EVENTS, DEAR BOY, EVENTS

A Political Diary of Britain from Woolf to Campbell

EDITED AND INTRODUCED BY
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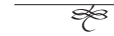
Contents

Contents



Introduction

On the eve of the millennium, two men confided their anxieties to their diaries. Chris Mullin wondered what kind of a world his (as yet unborn) grandchildren would inherit. Alec Guinness asked 'Oh Sceptre'd Isle set in the polluted sea, where are we heading?' They voiced a more general feeling of awe at the scale of change that had come about in Britain in the twentieth century and of what lay ahead (though they had no inkling of how close 9/11 was).

'Events, dear boy, events', the phrase attributed to Harold Macmillan, makes the point that the unexpected can ruin the best-laid plans. In Macmillan's own time, the abdication of Edward VIII, Dunkirk, the 1945 election, Suez, the Profumo scandal, all challenged expectations and sometimes derailed governments; thirty years later it was the poll tax riots, the Maastricht Treaty, the 9/11 attack, Iraq and the death of David Kelly, the credit crisis, MPs' expenses. There were many straws in the wind to warn of these events, but often straws are ignored until a crisis overtakes everything. Diaries, with no firm idea of what the significance or conclusion might be, record the unfolding events together with all the incidental observations and confidential thoughts of their authors.

The invitation to edit a 'political diary of Britain' was irresistible, not least because tweets and blogs and social networks may have put an end to diary-keeping. It coincided with an exhibition on Identity at the Wellcome Trust in which over a hundred volumes of diaries were on show and the Trust very generously allowed me access to the collection. It included the wartime diaries of General Alan Brooke, Joyce Grenfell and Noël Coward, the 'prison diaries' of both Jimmy Boyle and Lord Longford, *A Year with Swollen Appendices* by Brian Eno, the Alec Guinness volume, and a host of other treasures to augment my existing shelves of political diaries and memoirs which ranged

from Harold Nicolson, Tony Benn and Violet Bonham Carter to Gyles Brandreth, Paddy Ashdown and Oona King. The definition of 'political' thus became more and more elastic as *Events, Dear Boy, Events* took shape. No one could appreciate the pressures facing Churchill without reading Brooke's masterfully edited account of the Second World War; or understand the evolution of the Labour Party without the diaries of Beatrice Webb, who had probably the greatest influence on the character of the Labour Party besides Ramsay MacDonald. I read all of these volumes of diaries, and produced a list of just over seventy diarists. Omissions included, regrettably, several whom a different editor of the same book might have considered essential – C. P. Scott, for example, James Lees-Milne and Anthony Powell.

Inevitably in a book of this nature, there are gaps and simplifications – the independence and break up of India, for example, which had long-term consequences still felt today; or Rhodesia's declaration of 'UDI' in 1965 which occupied so much of Harold Wilson's time. It is not a history – there are many fine historians who have interpreted the twentieth century in all its aspects. Nor is it intended to be a nostalgic account of Great Britain. It is an impressionist view of politically changing times – of two wars, loss of the empire, the rise and fall of socialism, devolution, a civil war, global migration, European integration – during which Britons and their institutions have been stolidly resilient. The monarchy, trade unions, love of animals, the BBC, the House of Lords, the established Church (just), horse-racing, shooting and fishing, all-pervasive class differences, the parliamentary and party system, have all survived. And the period began and ended with a coalition government.

It has been a much harder project than I imagined it could possibly be, but made huge fun by John Davey, who has guided me through the book from the start, and Andrew Franklin and the team at Profile Books. It could not have been done without the help of Tony Benn, James Goddard, Jen Laney, Jayne Bryant, Patricia Moberly, David Wedgwood Benn, Christina Weir, Roger Luxton-Jones, Laura Rhode, Tom Arno, Ken Edwards and my remarkable mother Joan Marigold. I am indebted to all those editors whose hard work on the original diaries I have plundered, and who are listed in an appendix (not Brian Eno's!). Readers should be aware that I have retained the style and idiosyncracies of punctuation and spelling of my diarists, hence the inconsistencies from entry to entry; but I accept all blame for editorial errors.

Ruth Winstone
August 2012

Chapter One

1921–1931
The Internecine Years

After 1918 power ebbed away from the Liberal Party, from British imperialism (slowly) and from unearned wealth, and moved towards organised Labour (fleetingly), the United States of America, the new Soviet Union, and the mighty press proprietors. There was no shortage of diarists to record this fundamentally changing post-war world.

Beatrice Webb – intellectual, well connected and rich – embodied the new creed of socialist paternalism, from which the Labour Party has never escaped; Walter Citrine, an electrician who became a masterful trade union organiser, found himself at the head of the first 'general' strike of labour in 1926. Despite their diametrically opposite origins, their diaries show them united in concluding that the labour movement needed more authoritarian leadership in order to succeed.

For the MPs or future MPs who kept diaries, such as Leo Amery, Harold Nicolson, Henry 'Chips' Channon and Alfred Duff Cooper, it was clear that, personally, they felt their privileges and position under threat, and that politically the Great War and the Treaty of Versailles which followed it had resulted in discontent at home and trouble abroad, particularly in Europe, where even then some saw that the post-war settlement had already created the conditions for the next world war.

Others on the fringes of public life, or beginning their journeys into it, were well placed to observe the sublime and the ridiculous: Lt. Louis Mountbatten, Violet Bonham Carter (daughter of H. H. Asquith,

the former prime minister), John Reith (future Director General of the BBC); George Riddell (Lloyd George's media man, an early cross between Rupert Murdoch and Alastair Campbell), Frances Stevenson (Lloyd George's mistress), Thomas Jones (senior civil servant), Robert Bruce Lockhart (diplomat, journalist and spy), the writer/publisher Virginia Woolf, and the novelists Evelyn Waugh and George Orwell.

The collapse of the Liberal Party arose in part from the events of December 1916. Herbert Asquith, whose eldest son had been killed three months earlier in France, was struggling to lead the country in what was a European war for imperial supremacy. Supported by *The Times* and *Daily Mail*,* David Lloyd George, Asquith's Liberal colleague in the Cabinet, replaced Asquith as Prime Minister (but not as Liberal Party leader) and emerged in 1918 as the political hero who had turned disaster into victory – a victory that had cost the lives of over a million British and Empire subjects.

In the General Election that followed, the 'Asquith Liberals' refused to join Lloyd George's new 'Lib–Con' coalition government, which lasted for four years.† By 1926, a number of senior Liberal MPs had transferred allegiance to the new Labour Party. The Asquith–Lloyd George split endured into the next decades, and the party almost died from its wounds. The 'women's war' which had indeed been waged along the lines of a military campaign, entered a 'truce' for the duration of the war and the procrastination and prevarication of the politicians over votes for women could not be sustained after 1918.

By 1922 the Labour Party, resting on the three pillars of socialism, trade unionism and Christianity, had become a political force under the organisational brilliance of its elected chairman and leader, James Ramsay MacDonald. An inconclusive result in the General Election in 1923 led to MacDonald becoming the first Labour Prime Minister of a minority administration. He was a lonely and unhappy figure at Number 10: widowed in 1911 with five children to bring up, he never remarried. This first ever Labour government lasted only a year, to be

* *The Times* and the *Daily Mail* were owned, with other papers, by Alfred Harmsworth, the 1st Lord Northcliffe, who was appointed Director of Propaganda by Lloyd George. His brother Harold Harmsworth (the 1st Lord Rothermere) owned the *Daily Record* and *Sunday Pictorial* and, after Northcliffe's death, acquired the *Mail*.

† The so-called 'coupon' election of 1918 returned an overwhelming majority for the Coalition Conservative and Liberal candidates who were officially endorsed by the receipt of the coupon (a letter of support from the Coalition government). Seventy-three Sinn Fein MPs were also elected, but did not take their seats in the Commons. The label 'Unionist' (referring to the supporters of Union with Ireland) was still attached to some candidates and Conservative MPs were often referred to as Unionist MPs.

replaced by the Conservatives who remained the dominant influence in British politics for the next two decades. When Labour returned briefly to government in 1929, interest in the policies and parties of National Socialism on the German and Italian models began to attract some leading politicians from the mainstream parties.

As the first chapter opens, Lloyd George is into the third year of his Coalition – a Liberal Prime Minister depending on Conservative support.

Sunday, 30 January 1921

10 Downing Street

The Prime Minister asked me to come round at 8 o'clock to have some dinner and to sing Welsh hymns.

Miss Stevenson joined us at dinner upstairs and the conversation somehow got quickly on to Victor Hugo. I confessed I had never read any of the novels and this set the PM going and with great eloquence he told us the story of *Les Miserables* – 'the greatest book ever written not excepting Holy Writ. I have read it twenty times …'

Sometime during dinner the German indemnity was mentioned. The PM said they could pay the hundred millions a year easily enough. I suggested it was less than the capital of Lord Leverhulme's companies* and that he (the PM) could minimise it by speaking of it in that fashion.

We adjourned to the drawing room and for an hour Miss Stevenson played Welsh music.

Thomas Jones

Tuesday, 8 February 1921

The growing unemployment has added to the ferment of rebellious discontentment. The wonder is that there is not more outward sign of angry resentment. Perhaps it is due to the fact that for the first time some sort of weekly allowance is being received without the stigma of

*William Lever was founder and owner, with his brother, of Lever Brothers, soap manufacturers. He built up a business empire with palm oil plantations in the Belgian Congo. He became Lord Leverhulme in 1917.

pauperism … The principle of deterrence is completely discarded: no one suggests that unemployment is to be punished.

The Labour Party alone has had its enquiry and report (into unemployment) – the Labour Party is more and more taking the position of the only alternative Government to Lloyd George.

Beatrice Webb

Friday, 15 April 1921

Richmond-on-Thames

At 10 tonight, unless something happens meanwhile, all trains, trams, buses, mines and perhaps electric light works come to an end. The servants have been to the Co-ops and brought back a weeks groceries. We have a bundle of candles. Our most serious lack is coal, as Nelly forgot to order any. We burn coke in the drawing room and cook on gas. Still heaven knows why, I don't believe the strike will happen.*

Virginia Woolf

Sunday, 17 April 1921

And I was perfectly right. The strike didn't happen. About 7 o'clock L[eonard] rang up Margaret and heard that the Triple Alliance had split: the railwaymen and transport workers refusing to go on with it, and leaving the miners by themselves. Nothing is yet accurately known. Presumably the miners will have to give in, and I shall get my hot bath, and bake home made bread again; yet it seems a pity somehow – if they're to be forced back and the mine owners triumphant. I think this is my genuine feeling, though not very profound.

Virginia Woolf

*The Triple Alliance between the Miners' Federation of Great Britain, the National Union of Railwaymen and the National Transport Workers' Federation had called a co-ordinated strike in response to threatened wage reductions following the return of the mining industry to private ownership.

Sunday, 24 April 1921

Coal. The opinion in general is that the owners ought never to have put forward such a big cut in wages and that some scheme for graduating the fall should have been devised … This has been Churchill and Montagu's line and they are right.

Luckily for the Government, the miners confused the issue by flooding the mines and clamouring for a subsidy. The PM [Lloyd George] fastened on this and rode off on the back of the poor pit pony and pulled round … Then came the collapse of the Triple Alliance and the Red Revolution was postponed once more. It was the most exciting day since the armistice – three Cabinet meetings and endless comings and goings, the PM in great form as the day went on in his favour. The Strike Committee very sick … The Strike books had been issued … the troops were steaming in ship and train from Ireland, from Malta, from Silesia to defend us from the men of Fife. The Duke of Northumberland was lecturing about Moscow and the Miners in the *Morning Post* … I think we shall slide into at any rate a temporary settlement, the owners going without profits for 3 or 4 months, the men putting up with a reduction of from 2 to 3 shillings per day …

Thomas Jones

Monday, 27 June 1921

Today the manual working class is descending rapidly into destitution: not far off, relatively to the standard they attained during the war, from the destitution they suffered in 1840–50 … The universal lowering of the wages of the factory operative and the mechanic, and the sweeping away of the Agricultural Wages Board has completed the disillusionment; and the miners are now proved to have been right when they told the other trade unionists that if they were beaten it would be a rout for the whole working class.

Beatrice Webb

Thursday, 14 July 1921

10 Downing Street, Irish negotiations

De Valera has gone, after having been with D[avid Lloyd George] nearly 3 hours. I have never seen D so excited as he was before De Valera arrived, at 4.30. He kept walking in and out of my room and I

could see he was working out the best way of dealing with DeV. As I told him afterwards, he was bringing up all his guns! He had a big map of the British empire hung up on the wall in the Cabinet room, with great blotches of red all over it. This was to impress DeV. In fact, D says that the aim of these talks is to impress upon DeV the greatness of the B.E. and to get him to recognise it, and the King. In the course of conversation today D said to DeV: 'The B.E. is a sisterhood of nations – the greatest in the world. Look at this table: There sits Africa – English and Boer; there sits Canada – French, Scotch and English; there sits Australia, representing many races – even Maoris; there sits India; there sit the representatives of England, Scotland and Wales; all we ask you to do is to take your place in this sisterhood of free nations. It is an invitation, Mr De Valera: we invite you here.'

D said he was very difficult to keep to the point – he kept going off at a tangent and talking formulas and refusing to face facts. And every time D seemed to be getting him and De Valera appeared to be warming, he suddenly drew back as if frightened and timid. D says he is the man with the most limited vocabulary he has ever met!

D turned to another tack and said, 'I shall be sorry if this conference fails: terrible as events have been in Ireland, it is nothing to what they will be if we fail to come to an agreement … I hesitate to think of the horror if war breaks out again in Ireland.'

'But,' said De Valera, getting very excited: 'This is a threat of force – of coercion.' 'No, Mr De Valera,' said D, 'I am simply forecasting what will inevitably happen if these conversations fail, and if you refuse our invitation to join us.'

Frances Stevenson

Monday, 29 August 1921

Scotland

With LG and Mrs LG to Blair Atholl where we remained until Wednesday, when we motored to Inverness. The Duke and Duchess most kind and hospitable. It was interesting to see the relics of the chieftain system – kilted pipers after dinner, kilted gamekeepers and servants – all most impressive.

The Duke says he has to pay 18s 7d in the £ in taxation and fears he will be unable to continue to live at Blair Atholl. As it is, for a part of the year he occupies a small house on the estate. The Duchess is a

talented person and a hard worker. She is a brilliant pianist and has composed some excellent music.

George Riddell

Lord Louis Mountbatten accompanied David, the Prince of Wales (later Edward VIII) on a naval tour which took them to India and Japan – both of which countries were especially significant for the young sub-lieutenant.

Thursday, 17 November 1921

HMS *Renown*

We anchored in Bombay Harbour at 6.30 am. I dressed in white full dress at once, as there was a lot to do.

At 9.00 H. E. the naval C-in-C came on board. He left after ten minutes and then the Viceroy, accompanied by Lord Rawlinson (the military C-in-C) and 7 of the Ruling Princes attached to the staff, paid his official call. The Ruling Princes were dressed in their full state clothes and looked magnificent …

When this was all over the official procession started. This was done on a magnificent scale (rather too magnificent to be to David's liking, I fear) … The reception he got was really rather wonderful considering that Mr Mahatma Gandhi had arrived at 7 o'clock this morning and was putting all his forces in the field to boycott David.

Louis Mountbatten

Wednesday, 7 December 1921

The amazing skill with which Lloyd George has carried through the negotiations with his own Cabinet and with Sinn Fein has revolutionised the political situation. Whether or not it be true, few enlightened persons, even among the Liberals and Labour men, believe that any other man could have got this peace by understanding; no other leader could have whipped the Tories to heel and compelled them to recognise the inevitability of Irish independence.

Beatrice Webb

Tuesday, 7 February 1922

A question of conscience has been agitating my mind these days. I read those gruesome accounts of the Russian famine and wonder whether we are not brutes in failing to give all our available income, over and above the requirements for our own work, to the Russian Famine Fund? … The always present doubt whether, by saving a Chinese or Russian child from dying this year, you will prevent it dying next year, together with the larger question of whether those races are desirable inhabitants, compared to other races, paralyses the charitable impulse. Have we not English children dying from lack of milk? Obviously one would not spend one's available income in saving a Central African negro from starving or dying from disease; I am not certain that I would deny myself to save a Frenchman.

Beatrice Webb

Wednesday, 12 April 1922

Japan

On looking out of the bathroom scuttle at 6.45 a.m. I was able to catch my first glimpse of the famous Fujiyama.

I came on deck in time to see the Japanese First Fleet fire their 21-gun salute. Next to our own service I have never seen such fine ships; any one of them could have taken us on, on equal terms … I received the impression that here was a power to be reckoned with in a way in which no one who has not been here and seen for himself can possibly conceive … As we entered the breakwater a flight of aeroplanes flew out to meet us. It is largely owing to General Woodroffe's efforts, when he was last out here, that our R.A.F. are teaching the Naval Air Service here, and most of our officers in the mission are ex-R.N.A.S. men … Our own people say that the Japanese do not make good pilots.

Louis Mountbatten

Wednesday, 10 May 1922

It was still quite cool today. I think we are all sorry to be leaving such an interesting and picturesque place as Japan, but there can be no doubt about everyone's joy at the prospect of returning home, especially mine! The return voyage is expected to last exactly six weeks.