of Gainsborough.⁸ Indeed, his background, familial connections and his private and public identification with rural Northumberland and Hampshire made Grey a much more recognisably English politician, a rarity in a party now dominated by the 'Celtic fringe'. Even Asquith and Churchill, as Anglo-Saxon as could be, after all, represented Scottish constituencies.⁹

Grey's political outlook also deserves closer attention. Given his association with Rosebery, in some ways one of his political mentors, and with Asquith and Haldane, his contemporaries in the Liberal League, Grey tends to be labelled as a Liberal Imperialist. He was that, but the label captures and privileges only part of his politics. These were more complex and variegated than the LImp label would suggest, even if Grey himself was far from the 'compleat politician', as his part in the clumsy Relugas intrigue against Campbell-Bannerman in 1905 underlined.¹⁰ If anything, in his views on domestic affairs, he was closer to the Radicals than to any other Liberal grouping. He was part of a progressive caucus among members of the 1885/6 intakes, guided by John Morley, who 'may be said to have been our [political] foster parent':

'[W]e were thrown together instantly as members of a little group of advanced Liberals, which formed itself soon after the General Election. The group consisted of Asquith, Edward Grey, Haldane, Arthur Acland, Tom Ellis and myself [Sydney Buxton]. We were personal friends, holding the same progressive views, and anxious as far as possible to advance these views. We sat together, worked

together, introduced Bills together, and supported one another by speech and vote'.¹¹

Grey was driven by a strong sense of the growing 'democratisation' of British society and politics. Even if he himself did not feel entirely comfortable with the new age of mass politics, the era of the common man was approaching, and it behoved the old elites to smooth its progress. This consideration was at the root of Grey's support for MPs' salaries to allow working men to enter parliament, his advocacy of land reform, his pro-home-rule stance, and his championing of women's suffrage when many leading Liberals were opposed to it, though not as fiercely usually as their wives. Of course, there were pragmatic calculations of political advantage at work here, too. An infusion of working men at Westminster would broaden the Liberals' base and so facilitate their survival as a truly 'national' party. Resisting such reforms, by contrast, would lead to social disintegration and class warfare, the break-up of the Liberal Party and political chaos.¹² But Grey pursued such schemes because he thought them to be right and necessary. Independence of thought, he observed in the House of Commons during a debate on MPs' salaries in words that have a familiar ring to them even at the distance of over a century, 'is not a monopoly of men of wealth and leisure ... [I]n our excessive anxiety to make sure Members are men of leisure, we not only get the men who are by nature and habit leisurely outside the House but who introduce habits of leisure into business inside the House'.¹³

In a similar vein he supported the female franchise because he understood the 'sense of injustice of [women] being deprived of the vote'.¹⁴ Indeed, according to John Burns, the workingman Liberal minister, 'Grey ha[d] become almost obsessed by his fanatic adhesion to his cause'.¹⁵ Support for it fitted a pattern of piecemeal constitutional reform to enlarge the democratic element in British politics. It was for this reason that Grey, in his Leith speech of December 1909, advocated reforming the House of Lords, by substituting popular elections for the hereditary principle,

as necessary in terms of facilitating the transition to democratic politics and as the only practically viable alternative to a unicameral solution, which he regarded as dangerous.¹⁶ Grey was, indeed, as A. J. Balfour observed with acuity, 'a curious combination of the old-fashioned Whig and the Socialist'.¹⁷ For those to whom a Tory judgment may be suspect, Prince Lichnowsky, the German ambassador, a man of great intelligence and perception, later reflected that '[Grey] joined the left wing of the party and sympathised with Socialists and pacifists. One might call him a Socialist in the most ideal sense [of the term], for he carries the theory [of socialism] into his private life, which is marked by greatest simplicity and unpretentiousness, although he is possessed of ample means'.¹⁸

Whatever Grey's reforming instincts at home, on foreign policy he parted company with the Radicals, whose international pacifism made for loose thinking and self-delusions. His outlook, by contrast, was shaped by J. R. Seeley's *Expansion of England* with its emphasis on the imperial theme in Britain's post-1688 development, in sharp distinction from the usual Whig themes of the advance of constitutional governance and liberty.¹⁹ If Seeley gave a degree of intellectual rigour to Grey's views, his favourite country pursuit offers a glimpse into Grey, the man and the politician. The qualities required to succeed in fly-fishing would serve any diplomat or politician well. They need to be alert to 'the untoward tricks' of wind and currents. These could not be overcome 'by sheer strength', but had to be 'dodge[d] and defeat[ed] unobtrusively'. For this '[q]uiet, steady, intelligent effort' was needed; and the sportsman 'should make guesses founded upon something which he has noticed, and be ever on the watch for some further indications to turn the guess into a conclusion. [...] But there is a third [quality] ... It is self-control'.²⁰

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Given Grey's association in the public mind with the events of 1914, historians have tended to view his foreign secretaryship through the prism of Anglo-German

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relations. This is a problematic. For by privileging the German aspect it produces a skewed perspective on Edwardian foreign policy. It is imperative to keep in view its global, imperial character. In equal measure a European and an Asiatic power, Britain had a global strategic paradigm which linked her dispersed interests. The only other comparable power in this respect was Russia. Only she had the capacity to affect British interests on both continents. There was nothing novel about the Russian factor in British foreign policy. Indeed, it had been a constant in Britain's strategic equation since the 1820s, if not before.²¹ International politics were anything but stable during Grey's period at the helm of the Foreign Office, however, and British policy faced unprecedented challenges. Russia's double crisis – catastrophic military defeat abroad and the subsequent turmoil at home – eliminated her as an international factor for the foreseeable future after 1905. London's strategic calculus thus was complicated by Russia's weakness and her resurgence from 1912 onwards.

The shifts in the international landscape on account of the waning and waxing of Russia's might established the broad strategic parameters of Grey's policy. There was a further significant factor which influenced his outlook: his political generation's experience of Britain's relative isolation in the 1890s. In the years after 1900, Grey toyed with the notion of a 'new course' in foreign policy. Its aim was a rapprochement with Russia 'to eliminate in that quarter the German broker, who keeps England & Russia apart and levies a constant commission upon us.'²² Dispensing with Berlin's brokering services was the operative idea here; and it shaped Grey's thinking after 1905, as an internal minute from early 1909 testified. Britain 'used "to lean on Germany"' in the 1880s and 1890s, he noted: '[W]e were kept on bad terms with France & Russia. We were sometimes on the brink of war with one or the other; & Germany took toll of us when it suited her.'²³

For as long as Britain was locked into antagonistic relations with France and Russia, it proved impossible to escape from this relative dependence on Germany. But the 1904 Anglo-French colonial

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compromise and now the crippling of Russian power had transformed Britain's strategic position. It presented an opportunity, but there were also risks attached to it. Russia's prostration made her biddable and so facilitated a compromise to defuse the 'Great Game', the struggle for mastery in Asia that had bedevilled relations between the two countries for so long. On the other hand, her decline had unhinged the European equilibrium. No longer threatened by the prospect of a two-front war, Germany was free now to throw her weight about. This was the root cause of the European crises after 1905.

The Anglo-French convention of April 1904 was the work of Grey's predecessor, Lord Lansdowne. But he had supported this colonial compromise as an act of overdue imperial consolidation that would remove any leverage which the not entirely honest broker in Berlin's Wilhelmstrasse (the location of Germany's foreign office) had over Britain.²⁴ The agreement remained a 'cardinal point in our foreign policy' for Grey. Indeed, 'the spirit of the agreement is more important than the letter of the agreement', he argued.²⁵ Several historians have criticised Grey's apparent preoccupation with the 'spirit' of the convention, with the implication that he neglected Britain's national interests.²⁶ This is a grotesque caricature. For Grey had not irrevocably committed Britain to France. Given the international instability after 1905, he followed a policy of constructive ambiguity. When, during the first Moroccan crisis, the French ambassador 'put the question ... directly & formally' – that is, would Britain support France in the event of a continental war – Grey promised 'benevolent neutrality', but intimated that the British public 'would be strongly moved in favour of France', provided she did not commit an act of aggression.²⁷ Such carefully dosed assurances also extended to the controversial military talks, which Grey authorised to continue in January 1906. The advantages of learning the details of French military planning aside,²⁸ Paris had to be prevented from buckling under pressure from Berlin. If that happened, the colonial agreement of 1904 was likely to unravel, and

with it Britain's position in Egypt. Whatever assurances of support were given, however, they had to be conditional so as to ensure that France did not provoke Germany. This was meant to render impossible any 'independent action' by France without prior consultation with Britain. A British guarantee was out of the question. Such an undertaking would be 'a very serious [matter] ... it changes the Entente into an Alliance – and Alliances, especially continental Alliances, are not in accordance with our traditions.'²⁹

Carefully phrased statements addressed to Berlin were the reverse of Grey's constructive ambiguity in dealings with the French. London 'did not wish to make trouble', the Wilhelmstrasse was told, but this assurance was coupled with the hint that, were Germany to fall upon France, 'it would be impossible [for Britain] to remain neutral.'³⁰ Grey's stance compelled both France and Germany to act with restraint, the former to secure Britain's support, the latter to prevent her from entering any continental conflict. This was not traditional balance-of-power politics; Russia's weakness made that impossible. It was rather a form of British neo-Bismarckianism, to which the Edwardian generation was attracted.³¹

Grey stuck to this line in subsequent years. The Anglo-French notes of November 1912, and the 'division of labour' between the two navies underlined this. The arrangement was an exercise in *entente* management and in containing Germany, but without committing the government to any particular course of action. Britain had the flexibility and the strength to forge a policy commensurate with her regional interests. Decision-makers in London were 'faced with alternatives, not necessities.'³² Britain's degree of leverage over Paris was confirmed by none other than the French president. As the Sarajevo crisis reached its climax, Raymond Poincaré recorded in his diary that '[o]n account of the ambiguous attitude of England, we let it be known at St. Petersburg ...'³³ Although not altogether free of duplicity, advising Russia not to precipitate matters was dictated by the necessity of carrying Britain with the Franco-Russian group.

Britain's dealings with France were conditioned by the changing value of the Russian factor. Grey's attitude towards Russia, however, was complex. As any right-thinking Liberal, he was suspicious of tsarist autocracy. In the spring of 1917, out of office now, he 'rejoice[d] at seeing Russia purge her Gov[ernmen]t & strike out for freedom.'³⁴ No doubt, such overt ideological hostility especially amongst the Radicals complicated dealings with St Petersburg. Grey's Russian policy was nevertheless driven by pragmatic considerations of British global strategic interests. He appreciated the broader view that the waning of Russian power disrupted the European equilibrium. It was desirable, therefore, that Russia was soon 're-established in the councils of Europe & I hope on better terms with us than she has yet been.'³⁵ But he also understood that Russia's recent decline allowed for settling matters in Asia. Such an arrangement would help to consolidate the security glacis around India, including the Persian Gulf: 'And if we don't make an agreement, we shall be worried into occupying Seistan and I know not how much besides' – and overstretch would beckon.³⁶

By any standard, the 1907 Anglo-Russian convention was a considerable success, but Grey's policy towards Russia suggests a deeper understanding that this imperial compromise was no more than a temporary alignment, made possible by Russia's weakness and likely to loosen again once Russia recovered her strength. British policy could not control Russia, but nor did Grey give in to Russian blackmail during the Bosnian crisis of 1908–9.³⁷ Nor, for that matter, could he prevent the subsequent rise of Austro-Russian antagonism in the Balkans.³⁸ In many ways, a Romanov–Habsburg settlement in the region would have diffused the most explosive international flashpoint: '[A] war between them [Austria-Hungary and Russia] would be very inconvenient. I do not think that we could take part in it, and intervene on the Russian side in a Balkan War, and yet our absenteeism would prove a danger to the present grouping of European Powers.'³⁹

During the two Balkan wars of 1912–13 Grey continued his

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even-handed policy by supporting joint action by the powers as the only means of preventing an Austro-Russian rupture.⁴⁰ Lack of influence over Russia remained a problem, but Grey did not privilege preserving the wire to St Petersburg over maintaining the international concert. He could not do so because the two were linked. Without coordination with the Franco-Russian group, there was no prospect of moderating St Petersburg, in which case Germany was unlikely to keep Vienna in check. The challenge was to balance these competing demands. That this could be done was demonstrated by Grey's surefooted mediation and his skilful presiding over the London ambassadorial conference, in many ways the zenith of his international influence. There was, however, a tension between the two objects, and Grey was alive to the inherent risks of this policy. By 1913–4, he had begun to realise that international politics was on the cusp of major change, and it seemed better to stay one's hand until the pieces had settled into a new pattern: 'The best course ... is to let things go on as they are without any new declaration of policy. The alternatives are either a policy of complete isolation in Europe, or a policy of definite alliance with one or the other group of European Powers.' Indeed, Grey knew that 'we have been fortunate in being able to go on for so long as we are' without having to choose.⁴¹

Russia's recovery from the nadir of 1905 complicated Anglo-Russian relations and Great Power politics in general. More robust Russian proceedings in Persia raised doubts about the continued viability of the 1907 compromise.⁴² Renegotiating the compact, Grey thought, would be awkward: 'all along we want something, and have nothing to give. It is therefore difficult to see how a good bargain is to be made.'⁴³ A Franco-Russian attempt to coax Britain into a naval agreement complicated matters further.⁴⁴ Grey was adamant that no such deal with Russia was possible, even if it was not politic to say so to St Petersburg.⁴⁵ Any move in that direction would impair relations with Germany, so much improved in the last eighteen months before Europe's last summer: 'we are on good terms with Germany now and we desire

to avoid if possible a revival of friction with her, and we wish to discourage the French from provoking Germany.'⁴⁶

The cooling of relations with Russia and the détente with Berlin were linked. Indeed, the state of Anglo-German relations had been very much a function of those with the Russian empire since at least 1878. Even so, it would be a perverse attempt at revisionism to suggest that the antagonism between Britain and Germany after 1905 did not exist. But in terms of high politics it was short-lived, and it needs to be placed in its proper context. The nexus with Anglo-Russian relations aside, Grey strove for the same even-handedness in his dealings with Germany as characterised his policy towards France and Russia. 'Real isolation of Germany would mean war', he thought, but 'so would the domination of Germany in Europe. There is a fairly wide course between the two extremes in which European politics should steer.'⁴⁷

Steering such a course was nevertheless beset with practical difficulties, largely because Grey and the Foreign Office found it well nigh impossible to read Germany. Pace some historians, they did not invent the 'German threat' to suit some psychological need on their part. If any thing the nature and direction of Germany's ambitions, and the motivations that underpinned them, appeared confused. The kaiser's glittering public persona – so unlike Grey's in almost every way – was one complication. 'I am tired of the Emperor', he confessed, '– he is like a great battleship with steam up and the screws going but no rudder and you cannot tell what he will run into or what catastrophe he will cause.'⁴⁸ More fundamentally, uncertainty about Germany mirrored the strategic confusion at the heart of German policy. As Zara Steiner has observed, '[a]s the Germans themselves were divided, no foreign secretary, however acute, could have accurately read the German riddle.'⁴⁹ Official *Weltpolitik* rhetoric, emanating from the Wilhelmstrasse and its pliant press, covered that puzzle in stardust but it offered no real clues as to what Germany really wanted.

Grey's policy towards Germany sought to combine accommodation

with compellence. He was ready to make concessions to satisfy legitimate German ambitions, but not at the price of sacrificing Britain's naval supremacy or her relations with other powers. To some degree, Grey's readiness to accommodate Germany was shaped by the ideological divisions in the Liberal Party between 'navalists' and 'economists'. But his attempts to negotiate a naval agreement with Berlin was also driven by his conviction that the various arms races between the powers risked ruining them. They faced a danger, 'greater ... than that of war – the danger of bleeding to death in times of peace.'⁵⁰

Any naval agreement with Berlin, however, had to be based on reciprocity.⁵¹ And this proved to be the nub of the problem. In 1909 and 1913, Grey's policy of compellence, tempered by conciliation, appeared to have manoeuvred Berlin to where he wanted it to be, ready to settle the naval question and to agree to a fixed ratio of capital ships.⁵² Both sides, however, misread the situation, and the talks remained fruitless. Grey reasoned, not entirely inaccurately, that growing financial pressures would force Germany to curb her naval programme. In Berlin, by contrast, Grey was thought to be under the thumb of the Radicals who were calling for retrenchment and social reform. Ultimately, the German demand for a political formula to complement a naval convention, in effect a British neutrality pledge, was a step too far. It would have given Berlin a blank cheque to resort to preventive war.⁵³ Neither Haldane nor Churchill in 1912 and 1913 was able to remove this obstacle. But by then the Anglo-German naval race was over. German defence spending had come up against a fiscal ceiling, compounded by the accelerating French and Russian (and Belgian) armaments programmes on land, and threatening to trigger a constitutional crisis in Germany. The 1913 German army channelled funding away from the navy, and was, in effect, a unilateral German declaration of naval arms limitation.⁵⁴

Grey understood well enough the reasons behind Berlin's now more emollient tone: '[I]t is not the love of our beautiful eyes, but the extra 50 million required for

increasing the German Army.'⁵⁵ Even so, he refrained from exploiting Germany's difficulties for political gain. It seemed politic to let matters run their natural course. Any attempt to formalise the end of the naval race ran the risk of prolonging it by encouraging Tirpitz and his supporters to mount a rearguard action against the shift in defence spending. With this in mind, Grey stopped Churchill from travelling to Germany to meet the kaiser on the fringes of the Kiel regatta in June 1914. Even under very different circumstances, the idea of letting these two mercurial men, liable at the best of times to be carried away by their own rhetoric, settle matters had little to recommend itself to Grey.⁵⁶ But in 1914 such a visit was likely to cause more problems than could be resolved afterwards by Grey and his diplomats.

As naval matters receded into the background in 1913/14, there was a growing sense in diplomatic circles of '*une détente et ... un rapprochement*' between Britain and Germany.⁵⁷ This was not merely a question of atmospherics. A fortnight before Sarajevo, the two governments concluded an agreement on Near Eastern affairs, which aimed 'to prevent all causes of misunderstandings between Germany and Britain', and which, it was hoped, would provide a platform for further arrangements.⁵⁸ Grey certainly was determined to build on it: 'the German Gov[ernment] are in a peaceful mood and they are anxious to be on good terms with England, a mood which he [Grey] wishes to encourage.' International politics were on the cusp of change. As the Franco-Russian group regained its strength, so Britain could revert to her traditional balancing role. She could now act as 'the connecting link' between Berlin, Paris and St Petersburg, and so help to restrain 'the hastiness of Austria and Italy.'⁵⁹ There is, in fact, a substantial body of circumstantial evidence to suggest that Grey was ready to go further and to explore the possibility of a more substantive rapprochement. For this purpose his private secretary was meant to visit Germany on a secret mission. Ultimately, the visit never materialised. It had to be postponed several times, and was finally scheduled for July 1914 – but

by then another matter occupied the minds of Grey and the German chancellor.⁶⁰

To some extent, the episode was yet another amongst countless such failed initiatives that litter the pages of diplomatic history books. But to see it in this light means to miss its real significance. For it underlines the essential flexibility of British foreign policy. In 1914, Grey and his officials anticipated another shift in the constellation of the powers. Russia's resurgence tilted the military balance against Germany, but also left a question mark over Anglo-Russian relations in Asia. Some repositioning on Britain's part then seemed necessary, and a rapprochement with Germany was an option worth pursuing. The episode therefore also suggests the need to reconsider Grey's policy in more general terms. Grey did not privilege relations with France and Russia, and to that extent he was not '*ententiste à outrance*'. Supporting France was the correct policy response in 1905 and 1911; an Asiatic arrangement with Russia was practical politics after 1905; and maintaining it after 1907 served Britain's global, strategic interests. But Grey was not willing to adhere to both agreements beyond the point at which they ceased to be useful policy tools. And yet, Grey was '*ententiste*' in that the Near Eastern agreement with Germany conformed to the principles that had informed the arrangements with France and Russia. Like them, it was meant to consolidate Britain's international position by accommodating a rival without sacrificing vital interests. This has broader implications for scholarly interpretations of pre-1914 foreign policy. For it calls into question the descriptive and analytical value of the notion of a 'policy of the ententes'. No such policy existed in the sense of a commitment to France and Russia. It did exist as a strategy of imperial consolidation through targeted and limited concessions to actual or potential competitors; and this was in a line of continuity with much of British foreign policy since the Crimean War.

The *détente* with Germany and the underlying sense Great Power politics were on the verge of a major transformation established

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the parameters of Grey's diplomatic moves in July 1914. From the moment the news of the Sarajevo murders reached London, he was fully alert to the risk of escalation. Indeed, he was 'rather nervous as regards Austria & Servia'.⁶¹ His room for manoeuvre, however, was limited, both on account of foreign policy calculations and of domestic constraints. The latter were not insignificant. Any premature intervention had the potential to split party unity, always brittle in matters of foreign policy. At the same time, any firm indication of Britain's stance was liable to trigger unwelcome reactions by the other powers.

Grey's interviews with the German and Russian ambassadors on 6 and 8 July constituted a form of early, if indirect, intervention. The peaceful resolution of the Sarajevo crisis depended on cooperation with Germany. Already the previous Balkan turmoil had demonstrated this. The groupings of the powers were not to 'draw apart', Grey warned and promised that he 'would use all the influence [he] could to mitigate difficulties'.⁶² It was vital, moreover, that the Russian government reassured Germany, 'and convince her that no *coup* was being prepared against her'.⁶³ If it failed to do so, a diplomatic solution would prove elusive. The resurgence of Russia made the alliance with Austria-Hungary more important for Berlin, and 'the more valuable will be the Austrian alliance for Germany, and the more leverage Austria will have over Germany.' Indeed, Grey sought to instil a sense of urgency in both the Russian and German ambassadors: 'The idea that this terrible crime might unexpectedly produce a general war with all its attendant catastrophes – after all the great efforts in recent years to avoid it ... "made his hair stand on edge"'.⁶⁴

In this manner, Grey signalled British concerns about a possible escalation, coupled with a reminder that London could not be ignored if matters were to escalate. Even so, the focus in the scholarly literature on Grey's actions in the summer of 1914, whether by commission or omission, is misplaced. For at the root of the escalating crisis was the reluctance of France and Russia to listen to counsels of moderation,

and the fact that the Wilhelmstrasse turned a deaf ear to the warnings of its man in London. For Grey there were good practical reasons for pursuing the course he had chosen. Recent experience had reinforced the importance of Anglo-German cooperation in settling problems in South Eastern Europe; and throughout the first half of 1914 everything seemed to indicate German willingness to establish closer ties with Britain. Any direct warning addressed to Berlin would abort joint crisis management, and might drive Germany into a preventive war, precisely what Grey – and his contemporaries and later critics – wished to avoid.⁶⁵

That criticism of Grey is coloured largely by a Lloyd Georgeian fable has already been noted. But it is also based on an assumed dichotomy between a 'blue-water' and a continental security strategy. This is a strategic fallacy. For the purposes of practical politics, no such alternative existed. For Britain, the Russian and German factors were connected because she was both a European and an overseas power, and her security paradigm was thus global.⁶⁶ The cabinet did not decide to enter the war in Europe as a lesser evil when compared with the recrudescence of the Anglo-Russian Asiatic antagonism. Ultimately, a majority of ministers, swayed by Asquith and Grey, concluded that non-interference was not a realistic proposition. Whatever the outcome of the war, Britain would be left in a much-reduced position. If, most likely, the central powers won, they would reorder Europe; and a now rampant Germany would challenge Britain at some point in the future, and from a much broader base owing to her acquisition of the French navy and colonial empire. If, by contrast, France and Russia emerged victorious, they would destroy the two Germanic powers and the balance of power with it, and they were not likely to pay much attention to British interests.⁶⁷ And even if the continental powers, weakened by a prolonged war, were to agree to a negotiated peace, it would unite them against Britain. Peace might have been a British interest – the old mantra since 1815 – but once a continental conflict hove

into view, there were no good outcomes for Britain. In the summer of 1914, the inherent logic of Britain's geopolitical position meant that, given the greater likelihood of an Austro-German victory, Britain had to enter the war against these two.⁶⁸

Grey made mistakes, however. Consistent in his pursuit of international mediation, his various schemes for intervention by the four powers not directly affected by the Serbian crisis were nevertheless problematic. The quartet idea was not without its own internal logic, but Grey never explained why he preferred this slimmed down version of the classic European concert to involving all the Great Powers; and it allowed Vienna to operate in the shadows of international diplomacy to plot a war against Serbia. Grey also misread Austro-Hungarian policy in that he concluded that Habsburg policy could only be moderated by Berlin, and so never developed the habit of direct exchanges with the Ballhausplatz. But in most other respects, British influence was limited. In 1929, Grey wondered whether he could have gone further in his attempts to restrain Russia. Yet London's ability to apply pressure on the Russian government was circumscribed, not least by the knowledge that any such attempt would have triggered demands for a firm commitment to Russia: 'And to that question he [Grey] could not have given an affirmative answer'.⁶⁹ Indeed, given that, in July 1914, the Russian foreign minister pressed for the mobilisation of Russia's armed forces in the expectation that Britain would not join the fray, it is scarcely credible that moderating advice would have had any effect on him. If anything, it was Russian, and to an extent French, recalcitrance that forced Grey to utter his explicit warning of a world war on 29 July.

The experience of Europe hurtling towards war weighed heavily on Grey's mind afterwards:

I can't tell you how much I feel the horror of the great catastrophe. The whole time is like a great scourge; something inexorable & inevitable. I have searched my heart continuously

'I have searched my heart continuously as to whether we could have kept out of it & I am sure the consequences of staying out would have been worse than being in, but it is awful.'

as to whether we could have kept out of it & I am sure the consequences of staying out would have been worse than being in, but it is awful.⁷⁰

Indeed, at some point later in August he seems to have suffered a mental breakdown.⁷¹

The war marked the end of an era for Europe, for Britain and her empire, and for Grey's party. He himself ploughed on, impelled by a sense of duty and despite significant health problems,⁷² until Asquith's resignation in December 1916. But he was a man out of his time now: 'I took things as I found them and for 30 years spoke of progress as an enlargement of the Victorian industrial age: as if anything could be good that led to telephones and cinematographs and large cities and the *Daily Mail*.'⁷³

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It has been tempting for historians to present British foreign policy in 1914 as a study in failure. It has proved even more tempting for them to follow Lloyd George up the garden path of history. Both temptations should be resisted. If anything, the events of 1914 underline the limits of British power at the end of the long nineteenth century. It is a peculiarly British, or perhaps more particularly English, delusion to think that this country could (or can) shape the decisions made by others. All too often, indeed, criticism of Grey is little more than a form of latter-day 'Little Englanderism', albeit one appearing in the drab garb of scholarship. Grey himself had a shrewder appreciation of the constraints placed on Britain, and of the range of practical options open to British diplomacy.

This raises the wider issue of agency. Whatever Grey's manoeuvres in July 1914, once Vienna and Berlin had embarked on a course of escalation, he had no tools left to avert the descent into war. To that extent it might be argued that British policy had run its course. It cannot be argued, however, that under Grey's stewardship of foreign affairs that process was accelerated.

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Crisis: The World's Descent into War, Summer 1914 (2014).

- 1 As quoted in H. W. Harris, *J. A. Spender* (London, 1946), p. 159. Grey's recollection was less clear, [E.] Viscount Grey of Fallodon, *Twenty-Five Years*, 2 vols. (New York, 1925) vol. ii, p. 20.
- 2 M. Parris, *The Spectator*, 22 Feb. 1997.
- 3 Most recently M. Hastings, *Catastrophe: Europe Goes to War* (London, 2013). Grey's most persistent scholarly critic is Keith Wilson, see *Policy of the Ententes: Essays on the Determinants of British Foreign Policy, 1904–1914* (Cambridge, 1985); 'Grey' in id. (ed.), *British Foreign Secretaries and Foreign Policy: From Crimean War to First World War* (London, 1987), pp. 172–97; and 'The Making and Putative Implementation of a British Foreign Policy of Gesture, December 1905 to August 1914: The Anglo-French Entente Revisited', *Canadian Journal of History*, xxxi, 2 (1996), pp. 227–55.
- 4 D. Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, 2 vols. (new edn., London, 1938) vol. i, pp. 56, 58 and 60. For an interesting parallel with Churchill's memoirs see D. Reynolds, *In Command of History: Churchill Fighting and Writing the Second World War* (London, 2004).
- 5 K. Robbins, *Sir Edward Grey: A Biography of Lord Grey of Fallodon* (London, 1971), p. 13. For a succinct appraisal of Grey's policy see K. Neilson, "'Control the Whirlwind": Sir Edward Grey as Foreign Secretary, 1906–1916', in T. G. Otte (ed.), *The Makers of British Foreign Policy: From Pitt to Thatcher* (Basingstoke and New York, 2002), pp. 128–49.
- 6 G. M. Trevelyan, *Grey of Fallodon* (London, 1937), p. 24; H. Pelling, *Social Geography of British Elections, 1885–1910* (London, 1967), pp. 331–3. Before 1885 Liberals and Conservatives were evenly balanced here, and its electors usually returned one candidate from each party. Only Sir Alan Beith represented this seat for longer (Nov. 1973 – May 2015).
- 7 M. Creighton, 'Grey, Sir George (1799–1882)', *Dictionary of National Biography*, viii (London, 1908), p. 627; also *Memoir of Sir George Grey, Bart., GCB* (London, 1901), pp. 113–6.
- 8 Through his paternal grandmother he was also related to the Tory Ryder family (the earls of Harrowby), and both Northbrook and Gainsborough joined the exodus of the Whigs.
- 9 M. Bentley, *Politics without Democracy: Perception and Preoccupation in British Government* (pb., London, 1984), p. 319, who, however, implies a degree of 'Scottishness' in Grey. I am grateful to Keith Robbins for his thoughts on Grey's 'Englishness'.
- 10 In later years Grey suggested that the 'Relugas Compact' had been more about the tone and style of Campbell-Bannerman's pronouncement than about the substance of his politics, Grey to Elizabeth Haldane, 14 June 1930, Haldane MSS, National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, MS 6037.
- 11 S. Buxton, 'Notes on Asquith' (MS), n.d., Buxton MSS, British Library (henceforth BL), Add. MSS. 87045.
- 12 This was a constant concern of Grey's, e.g. Grey to Asquith (private), 26 Oct. 1910, Asquith MSS, Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Asquith 12. For further thoughts on the perceived danger of social disintegration see also H. C. G. Matthew, *The Liberal Imperialists: The Ideas and Politics of a Post-Gladstonian Elite* (Oxford, 1973), pp. 128–9.
- 13 Hansard, Parl. Deb. (series 4), vol. 334, col. 1196 (29 Mar. 1889).
- 14 Hansard, HC (series 1), vol. 36, cols. 673–7 (28 Mar. 1912). He remained silent, however, on women MPs.
- 15 Burns diary, 25 Jan. 1913, Burns MSS, BL, Add. MSS. 46335.
- 16 'Sir Edward Grey at Leith', *The Times*, 6 Dec. 1909; see also V. Bogdanor, 'The Liberal Party and the Constitution', *Journal of Liberal History*, 54 (2007), pp. 48–52.
- 17 As quoted in R. Jenkins, *Mr. Balfour's Poodle: Peers v. People* (pb. repr. London, 1989), p. 71.
- 18 [K. M.] Prince Lichnowsky, 'Meine Londoner Mission, 1912–1914', *Börsen-Courier*, 21 Mar. 1918, repr. in M. Smith (ed.), *The Disclosures from Germany* (New York, 1918), pp. 86–88 (my translation).
- 19 Trevelyan, *Grey of Fallodon*, p. 28. For Seeley see D. Wormell, *Sir John Seeley and the Uses of History* (Cambridge, 1980), pp. 75–109.
- 20 [E.] Viscount Grey of Fallodon, *Fly Fishing* (rev. ed. repr. London, 1947 [1st edn. 1899]), pp. 18–20.
- 21 See K. Neilson, *Britain and the Last Tsar: British Policy towards Russia, 1894–1917* (Oxford, 1995); also T. G. Otte, "'A Very Internecine Policy": Anglo-Russian Cold Wars before the Cold War, 1743–1940', in C. Baxter, M. L. Dockrill and K. Hamilton (eds.), *Britain in Global Politics*, vol. i: *From Gladstone to Churchill* (Basingstoke and New York, 2013), pp. 17–49.
- 22 Grey to Maxse (private), 24 Nov.

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- 1901, Maxse MSS, West Sussex Record Office, Chichester, Maxse 448.
- 23 Min. Grey, n.d., on Goschen to Grey (no. 141), 16 Apr. 1909, The National Archive (Public Record Office), FO 371/673/14511.
- 24 Grey to Spender, 19 Oct. 1905, Spender MSS, BL, Add. MSS. 46389. This was what Grey had in mind when he emphasised the fact that the convention 'marks a change of policy', to Maxse (private), 21 June 1904, Maxse MSS, Maxse 452.
- 25 Grey, Cannon Hotel speech, 20 Oct. 1905, *The Times*, 21 Oct. 1905; partially reproduced in Trevelyan, *Grey*, pp. 90–2.
- 26 J. Charmley, *Splendid Isolation?: Britain, the Balance of Power and the Origins of the First World War, 1874–1914* (London, 1999), p. 332, echoing Wilson, *Policy of the Ententes*, pp. 86–99.
- 27 Memo. Grey, 10 Jan. 1906, Campbell-Bannerman MSS, BL, Add. MSS. 41218; T. G. Otte, "Almost a Law of Nature": Sir Edward Grey, the Foreign Office and the Balance of Power, 1905–1912, E. Goldstein and B. J. C. McKercher (eds.), *Power and Stability: British Foreign Policy, 1865–1965* (London, 2003), pp. 77–118.
- 28 Grey to Morley (private), 3 Nov. 1911, Morley MSS, Bod., Ms. Eng. d. 3574.
- 29 Grey to Bertie (private), 15 Jan. 1906, Bertie MSS, BL, Add. MSS. 63018.
- 30 Grey to Lascelles (no. 11), 9 Jan. 1906, G. P. Gooch and H. W. V. Temperley (eds.), *British Documents on the Origins of the War, 1898–1914*, 11 vols. (London, 1928–38), vol. iii, no. 229.
- 31 See T. G. Otte, *The Foreign Office Mind: The Making of British Foreign Policy, 1865–1914* (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 298–302.
- 32 K. Neilson, "Greatly Exaggerated": The Myth of the Decline of Great Britain before 1914, *International History Review*, xiii, 4 (1991), p. 704; see also T. G. Otte, 'Grey Ambassador: The Dreadnought and British Foreign Policy', R. J. Blyth, A. Lambert and J. Rüger (eds.), *The Dreadnought and the Edwardian Age* (Farnham, 2011), pp. 69–72. The notion of a binding commitment has been effectively refuted by T. Wilson, 'Britain's "Moral Commitment" to France in August 1914', *History*, lxvii, 212 (1979), pp. 380–90.
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- 34 Grey to Haldane, 25 Mar. 1917, Haldane MSS, MS 5913.
- 35 Grey to Spring Rice (private), 22 Dec. 1905, Spring Rice MSS, TNA (PRO), FO 800/241; Neilson, "Control the Whirlwind", pp. 129–30.
- 36 Grey to Fitzmaurice, 24 Sept. 1906, Fitzmaurice MSS, Bowood House, EFm 20. I am grateful to The Most Hon. The Marquess of Lansdowne for granting me access to this collection; for some of the background see also K. Neilson, 'Watching the "Steamroller": British Observers and the Russian Army before 1914', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, viii, 2 (1985), pp. 199–217.
- 37 Min. Grey, 15 Apr. 1912, FO 371/1493.
- 38 Grey to Lowther (no. 434), 15 Oct. 1908, *BD* v, no. 383; Neilson, *Britain and the Last Tsar*, p. 300.
- 39 Grey to Bertie (private), 9 Jan. 1912, Grey MSS, TNA (PRO), FO 800/53.
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- 41 Grey to Harcourt (private), 10 Jan. 1914, Harcourt MSS, Bod., Ms. Harcourt dep. 442.
- 42 Grey to Spender (private), 24 Sept. 1912, Spender MSS, Add. MSS. 46389.
- 43 Grey to Buchanan (private), 30 Mar. 1914, *BD* x/2, no. 535. J. Siegel, *Endgame: Britain, Russia and the Final Struggle for Central Asia* (London, 2002), pp. 175–96, provides some insight into the regional problems.
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- 45 Grey to Bertie (no. 249, secret), 1 May 1914, FO 371/2092/19288.
- 46 Memo. Bertie (on conversation with Grey), 25 June 1914, Bertie MSS, BL, Add. MSS. 63033.
- 47 Min. Grey, n.d., on Rodd to Grey (no. 47), 10 Feb. 1909, FO 371/599/6296.
- 48 Grey to Katherine Lyttelton, 8 Nov. 1908, Lyttelton MSS, Queen Mary College, PP5; see also T. G. Otte, "The Winston of Germany": The British Foreign Policy Elite and the Last German Emperor, in *Canadian Journal of History*, xxxvi, 4 (2001), pp. 471–504.
- 49 Z. S. Steiner, *Britain and the Origins of the First World War* (London, 1977), pp. 255–6.
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- 53 Min. Grey, n.d., on tel. Goschen to Grey (no. 94, secret), 21 Aug. 1909, *BD* vi, no. 187.
- 54 T. G. Otte, 'War, Revolution, and the Uncertain Primacy of Domestic Politics', in R. N. Rosecrance and S. E. Miller (eds.), *The Next Great War?: The Roots of World War I and the Risk of U.S.–China Conflict* (Cambridge, MA, 2015), pp. 106–8.
- 55 Grey to Goschen (private), 5 Mar. 1913, *BD* x/2, no. 465.
- 56 Memo. Grey, 25 May 1914, *BD* x/2, no. 512; for a Churchillian interpretation see J. H. Maurer, 'Averting the Great War?: Churchill's Naval Holiday', *US Naval War College Review*, lxvii, 3 (2014), pp. 25–42.
- 57 J. Cambon to Doumergue (no. 51), 4 Feb. 1914, Ministère des Affaires Étrangère (ed.), *Documents Diplomatiques Française*, 3rd ser., 1911–1914, 11 vols. (Paris, 1929–36), vol. ix, no. 220.
- 58 'German–British Convention', 15 June 1914, *BD* x/2, no. 249; T. G. Otte, *July Crisis: The World's Descent into War, Summer 1914* (Cambridge, 2014), pp. 149–50.
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- 60 For a detailed account see my 'Detente 1914: Sir William Tyrrell's Mission to Germany', *Historical Journal*, lvi, 1 (2013), pp. 175–204.
- 61 Goschen to Rumbold, 11 July 1914, Rumbold MSS, Bod., Ms. Rumbold dep. 16; Otte, *July Crisis*, pp. 142–3.
- 62 Grey to Rumbold (no. 214, secret), 6 July 1914, *BD* xi, no. 32; Lichnowsky to Bethmann Hollweg (secret), 6 July 1914, K. Kautsky, M. Montgelas and W. Schücking (eds.), *Die Deutschen Dokumente zum Kriegsausbruch*, 4 vols. (Berlin, 1919) vol. i, no. 20.
- 63 Grey to Buchanan (no. 264), 8 July 1914, *BD* xi, no. 39.
- 64 Benckendorff to Sazonov (private), 26 June/9 July 1914, O. Hoetzsch (ed.), *Die Internationalen Beziehungen im Zeitalter des Imperialismus*, 1st ser., 5 vols. (Berlin, 1931–6) vol. iv, no. 146.
- 65 This consideration provides the context to the exchanges on 1 Aug. 1914, tels. Grey to Goschen (nos. 250 and 252), 1 Aug. 1914, *BD* xi, no. 411 and 417; for a fresh interpretation of the 'misunderstanding' see Otte, *July Crisis*, pp. 480–5.
- 66 See the 'twin' pieces by K. Neilson, 'The Russo–Japanese War and British Strategic Foreign Policy', in R. Kowner (ed.), *Rethinking the Russo–Japanese War, 1904–5*, 2 vols. (Folkestone, 2007) vol. i, pp. 307–17, and T. G. Otte, 'The Fragmenting of the Old World Order: Britain, the Great Powers and the War', in R. Kowner (ed.), *The Impact of the Russo–Japanese War* (London, 2007), pp. 91–108.
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- 71 Crowe to Clema Crowe, 6 Aug. 1914, Crowe MSS, Bod., Ms. Eng. e. 3020.
- 72 Grey to Crewe, 29 May 1916 and 2 Feb. 1917, Crewe MSS, Cambridge University Library, box C/17.
- 73 Grey to Katherine Lyttelton, 16 Jan. 1918, Lyttelton MSS, PP5.