

Neville Chamberlain: A Biography

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Author:

Robert Self

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Gábor Bátonyi

On 17 May 1940, in a unique display of vulnerability and anguish, Neville Chamberlain confided to his sisters that his whole world had 'tumbled to bits in a moment' (p. 434). Clearly in shock from his 'tremendous reverse of fortunes' (p. 1), he lamented: 'There is no pleasure in life and no prospect of any' (p. 434). Out of power and awaiting an impending military disaster in France, Chamberlain could no longer maintain his 'grimly pragmatic spirit' (p. 311). Stigmatized as one of 'the authors' of Britain's misfortunes (p. 384), he was in no position to dream of retiring 'with a quiet mind' (p. 344). Yet this melancholic and 'physically broken man' (p. 434) persisted in his stubborn defiance and legendary self-righteousness to the bitter end. He still hoped against hope that, in an instant, a 'widespread demand for peace across all of Europe would find expression'. More bizarrely, he also half expected to 'be called upon once more to assume the mantle of the peacemaker' (p. 394). For all his soul-searching and uncharacteristic self-pity, he remained strangely upbeat about his own historical legacy:

The day may come when my much cursed visit to Munich will be understood. Neither we nor the French were prepared for war. I am not responsible for this lack of preparation...It would be rash to prophesy the verdict of history, but if full access is obtained to all the records it will be seen that I realized from the beginning our military weakness and did my best to postpone if I could not avert the war (p. 435).

As far as the historical reassessment of his pre-war diplomacy is concerned, Chamberlain's prophecy has to some extent been fulfilled. He is now widely credited with the attempt 'to "buy time" for a carefully-staged expansion of rearmament at an economically sustainable pace' (p. 270). Revisionist historians have quashed most of the charges against the 'men of Munich'. And yet the reputation of Neville Chamberlain is still hugely overshadowed by the memory of his ill-fated premiership on the eve of war, in particular the humiliation at Munich and the 'unfortunate promise of "peace for our time"' (p. 349), and of his torrid spell as wartime leader. Indeed, Churchill's alleged prediction that 'poor Neville will come badly out of history' (p. 4) was not far off the mark.

A recent comparative study of twentieth-century British prime ministers confirmed the rating of Chamberlain's political achievements as 'below average' (1). Of course, the historian may be sceptical about the reliability of poll-based 'premiership leagues' (2). In the cutting words of Peter Riddell, the ranking of the performance of presidents and prime ministers is 'the ultimate parlour game for political junkies' (3). In any case, it is a telling detail that Neville Chamberlain came near the bottom of all such academic surveys. It has to be added, however, that this verdict may be taken as relatively benign when set against such notable 'failures' as Eden's premiership. Contrary to popular belief, in none of the academic rankings of British prime ministers was Neville Chamberlain's premiership singled out as the worst. The University of Leeds/MORI survey of 2004, based on the opinions of 258 historians and political scientists, ranked Chamberlain seventeenth out of twenty premiers, ahead of Balfour, Douglas-Home, and Eden. In 2000, the British Politics Group survey of British and American scholars placed him ahead of Bonar Law and Major as well. Arguably, therefore, in contemporary appraisals Chamberlain has become less of a 'profoundly underrated, misjudged and misunderstood figure' (p. 2) than his latest biographer would have us believe. Whilst one may fully accept Robert Self's argument that Chamberlain's historical legacy has been unfairly judged by the debacle of his short premiership, the same could be said about a number of unpopular or unsuccessful heads of government, especially those who fell from grace amidst the turmoil of international crises. Conversely, victorious wartime leaders, irrespective of the length and breadth of their political careers, have always received more than their fair share of popularity and historical interest. Undoubtedly, however, as Theakston and Gill's survey readily conceded, there is a certain amount of distortion and an 'element of circularity' in measuring and comparing the success and failure of prime ministers, with 'more famous or more popular prime ministers commanding more scholarly interest which in turn reinforces their reputation and feeds in to academic evaluations' (4).

This circularity is particularly evident in the persistence of negative stereotypes about Chamberlain and in the general neglect of his achievements in historical writing. Post-revisionist works, such as R. A. C. Parker's 1993 monograph, have come a long way from the moralizing diatribes of the 1950s, only to perpetuate Chamberlain's image problem by using old labels like the 'optimistic appeaser' (5). Although the historical judgement on Chamberlain's policies and personality has undeniably mellowed a great deal over the years, 'a more balanced evaluation of the man and his broader career' is still somewhat hindered by the fact that Chamberlain's name has become 'synonymous with the ambivalent and rapidly changing emotions generated by "Munich" and the disastrous drift into total war' (p. 3). Harold Nicolson's savage denunciation of Chamberlain's policy and public persona in June 1938 still has some faint echoes in the historical literature:

Chamberlain (who has the mind and manner of a clothes-brush) aims only at assuring temporary peace at the price of ultimate defeat. He would like to give Germany all she wants at the moment and cannot see that if we make this surrender we shall be unable to resist other demands. If we assuage the German alligator with fish from other ponds she will wax so fat that she will demand fish from our own ponds. And we shall not by that time be powerful enough to resist... (6)

On balance, the reluctance of historians to engage in a major rehabilitation of Chamberlain or to rethink the

legacy of his entire ministerial career is hardly surprising. The historical assessment of the policy of appeasement is easier to change than the image of an ageing Tory prime minister famed as an 'arrogant meddler' (p. 239) or for being vain, sneering, dull and obstinate. As Donald Watt aptly remarked, it is 'extremely difficult to like Neville Chamberlain' (p. 16). 'Neville's manner freezes people,' observed Chamberlain's own half-brother (p. 9). In the words of Harry Snell, Chamberlain's demeanour 'suggested...that he had been "weaned on a pickle"' (p. 7). Above all, his flippant and venomous description of Labour politicians-'intellectually, with a few exceptions, they are dirt' (p. 115)-provides an important insight into his political make-up. Although Chamberlain supposedly loathed the 'humbug' and 'blind obstructionism' (p. 15) of the adversarial political system, in which ritualized party warfare predominated over good sense, the extent to which he revelled in his hatred of party opponents, or their hatred of him, did little to enhance his wider appeal. More to the point, such militancy against the left was hardly becoming of a social reformer and self-proclaimed friend of the 'less fortunate classes' (p. 133). Undoubtedly, his partisanship also damaged his reputation as a wartime prime minister. Thus, unlike his nemesis Lloyd George or his successor and detractor Churchill, Chamberlain is likely to remain exiled, for some time to come, 'to the margins of popular and historical attention' (p. 2).

Post-revisionist scholars may have reignited the debate about Chamberlain's reputation, but they are accused of only adding to the many distortions by refocusing the debate on the final chapter of Chamberlain's life. As a result, there have been few really sympathetic accounts of Chamberlain's career since Keith Feiling's biography was produced in 1946 at the family's request. Although, in 2001, David Dutton provided a more attractive portrait of Chamberlain the paternalistic reformer, Robert Self's biography is the first attempt to provide a new, complete account in one volume.

In his own bold words, Self set out to fill a 'lacuna in our historical understanding', believing that the case for revisiting the life and achievements of Chamberlain is 'so compelling as to be absolutely overwhelming' (p. viii). This strikes me as an overstatement. Nevertheless, this rather bulky new biography provides full, dispassionate, and balanced coverage both of Chamberlain's long rise to power and of his quick demise. As such, it is likely to become a widely used text in undergraduate courses on interwar British history.

Self is the editor of the four volumes of *The Neville Chamberlain Diary Letters* and, as would be expected, his biography shows a formidable grasp of the primary sources. In view of the controversial nature of the book, it is a bit surprising that the volume contains only a short historiographical discussion at the beginning and a guide to sources at the end, but no bibliography. One can only assume that this omission was caused by space constraints, as the notes and references take up 85 pages. In any case, this is clearly a scholarly work, based on extensive research, and, according to the blurb, on the study of more than 150 archival collections. What makes this book original, however, is not necessarily the use of primary sources.

The structure of the book clearly reflects the author's intention to separate the legacy of Munich and the early war years from the much longer and more fruitful formative period of Chamberlain's political life. Consequently, only Chapters twelve to eighteen (less than half of the text) deal with his premiership. Apart from a brief discussion of the young Chamberlain's family background, modest education, and other formative influences, such as an abortive business venture at 'a Godforsaken backwater of Empire' in the Bahamas (p. 22), the biography provides a blow-by-blow account of his move from municipal to national politics, and of how he turned from a 'frustrated backbencher' (Chapter 4) into a 'rising star' of the Conservative Party (Chapter 5). The discussion of Chamberlain's early ministerial career shows not only his administrative skill and political ambitions, but also his commitment to social reform. He is likened to his father, acting both in local politics and in government like 'a late-Victorian reformer motivated by genuine humanitarian impulses' (p. 105). His role in the Treasury during the Great Depression is identified by the author as 'the most neglected and the most in need of reassessment' (p. 193). According to the biographer, the Tory Chancellor deserves to be considered amongst the founders of a species of 'managed economy' (p. 214) in Britain. Challenging the prevailing view that the national government had no unemployment policy, or that Chamberlain was waiting out the slump with a policy of passivity, Chapter 10 hails the Chancellor's small-scale policy innovations and piecemeal attempts to buttress and 'renovate the system of private enterprise' (p. 218). However, the comparison between the visions of Keynes and Chamberlain is likely to

startle any economic historian.

The story of Chamberlain's involvement in defence preparations and foreign affairs is more familiar to the student of modern history. The author admits the fundamental flaws in Chamberlain's diplomacy, but defends the record of his premiership. As for his wartime role, Chamberlain is credited with introducing a 'new vigour into the home front'. After all, Churchill himself referred to his predecessor, acting briefly as Lord President, as 'the best man he had-head and shoulders over the average man in the administration' (p. 436).

The picture of Chamberlain that emerges from the book is complex, at times recognizable, but always full of ambiguities. He seems 'a curious mixture of qualities and defects' (p. 10), neither the inspired hero, nor the blundering amateur. The reader should be in no doubt where the biographer's sympathies lie. Behind Chamberlain's alienating facade of overweening confidence and pride, the author finds 'a shy personal charm and even some magnetism' (p. 9). In fact, Robert Self comes as close to convincing one of Chamberlain's talent, human touch, and personable qualities as any biographer could possibly manage. All the same, the contradictions and puzzling qualities of an unconventional politician are expertly pursued throughout the text. On his first appointment to the Treasury in August 1923, Chamberlain was visibly apprehensive and 'very frightened'. His knees knocked together when he contemplated speaking to 'City men' (p. 94). Later in the text, in Chapter 9, which deals with his lengthy second term as Chancellor of the Exchequer from November 1931 to May 1937, Chamberlain looks an altogether different person, disparaging Roosevelt's 'New Deal' and haranguing Treasury men on the benefits of a balanced budget and financial orthodoxy. At times, he comes across as cold, unemotional, and unrelenting, an unimaginative but efficient administrator. Yet he is frequently depicted as the very opposite: an affectionate family man, a politician with a conscience, an incisive analyst, a visionary even. At one moment he appears petulant and sulky, at the next he pours scorn on any 'sentimental sob-stuff' (p. 133). According to the author, such conflicting personality traits add up to something called the 'Chamberlain enigma' (p. 10). He has a point. Even so, one can't help feeling that most of the latent inconsistencies and ambiguities of the public persona and the private individual stem from one and the same source. They were fostered and brought to the surface by the dizzying experience of a long, but unusually belated, rise to the top of British politics.

Notes

1. K. Theakston and M. Gill, 'Rating 20th century British prime ministers', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 8 (2006), 195. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Theakston and Gill, 'Rating 20th century British prime ministers', 196. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Theakston and Gill, 'Rating 20th century British prime ministers', 194. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Theakston and Gill, 'Rating 20th century British prime ministers', 201. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. R.A.C. Parker, *Chamberlain and Appeasement: British Policy and the Coming of the Second World War* (New York, 1993), p. 392. [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Monday, June 6, 1938, *Nicolson Diaries*, Vol. 1938, Balliol College Library, Oxford; Sir Harold Nicolson *Diaries and Letters, 1930-1964*, ed. N. Nicolson, Vol 1 (Atheneum, New York, 1980), p. 345. [Back to \(6\)](#)

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