

## Splendid Isolation? Britain, the Balance of Power and the Origins of the First World War

**Review Number:**

198

**Publish date:**

Tuesday, 1 May, 2001

**Author:**

John Charmley

**ISBN:**

340657901X

**Date of Publication:**

1999

**Pages:**

525pp.

**Publisher:**

Hodder and Stoughton

**Place of Publication:**

London

**Reviewer:**

Thomas Otte

John Charmley is, of course, no stranger to controversy.... How tempting it would be to begin a review of his latest book in this vein. Indeed, one suspects that Professor Charmley must be only too aware that his own reputation as a trenchant Conservative (with a very capital C) controversialist all too often overshadows the substance of his arguments. Unsurprisingly, then, most reviewers have focused on the final third of *Splendid Isolation?*, in which Charmley deals with the fateful decision of the Asquith Cabinet to join the ensuing war on the continent in August 1914. Certainly to this reviewer's mind, this is the most problematical aspect of the book. Nevertheless, this foreshortening of the perspective is somewhat unfortunate, for *Splendid Isolation?* is a book of some considerable scholarly erudition and merit, and has more to offer than a revisionist take on '1914'.

Having said that, this is not an easy book to review. First of all, its title is slightly misleading. This is not primarily a history of British foreign policy from Disraeli's second administration to the outbreak of the Great War. Charmley's chief interest is rather in what he calls a Conservative, or 'Country Party', foreign policy tradition. Secondly, especially in the first part of the book, he deals less with the actual course of British diplomacy than with the politics of British foreign policy, that is the influence of diverse groups and individuals within the Cabinet on policy-making. It is here, in its 'high politics' approach, that the book's real strength lies. Broadly speaking, the book falls into three parts, the first of which deals with the problems of British foreign policy under the auspices of the awkward Disraeli-Derby tandem. This is followed by a survey of Lord Salisbury's long and unruffled ascendancy over Britain's foreign relations, and its sequel under Lord Lansdowne. As almost a kind of anti-dote, the final part of the book is devoted to what Charmley sees as Edward Grey's gratuitous over-committing of this country to France and Russia, and his subsequent blundering into war.

At first glance, *Splendid Isolation?* may strike the reader as curiously old-fashioned. In parts, it is almost Macaulay-esque in its partisanship (- though, of course, Professor Charmley sends his shock troops into battle under the banner of a quite different political colour). John Charmley has his heroes and villains, and he presents his tale with great verve and punch. And yet, it is not quite as old-fashioned as it might appear. The history of Britain's foreign relations in *Splendid Isolation?* is not of the 'what-one-clerk-said-to-another' variety, and this is not just because clerks do not feature very prominently in this book - in sharp contrast to the Tapers and Tadpoles of the Tory party. In its first part, John Charmley offers a shrewd analysis of the developing dynamics within the Disraeli Cabinet, especially the Earl of Derby's attempts to rein in Disraeli's forays into foreign policy, though he perhaps underestimates the importance of the 'secret committee' formed by Disraeli, Salisbury and Cairns, the Lord Chancellor, in late 1877 to by-pass Derby. Sadly, however, we shall probably have to bid farewell to the myth of Lady Derby's romantic attachment to Russia's ambassador Count Pyotr Shuvalov as the main source through which St. Petersburg learnt about policy debates in Downing Street. Sir Stafford Northcote, whose historical reputation never really recovered from his mauling by Randolph Churchill and other Tory back-benchers in the 1880's, emerges as the crucial ball-bearing that kept together the disparate groups in the Cabinet; and Lord Salisbury appears a little bit more scheming and ambitious than his biographers have been prepared to concede. Moreover, by emphasizing the importance of foreign policy traditions, Charmley has identified an important, though perhaps somewhat unduly neglected aspect of international history. To some extent, indeed, he seeks to do for 'authentic' conservatism what A.J.P. Taylor did for the dissenting tradition in his *Trouble Makers*. Following in the footsteps of John Vincent, Charmley particularly seeks to vindicate Derby's policy. He argues convincingly that Derby's passive attitude during the Great Eastern Crisis of 1875-8 was not so much a reflection of his flabby and phlegmatic personality, as has often been argued (- and which he undoubtedly had); but that he was shaped by the core beliefs of the insular 'Country Party' tradition in which he was so firmly rooted. According to Charmley this tradition 'had been ill-disposed towards too great an intervention in European affairs and had tried to avoid expensive commitments abroad' (p.23). This was not merely a question of values but also of self-interest, as Charmley rightly points out, for the expenses of war would have to be borne by the squires and the large landowners (of whom, it ought to be noted, the Lancashire magnate Derby was one, and by no means the least significant) (p.114). All of this makes good sense, and it opens up avenues for further research. Yet, it is unfortunate that Charmley confines himself to a few en passant remarks on this subject. This is perhaps a slightly unfair criticism because it is essentially a request for more, in what is already a weighty tome of some 400-odd pages of text and another 100 pages of footnotes. Nevertheless, the roots and principal tenets of this Conservative tradition are not as clearly worked out as one would have wished. Reference is made to the Tories' seventeenth century 'Country Party' roots, though the real influences are probably to be found in Canning or Aberdeen (p.23). Indeed, one is left wondering whether this 'tradition' was not perhaps more a reaction against the huge financial burden imposed on the country by the Great War against revolutionary and Napoleonic France. Also, given the interaction between economic self-interests of the land-owning aristocracy and its foreign policy preferences one would have wished for Professor Charmley to pursue this topic a little further.

If Derby is the unlikely hero, then Disraeli is clearly the villain of the piece. Although he pays respect to Disraeli's political courage, the latter emerges as the sort of exotic adventurer his contemporary critics held him to be. For Charmley, Disraeli was a Palmerstonian without Pam's moral concerns. Indeed, he contends that the combination of Disraeli's populist instincts, geopolitical awareness, and his cynical irresponsibility drove the country to the brink of war with Russia. It may have become unfashionable to defend Disraeli, but one wonders whether his many detractors on the Conservative right have not perhaps been taken in by his theatrical bombast and seemingly blasé cynicism. If he played to the gallery at home, he did so because he had understood better than Derby that public opinion could no longer be ignored in the conduct of foreign affairs. As his successor as Conservative leader, Lord Salisbury, noted many years later, success in foreign policy depended on 'the swing of the pendulum at home.'<sup>(1)</sup> It was perhaps the most important lesson he learnt from Disraeli. Moreover, the risks Disraeli was prepared to take were calculated ones. Russia, still not recovered from the Crimean War over twenty years previously, was in no state to wage war; her alliance with the two other Eastern monarchies, Germany and Austria-Hungary, was built on flimsy foundations; and the fact that Disraeli kept open the diplomatic channels to the other great powers ensured that the British government could exert pressure by playing on the differences between the other powers, without having to resort to military force. It was a conjuring trick, but it was effective. John Charmley rightly points out that, in terms of Britain's international standing, the achievements of the Disraeli-Salisbury duo at the Berlin Congress in July 1878 did not last long. But then it is, perhaps, illusory to assume that any kind of permanence can be achieved in international politics. Indeed, thoughtful, intelligent and convincing as his analysis of the high politics dimension of foreign policy is, Charmley's book is hampered by what strike me as two blindspots. First, the exclusive focus on political actors comes at the price of neglecting the role played by the Foreign Office and Britain's diplomats abroad. This is not to advocate old-fashioned 'what-one-clerk-said-to-another'-ism. But leaving the clerks out altogether means that the reader does not get a sense of Derby or any of his successors as operators within the Whitehall machinery. It also means that the reader remains unaware of the extent to which, for example, Disraeli relied on Lord Tenterden, the permanent under-secretary of the FO, for advice, or later Salisbury let himself be guided by the ambassador at Constantinople, Sir William White, during the Bulgarian crisis of 1885 (when Salisbury performed what appeared to be a *volte face*). A notable exception, though, is John Charmley's accurate emphasis on the influence Sir Thomas Sanderson exercised as PUS between 1894 and 1906. Secondly, by relying on thumbnail sketches of foreign leaders such as Bismarck, Andrassy or Gorchakov, deftly executed and peppered with witty aperçus though they are, John Charmley does not convey fully the dynamics of international diplomacy, the background influences shaping the policies of the other great powers, and Britain's interactions with them. Now, *Splendid Isolation?* is, of course, a book about British foreign policy. But Charmley's approach has the unfortunate consequence of making international politics appear as some sort of unwelcome intrusion of foreign problems into the orderly course of British affairs. Thus, for example, Bismarck's approach to Britain in 1879 remains mysterious because Austria's desire for close cooperation with Britain in addition to the contemplated dual alliance with Germany is not explained properly.<sup>(2)</sup>

After the long and detailed examination of the Disraeli period, the Gladstone-Granville stewardship of Britain's external relations between 1880 and 1885 is dealt with in one-and-a-half chapters (- the Rosebery-Kimberley interlude of 1892-5 fares even worse, crammed into two brief paragraphs). This underlines Charmley's overall concern with the Conservative tradition in foreign policy, but it does less than justice to the Liberals' two spells in government. Charmley is undoubtedly right to be critical of Gladstone's idealistic notions about a renewed Concert of Europe and of his 'invertebrate dithering' during the Egyptian crisis in 1882 (p.185). But at no stage does his analysis here reach the level of sophistication and insight displayed in the earlier part of the book. By contrast, he is on much firmer ground with Lord Salisbury who virtually dominated British foreign policy from 1885 to 1902. Charmley very neatly and persuasively outlines Salisbury's approach to foreign policy. His Salisbury is very much a recognizable historical figure, flexible, patient and eschewing as much as possible European entanglements and commitments; someone who had more in common with Derby than is often thought, but who adapted Conservative foreign policy to the changed international circumstances, not least because he accepted the burdens of Empire. Charmley very rightly stresses the fact that the term 'isolationism' does not satisfactorily capture the nuances and the

subtlety of Salisbury's diplomacy. It would be difficult to fault John Charmley's scholarship and his grasp of the Salisbury period, though occasionally it seems that he overestimates the strength of Salisbury's position in international diplomacy. The crucial difference between him and Derby was that Salisbury accepted that British interests could only be secured on the marketplace of European politics, and that meant treating with the continental powers. True, Bismarck met his diplomatic match in Salisbury, as Charmley demonstrates very well in the context of events in 1886-7 (p.219). But this should not be construed into an assumption of Salisbury's strength. Salisbury needed Bismarck, and indeed was forced into making barely palatable concessions in Zanzibar in return. Similarly, Charmley's account of the genesis of the Mediterranean agreements with Italy and Austria-Hungary in 1887 is very thorough and persuasive. But he never comes to grips with the background to the agreements, the ongoing 'duel' for control over each other between Bismarck and Salisbury, two players whose respective international position was weakening. It is, therefore, regrettable that Charmley does not properly explore Bismarck's 1889 alliance offer or the Anglo-German colonial agreement respecting Zanzibar of the following year. On the whole, Charmley seems less sure-footed when dealing with the Unionist Cabinet of 1895-1902. It is rather doubtful that Chamberlain was Salisbury's main antagonist already at the formation of the new government in 1895 when most contemporary sources still indicate the reverse.<sup>(3)</sup> Whereas Charmley displays considerable forensic skill in disentangling the skeins that constituted the politics of foreign policy in the late 1870's, he does not really fully grasp the extent to which Lord Salisbury's last Cabinet grew increasingly impatient with his conduct of foreign policy, and the extent to which Chamberlain was later able to manipulate this growing sense of frustration. A case in point is Charmley's reconstruction of the Cabinet discussions at the height of the Far Eastern crisis in February and March 1898, which he rightly identifies as crucial. His contention that Salisbury was opposed to Britain following the Russia and Germany by acquiring territory in China; that Chamberlain was in favour; and that Curzon, Salisbury's parliamentary under-secretary, opposed the premier, is not borne out by the extant archival evidence. Ironically the reverse was the case: Chamberlain opposed the lease of the Wei-hai-Wei naval base, whereas Salisbury and Curzon favoured it.<sup>(4)</sup>

But this is very much a momentary lapse. Charmley very briskly and accurately summarizes Chamberlain's role in the abortive Anglo-German alliance talks in 1898 and again in 1901. The other great merit of this book, in addition to his re-examination of Derby's diplomacy, is his treatment of Lansdowne's unduly neglected foreign-secretaryship. Charmley rightly stresses the continuity between Salisbury and his successor at the FO (- though he does perhaps underestimate the extent to which Lansdowne was 'his own man'). Lansdowne's foreign policy was not about alliances per se, but about reducing the burden of Britain's imperial commitments. Ironically, as Charmley points out, the Anglo-Japanese alliance of 1902 provided 'a Salisburian ... answer to the problem of how best to safeguard British interests in the Far East', even though Salisbury himself opposed this combination (p.295). Similarly, he rightly stresses the nature of the entente with France as limiting imperial over-stretch, as well as the link between this agreement and a possible agreement with Russia which Lansdowne, Balfour or Cromer had hoped for. His treatment of Lansdowne's deft diplomacy during the first Moroccan crisis of 1905, giving only vague assurances to France whilst ensuring that France and Germany would not come to a deal at the expense of British interests, is particularly convincing.

In the third and final part of *Splendid Isolation?* Charmley turns to Sir Edward Grey's diplomacy which, he argues, committed Britain ever more closely to France and Russia against Germany as a power with 'Napoleonic' aspirations. The Grey who emerges from these pages was inflexibly wedded to the idea of maintaining in the long term what had originally been conceived of as a temporary diplomatic instrument, the entente with France (p.339). In Charmley's reading, Grey was also inflexible in his dealings with Germany and plainly wrong-headed in his regarding the Austro-German Dual Alliance as quasi-monolithic (p.354). He rashly committed this country to intervening on the side of France in the event of a continental war. Grey thus occupies a place in Charmley's rogues' gallery alongside Disraeli and Winston Churchill (pp.400-1).<sup>(5)</sup> All three burdened Britain with continental commitments in Europe, and made her, in the words of a more recent Foreign Secretary, 'punch above her weight'. In doing so, Charmley argues, they helped to bring about the decline of this country in the twentieth century. The decision for war in 1914 was, then, the most fatal one in a series of political blunders from the late 1870s to 1939.

These are bold claims. They echo some of the arguments advanced recently by Niall Ferguson, though thankfully in this thoroughly researched and intelligently argued book the reader is spared the inanities to which Ferguson treated his readers.<sup>(6)</sup> Nevertheless there are a number of problems, partly conceptual and partly interpretative. The underlying thesis of Charmley's book queries the appropriateness of the 'continental commitment' as Britain's true strategy (p.2). In so doing, Charmley takes on a whole phalanx of historians, among them Michael Howard and Paul Kennedy, who argued that the best means of protecting Britain's imperial interests was to prevent any one power from dominating the continent of Europe.<sup>(7)</sup> To some extent Charmley is, of course, quite right: the principal concern with European diplomacy, and Anglo-German relations more especially, has led to the neglect by historians of the geostrategic periphery in great power politics. Given that Britain's imperial interests lay in the periphery, this neglect is deplorable. However, Charmley himself focuses almost entirely on Britain's European involvement, without elucidating the interaction between developments in the periphery and the (European) centre of international politics. Thus, to my mind, *Splendid Isolation?* fails to make sufficiently clear how and why successive Foreign Secretaries, including Salisbury and Lansdowne, thought it imperative to safeguard Britain's imperial interests through limited engagements with other great powers.

This leads me to his treatment of Grey. John Charmley charges him with rashly tying Britain to France and, though to a lesser extent, Russia. He praises Lansdowne for refusing to support France in during the early stages of the Moroccan crisis in 1905, and blames Grey for indulging in casuistry in his dealings with the French during the final phase of the crisis (pp.322 and 336). Essentially, though, both men were pursuing the same objective, viz. to prevent the French from caving in to German pressure and come to a separate agreement with Berlin, possibly at the expense of Britain. Did Grey, then, pay more attention to the spirit of the entente than its details, as Lansdowne did (p.332)? Perhaps, so. More significantly, however, the international scene had changed fundamentally. Russia's defeat in the Far East in 1905 had also, at least temporarily, shifted the European balance of power in Germany's favour. More was therefore required to encourage France to remain firm, though the assurances given to Cambon were still too vague for the Quai d'Orsay's liking. One would have liked to read more about John Charmley's assessment of German diplomacy during the crisis, including also the discussions about the possibility of a preventive war against France. This touches upon a more fundamental problem concerning Professor Charmley's reading of German policy and strategy. He is right to point that 'the skies had not fallen in and civilization had not ended' following France's defeat in the war of 1870 in which Britain remained neutral (p.2). Perhaps the skies would not have fallen in 1914 either, had Britain remained aloof from the war on the continent. But the skies would have been dark with thunder-clouds. The Kaiser's Germany of 1914 was not the same any more as the altogether more moderately ambitious Prussia of Bismarck in the late 1860's. Germany had a large navy which was clearly poised against Britain; she had colonial aspirations; government-orchestrated nationalism was rife in Germany; she was increasingly unpredictable, and to no small degree the cause of the pre-1914 'l'inquiétude de l'Europe'.<sup>(8)</sup> On the whole, Charmley tends to underestimate the aggressive nature of German policy in the years before 1914, which even the critics of Fritz Fischer now concede.<sup>(9)</sup>

*Splendid Isolation?* is a thoroughly researched, intelligently argued and very well written book, that is a pleasure to read. In it John Charmley has offered a series of thought-provoking and useful re-interpretations especially of the Derby and Lansdowne periods; and it is to be hoped that this book will contribute to a revival of interest in nineteenth century international history. But his critique of the fateful decision for war in 1914 seems overdrawn, and is ultimately focusing on the wrong question. It was not the decision to intervene in the war that caused Britain's problems in the later twentieth century, but the inept and wasteful military leadership during the Great War. His scolding of Liberal statesmen is good knock-about stuff, but ultimately detracts from the substance of his argument. Too often one wonders whether John Charmley is not too much influenced by current debates about the future direction of this country vis-à-vis EU-rope, and about current woes of contemporary conservatism.

## Notes

1. E de Groot, 'Great Britain and Germany in Zanzibar: Consul Holmwood's Papers, 1885-7', in *Journal of Modern History*, vol.xxv, no.2 (1953), pp.135-6.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. P. Kluge, 'Bismarck and Salisbury: Ein diplomatisches Duell', in *Historische Zeitschrift*, vol.clxxv, no.2 (1953), pp.285-306.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Cf. Lady F. Balfour, *Ne Obliviscaris: Dinna Forget* (2 vols., London: Hodder and Stoughton, s.a.), vol.ii, pp.270-1.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. T.G. Otte, 'Great Britain, Germany and the Far-Eastern Crisis of 1897-8' in *English Historical Review*, vol.cx, no.439 (1995), pp. 1157-79.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Cf. J. Charmley, *Churchill: The End of Glory* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1993).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. N. Ferguson, *The Pity of War* (London: Allen Lane, 1999).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. M. Howard, *The Continental Commitment* (London: Penguin, 1974); P.M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (London: Allen Lane, 1976).[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. P. Renouvin, *La Crise Européenne et la Première Guerre Mondiale* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1962), p.183.[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. K. Hildebrand, *Das verangene Reich: Deutsche Aussenpolitik von Bismark bis Hitler* (Stuttgart: DVA, 1995).[Back to \(9\)](#)

### Other reviews:

[2]

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/198#comment-0>

### Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/1197>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>