

## Margot Asquith's Great War Diary 1914-1916: The View from Downing Street

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The late Dr Michael Brock and his wife Eleanor were responsible for the publication one of the most important and widely cited sources on the premiership of Herbert Henry Asquith, his letters between 1912 and 1915 to his paramour Venetia Stanley. Those letters are such a valuable resource for historians because they give a blow-by-blow account of political events in Asquith's own words, as he successively faced the challenges of the Irish Home Rule crisis, Britain's entry into the First World War in August 1914 and first few months of wartime political management.

In publishing the diaries of Asquith's second wife Margot from just before the outbreak of war through to Asquith's fall from power in December 1916, the Brocks have provided another useful service to students of the period. But these diaries are destined to be a less important source than Asquith's own letters, for reasons acknowledged by Michael Brock in his preface. He rightly comments that while Margot 'possessed some narrative skill, she was an opinionated egoist, often inaccurate, the victim of flattery and occasionally prone to fantasy.' What, then, is the value then in publishing them? According to Brock all Margot's weaknesses 'are outweighed by her advantage: she was closer to the Prime Minister, and thus to the centre of events, than anyone else'. There is some truth in this, although one may question the subtitle of the book, *The view from Downing Street*: it represents Margot's distinctive take on events, and she was indeed close to those at the heart of power. Yet her opinions cannot be taken as those of her husband or anyone in government and even her recording of their opinions needs to be viewed with a sceptical eye.

Michael Brock contributes an extended introductory essay giving an overview of Asquith's wartime premiership, and explaining why Margot was less than an asset to him. Her extravagance and insistence on playing a role in society had been a liability to him even during peacetime, but became especially damaging after the outbreak of war. Margot continued to hold dinner parties on a lavish scale, maintain a large establishment of servants and dress expensively at a time when other prominent figures were making a show of economising. This understandably led to criticism not just from a hostile press, but also from her own circle of acquaintances. She lacked all awareness of how this might be perceived or that she should moderate her lifestyle at a time when many young men were risking their lives for their country. In June 1915, she

observed in her diary, with no sense of irony, that while she 'felt not the faintest excitement' at the first Zeppelin raids over London:

What really upset me was my maid telling me that a new and pretty dress of mine (violet silk gabardine with beautiful embroidered belt) and my new gold fencing jacket were put on top of the motor... and had, I need hardly say, been lost on the road ... I can't describe what I've suffered from servants in these last years.

Brock's summary of the reasons why Asquith struggled as a wartime leader and ultimately fell from power will be familiar to students of the period, but is nonetheless useful for being spelled out in such detail. Asquith famously deplored the crowds cheering the outbreak of war, and struggled to understand popular wartime sentiment. As Brock comments, Asquith 'shrank from anything which he saw as irrational; but, for a statesman, refusal to take popular irrationalities into account is itself far from rational'. He was particularly unwise in his patronising treatment of the Unionist leader Bonar Law. While he was far from alone in holding a low opinion of Law's abilities, Brock points out that his crucial mistake was failing to recognise that Law's support was vital precisely because he was the leader of the Unionist party, which by this time had more MPs in Parliament than the Liberals. At any rate, Asquith would have done well to heed Law's advice that: 'In war it is necessary not only to be active but to seem active'. Asquith's fondness for bridge, dinner parties and country weekends undermined his reputation. This was where Lloyd George had the advantage by giving the impression of great activity and wartime sacrifice. Like Asquith, he enjoyed weekends in the country and rounds of golf, but managed to be rather more circumspect about his off-duty activities.

In Brock's view, Asquith also failed to appreciate how the war had changed the political landscape on key issues such as conscription. In peacetime the Liberals could be confident that the public would agree with their staunch opposition to compulsory military service, but this did not necessarily hold good once Britain was involved in a prolonged war and had to maintain a large army. He argues that Asquith would have done better to accept the case for conscription in early 1915, rather than appear to be dragged into it step-by-step over the subsequent year. To say this is possibly to underestimate how much resistance there might have been to an early introduction of conscription, but it is certainly the case that by delaying then ultimately introducing conscription Asquith pleased neither its supporters nor its opponents.

To a great extent the qualities that were Asquith's strengths as a peacetime prime minister were precisely those that caused problems in the changed conditions of wartime. His great success had been to reconcile differences of opinion within his cabinet and to find compromises that were acceptable to everyone. Essentially he acted more as a chairman than a leader. This challenge became that more difficult when managing a wartime coalition, in which Unionist goodwill could not be taken for granted and when keeping all the members of the cabinet happy needed to be subservient to the vigorous prosecution of the war.

Asquith's failure to remain in power and see the war through to a successful conclusion has almost inevitably led to his wartime premiership receiving a negative press from historians. In this regard Brock's essay is very much in line with received wisdom. Yet more recently there have been attempts to at least partially rehabilitate Asquith's wartime record. George Cassar in his 1994 monograph *Asquith as war leader* was still very critical, but concluded that nearly all the key decisions that contributed to Britain's ultimate victory in the war had been taken while Asquith was prime minister. Roland Quinault has very recently argued in *History Today* that Asquith might be given more credit for bringing a united country into the war, preventing an early Germany victory by despatching the British Expeditionary Force and overseeing

the creation of a mass army. In fairness, one should point out that Quinault's essay appeared when this volume must already have gone to press. But, valuable though Brock's essay is, it would have gained something by at least considering the case for Asquith's defence.

It is true, however, that Margot's diaries tend to provide ammunition for the prosecution. She continued to see politics through the prism of pre-war party divisions and entirely failed to understand the changed dynamics caused by the war. She resents having to entertain Bonar Law to dinner and dismisses him as 'this 5th rate man', refers to Unionists in the new coalition cabinet in 1915 as 'the aliens we were interning'. At the same time she was so convinced of her husband's greatness and that he was irreplaceable that she expected the Unionists in his cabinet to show him great personal loyalty and disregard the growing discontent with the government within their own ranks. She remained convinced until the last that conscription would be enormously unpopular and was if anything critical of her husband's greater pragmatism on the issue.

Margot was more alert than her husband to the growing threat to his position. She warned against making Lloyd George war secretary after the death at sea of Kitchener in June 1916. Yet she was wrong about why this was a problem. She feared that Lloyd George would use the post to manipulate the press to Asquith's disadvantage, but in fact Lloyd George himself faced press criticism and the appointment did not enhance his reputation. The issue was rather that the incident showed that Asquith was no longer strong enough to resist having the appointment forced upon him. When, later in the year, he did try to hold out against pressure from the Unionists and Lloyd George to give up day-to-day management of the war, it led to his downfall.

For all Margot's shortcomings, these diaries will be useful to historians even if it is primarily in providing background colour rather than real insight into the workings of Asquith's wartime administration. They offer a vivid picture of an increasingly beleaguered household, as Asquith struggled to cope with the managing a government increasingly beset by crises. They provide a touching portrait of marital devotion, which seemed unaffected by Asquith's liking for younger female company. Similarly, the frequent references to the deaths at the front of friends and acquaintances, culminating in that of Asquith's eldest son Raymond in September 1916, is a reminder that those charged with the management of the war also had to cope with private tragedy. Brock is right to say that Margot possessed narrative skill and this portrait of the climax of Asquith's career can almost be read as a non-fiction novel.

She did also have her moments of political insight, such as her comment on Lloyd George's and Churchill's appetite for coalitions: 'I should think it was even betting that Winston joined the Tory party some day and Ll. G is a natural adventurer who may make or mar himself any day'. She captures well the position of John Morley, who had resigned from the cabinet over the outbreak of war, recording: 'He pretended it might have been avoided, but when I squared up to him and asked 'How' and 'When', was ragged and very unconvincing'. Likewise she captures the essence of Lord Rosebery's character in describing his letter of refusing office as the sovereign's representative at the Church of Scotland General Assembly as 'a masterpiece of egoism and self-consciousness'.

This book was clearly a labour of love for Michael and Eleanor Brock, who were first asked to undertake the task of editing the diaries in 1982 by Asquith's grandson, Lord (Mark) Bonham-Carter. Although, as they explain, this was interrupted by other work, nonetheless they stuck to the task, and carried it out with great care and professionalism. They provide thorough and meticulous explanatory footnotes as well as biographical details of the more significant figures mentioned in the diaries so that the general reader will not get lost among the large cast of Margot's acquaintances. It is a shame that Michael Brock died just a few weeks before the book was published. For this volume, and the publication of the *Letters to Venetia Stanley*, all who are interested in Liberal politics during this period are in his (and indeed his wife's) debt.

#### **Other reviews:**

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Telegraph

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Times

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Guardian

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