

Reviews in History

Published on: *Reviews in History* (<https://reviews.history.ac.uk>)

The Neville Chamberlain Diary Letters. Volume Two: The Reform Years, 1921-27

Review Number: 256
Publish Date: Friday, 1 March, 2002
ISBN: 9781840146929
Date of Publication: 2000
Price: £75.00
Pages: 500pp.
Publisher: Ashgate
Publisher URL: <http://www.ashgate.com/isbn/9781840146929>
Place of Publication: Aldershot and Burlington, Vermont
Reviewer: David J. Dutton

Modern historians, and particularly biographers, soon become aware of the importance to their research of the private papers of leading politicians. They hope that such archives will add a human dimension to their studies, the opportunity to get to the private individual behind the public figure. They hope also for those extra insights and understandings that cannot be found in the public record, the additional elements of detailed explanation which the politician is only prepared to reveal to those particularly close to him, or perhaps only to himself in the privacy of his diary. Often, of course, disappointment awaits. Many collections described as 'private papers' turn out in fact to consist largely of private office papers - documents which essentially form part of the public life of the individual concerned. Sometimes, indeed, they are no more than copies of documents that are also to be found in the public archives, rather than genuinely private letters and papers. Typically, the historian will hope for the survival of a diary - providing it has not been kept too self-consciously with a possible eye to later publication - and family correspondence where the individual concerned unburdens himself in total confidence to a close relative, revealing aspects of himself or thoughts about the key issues of his public life which he would not confide to a public document no matter how restricted its circulation.

Chance can play an important part in the existence or otherwise of such material. Even in the great age of letter writing family members were often too close to one another in geographical terms to require a continuous written correspondence. Husband to wife letters can be particularly revealing but are usually extremely intermittent for the obvious reason that they are only required when the two are temporarily separated. Modern means of communication have to a large extent curtailed the practice of writing long personal letters. Neville Chamberlain lived at a time when the telephone had become available and one was installed in his Birmingham home. But, to the infinite benefit of the

historical profession, he remained to the end of his life deeply distrustful of this instrument. Thus, it has long been recognised that the series of letters written by Chamberlain to his two spinster sisters, Ida and Hilda, living in the village of Odiham in Hampshire, represent by far the most valuable single element in Chamberlain's private papers held at the University of Birmingham. The letters - nearly 1200 in number and containing almost two million words - span the period between 1915, when the sisters left the family home in Birmingham, and Neville's death in 1940. Over a quarter of a century, during which time he progressed from being Lord Mayor of his city to Prime Minister of his country via a succession of cabinet offices, Chamberlain shared his thoughts on the developing political situation with his female siblings with, it must be said, far greater candour and openness than he ever showed towards his half-brother, Austen, notwithstanding their shared participation in the game of politics. The letters thus provide a unique and detailed commentary on the inner workings of the Conservative Party and of the British government which, as regards the 1920s and 1930s, is probably without equal. Chamberlain entered the House of Commons in December 1918; by October 1922 he was a government minister; thereafter he was only out of office during the brief interludes of Labour government in 1924 and 1929-31 until a few weeks before his death in November 1940. Yet throughout this period he rarely failed to find the time to write in his own hand a lengthy weekly epistle, addressed alternately to Hilda and Ida, but clearly intended for the eyes of both.

For Chamberlain himself the letters are particularly important. Dying so soon after leaving office, he never had the opportunity, enjoyed by so many of his political contemporaries and put to such effective propaganda purpose by his successor in 10 Downing Street, of stating his own case at the bar of history in the form of a political memoir. Indeed, he only ever wrote one book, a short but occasionally revealing study of his cousin, Norman, who lost his life on the Western Front in 1917. He was in any case the most private of men who strained to conceal his true personality behind an outwardly cold public façade. Such, however, was the relationship between Neville, Hilda and Ida Chamberlain that 'there were no external inhibitions upon the author in revealing as much about his personal and emotional life as he was ever capable of expressing' (*Neville Chamberlain Diary Letters* vol. 1, p. 32). If, then, Chamberlain is to have the posthumous chance to 'speak for himself', his letters to his sisters provide the obvious vehicle.

The letters themselves have enjoyed an interesting history. Chamberlain's surviving family, and particularly Hilda who lived on until 1966, clearly believed that they contained the raw material upon which the eventual rehabilitation of his historical reputation could be based. From here would come the counter-thrust to rebut the powerful indictment made by *Guilty Men* and other popular tracts of a second-rate politician who had presided with complacency and indifference over the country's fortunes during a period of acute national danger. The letters were used extensively, but selectively, by Keith Feiling in his official biography published in 1946. Thereafter their availability was jealously superintended. Selected extracts were offered to sympathetic authors such as Chamberlain's cabinet colleague, Samuel Hoare. Not until 1975 were they made generally available for research. Since then they have formed an indispensable quarry for scholars of the Chamberlain era, particularly those intent on adding to the seemingly limitless historiographical mountain relating to British foreign policy in the 1930s. What is striking, however, is the way in which this one source, and often the very same letters and even quotations from them, have been used to diametrically opposed purposes. 1989 saw the publication of two studies that relied heavily upon this source for their best insight into Chamberlain's policies and inner beliefs. According to John Charmley, writing in *Chamberlain and the Lost Peace*, Chamberlain had striven manfully to avert the catastrophe of the Second World War and to preserve the British Empire. His reputation 'stands better now than it has ever done'. Yet for Sidney Aster in "'Guilty Men": The case of Neville Chamberlain' the pendulum of revisionism had swung too far and it was time to revert to those moral judgements which had so damaged Chamberlain's standing back in 1940. For Aster,

Chamberlain stands condemned not just by his actions, but also by his own words.

Now Robert Self has placed all students of inter-war Britain in his debt by producing an expertly edited collection of Chamberlain's letters to his two sisters. The title *The Neville Chamberlain Diary Letters* is somewhat misleading to the extent that Chamberlain, unlike his half-brother, did keep an extensive, if not continuous, diary, and the primary purpose of his letters to Ida and Hilda was not to record events for posterity but to keep them informed, to share his concerns with two women of considerable intelligence and good sense, and to use his sisters as a sounding board for his own thoughts and plans. None the less, the letters do form an almost continuous record and Chamberlain did, on occasion, clearly use them as a substitute for entries in his diary which the busy schedule of an over-burdened cabinet minister sometimes prevented from being written.

The project still has some way to go. The present volume, the second to be published, only takes the story up to 1927, still a decade away from the dramatic events of the premiership upon which, for better or for worse, Chamberlain's historical reputation will in the last resort always depend. But the years that are covered here, 1921-27, are full of interest and offer vital insights into Chamberlain's career. For Chamberlain personally it was a period of dramatic transformation. At the start of 1921 he was a humble, if industrious, backbencher of just two years standing and, already in his early fifties, entertaining little prospect of ministerial advancement. Six years later he was a senior cabinet minister, had already served as Chancellor of the Exchequer, had been responsible for a considerable body of reforming legislation and probably stood as the number two figure in the Conservative party, the most likely successor as Prime Minister should Stanley Baldwin, for whatever reason, decide or be forced to stand down from his leading position. This advance might be described as meteoric, if only that adjective did not seem curiously inappropriate when applied to Chamberlain. He had achieved this transformation in his personal fortunes, as these letters illustrate, through a combination of good fortune - being on the right side in the Conservative split of 1922 - hard work, sheer administrative competence and a healthy measure of self-confidence in his own worth.

Above all we are presented here with the authentic Chamberlain, the committed domestic reformer on the progressive left of the Conservative party and, in this respect at least, a very different political animal from his half-brother. If what history has judged to be the most important part of Chamberlain's career came to focus on his role in international diplomacy, this was not something which he himself engineered. Equipped perhaps to be a great peacetime Prime Minister it was fate, and Adolf Hitler, which decreed that he had instead to focus on foreign policy and preparations for war. Yet almost certainly he would have wished, had circumstances been otherwise, to be remembered as a domestic reformer. It was obvious, noted a cabinet colleague of many years standing at the time of Chamberlain's death, 'that he looked back, as he was entitled to look back, on what he had done at the Ministry of Health [1924-9] as really the thing in his career in which he felt he had served the people well'.

Chamberlain's commitment to social improvement, albeit of a distinctly paternalistic hue, shines out from these pages. It was to his great relief that Baldwin offered him the Ministry of Health in 1924, rather than obliging him, as he had thought probable, to return to the Treasury, even though it was the latter office which was more likely to lead to further advancement within the Tory hierarchy and possibly to the premiership itself. 'If I have 4 or 5 years of office', he wrote in 1925, 'I may leave behind as great a reputation as Minister of Health as Father did as Colonial Secretary. Only it will probably take longer for the public to find it out and it will only be after I am dead that my administration will be talked of as a Golden Age at the Ministry!' As his prevailing reputation remains engulfed in the mire of appeasement, the second part of his expressed hope is, even now, at best only partially fulfilled. Those who read these pages may do something to turn the tide. We see a minister who set himself goals and strove mightily to achieve them. This was not a man who was in

politics for its own sake or for the crude pursuit of power. More than fifty years ago Feiling declared that Chamberlain's legislative record at the Ministry of Health stood 'massive and unquestioned, the chapter of his life least controverted'. There is little here to challenge that judgement.

The letters also throw light on the surprisingly difficult relationship which existed between Chamberlain and his half-brother. At the beginning of Neville Chamberlain's parliamentary career attitudes towards Lloyd George seemed to lie at the heart of the problem. Neville never forgave the Prime Minister for the unfair way in which he believed he had been treated during his first incursion into national politics as Director-General of National Service in 1917. Austen, by contrast, had become attracted - seduced is hardly too strong a word - by Lloyd George's beguiling charm and undoubted qualities of dynamic leadership, becoming a mainstay and leading apologist of the post-war coalition. These differences caused family friction throughout the lifetime of Lloyd George's government which were not ended by the fall of the coalition in October 1922. For while Neville now accepted office in Bonar Law's new Conservative government, Austen remained loyal to the concept of coalition government and still viewed favourably the prospect of future alignment with sympathetic Liberals. Such tactical divergences reflected deeper differences between the two men. All the Chamberlains came, of course, from Liberal stock, but Austen was a born conservative and had drifted more easily and naturally than either his father or Neville into the embraces of the Tory party. For him the post-war coalition and a possible party realignment represented the indispensable means of resisting the advance of socialism. Neville, by contrast, was a genuine radical. He once said that he and Samuel Hoare were 'the only Socialists in the late [Conservative] Govt' [p. 237]. And he did not dissent from the proposition that the Conservatives (or at least the sort of Conservative party which he wanted to mould) had more in common with Labour than either had with the Liberal party [p. 214]. Indeed, for him the Liberals had become an outdated irrelevancy and it was the duty of Conservatives like himself to destroy what remained of a once great party. We see also Chamberlain's firm roots in the city of Birmingham, roots which Austen, who had not served an apprenticeship in local government, never aspired to match. Neville comes as close as was seemly to telling his sisters that Austen was a poor constituency MP. He even seemed to seek their confirmation that his children were more interesting and talented young people than were those of his half-brother [p. 108].

Insights are also provided into relationships which acquired greater significance in later years. If Chamberlain sympathised with at least some of the aspirations of the Labour party, he also developed a growing contempt for its parliamentary leadership. Though, as an industrialist, he had once enjoyed a good rapport with organised Labour, we note here the beginnings of that steady alienation between Chamberlain and his political opponents which would have fatal consequences in the national crisis of 1940 'I suppose what irritates [Ramsay MacDonald]', he wrote revealingly in 1926, 'is what the Nation calls my "sharp tongue and the bitter sarcasms with which I delight to stir up the hornets nest in front of me"!' [p. 360]. A few months later he added: '[Douglas] Hogg and I are left as the only ones who really annoy the Socialists and of the two I believe they hate me most. I fancy its because of my nasty sarcastic way.' [p. 405]. Chamberlain's other nemesis of 1940, Winston Churchill, also figures prominently in his correspondence of this time. In the light of the growing revisionist literature about the great war leader, Chamberlain's comments seem more acute than might once have been the case. 'The worst of having a genius for a colleague', he noted perceptively in November 1927, 'is that he is always flying after some new game which diverts him from the more humdrum but more practical political paths' [p. 428].

Self's editorial work is generally meticulous, though there might have been scope to increase the number of those footnotes which explain allusions within the text. As an adoptive Liverpudlian the present reviewer may be permitted one factual quibble. Edwin Lutyens did not design Liverpool's

Roman Catholic Cathedral, at least not the one that was actually built. The volume begins with a thoughtful commentary on these important years in Chamberlain's career, though the excellent discussion of his life as a whole and of the general importance of the run of letters contained in Self's first volume is not reproduced. Those who come first to volume two would be well advised to refer back to this essay. When, a few years ago, the same editor produced a volume of Austen Chamberlain's letters to his two sisters (and the contrasting commentary on the same events provided by the brothers is often most instructive), he usefully provided the archival reference of each document. Dropping this notation from Neville's letters is a pity. Such complaints are, however, at the margin. Robert Self is to be congratulated on another valuable and well-produced volume. It is only a pity that its price is likely to deter many potential purchasers. It will be interesting to see how the editor interprets the later and increasingly controversial years of Chamberlain's career. It may be that no consensus is ever going to be reached about this key figure of inter-war British politics. But Self's work will at least ensure that the case for Neville Chamberlain is put as persuasively as the subject's own words permit.

Source URL: <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/256/>

Links:

[1]
<https://reviews.history.ac.uk/reviewed-item/the-neville-chamberlain-diary-letters-volume-two-the-refo-1921-27/>