

as suggested. But, if we cannot necessarily accept Margot's self-assessment that she was 'a sort of political clairvoyant' (p. xlvi), there can be no doubt that the editors have provided us with a rollicking good read!

David Dutton's most recent book is Tales From the Baseline: a History of Dumfries Lawn Tennis Club (2014) – a new departure for a student of twentieth-century British politics.

- 1 Elshields Tower, papers of Sir Walter Runciman, Sir W. Runciman to W. Runciman, 28 April 1920.
- 2 Ibid., Sir W. Runciman to W. Runciman 6 November 1926.
- 3 Ibid., Sir W. Runciman to W. Runciman 28 April 1920.
- 4 H. Nicolson, *King George V* (London, 1952), p. 342.
- 5 K. Rose, *George V* (London, 1983), p. 376.
- 6 D. Dutton (ed.), *Odyssey of an Edwardian Liberal* (Gloucester, 1989), p. 38.

Assessing Edward Grey

Michael Waterhouse, *Edwardian Requiem: A Life of Sir*

Edward Grey (Biteback 2013)

Review by **Dr Chris Cooper**

THE HISTORICAL REPUTATION of Sir Edward Grey (1862–1933) stands remarkably high for a man whose efforts to maintain European peace as foreign secretary (1905–1916) failed in August 1914 with catastrophic consequences. Neville Chamberlain, whose similar efforts failed twenty-five years later, has not been afforded such a sympathetic hearing. Michael Waterhouse's biography of Britain's longest continuously serving foreign secretary reinforces the conventional view of Grey: he strove admirably to avert the seemingly unstoppable drift to war. He is depicted as 'a first-class Foreign Secretary' who 'prepared his country for the inevitable' (p. 375). While Grey was less flamboyant than Liberal contemporaries such as Winston Churchill and David Lloyd George, he is well remembered. The famous words he uttered after the House of Commons had in effect sanctioned Britain's entry into war, 'The lamps are going out all over Europe. We shall not see them lit again in our lifetime', have been grafted on to Britain's national consciousness. This was signified in August 2014, on the centenary of Britain's declaration of war, when the lights went out across the UK and candles were lit in their place.

With the last biography of Grey being published four decades ago, a fresh study taking account of historiographical developments and

drawing upon fresh sources would be most welcome. But this reviewer was disappointed. The book offers little beyond the existing knowledge of Grey. Many readers will understandably be interested in his political career and diplomacy. Yet fishing adventures and birdsong repeatedly interrupt the narrative of important events in European history. Grey's attachment to the country and wildlife should really have been dealt with separately and more briefly.

Edward Grey was drawn from Whig stock. His most famous ancestor was the second Earl Grey, prime minister when the 1832 Reform Act was passed. Grey entered parliament in 1885 and, after establishing himself on the imperialist wing of the party, he became Lord Rosebery's junior minister at the Foreign Office in 1892. Yet Waterhouse suggests that Grey was always a reluctant participant. He served in several governments only out of a sense of duty. Nonetheless, with the foreign secretary in the Lords, Grey explained the government's policy and answered questions in the elected chamber. He had, therefore, assumed an important role and he filled the post with distinction. It was in this capacity that he made his celebrated declaration in 1895, outlining British interests on the River Nile to deter French expansionism. Before the turn of the century William Harcourt, the

outgoing Liberal leader, described Grey as 'the young hope of the party' (p. 72).

Though embarrassing party leader, Henry Campbell-Bannerman, over his very public support for the Boer War, and being one of the 'Relugas Compact' conspirators, Grey's standing in the Liberal ranks ensured that he was offered the post of foreign secretary shortly before the party's election landslide of 1906. Grey accepted and retained the post until 1916. His tenure of the Foreign Office was characterised by closer relations with both France and Russia and a failure to achieve an understanding with Germany. After outstanding colonial disputes between Britain and France had been settled, Grey, who was given great latitude under both Campbell-Bannerman and Herbert Asquith, emerged as one of the foremost champions of the Anglo-French entente. Though he inherited this policy from his Conservative predecessor, he pursued it vigorously. He sanctioned formal military conversations with the French, thereby enhancing Britain's moral commitment to them whilst managing to cultivate crossbench support for his approach to foreign affairs.

Grey's previous dealings with German leaders bolstered his desire for an Anglo-French rapprochement. Convinced that 'morals do not count' in German diplomacy (p. 146), he refused to threaten a blossoming friendship with France for an agreement with Germany which might have proved worthless. He began warning the German ambassador about Britain's likely participation in a Franco-German war in defence of France as early as January 1906. During the Moroccan Crises of 1905–6 and 1911 Grey threw diplomatic support behind the French, thereby strengthening the entente. Linked to the Anglo-French accord was Grey's advocacy of closer relations with Russia, particularly granted the two powers' unresolved colonial issues. This was a formidable task, not least because many Liberals loathed the autocratic tsarist regime. Nonetheless, an entente was signed with Russia in 1907. Grey then attempted to reach an agreement with Germany. He was, however, thwarted in his attempts to slow the pace of German naval construction and refused to

Waterhouse is too ready to defend a man he clearly admires and is unwilling to mete out criticism.

guarantee British neutrality in a future Franco-German war.

Following several near misses, Grey was unable to avert a general European war in 1914. After the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, Grey's previous success in containing the first Balkan War (1912–3) prompted his unsuccessful attempt to assemble a conference in London in July 1914. Once hostilities began, Britain's participation in the conflict, though likely, was far from certain. Despite the moral commitment to France, and to a lesser extent Russia, Britain was not legally obliged to go to their aid. The crass German ultimatum sent to Brussels and the subsequent violation of Belgian neutrality, however, helped clarify Britain's position. Grey's noteworthy speech to the Commons on 3 August 1914 'carried a united nation into war and solved a ministerial crisis' (p. 353). But Grey's career had, by now, passed its peak. Once the war began, Grey was 'not a Foreign Secretary for a wartime environment' (p. 354). He enjoyed little success in foreign policy from 1914–16. After receiving a peerage in July 1916, he stepped down as foreign secretary when Lloyd George became prime minister in December. He

was never to return to high office, although he did serve a brief, and largely fruitless, term as Britain's ambassador in Washington and acted as the Liberal leader in the Lords during 1923–4, despite his failing eyesight.

Grey the politician is difficult to compartmentalise. Arthur Balfour, once remarked that Grey was 'an odd mixture of an old-fashioned Whig and a Socialist'. His imperialist credentials were clear and Grey adopted a non-partisan approach to foreign affairs, which saw a good deal of support from the Conservative benches. Yet, as Waterhouse notes, he 'had surprisingly strong ties to the radical wing of the party' (p. 69). This was clear in his support for extending the franchise, land reform, the establishment of a federal United Kingdom, an elected second chamber and a scheme of national insurance. Grey also sat on the board of directors for the North Eastern Railway and accepted the need for business and government to work with, rather than smash, trade unions.

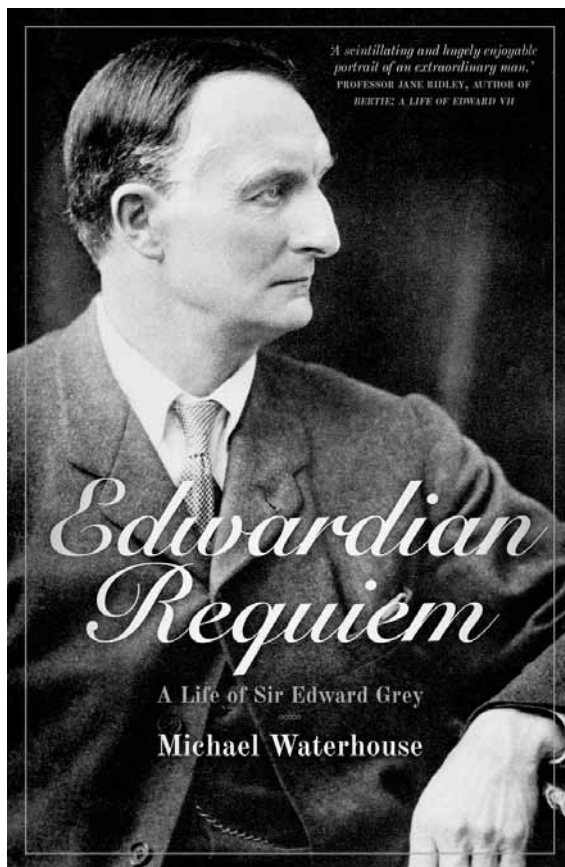
One new departure in Waterhouse's study is the possibility that Grey may have had a colourful private life. This is surprising granted that he was renowned for his integrity and straightforwardness in public life. While the evidence presented is circumstantial, Grey, who had married the frigid Dorothy Widdrington, may have had extramarital affairs and fathered illegitimate children. But Waterhouse uses these claims to draw conclusions about Grey's political career. His ability to 'justify to himself his double life', helps explain 'how he managed to survive so long at the top in politics' (p. 59). The author also draws odd parallels between Grey's love of wildlife and his political career. His 'amazing ability to tame birds and animals' somehow demonstrated 'the same sense of trust and patience that had stood him so well at the Foreign Office' (p. 393).

Waterhouse continually reminds his readers that Grey was a proficient ornithologist, lover of wildlife, reader of poetry, keen fisherman and gifted sportsman. Yet the detail that the author goes into regarding Grey's pursuits is tiresome. The chapter entitled 'The Boer War' is constantly interrupted with tales from the countryside. One extract from Grey's *The Charm*

of Birds (1927) is a page and a half long. Even in the midst of the July Crisis the reader learns about Grey's catches, when the author should probably have criticised Grey for leaving his desk in Westminster – particularly as his diplomacy was arguably overtaken by events.

Michael Waterhouse has missed an excellent opportunity to contribute to the historical record in terms of Grey's career after 1916. The sketch reveals little that is new. While Grey's private papers were destroyed shortly after his death, a proper trawl through Hansard, digitised newspapers and the private papers of leading Liberals would have shed considerable light on his post-1916 career. The main revelation is that, despite Grey's increasing blindness, he could still catch trout! Although Grey was consulted by Liberals who held office during the hectic days of 1931 and 1932, his thoughts on the splintering of the Liberal party, the banking crisis, the formation of the National Government, the celebrated 'agreement to differ', and his disillusionment with what he called the 'so-called Liberal Party' are either barely mentioned or completely ignored. Disappointment is compounded when one learns nothing about Grey's thoughts on the League of Nations World Disarmament Conference which began in 1932, or the preceding Preparatory Commission, particularly as Grey was the first president of Britain's League of Nations Union and it was he who coined the maxim 'great armaments lead inevitably to war'. This lack of new findings is unsurprising granted that the select bibliography implies that no archival research has been undertaken and there is little engagement with recent historiographical debates. Waterhouse repeatedly picks a very easy target, in Lloyd George, to correct what he deems are common misconceptions. While myths peddled in Lloyd George's *War Memoirs* (1933) are identified, the Welshman's apparent amnesia is already well documented.

Waterhouse's overall grasp of the period under discussion is unconvincing. He relies on succinct studies such as Norman Stone's *Short History of World War One* and merely regurgitates the findings of worthy, but dated, studies. To undermine Lloyd George's claims



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that the cabinet was unaware of the nature of Britain's commitments to France, Waterhouse quotes Zara Steiner's 1969 monograph at length. The infamous 'misunderstanding' between Grey and the German ambassador on 1 August 1914 is not explored – despite the historiographical debate on the subject being nearly forty years old. Likewise the proposed mission to Germany in mid-1914 by Grey's private secretary, William Tyrrell, is overlooked. While vaguely acknowledging Grey's commitment to maintaining 'the European balance power', the author does not explore the 'unspoken assumptions' which helped shape British policy.

Waterhouse's judgment is also questionable. Without more evidence, Grey's supposed role in constructing the 'Special Relationship' with the United States appears exaggerated. Grey was on friendly terms with prominent Americans but this falls some way short of bringing America into the First World War. He himself admitted that 'it was the unrestricted [German] submarine campaign that precipitated American entry' (p. 372). Furthermore, Grey, according to Waterhouse, was a 'tenacious character', 'made of sterner stuff than many give him credit for', carried 'great weight in cabinet' (p. 213) and 'was nothing if not resolute

and, at times, downright obstinate' (p. 269). He was at the zenith of his powers in 1914, respected in parliament and across Europe, and he was not afraid to threaten resignation. Grey is, therefore, portrayed as a political heavyweight who could carry the cabinet with him. Yet, if so, why did Grey not deliver a timely and an unequivocal message to Berlin about Britain's near-certain participation in the unfolding war? True, there were divisions in the cabinet and parliament had to be consulted, but if Grey was the unflappable and universally trusted statesman depicted, surely he could have acted more decisively to solve the crisis.

Many readers would also challenge the claim that Grey had a 'capacity for hard work' (p. 36). Amazingly, this stay-at-home diplomat made only one trip abroad during his eleven-year tenure of the Foreign Office. Grey characteristically retreated to his country cottage over the weekend of 25–26 July 1914, just as Churchill had left the First Fleet at Portland to guard the Channel. Similarly, it is difficult to accept the contention that Grey 'continued to push himself to the limit' during the first years of the war, particularly as Waterhouse informs us that he 'enjoy[ed] a certain amount of leisure time during his war years in office.' (p. 363).