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Lloyd George and the Lost Peace: From Versailles to Hitler 1919-1940

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A. J. Sylvester, David Lloyd George's private secretary from 1921 until 1945, and who therefore should have had a better opportunity than most to reach a judgement, was, like most historians who have tried to come to terms with the Welshman's energetic and enigmatic character, baffled by it. In the space of a week he was torn between his view of Lloyd George as 'a very wonderful man' and the less flattering thought that 'I am so contemptuous of him I have hardly any patience'. (p107) Professor Lentin's collection of essays concentrates mainly on the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, but there are two later chapters investigating Lloyd George's visit to Hitler in 1936 and his reactions to the fall of Poland in the early days of the Second World War. The study illustrates well why Lloyd George caused, and continues to cause, such confusion.

With his characteristic panache and eye for the telling quotation Lentin, in 'Lloyd George at the Paris Peace Conference', surveys a number of episodes which demonstrate Lloyd George's perception, instinctive grasp of critical issues and essentially liberal philosophy and yet also reveal his lack of scruple and willingness to deceive. His record on national self-determination was generally, though not universally, good and he fought hard, particularly over the Polish frontiers, to include as few Germans as possible in the new Poland. His

admirers, most notably Professor Kenneth Morgan, argue that he was a force for moderation in Paris and that the settlement would have been worse but for his influence. There is indeed much to admire in the vision and frankness of the Fontainebleau memorandum of March 1919 and Lloyd George did wish to see a stable and prosperous Europe. Yet as Lentin neatly puts it, 'The idealism of the Fontainebleau Memorandum, calling for reconciliation in a Europe of sovereign national states, attracted liberals; at the same time it was wholly in accord with British interest in a balance of power'. (p21) This he would see as typical of one who 'believed firmly in Britain and its empire as a force for order and civilisation in the world, [who] at all times placed its interests first, and fought, without stint and sometimes without scruple, to make those interests prevail'. (pxii)

Yet at the same time he left his fellow negotiators with the impression that he was slippery, unstable and lacking clear aims and objectives - as one despairing American diplomat complained - 'I wish Mr Lloyd George could tell us just what he finally wants'. (p20) Perhaps it did not matter, Lloyd George enjoyed himself in Paris, leaving one with the feeling that he relished negotiation for its own sake almost as much as the satisfaction in bringing together positions and policies that were apparently irreconcilable. To achieve this his methods were often mendacious or, more charitably, less than frank.

He was, for example, prepared to dazzle the French premier, Georges Clemenceau, with his promise of a Channel tunnel to bring British troops to France more swiftly in any future confrontation with Germany. Yet he knew that his careful last-minute emendation of the text of the Anglo-French treaty of guarantee on 27 June 1919 on the eve of its signature would mean that there could be no possibility of Britain alone bearing the burden and only an outside chance of any obligation at all. Only if the Americans ratified their parallel commitment would Britain's guarantee become operative, and, if the Americans did pledge themselves to the defence of France, then the likelihood of any future German assault would be hugely reduced. Nor (it might be added) was his commitment to building the tunnel as firm as his statement suggested. 'Heads I win, tails you lose' was always Lloyd George's watchword and Lentin's chapter on 'The Treaty that Never Was: Lloyd George and the French Connection' offers an excellent example of the spin of a Lloyd George coin. Yet there was a cost because the French did not forget this confirmation of their distrust of perfidious Albion (even if it should have been perfidious Pays Galles.)

In what is the most important and perceptive chapter of this impressive collection, 'Reparations and Reputations: Lloyd George and Lord Cunliffe', Lentin analyses the relationship between Lloyd George and Lord Cunliffe, one half of the 'Heavenly Twins'. Together with his 'sibling' Lord Sumner, the prime minister cast as the pair as the villains of the reparations settlement in his inaptly entitled memoirs of the conference 'The Truth about the Peace Treaties' and his verdict endorsed the views of earlier impressive witnesses such as Harold Nicolson and John Maynard Keynes. The implication was that Cunliffe and Sumner stood between his preferred option of a possible reparations settlement rather than an impressive but impossible German bill. This view has persuaded some historians (including Lentin himself in earlier writings) that there was a real difference of approach. Yet, as Lentin now shows with great clarity, the reality was very different. It was much more that Cunliffe mirrored Lloyd George's belief that Germany did indeed deserve to pay, and much less that he represented an inconvenient barrier to the reduction of Germany's account that many of the prime minister's colleagues pressed him to negotiate in June 1919. Lentin argues that Lloyd George's 'curious reluctance' to revise the reparations clauses, noted by Robert Cecil at the time, was really evidence of a longer-term consistency on the matter. Indeed he believes Lloyd George was already intentionally acting insincerely when he agreed to the 5 November 1918 Lansing Note which specifically ruled out the possibility of an indemnity. 'He was never', Lentin suggests, 'in thrall to the Twins: they were the obedient agents of his bidding.' (p39) And Lloyd George did not show much gratitude, as Cunliffe complained to Lord Riddell, the press magnate, 'You are ordered here and ordered there, do this and do that. But no-one ever says "Good dog!"' (p45)

Lentin returns to the theme he first explored in his 1984 book *Lloyd George, Woodrow Wilson and the Guilt of Germany* in 'The Worm in the Bud: "Appeasement" at the Peace Conference'. Here he charts the growing body of disapproval within the British delegation at the direction the conference was taking and of the implications of its decisions. These doubts about the vindictive nature of the treaty were shared by some

American experts, though many of the French feared that the treaty was insufficiently harsh. Some of the British delegation became increasingly sympathetic to the Germans, and many became increasingly antipathetic to their French allies - an interesting commentary on the fate of victorious alliances. James Headlam-Morley, drafted to Paris to act as a bridge between the Foreign Office, of which he was a temporary member, and Lloyd George's entourage, believed that the treaty had not sufficiently taken account of the changes within Germany and thought that it did not offer enough support and encouragement to the new Weimar regime. Jan Christian Smuts, the South African statesman and former Boer commander who had a great influence on Lloyd George, was scathing about the settlement, fearing that it carried the germ of future, and far worse, conflicts. The British Treasury official, John Maynard Keynes, quit the conference in June 1919 and within six months had published *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*, which gave many Anglo-Saxons a bad conscience about the treaty. There was a striking demonstration of British domestic and imperial unease when the Cabinet and Empire delegation met in Paris in June 1919 to review the draft settlement. They empowered Lloyd George to seek substantial revisions of that draft and, even when he did not succeed (or indeed, in terms of reparations, did not try) they did not see the set-back as final. Lentin argues that 'many, perhaps most, in Lloyd George's delegation' did not accept the treaty 'in more than a formal sense.' (p73). Thus there was, from the start, amongst much of the British elite the conviction that the treaty should be revised in Germany's favour but whether 'Balliol and appeasement' (two-thirds of the delegation staff were Balliol men (p85)) was quite the same thing as the later 'All Souls and appeasement' may be doubted.

The final two chapters skip the best part of a generation and arrive in the mid- and late-1930s. Lloyd George's visit to Hitler at the Berghof in 1936 was condemned by Churchill as a monumental misjudgement, the Welshman's intuitive grasp had failed him. Yet Lentin asks, 'Who fooled whom in this Alpine encounter?' (p99) and he suggests that the two men shared many characteristics and attributes of showmanship and statecraft. He could have added that both were consummate liars but there was always the saving grace that, despite Lloyd George's public praise for Hitler's achievements, he never approved his methods - political and religious persecution and concentration camps were all 'a terrible thing to an old Liberal like myself'. (p103) Was there anything more to it than a mutual admiration session? Hitler in 1942 suggested that, had Lloyd George had the power, there might have been an Anglo-German understanding in 1936, and Frances Stevenson, Lloyd George's secretary, mistress and second wife, agreed. Lloyd George himself had no doubt and Lentin believes 'that Lloyd George could have saved the peace' (pxiii) but the questions of upon what terms such an agreement could have been reached and what its implications might have been do not permit easy, nor, it must be said, very optimistic answers. Given Hitler's insatiable appetite for conquest it seems unlikely that there could have been lasting peace between the sort of Britain in which, Lentin argues, Lloyd George believed and wished to safeguard, and the Nazi regime.

There was no agreement, and Lentin's final chapter ('"A Conference Now": Lloyd George, Chamberlain and Churchill, 1939-40') reviews the reactions of Lloyd George to the outbreak of war, the fall of Poland and the political situation within Britain during the 'phoney war.' It was his behaviour in this period that drove Sylvester to believe that Lloyd George was a defeatist and made him despair for his master's career and reputation. From outside the government (into which many had expected the energetic 76-year-old to be called) Lloyd George sniffed at the possibilities of a negotiated peace in the wake of Poland's collapse. He had already published an article in the *Sunday Express* on 24 September 1939 criticising the Polish regime and, of course, he had asked in Paris in 1919, if Britain was prepared to 'die for Danzig'? In the House of Commons after the Polish surrender of 3 October he had hinted, in a speech which conveyed an impression far beyond the words he used, at the possibility of a conference with Germany. (pp113-4) Now he toyed with the idea of a dramatic gesture calling for a peace conference but, in the end, he played to all sides in his constituency speech on 21 October. As Lentin reminds us, the myth of an absolutely determined and resolute Britain in 1939-1940 was, at least in part, just that, a myth, and there were many who believed that reason and reality called for a less heroic stance. (pp119-20)

Such a policy might also bring him back to power, but he would have no truck with any government that included Neville Chamberlain. Without Chamberlain, however, there could be no guarantee of Conservative

support and any government would need that backing - the revisitation of Lloyd George's uncomfortable political situation in 1919. Churchill's first offer of a post in May 1940 foundered on the necessity for Chamberlain's approval, his second in June on Lloyd George's refusal to serve with Chamberlain - 'I won't go in with Neville.' (p126) Lentin considers that the offers may have been made because Churchill 'did after all envisage an alternative to total victory other than total defeat.' Lloyd George might be able to do what Churchill would never do, negotiate with 'That Man'. (p128) As it was, events saved Lloyd George from any danger of becoming Britain's Petain, but Lentin suggests that he would not have been averse to emerging from the ruins to seek a settlement had Britain fallen.

Professor Lentin writes with verve and engagement and, although he does not hide Lloyd George's faults, he has obvious admiration for the jovial figure 'full of a baffling fascination and disquiet' captured in William Orpen's brilliant peace conference portrait. This excellent collection of insightful, entertaining and provocative essays may not solve the enigma of Lloyd George - as Lord Birkenhead remarked in 1924 'In Mr Lloyd George there are always so many facets that a new study at a fresh angle inevitably and always suggests a new conclusion' (px) - but the reader is given plenty of information to guide a quest for the elusive Welshman.

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