Balfour's World: Aristocracy and Political Culture at the Fin de Siècle

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To counter what he sees as the increasing influence of cultural studies, John Tosh has argued that historians need 'to reconnect with that earlier curiosity about experience and subjectivity, while recognising that experience is always mediated through cultural understandings'.⁽¹⁾ As if in response to that plea, *Balfour's World* sets out to examine and understand the experience and subjectivities of a group of men and women who dominated the politics and social discourse of upper class Britain in the late 19th century. However, this is not simply another description of the antics and aperçus of the Souls, as they became known. Instead, by adopting an original approach, Ellenberger has provided a fresh and illuminating perspective of what would otherwise be familiar territory for scholars of the period.

The book takes its place alongside a number of other studies which bridge the divide, assuming there is a divide, between biography and history. Whilst the evocation of a particular 'world' or group of individuals is not new – see Thames and Hudson's lavishly illustrated series which began in the 1960s – this more recent genre takes a more analytic approach to explore the underlying mentality of the group concerned. Thus, in *Soldier Heroes*, Graham Dawson examined the motivation of young men who joined up with such supposed enthusiasm in the First World War.⁽²⁾ Whilst he adopted the sort of cultural studies techniques to which Tosh was referring in the passage quoted above, other work has drawn on primary sources to tease out these psychological forces.

It is an approach which presents particular challenges since it needs to ensure that, whilst the central theme remains dominant, the ebb and flow of the individual lives is not lost. Scholars have employed different ways of achieving this. In *The Inner Life of Empires*, Emma Rothschild drew on a cache of family papers to examine 'the eighteenth century world of the mind', calling her study a new kind of prosopography. Having related the family's history in the first section, she then analyses the 'larger historical questions', which arose at the time, and concludes by discussing the 'inner life' of the family members at the end. The problem is that this necessarily involves some repetition as her characters weave in and out of the narrative. Roy Foster takes a different line in *Vivid Faces*, in which he describes the mentality of 'that extraordinary generation' of men and women, which spawned the 1916 Uprising and Ireland's struggle for independence. Whilst the book focuses on the shaping of those mentalities, the detail of their lives is left to an extensive

Adopting what she calls 'a braided narrative', Ellenberger explores the contrasting lives of her chosen characters, by assembling them in groups of twos and threes and showing how their 'gendered identities' were first forged, and then informed their later lives. The study, therefore, deploys gender scholarship to examine the wider political themes and the interaction between the public and private worlds.

If this sounds somewhat intense, the ensuing narrative is in fact both informative and entertaining, not least in its rescuing of George Herbert (the 13th Earl of Pembroke) from undeserved obscurity. Paired in the first chapter with his contemporary, Arthur Balfour, his early life shows what a young man with a large fortune and some imagination could do at the time. Full of adventure, he and his tutor, George Kingsley, brother of Charles – author of *The Water Babies* and coiner of 'muscular Christianity' – spent three years travelling through Australasia and the Pacific islands. This was George's 'version of the moral science tripos' as well as being 'a crash-course in male-female relations', in which he was subjected to 'astounding sexual distractions'. With a deft wave of the hand, Ellenberger dismisses his assertion that he and the doctor 'kept each other from succumbing to the sexual temptations of the islands' as 'hard to take seriously' – a light-touch, leaving readers to make up their own minds as to what in fact took place.

The young Balfour, by contrast, had no such sense of adventure and, having failed to shine at Eton academically or in sport, gave no hint of what he would eventually achieve. The pairing works well as the two men had similar backgrounds, both lost their fathers when they were young and both were dominated by their mothers in their early lives. The second pairing also provides contrasting portraits, this time of two women, Laura Tennant, who came from a rising and immensely wealthy industrial family, and the upper class Mary Wyndham (later Lady Elcho). Whereas Laura's upbringing was comparatively free, Mary's was intensely sheltered in a family which was extremely close, her father zealously protecting her from the wider world, albeit ultimately, without success. Whereas Mary continues as a key figure throughout the book, becoming Balfour's life-long companion, Laura died tragically young, shortly after giving birth to her first child. Her death marked her family and friends indelibly, her sister, Margot, writing in her autobiography, how 'in her short life she influenced more people than I have done over twice as many years'.(4) Devoted to, but very different from her sister, Margot Tennant (later Asquith) is appropriately the subject of the next chapter. However, the pairing with Mary Wyndham's brother, George, is, I feel, less successful. Although they are linked under the chapter heading, 'Small wars', the one physical and the other psychological, there is insufficient to connect their early lives and the device seems somewhat contrived.

Whilst overall the approach works well, the absence of a chronology and lack of detail in the cast of characters means that at times the individual lives are in danger of overwhelming the central theme. For example, the short and little-known second Suakin campaign (1885), in which George Wyndham played a minor role, is described at length and whilst it may have caused his nervous breakdown 20 years later, it is difficult to see that it warrants this extensive treatment.

The chapters are punctuated by two 'Interludes', and a final Coda, '1895', which brings the curtain down. In the first Interlude, the collapse of Gladstone's government (1885) and the ensuing political re-alignments introduce the next section, in which the five principal characters, whom we have already met and got to know, are re-assembled. Margot Tennant is paired with George Pembroke, and here we first encounter the Souls, whom George's sister, Gladys, described as his 'queer friends'. However, whilst George did enjoy a long gay affair, most of them were not 'queer', even if, like Balfour, they never married. Many had long and rewarding platonic relationships with the opposite sex and had no wish to indulge in the 'flight from domesticity' in which many men were indulging, caused, so it is said, by fear of women's new-found freedom.

That freedom certainly dominated Balfour's world. In their conversation, parlour games, practical jokes and outdoor pursuits, which scandalously included mixed-bathing, the women were well able to hold their own. A number went further and enjoyed a series of extra-marital relationships. Respectable unmarried 'maidens',

however, were off-limits, as the rising political star Harry Cust found to his cost, when the young Nina Welby-Gregory became pregnant. To avoid the scandal engulfing the government, he was compelled to marry her. In the event, she lost the baby and the unhappy union produced no children. Margot Tennant was more fortunate in avoiding pregnancy. Having lost her virginity at her own initiative to the serial adulterer, Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, she enjoyed passionate relationships with at least two suitors – Peter Flower and Evan Charteris – both of which were almost certainly consummated, before settling for a more conventional life.

Seriously wealthy and intensely self-centred, this world seemed untouched by the wave of democracy which was sweeping across the country in the wake of the 1884 Reform Act. It was one in which Margot Tennant thrived but George Pembroke could never feel quite at home and was already suffering one of the crises, which would end his political career. Just as his star was fading, Balfour was being propelled into the limelight. Although he had held minor political office, he had failed to make his mark in the House of Commons, save when he accused Gladstone of ‘infamy’ following Parnell’s release from prison under the ‘Kilmainham Treaty’: an incident which Ellenberger might have mentioned, as it seriously sullied Balfour’s relationship with Gladstone. However, it led Winston Churchill to commend his ‘cool ruthlessness’ and contributed to the decision of his uncle, Lord Salisbury, to appoint him Chief Secretary for Ireland – probably the most important post in the Cabinet given the increasing power of the National League.⁽⁵⁾

On both a public and private level, Balfour presented a puzzle. Aged 38, he had shown little political aptitude, yet his appointment was crucial to the survival of Salisbury’s government. Regarded as cold and aloof in his personal life, he had begun a relationship with the 24-year-old Mary Elcho (née Wyndham), which would continue for the next 50 years and can be followed in detail in their correspondence.⁽⁶⁾ If, over that period, they would ‘come to share the jokes, oblique references, gossip and unspoken confidences of a married couple’, it remains unclear whether the union was consummated. Certainly, she had other extra-marital affairs, most famously a desert fling with Wilfred Blunt, by whom she had a child, Mary. Her husband, Lord Elcho, was more concerned about his mistress, the Duchess of Leinster, who was dying in Menton, and with an insouciance which was typical of that world, quietly accepted the child as his daughter. As she would later say to her own daughter shortly before she married, ‘Of course you will never have affairs because you won’t be able to afford enough servants’. Although these events are not mentioned as they took place shortly after the book ends, they are relevant to the story, since even the unemotional Balfour felt somewhat put out by Mary’s behaviour. Indeed, theirs was very much a mutual relationship, and as Ellenberger convincingly argues, one which was key to Balfour’s ability to navigate the challenges he faced in his political life.

Those challenges became evident as soon as his appointment was announced in March 1887. Pilloried by the press on both sides of the Irish Sea, Balfour proved initially inept as a speaker and unconvincing as a politician, his apparently ambiguous sexuality giving rise to endless innuendo. Ellenberger builds the tension as the vitriol reached its crescendo, when Parliament re-assembled in February 1888 to debate the Queen’s Speech and Parnell rose to condemn the government’s Irish administration. Balfour waited until the final day of the debate before responding. The House was packed. Refusing to rise to the bait, he calmly and methodically dissected and refuted the allegations. It was a triumph: his opponents were silenced, temporarily at least, and he never looked back. During the following years, he discharged the duties of Chief Secretary with a cold efficiency, presiding over the most far-reaching curtailment of freedom that the country had ever witnessed. Crucially, he learned how to manage the press, whose role was becoming increasingly influential. In this, he was ably assisted by his Private Secretary, George Wyndham, who, acting as an early version of Alistair Campbell, culled the available evidence to create counter-narratives refuting ‘the anecdotal calumnies’ levied against him.

Lacking the charisma of the Victorian statesman, Balfour cultivated a conversational manner, appearing to confide in, rather than command, his audience. But it was only an appearance – *au fond* he remained aloof, but almost over-night he had learned how to become a skilled performer. If the transition from detached patrician to modern-style politician is not fully explained, Ellenberger suggests it was part of a changing

world, in which the virtues of 'honour, integrity and purity of motivation' were being replaced by 'levity, instrumentality and concealment'. This may over-state the changes which were taking place but it reflects how powerful the press was becoming. In short, it was the beginning of spin.

It was a world which still depended on the rituals, intrigues and games of the country house party, particularly daunting experiences for an outsider, in which 'anyone might be put on the spot to guess, act out or invent, becoming a performer for the amusement of others'. Despite his aloofness, Balfour was a frequent attendee at Stanway, the Elizabethan mansion set in the Gloucestershire countryside, where Mary Elcho entertained on a grand scale. But, as Ellenberger argues, there was in truth little entertainment. It was an artificial and insincere milieu which fuelled 'a moral evasiveness', which Oscar Wilde would so skilfully dramatise and in which Balfour learned the performative skills needed for his parliamentary career.

Whilst Britain's statesmen and their wives were pursuing their country-house activities, across the water, the Irish Crimes Act was being enforced with a ruthless efficiency. Priests, MPs, mayors and other officials were being locked up, battering rams used to break down the doors of farms, where rent was being withheld, and documents forged by government officials to implicate Parnell in the Phoenix Park murders. None of this harmed the growing reputation of 'bloody Balfour' who revelled in his new nick-name. And, when the leadership of the Conservative –Unionist alliance in the Commons became vacant in 1891, he was the obvious person to assume the role.

In the second interlude, Ellenberger seeks to analyse Balfour's mentality through his writings and speeches on social theory. Pouring scorn on the liberal notion that intelligent state action could improve the well-being of society, he told an audience of undergraduates that 'the future of the race is ... encompassed with darkness'. His pessimism was all the more persuasive by being inflected with a profound learning, albeit one worn lightly, and a wit which typified the fin de siècle mood.

However, whilst this tone of frivolous helplessness was in tune with the decadence of the age, it was not reflected in the lives of George Pembroke, George Wyndham and Margot Tennant, who are assembled together in the next chapter. Turning away from Westminster, Pembroke concentrated on improving his Wiltshire estates and his Irish inheritance, where the family owned large parts of Dublin. Whilst Balfour's men were rounding up anyone expressing anti-British sentiments, Pembroke was introducing significant improvements in fashionable areas, such as Ballsbridge and Sandymount, and promoting philanthropic projects elsewhere in the city. In exploring this form of aristocratic patronage, the book is perhaps straying from its central theme. However, Pembroke continued to be part of the country house set, although he was never regarded as a member of the Souls, and the focus on his work puts that world in context, by showing that, amongst some of the landed aristocracy, there was an older and less cynical approach.

The young Conservatives, whom Balfour patronised after 1892 when the party went into opposition, were also unaffected by his mood of pessimism, with his faithful acolyte, the idealistic Wyndham, now struggling to make a name for himself in Parliament. Alongside them, Margot Tennant and other hostesses were playing an assertive role in political life, attending Parliamentary debates, participating in vigorous discussions and promoting the cause of the Primrose League, all this against increasing pressure from the press and public opinion and the development of a celebrity cult.

Whether she liked it or not, Margot Tennant was at the centre of this new world. Frequently suggested as a partner for Balfour, she featured not only in newspapers and journals, but also in novels, such as E. F. Benson's *Dodo: a Detail of the Day*, in which her breathless conversational style was reproduced in the form of a *Private Eye* parody. But eventually, she tired of this life and her dashing but feckless suitors, and when, in 1894, the recently widowed Asquith proposed, she agreed to take him on, together with his household and five children. Balfour was also the subject of caricatures, but in many ways to his advantage, with cartoons depicting him jousting with Gladstone at the end of his premiership. With Margot's marriage, and the Conservatives returning to power in 1895 after Rosebery's defeat in the general election (following Gladstone's death the previous year), the story reaches its natural conclusion. The age of Balfour is about to

dawn and eight years later, he would finally succeed Salisbury as Prime Minister.

If anyone ever really understood Balfour, it was most probably Mary Elcho and it is no criticism that, when we reach the end of the book, he remains an enigma. The subject-matter after all is the mentality of his world rather than of him as an individual. But the enigma is important in itself because he represents a particular type of male at this juncture, whether married or not, who felt unwilling or unable to express his inner self, whether to his family or friends. It was a *persona* which would have major implications for the next generation as Britain headed towards the First World War. In the words of Jeanne Mackenzie, 'they were romantics, personally attractive but supercilious as a class – only a few had the imagination to question the assumptions of that class'.⁽⁷⁾ *Balfour's World* describes the crucible in which that mentality was forged.

As Ellenberger acknowledges, there is a vast literature relating to both Balfour himself and most of the other characters who feature in her study. If much of the material is familiar, by adopting her gendered approach, she casts the events in a new light and provides further nuance to the role of women and the subtle ways in which power was exercised on both a public and private level. This all contributes to a better understanding of the mentality which shaped an age in which facility and wit became all-important.

The book also shows how the analysis of a 'world', whether it is political, commercial or intimate, can help us understand the dynamics of a particular institution or social group. It leaves one wondering what worlds will be evoked to illuminate the mentality of today's establishment and the moral evasiveness which underlies it on both sides of the political divide.

Notes

1. John Tosh, 'The history of masculinity: an outdated concept?', in *What is Masculinity? Historical Dynamics from Antiquity to the Contemporary World*, ed. John H. Arnold and Sean Brady (Basingstoke, 2011), p. 31.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (London, 1994).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Emma Rothschild, *The Inner Life of Empires: An Eighteenth Century History* (Princeton, NJ, 2011); R. F. Foster, *Vivid Faces: The Revolutionary Generation in Ireland, 1890–1923* (London, 2014).[Back to \(33\)](#)
4. *The Autobiography of Margot Asquith*, ed. Mark Bonham Carter (London, 1962), p. 24.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Roy Jenkins, *Gladstone* (London, 1995), pp. 470–1.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. *The Letters of Arthur Balfour and Lady Elcho*, ed. Jane Ridley and Clayre Percy (London, 1992).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Jeanne Mackenzie, *The Children of the Souls: A Tragedy of the First World War* (London, 1986), p. 51.[Back to \(7\)](#)

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