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The Marquess of Londonderry. Aristocracy, Power and Politics in Britain and Ireland

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In a strange coincidence, two books have been published on 'Charlie', the 7th Marquess of Londonderry, in the last two years: Ian Kershaw's *Making Friends with Hitler: Lord Londonderry and Britain's Road to War* (2004) and Neil Fleming's, the subject of this review. It is strange because although Londonderry had pretensions to play a significant role in British, and to some degree Irish, high politics, his contribution to government was second rank and clouded by failure.

The objectives of the books are different and to some degree, complementary. Kershaw brings his mastery of Hitler and German history in the 1930s to a study of Londonderry as an appeaser who, following his dismissal from the National Government in 1935, pursued his goal by personal diplomacy with the Nazi leadership. Fleming, on the other hand, describes and assesses all aspects of his career in order to establish its overall significance and 'to explain his actions' by linking 'the contrasting aspects of his life' (p. 212).

Fleming certainly achieves many of his objectives. Each stage of Londonderry's career is traced in carefully honed prose, making full use of the extensive personal and official records that are available. He was born in 1879 and became heir to the Londonderry estates in counties Down and Durham, the latter containing extensive collieries and being the foundation of the family's longstanding prominence in north-east Conservatism. His parents subsequently saw to it that he would enter politics on the Conservative side, preventing him from becoming a soldier during the Boer War and ensuring his return for Maidstone in 1906. Between then and 1915 when he succeeded his father and went to the Lords, he made a promising, if unspectacular, start as a parliamentarian. He intervened regularly in debate, supporting the Union ? and

establishing himself later as a semi-detached supporter of militant Ulster unionism; and eventually shifted from being a free trader to an advocate of Bonar Law's compromise policy of tariff reform that met with the approval of the Dominions.

During the war, Londonderry was disappointed in his desire to fight at the front, occupying instead a support role, and was one of the Ulster Unionist Council's delegates to the Convention established to find an answer to the Irish question. At this, he pressed privately for a federal solution, but in the end toed the UUC line and supported the case for Ulster's exclusion in a Home Rule solution. Indeed, both Ulster unionists and Conservative leaders praised his record in the Convention ? a factor that together with the support of his cousin, Winston Churchill, led to his appointment in 1919 as the Finance Member and then the Under Secretary of the Air Ministry in the Lloyd George Coalition. In 1921, however, separate ministries of War and Air were established, and Londonderry failed to be appointed Secretary of State despite the fact that he had been responsible for an important Air Navigation Act in 1920 and had broadcast his wish for significant promotion. He therefore accepted an invitation to become Minister of Education in the new Northern Ireland government.

In that role, Londonderry's principal contribution was an Education Act of 1923, founded on the report of a committee that he had established. His aim was secular state education but in this he was frustrated by the refusal of the Roman Catholic leaders to submit themselves to the new Northern Ireland state, and ultimately, by Protestant opposition to the proposed banning of religious instruction. Londonderry was therefore forced to make some concessions to Protestant opinion and by January 1926 had submitted his resignation, arguing that his mining interests in Durham needed his urgent attention. Although frustration with the 'parochialism' (p. 94) of Ulster politics and deteriorating relations with Craig, the prime minister, were probably the principal reason, there was some justification in his claim. Tensions between colliery owners and miners were at breaking point and ruptured a few months later. During the General Strike he castigated the miners' leaders for their left-wing beliefs but was a moderate as far as a settlement was concerned, especially after the Strike had collapsed. A year later, his return to British politics was very modestly rewarded with the chairmanship of a Royal Commission on London Squares and in October 1928 he rose a step up to become 1st Commissioner of Works, an appointment in which Churchill once again had a hand.

Following the collapse of Labour in 1931, Londonderry supported the formation of a National Government and was made Minister for Air shortly after the 1931 election. Fleming makes the point that Londonderry's previous experience and continuing enthusiasm for air travel made him a credible candidate for the post but states that is unclear how far either MacDonald's infatuation with Lady Londonderry or Baldwin's support for him played a role in the decision. What is clear, however, is that the post was the occasion of Londonderry's own hubris and nemesis as a minister. Occupying a post in a Westminster cabinet for the first time, he busied himself with defence and foreign policies, made modest reductions and then increases in the strength of the RAF, hoped for an international agreement on disarmament that would include Germany, and supported aerial bombing as a cost-effective form of colonial 'policing'. He laid other plans ? for example, for the development of civil aviation and the research that led to radar and the Hurricane and Spitfire ? but his world collapsed in 1935. In March he announced increases in the RAF but observers were shocked a few weeks later when Hitler claimed, falsely, that the Luftwaffe was already of equal strength. Londonderry was regarded as a minister who had not done enough, a point the prime minister seemed to endorse when he established a new cabinet committee to oversee defence matters from which the Air Minister was excluded. Londonderry therefore resigned but gave hostage to fortune in his farewell speech by saying that at least he had safeguarded bombers ? a statement that Labour seized on to attack ministers for their warmongering. Baldwin subsequently appointed him Leader of the House of Lords but sacked him after the 1935 election.

Londonderry, however, did not believe his political career had come to an end. Aggrieved by the treatment he had received from Chamberlain and Baldwin and not thinking much of their talents anyway, he set about a round of personal meetings with Ribbentrop, Goring and Hitler in an attempt to further good relations between the two countries. His thinking was that France was to blame for the harsh conditions imposed upon Germany in 1919 and was also responsible for the collapse of the Disarmament Conference. He also

believed that Germany could act as a bulwark against Russian Communist expansion and that if a world war took place, Germany's defeat would make that inevitable. His personal contact with the Nazi leadership ceased after Kristallnacht but this did not stop him continuing to preach the virtues of mutual understanding until the war broke out. It was at that point that he moved from London to Mount Stewart in Co. Down, where he died in 1949.

Fleming's assessments of the various contexts in which the frequent turns in Londonderry's career took place are particularly impressive, displaying a solid command of both British and Ulster politics. Londonderry's membership of the Irish Convention, for example, was fraught with dangers to his career: too close an identification with militant Ulster unionism might destroy his standing with the Conservatives; too strong an advocacy of federalism might do equal damage to his Ulster unionist credentials. Fleming, however, argues convincingly that Londonderry was able to leave the Convention with friends on both sides: with Ulster unionists because he played the role of a 'party lieutenant' as opposed to a chieftain; and with Conservatives such as Balfour, Carson and Law, because he seemed to be a moderating influence in Ulster (pp. 50?2). Another example concerns his being passed over as Secretary of State of the new Ministry of Air in 1921. Fleming argues that this can be explained by three considerations. First, that Londonderry's appointment would have been attacked in the press and elsewhere on the grounds of his being a peer. Second, that Law and other Conservative leaders such as Curzon did not wish to increase the influence of Churchill, Londonderry's cousin. And third, that it would have been unwise to promote such a prominent colliery owner just at the time when the future of the coal industry was a matter of intense 'public scrutiny' (p. 85). Judicious assessments of this kind are also provided on some of the more controversial aspects of his career such as the extent of his role in the UVF after 1912 and how far he owed his appointment as Minister for Air in 1931 to his wife's cultivation of MacDonald. In both cases, Fleming argues that the evidence does not support anything more than modest roles and such is the strength of the archival basis of this book, that these are convincing judgements.

The book also has a fair measure of success in its stated objective of linking the 'contrasting aspects of his life in order to explain his actions', the most notorious of which is his long-lasting belief in the advantages of an accommodation with Nazi Germany. Fleming's portrait of Londonderry is therefore of a politician who sought conciliation between opposing groups, who was prepared to be flexible on some issues, but was outspokenly firm on others. Londonderry therefore sought conciliation on a series of issues over time: between Liberal radicals and Tory die-hards on the issues of House of Lords reform and Home Rule; between the Roman Catholic leaders and Ulster unionist extremists on the issue of education in Northern Ireland; between colliery owners and miners and their trade union representatives during the General Strike; and of course, between Britain and Germany in the 1930s. He was also flexible, a quality that Fleming prefers to describe as pragmatic: on the issue of free trade which he espoused, 1906?12, but then abandoned for tariff reform and imperial preference; and at the Geneva Disarmament Conference, when he supported publicly a government case that he had reservations about in private. Finally, there is no doubt of his 'single-mindedness': in his advocacy for free trade, when it had marginal support in the Tory party; his constant support for the claims of the RAF in its contests with the Treasury and the Foreign Office; and, ultimately, his refusal to abandon the cause of an agreement with Hitler, long after it had become politically ruinous. The conclusion is that that there were some consistent characteristics of his career and these undoubtedly make his 'actions' more understandable.

But Fleming also makes some general points that invite discussion. Throughout the book, referring often to Cannadine's work, he argues that 'the real significance of his political life' lies in its 'overtly aristocratic character at a time when traditional authority was irrevocably in decline' (p. 212). This raises a number of issues. No one doubts that the aristocracy was in decline economically and in general terms, politically, but this begs the question of how far an aristocratic style of politics was in decline in the Tory party that governed Britain for most of Londonderry's career and to which he belonged. Fleming outlines the principal features of his aristocratic status, but given the significance he attaches to it, he might have gone further in his analysis. How did he live at Mount Stewart and Wynyard? How many staff did he have, what were his interests and pursuits outside politics, who were his personal friends in counties Down and Durham? More

particularly, what were his reading habits, was he unusual in conducting politics by speeches, letters and entertaining? And more particularly still, what were his relations with the Carlton, the National Union headquarters, and the London watering holes where, it appears, so much real business was done in Tory circles?

This focus on Londonderry as a politician out of step with the onward 'march' of 'legal-rational authority' (p. 3) also raises questions about the judgement of his success and failure as a politician. Fleming's core argument is that Londonderry's rank led him to neglect seriously the need to respond at crucial moments to public opinion ? either in the country at large or in the Ulster Unionist or Conservative parties. As Minister in the Northern Ireland Government and later as Air Minister, for example, it is argued that 'he disregarded the need to appease public concerns' (p. 141): by ignoring the opinions of Orangemen in the first case, and by refusing to recognise public misgivings about the strength of the RAF in the second. In other words, the assumption here is that the principal goal of successful politicians is being in office and therefore having 'power'; and that when in office, their decision-making has to be influenced by the opinions of their senior colleagues, their party and the electorate. Two questions arise. The first is how many politicians of this period thought in that way? Could it not be argued that there were other views of the purpose of politics: for example, that it was more about service to an ideology or service to the state by being involved in the business of government? The second is how far Londonderry thought of politics in terms of holding 'power'. Given his lineage, it is possible that he regarded 'governing' as something that he should practice; and that to him, 'governing' was not the same as having 'power'. Instead, it may have involved taking a view on the issues of the day at his own time and expense; being prepared to write privately and speak publicly on those issues; if in office, relying on officials to do most of the necessary research and paperwork; and, when necessary, defending their views.

Overall, Fleming's book is one that all students of twentieth-century British and Ulster politics should have on their bookshelves. It provides a comprehensive treatment of Londonderry's career that is based solidly on extensive archival sources. Moving confidently and authoritatively from Westminster to Belfast politics, it assesses the contexts of his career path convincingly and draws out some of the key characteristics of his own decision-making. In these respects, his actions become much more understandable. Further, it has the merit, for this reader at least, of raising questions about how not only his career should be assessed, but that of any right-centre politician and minister in the first thirty years of a mass electorate.

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The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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