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The Chamberlain Litany: Letters Within a Governing Family from Empire to Appeasement

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For many years now the letters written by Austen and Neville Chamberlain to their spinster sisters, Ida and Hilda, have been recognised as an invaluable source for students of British political history from the middle of the First World War to the beginning of the Second. The superb editions produced by Robert Self have now made them widely available. The letters constitute a diary of the doings of two half-brothers who, between them, occupied most of the key posts in British government between the Lloyd George Coalition and the start of Churchill's wartime administration. Neville, in particular, maintained the flow of communications, whatever the demands of public office, with an almost religious commitment. All the requirements for a revealing archive of private papers were in place. The first point was separation. Ida and Hilda left the family home in Birmingham in 1914, having sacrificed their best chances of marriage by devoting themselves to the care of their invalid father, Joseph, after his severe stroke in the summer of 1906. They took up residence in the Hampshire village of Odiham where they created constructive lives for themselves within the local community. Meanwhile, the advancing careers of Austen and Neville took them increasingly to London. Neville, never intended by his father for a life in politics, joined Austen in the House of Commons after the General Election of 1918 and between 1924 and 1929 the two men served alongside one another in cabinet – the last siblings to do so before the brothers Miliband. Written correspondence became the best way for the family to keep in touch. But to separation was added two further important factors – an abiding interest in politics, gained at their father's dining-table and by no means restricted to the two brothers who made it their career, and a trust and confidence in one another that enabled Austen and Neville, and particularly the latter, to 'open up' on matters of national politics – their inner thoughts and motivations – in a way that neither did elsewhere.

But the letters of Austen and Neville are not the end of the matter. The Chamberlain archive at the University of Birmingham contains a vast collection of material written by other members of the family. The correspondence between brothers (especially Neville) and sisters predates 1914, though it is inevitably not continuous as the siblings were then often in close personal contact. But as a young man in the 1890s Neville spent seven long and lonely years on Andros in the Bahamas in an ultimately vain attempt to grow a financially viable crop of sisal in order to restore the family's economic fortunes. Letters from home were one of the few consolations of his isolated existence at this time. In addition, both brothers wrote revealingly at times to one another and to their respective wives, while Austen's lengthy correspondence with his step-mother Mary, designed to keep his stricken father in touch with the political world, was published as long ago as 1936. Many scholars will have been tempted to consult the replies despatched by Ida and Hilda to their brothers; some have no doubt dipped into their writings; but no-one has previously attempted what Peter Marsh has now achieved in writing an inter-related portrait of Austen and Neville from within the family which remained so important to them throughout their lives. 'The very volume of the Chamberlain family letters', writes Marsh, 'altogether there are some ten thousand - has [previously] deterred investigation' (p. xii). The achievement is impressive, covering the period from the death of Joseph's second wife in 1875 to that of her son Neville in 1940 and the subsequent efforts of his surviving sisters to secure historical justice for him in the appointment of a suitable biographer.

Both brothers grew up without a mother. Austen's mother, Harriet Kenrick, died at his birth in 1863; Neville's, Florence Kenrick, (a first cousin of Harriet) died 12 years later, also in childbirth, when Neville was only five. The two brothers married relatively late - Austen in 1906 when he was 43; Neville five years later at the age of 41. These facts help explain the closeness of the bonds which bound both men to their sisters. From Marsh's skilled use of his sources the Chamberlain women emerge as rounded figures in their own right. There is Joe's third wife, Mary - closer in age to Austen, with whom she developed an especially close relationship, than to her husband - who rescued Joe from the remote introspection that overcame him following the death of Florence and thereby helped to re-create the vibrant family unit at Highbury. Austen's wife Ivy was often in frail health and was largely uninterested in politics, but she played her own cameo role in international history when acting as an intermediary between her brother-in-law, by then Prime Minister, and Benito Mussolini in the winter after her husband's death. Neville's wife, Annie, was, it seems, repeatedly on the verge of a nervous breakdown, yet she brought out of Neville a warmth which few outside the family ever saw. And mention must be made of Beatrice, Joe's talented eldest child, closer in personality to him, perhaps, than any of his other children, who fell victim to the influenza pandemic of 1918. Above all, however, Ida and Hilda are the central figures of this work. They were not simply the passive recipients of accounts of the doings of their distinguished brothers, though Neville was always keen to seek their endorsement of what he had achieved. The daughters of Joseph Chamberlain, notes Marsh, 'were almost as strong-minded as his sons' (p. xiii). Their influence upon Austen and Neville was profound. Ida, 'a natural administrator, good with statistics and adept at the solution of practical problems' (p. 99), made a considerable mark in local government. Her work gave her insights into those problems with which Neville, as Minister of Health in the 1920s, had to grapple at a national level. Hilda's contribution to public affairs was energetic but more modest, though she did become prominent in the Women's Institute movement.

As Marsh understands, it is important to recognise what a book based almost exclusively on family correspondence can (and cannot) do. It allows for a detailed picture to emerge of the Chamberlains' mind-map, a portrait of the world as they saw it, but not necessarily as it was seen by anyone else. There was always another point of view, which inevitably is largely absent from these pages. The approach works best in relation to the 1920s. In that decade the two brothers reached the pinnacle of their achievement. Each found himself in a ministry that gave full scope for his particular talents - Austen at the Foreign Office and Neville at the Ministry of Health - or, as Ida put it, 'For once we

have the square peg in the square hole and the round peg in the round hole' (p. 195). At this time, the family's internal chemistry was at its most constructive, especially between Ida and Neville, with the Minister of Health deriving clear benefit over issues such as rural housing from the experience and expertise of his siblings. But in taking pleasure at the posts occupied by her brothers, Ida added perceptively that 'in these positions ... each will have a field of their own and their rather different points of view won't clash' (p. 195). For Austen and Neville were very different men politically and their relationship in the early 1920s was, as the family correspondence makes clear, often strained. Austen 'never will agree with you on social questions', Ida reminded Neville, 'because at heart he is more of a Conservative than a radical, whilst you are the other way around' (p. 156). These differences were, paradoxically, compounded by the opposing views that the two men took of the Lloyd George coalition government. Whereas Austen, the natural Tory, developed an increasingly positive attitude towards the Welsh Liberal, an attitude that kept him off the Conservative front bench during the Bonar Law and first Baldwin administrations, Neville, in some ways a life-long Liberal Unionist, never forgave Lloyd George for the way he had been treated during his brief spell as Director-General of National Service in the First World War and declined the offer of office in his post-war government, but then readily accepted appointment in those governments from which Austen held aloof. Ida and Hilda found themselves caught between the conflicting wills of their two brothers, though their sympathies almost always lay with Neville, a reminder that he was their full brother in terms of shared parentage. The complex relationship between the two men is very effectively explored in these pages.

Marsh's formula works less effectively in relation to the 1930s. The author himself now seems less sure-footed. The statement that 'the Germans invaded Poland. Before midnight Britain found itself at war' (p. 330) cuts out 48 of the most traumatic hours in Neville's career. But the bigger problem derives from the source material itself. By then the positions of the two men had changed dramatically. Austen's ministerial career came to an end in 1931 after a brief spell as First Lord of the Admiralty in the first National Government. Neville's, by contrast, advanced. As the Chancellor of the Exchequer who steered, or was perceived to have steered, the British economy out of the worst dangers of the international depression, he moved inexorably towards 10 Downing Street, the crowning achievement that had been denied to both his father and his brother. Yet the whole process was over-laid by paradox. After an initial sulk over his failure to secure a second spell at the Foreign Office, Austen enjoyed an Indian Summer, in many ways the most distinguished years of his long parliamentary career. This is something which doesn't really emerge from Marsh's account, perhaps because Ida and Hilda continued, as before, to reflect Neville's thinking rather than Austen's. As an elder statesman on the National Government's backbenches, Austen emerged as one of the very small band of genuine anti-appeasers, a man who judged from the outset that the nature of the Nazi regime in Germany was such as to rule out making any concessions to it. The fascinating 'what if' of this story lies in the inter-reaction of the two brothers (and their sisters) if Austen had not died suddenly in March 1937, two months before Neville reached the premiership, and had thus had the chance to watch his brother take the policy of appeasement to its tragic denouement at Munich. At the same time, while Neville climbed up the governmental hierarchy, he moved increasingly out of his comfort zone, away from the realm of social reform that had taken him into politics in the first place. Yet, rather than admit to his inexperience and need for expert advice, he developed an almost blind confidence in his own judgement and in his ability to save the world from the disaster of another great war. With Hilda ranking her brother on a par with the Younger Pitt and the Duke of Wellington, Neville's self-confidence was perhaps not surprising. But the change was reflected in his correspondence with Ida and Hilda. As Marsh puts it: 'Their experience in the local government of Hampshire and the Women's Institutes had served him well when he was Minister of Health, but it had little bearing on the darkening international scene. Neville no longer looked for informed advice from them but for approval, even applause' (p. 258).

Approval and applause he certainly got, much to his delight. Returning from Munich at the end of September, 1938, Neville noted that the letters he received from Ida and Hilda were 'what I wanted' (p. 312). Yet these letters are almost embarrassing in their praise and the reader will want to shout out to offer an opposing point of view, if only in the interests of historical balance. 'If this meeting has been arranged it must be because the dictators have quailed at the last moment', judged Ida when writing to Annie on learning that Neville had agreed to make a third visit to Germany to see Hitler and Mussolini at Munich. 'Surely once they have drawn back from the brink of the precipice they cannot return to it! - And it is to Neville's superhuman courage & resource, judgment & firmness that we owe this reprieve. What millions of blessings must be being called down upon him' (p. 310). The agreement reached at Munich brought the paeans of praise to an almost intolerable pitch. 'Millions bless your name today', insisted Hilda, '& your happy sisters are uplifted beyond words, by the thought of all that you have been able to do! ... You have accomplished the impossible, you have indeed snatched victory from the jaws of death. We lift up our hearts in thankfulness for you, for your character, trained & disciplined all through your life so that the great emergency found you armed at all points' (p. 312). It must at least be worth pondering whether Neville would have adopted a more sceptical attitude towards his own policies at this critical moment in the nation's affairs if the commentary on his doings offered by his sisters had been even marginally critical.

From the heights of popular acclaim in September 1938 there was now only one direction in which Neville's reputation could travel and this it certainly did in the last months of his life. By the time of his death in November 1940 he was in many minds already the principal 'Guilty Man', an unenviable status from which he has yet fully to escape. Hilda had managed to discern a pattern in the careers of her father and two brothers in which each managed to bring his predecessor's work to a successful conclusion. The process had culminated with Neville's fulfilment at Munich of Austen's quest for a lasting European peace. Living on into the late 1960s, Hilda had at least the time to re-write this story. The litany, concludes Marsh at the end of this very readable book, turned into a lament.

The author has replied that David Dutton's review of *The Chamberlain Litany* is as fair in its criticisms as it is generous in its praise.

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