as in January 1916 when at a lunch at Downing Street, Harcourt and Asquith discuss the fear of Simon's possible resignation at the Home Office. Asquith felt that Harcourt was the only man for the job. Harcourt's response was that nothing would induce him to take it, listing the factors that would make it uncongenial, 'Press Censor, aliens, prisoners camps, capital sentences, police, prisons & above all heavy parliamentary work with innumerable bills'. He candidly admits that his suggestions for alternatives had but 'one object … to find some one who is not myself'.

There is an interesting sidelight on the conversion of both Harcourt and Asquith to the idea of female suffrage in August 1916. As always, Harcourt gives himself a lead role in this. If true, it appears to push back the date of Asquith's conversion, though I have not checked detailed sources on this:

> PM says his opposition to female suffrage is vitally affected by women's work in the war. I said the only logical & possible solution is Universal Suffrage (including women). This upset most of the cabinet, but the PM agreed with me …
>
> Grey says this is a criminal waste of time when we ought to be devoting our energies to winning the war.

I will end with another insight into the fall of Asquith in December 1916 when Harcourt, who of course fell with Asquith, records his conversation with King George V on the occasion of his ennoblement as Viscount Harcourt. Speaking of Asquith, the king said:

> 'I feel his loss very much & I stuck to him and fought for him to the end, but I fear your Govt. had got a little out of touch with public opinion, you allowed them to push you instead of leading them, and then you had all that d—d Press agitation against you'. I said I wondered how long it wd be before Northcliffe turned agst. Ll. Geo. and that when he did I expected Ll. Geo. wd. close up his papers and shut Northcliffe up. The King sd 'and a good job too or this country will be ruled only by the newspapers'.

'PM says his opposition to female suffrage is vitally affected by women's work in the war. I said the only logical & possible solution is Universal Suffrage (including women).'

Mike Webb is Curator of Early Modern Archives & MSS at the Bodleian Libraries. He is the author of the book From Downing Street to the Trenches: First-hand Accounts from the Great War, 1914–1916 *(Bodleian Publishing, 2014).*

1 See the Bodleian online catalogues of Harcourt family papers: http://www.bodley.ox.ac.uk/dept/scwmss/wmss/online/1500-1900/harcourt-w-l/harcourt-w-l.html; http://www.bodley.ox.ac.uk/dept/scwmss/wmss/online/1500-1900/harcourt-w-l-add/harcourt-w-l-add.html; and http://www.bodley.ox.ac.uk/dept/scwmss/wmss/online/1500-1900/harcourt-estate/harcourt-estate.html.

2 For the catalogue of the Additional Lewis Harcourt papers, see: http://www.bodley.ox.ac.uk/dept/scwmss/wmss/online/modern/harcourt-lewis-adds/harcourt-lewis-adds.html. For the mainly eighteenth and nineteenth-century additional Harcourt family papers, see: http://www.bodley.ox.ac.uk/dept/scwmss/wmss/online/1500-1900/harcourt-fam-add/harcourt-fam-add.html.

3 See Edward David (ed.), *Inside Asquith's Cabinet: From the Diaries of Charles Hobhouse* (John Murray, 1977).

4 See James Lees-Milne, *The Enigmatic Edwardian: Life of Reginald, 2nd Viscount Esher* (Sidgwick & Jackson Ltd, 1986), p. 337.

5 Cameron Hazlehurst, Sally Whitehead and Christine Woodland (eds.), *A Guide to the Papers of British Cabinet Ministers 1900–1964* (Royal Historical Society Guides and Handbooks, 19; Cambridge University Press, 1997).

6 Patrick Jackson, 'Harcourt, Lewis Vernon, first Viscount Harcourt (1863–1922)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan. 2008.

7 Now catalogued as MSS. Eng. c. 8264–8271, d. 4173–4188.

8 Mike Webb, *From Downing Street to the Trenches: First-hand Accounts from the Great War, 1914–1916 (*Bodleian Publishing, 2014).

9 Bodleian Library, MS Harcourt 446, fo. 79.

REPORTS

Among the Fallodonistas

Sir Edward Grey and the outbreak of the First World War
FCO/LSE symposium, 7 November 2014
Report by **Iain Sharpe**

The understandable focus of First World War centenary commemorations on the suffering and sacrifice of those on the front line has meant that the political and diplomatic background to the outbreak of war has tended to be marginalised. Even so, it was a surprise to learn in Professor David Stevenson's opening remarks that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office/LSE symposium 'Sir Edward Grey and the Outbreak of the First World War' at Lancaster House on 7 November 2014 was the only 1914 centenary event to focus specifically on diplomacy. Yet, if it was the only such event, it was certainly an impressive and enlightening one, with speakers including many leading experts on pre-First World War European diplomacy.

The opening speaker was Professor T. G. Otte of the University of East Anglia, whose recent book *July Crisis* is broadly sympathetic towards Grey's diplomacy. Professor Otte commented that Grey has been unlucky in the treatment of his posthumous reputation. His critics have been the dominant voice, from the unfair attacks in Lloyd George's *War Memoirs* to his being voted the worst MP ever in a

recent poll. What Otte described as Grey's 'aloof and reticent personality' combined with the destruction of his personal papers has contributed towards this. He argued that historians have often failed to recognise the constraints under which Grey laboured. Throughout his foreign secretaryship, he pursued a diplomatic policy of constructive ambiguity, trying to deter France from provoking Germany, but warning Germany against belligerence towards the French. As a result, in order to win British support, in 1914 France went to some lengths not to be seen as the aggressor, even at the expense of greater initial losses.

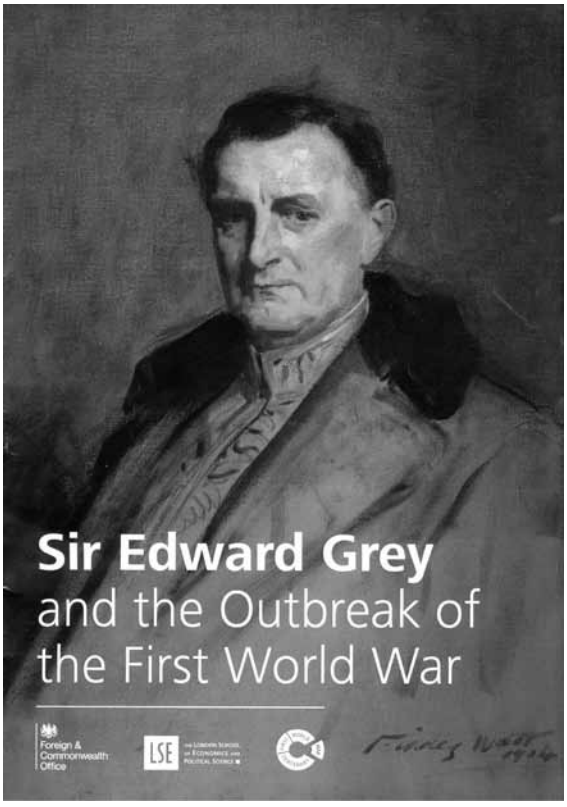
Grey was concerned about the dangers of British isolation: even when in opposition he had written privately of the need to make peace with Russia to escape the problem of always requiring diplomatic backing from Germany, for which it exacted a high price. Russia's temporary weakness following defeat in the 1904–5 Russo-Japanese War enabled Grey to conclude a treaty in 1907. But he was aware that this weakness was transient, and increasing tensions between the two meant that Britain might not have renewed the agreement when it expired in 1915. Although Grey has been accused of prioritising the entente with France above all else, Otte argued that he was aware of the twin dangers of German isolation and domination. He insisted on British naval supremacy but by 1914, with the naval race effectively won by Britain, he sought détente with Germany based on resolving imperial and Near East matters and this was increasingly bearing fruit. Throughout the July 1914 crisis he was alert to the dangers of conflict escalating. This is why he sought to promote conflict resolution mechanisms via Anglo-German crisis management, an approach that had proved successful in the Balkan wars of 1912–13. Grey made mistakes, particularly in trying to deal with Austria through Germany rather than directly but, citing the comment of a contemporary writer that 'diplomacy could only postpone the evil day', Otte concluded that 'Grey's policy did not bring that day forward.'

The next session focused on Grey's relations with the 'entente powers', France and Russia. Professor John Kieger of Cambridge University argued that while Grey sought to avoid making a specific commitment to France, the defining moment was the exchange of letters between the foreign secretary and French ambassador Paul Cambon in November 1912, which divided naval responsibilities between the two countries, with Britain concentrating on the North Sea and France on the Mediterranean. While the prime minister, Asquith, claimed that the letters made no specific commitment and indeed were 'almost a platitude', in Kieger's view they meant that Cambon had manoeuvred Grey into a position from which he could not break free in August 1914: Britain having a moral obligation to France which amounted to an alliance in all but name.

Keith Wilson, emeritus professor at Leeds University, discussed Grey's relationship with Russia. Wilson's work in many ways prefigured Niall Ferguson's arguments about Britain's reasons for going to war, in particular claiming that Grey had already committed Britain to supporting France and Russia in the event of war, and stressing the importance of Britain's need to conciliate Russia in Asia in order to protect the Indian frontier. He highlighted Grey's assurance to Russian Foreign Minister Sazanov, three weeks before the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, that friendship with Russia was the cornerstone of British policy. According to Wilson this gave Russia greater leverage over Britain, so that in late July Sazanov was effectively able to blackmail Grey by saying that Britain must either support Russia or forfeit her friendship in Asia. He concluded that this imperial dimension, Grey's belief that peace on the Indian frontier trumped everything, together with the impact on the Liberal cabinet of his threat to resign, was what carried Britain into war.

The first afternoon session was devoted to Grey's personal life. Dr Richard Smith, senior historian at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office stressed the apparent contradictions about Grey: his lack of overt political ambition, his interest in country pursuits and his reputation as a man of high principle; versus his long tenure of high office, spending much of his life in London, and rumours of extra-marital affairs and illegitimate children. It appears that Grey and his first wife Dorothy were soul mates without being lovers, and she yearned for him to give up politics. Dr Smith commented that it is interesting to speculate whether Grey would have remained at the Foreign Office until 1914 had she lived. He expressed scepticism about the cases cited by Michael Waterhouse, in his recent biography of Grey, about possible illegitimate children. While men did take mistresses, there were rules, including sticking to married women, and it seems unlikely that Grey would have been caught out three times. This was reinforced by comments from Grey's great-great nephew, Adrian Graves, who said that recent DNA tests showed no close match with descendants of three of the supposed illegitimate children.

In the case of Grey's second wife, Pamela Tennant, Grey certainly enjoyed a long and close friendship with her during her first, unhappy marriage, although he was also a close friend of her husband, Margot Asquith's brother Eddy Tennant. Pamela was rumoured to have had many affairs and one of her children, David Tennant, believed Grey might have been his father. David Lloyd



George thought Grey's untainted personal reputation too much to bear and made references in his papers to Grey not being found out. Dr Smith concluded that there are elements of Grey's private life, as well as his public life, that are destined to remain an enigma.

The next speakers considered Grey's relations with the Central Powers, with F. R. Bridge, emeritus professor at Leeds University, and Professor Annika Mombauer of the Open University discussing Austria and Germany respectively. Professor Bridge stressed the extent to which Grey's prestige in the country and reputation for honesty and integrity enabled him to overcome radicals in the cabinet. Grey rejected the idea of trying to build friendship with Austria because he did not want Germany to be isolated. At the same time, he feared Russia being drawn into the orbit of the Triple Alliance, which would leave Britain isolated. So he tried to preserve the balance of power, believing that Europe could be divided into two diplomatic groupings without being at war. The London Conference after the Balkan Wars appeared to vindicate this approach, but according to Professor Bridge, it destroyed Austria's confidence in diplomacy, with Serbia doubling in size and looking to add to its territory. Although he criticised Grey's 'insouciance' during the July Crisis, his greater charge was that by prioritising good relations with Russia above all else in the preceding years, Grey had already alienated Austria.

Annika Mombauer was rather less critical of Grey and placed responsibility on Germany for the outbreak of war. She pointed out that even before taking office, Grey in a famous speech of November 1905 had spoken of the need for rapprochement with Germany, provided this did not compromise good relations with France. Unfortunately, détente was only possible if both sides wanted it and Germany felt strong enough repeatedly to reject British overtures. Although relations began to improve after the 1911 Agadir Crisis, Germany wanted more than Britain could give, namely a guarantee of neutrality. In 1912 Grey had pointed out to Germany that although Britain's hands were not tied they could not stand aside and let France be crushed. During the July Crisis itself, for Grey the fact of Germany transgression of Belgian neutrality was important for convincing those in Britain who doubted the wisdom of war. Professor Mombauer concluded, however, that British ambiguity did not affect the outcome of the crisis. Other countries took decisions regardless of what was decided in London and Britain's role was less decisive than British diplomats liked to think.

Professor Clark discussed the contradictions of Grey's career: the fact that his policy was opposed by many of his Liberal colleagues and supported by his Conservative opponents; his aura of engaging in politics out of duty not ambition, yet becoming foreign secretary only as a result of conspiratorial planning.

The July Crisis was the specific focus of the lecture by Christopher Clark, newly appointed Regius professor of History at Cambridge University. Professor Clark began by coining the term 'Fallodonistas' (after Fallodon, Grey's Northumberland home) to describe the assembled company. Like Richard Smith earlier, Professor Clark discussed the contradictions of Grey's career: the fact that his policy was opposed by many of his Liberal colleagues and supported by his Conservative opponents; his aura of engaging in politics out of duty not ambition, yet becoming foreign secretary only as a result of conspiratorial planning.

Through his recent bestselling work, *The Sleepwalkers*, Professor Clark is known for arguing against the primary German responsibility for the outbreak of war, and his book is quite critical of Grey. To the ears of this audience member, his comments at the conference represented a slight softening of attitude towards Grey. He acknowledged that the pace of change in European diplomacy was stepping up in the years before 1914, with the Italo-Turkish War and the Balkan Wars. He acquitted Grey of any charge of failing to take the news of the assassination in Sarajevo seriously. For example, on 5 July Grey warned France of the need to calm things down, and he warned the German ambassador, Lichnowsky, that Britain's relations remained good with its entente partners and later made clear that Britain would find it hard to stand aside and watch France be crushed.

At the same time, Clark remained critical of Grey's attitude towards Austria-Hungary. Although acknowledging that some of the dual monarch's demands against Serbia were fair, Grey still considered its note of 23 July to be 'the most formidable document I have ever seen addressed by one state to another' and, as the crisis progressed, he did not really consider the justice of the Austro-Hungarian demands – he continued to view the crisis through the lens of the entente. For example, he believed that it would be difficult to persuade Russia not to mobilise when Austria-Hungary was mobilising, while failing to consider that the latter's mobilisation was only against Serbia, whereas the former's was against Austria-Hungary and Germany (and therefore by implication more provocative). Nonetheless, Clark acknowledged the constraints that Grey faced, including the reality that in foreign policy the building blocks are not of one's own making, that his influence over his entente partners was limited and that he could not know if his own cabinet would ultimately support him. Clark concluded that there was no evidence that clearer signs from Grey to Germany would have changed the course of the crisis. On the question of the decision to intervene, it was hard to fault the argument of his speech to parliament on 3 August 1914.

The final panel session included contributions by Zara Steiner (author of many works on pre-1914 diplomacy, including *Britain and the Origins of the First World War*), Grey's biographer Professor Keith Robbins and Professor T. G. Otte. Dr Steiner stressed the extent of Grey's independent-mindedness: in 1905 he was firmer than both his Liberal Imperialist colleagues Asquith and Haldane in negotiations with Campbell-Bannerman. Despite his reputation for being on the right of the Liberal party, he was in domestic politics firmly Liberal: in favour of labour interests and women's suffrage. As foreign secretary, his views were independent of his officials, who have wished for a clearer commitment to France. Grey believed in Britain having ententes rather than alliances and pursued his own policy.

Keith Robbins, whose 1971 biography remains the most authoritative study of his Grey's life, focused on aspects of his personality that are often ignored. He stressed the importance of Grey's physical vigour. While the focus is often on his interest in birdwatching and fly-fishing it is too easy

forgotten that he was also a real tennis champion. Robbins also defended Grey against criticism about not travelling or speaking foreign languages: pointing out that Grey was always at his desk, unlike modern foreign secretaries who 'travel all the time and do nothing'. Robbins stressed the importance of the influence on Grey of the historian and Anglican bishop Mandell Creighton, in particular his essay on the English national character and the sense of Grey being groomed as the embodiment of that character. In a cabinet with considerable Celtic influence, Grey was a very English figure and played up to the idea of the sensible Englishman. Professor Otte agreed with Professor Robbins about Grey's Englishness and stressed the influence of the imperialist and historian J. R. Seeley on Grey's generation – in particular the belief in the importance of British greatness and of Britain being different because it was a maritime power.

The symposium showed how vigorous the debate remains about Grey's policy and reputation. The overall impact of the contributions might have left an open-minded audience member more sympathetic to Grey by the end of the day than at the start; however, he is destined to remain an elusive and controversial figure. It is unfortunate that the 1914 commemorations did not include more events of this nature, but it remains a considerable achievement to bring together such an impressive range of speakers for a one-day event. The organisers also deserve credit for making attendance free of charge and open to members of the public rather than restricted to policy-makers, parliamentarians and academics.

Podcasts of most of the papers given at the conference are available at: https://audioboom.com/playlists/1265752-sir-edward-grey-and-the-outbreak-of-the-first-world-war-podcasts

Dr Iain Sharpe completed a University of London PhD thesis in 2011 on 'Herbert Gladstone and Liberal party revival, 1899–1905'. He works as an editor for the University of London International Academy and has served as a Liberal Democrat councillor in Watford since 1991.

REVIEWS

The view from Downing Street

Michael and Eleanor Brock (eds.), *Margot Asquith's Great War Diary 1914–1916: The View from Downing Street* (Oxford University Press, 2014)
Review by **David Dutton**

I cannot recall ever having had such an entertaining and enjoyable hour's conversation with anyone before.' So wrote Sir Walter Runciman, father of the one-time Liberal cabinet minister of the same name, after a meeting in 1920 with Margot Asquith, second wife of H. H. Asquith, then still leader of the Liberal Party. She was, judged Runciman, 'a most likeable person, perfectly frank and, I think, taking into consideration her characteristics, much misjudged'.[1] Over the years that followed, Sir Walter would have cause to modify his opinions, not least when Margot wrote to suggest that he might finance the purchase of a new car for her personal use, as an alternative to her husband's Rolls Royce, and when in 1926 she suggested that Walter junior could become Liberal leader in succession to her husband and 'Prime Minister whenever he likes', providing father and son were prepared to 'put up a quarter of a million'. Quite how this transaction was to be put into effect was not explained, but Sir Walter's assessment on this occasion of 'a clever incompetent person without any sense of proportion' does not seem wide of the mark.[2]

What had charmed Sir Walter in 1920 was a preview of the first volume of Margot's *Autobiography*, published later that year. She had, she admitted, 'been discreet about Downing Street'.[3] Even so, what she did write offended many. 'People who write books ought to be shut up', suggested George V in evident perturbation at the prospect of Margot's forthcoming publication.[4] The king's concerns appear to have been justified. He 'let fly about Margot', recorded Lord Curzon. 'He severely condemns Asquith for not reading and Crewe for reading and passing her scandalous chatter.'[5] What His Majesty would have made of Margot's unexpurgated wartime diaries, edited now by Michael and Eleanor Brock, whose earlier collaboration made Asquith's revealing letters to his young confidante, Venetia Stanley, generally available, we can only surmise.

The diary is written in the same breathless manner, with passion as evident as punctuation is absent. Margot frequently employed underlining – one, two or even three lines – to drive home her emphasis and sometimes her indignation.

This book, covering the period between the outbreak of war and her husband's loss of office in December 1916, is certainly of more value to historians than the memoir published nearly a hundred years ago. It has the merit of immediacy, with no evidence that the author attempted to revise her contemporary judgments in the light of later reflection, though she did occasionally add marginal comments at a later date. Furthermore, the Brocks reveal the cavalier way in which Margot used her diary as an aide-memoire in the writing of her autobiography. But an uneasy question remains about the diary's worth as an historical source. Scholars who have worked on the Liberal Party's history in this period, even if they have not used the diaries themselves, will be familiar with Margot's style. Her letters, often scribbled in pencil, pepper the surviving private collections of her husband's political contemporaries. The diary is written in the same breathless manner, with passion as evident as punctuation is absent. Margot frequently employed underlining – one, two