

Joseph Chamberlain: International Statesman, National Leader, Local Icon

Review Number:

1981

Publish date:

Thursday, 1 September, 2016

Editor:

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Chris Upton

ISBN:

9781137528858

Date of Publication:

2016

Price:

£65.00

Pages:

292pp.

Publisher:

Palgrave Macmillan

Publisher url:

<http://www.palgrave.com/fr/book/9781137528841#otherversion=9781349708031>

Place of Publication:

Basingstoke

Reviewer:

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Joseph Chamberlain exercises more interest among historians than any other politician who did not either hold one of the major offices of state or introduce a major legislative reform. He has been the subject of numerous biographies and monographs. His claim on our continuing interest is not so much on his political achievements, which at a national level at least were rather meagre, but as someone who, in the words of Winston Churchill was ‘the most live, sparkling, insurgent compulsive figure in British affairs’, someone who ‘made the weather’. Churchill’s comment is cited in the introduction to this volume by Peter Marsh (p. 1), author of the best recent biography of Chamberlain, who points out that Chamberlain’s championing of social reform, his pioneering work on party organisation, his imperial vision and his record of municipal improvement in his adopted city of Birmingham ‘left currents in the air that continued to circulate in the political atmosphere’ (p. 12).

This volume brings together in printed form various papers presented to a conference at Newman University, Birmingham in 2014 commemorating the centenary of Chamberlain’s death. Its co-editor Ian Cawood has become something of a one-person cottage industry on Chamberlain, publishing an excellent history of the Liberal Unionist party as well as numerous articles in academic journals. This book adds to that already considerable achievement and tackling Chamberlain’s career through a series of essays by different authors is surely a more useful approach than yet another biography. Together the different authors certainly

demonstrate why Chamberlain remains a figure of such fascination even if cumulatively they reinforce rather than revise his reputation as brilliant and visionary yet quarrelsome and divisive.

As outlined in the title, the collection is themed around Chamberlain's international, national and local roles, with three essays covering each of these strands. On the first of these, Professor Thomas Otte demonstrates the centrality of foreign affairs to Chamberlain's career even before his overt imperial phase after he broke with the Liberal party in 1886. Although in many ways he echoed Gladstone's criticism of Disraeli's foreign policy in the 1870s, there were already signs of emerging imperial sentiment, or at least an understanding of the need to assert British power. His response to Disraeli's purchase of Suez Canal shares, dismissed by most Liberals as a flashy gesture, contained an undisguised note of admiration. As a member of Gladstone's government he acquiesced in the withdrawal from the Transvaal after 1881, but over the British invasion of Egypt the following year he ended up as 'almost the greatest jingo' in the cabinet, despite the opposition of most of his fellow radicals to the venture.

Otte points out that it was part of Chamberlain's political style to reject 'sophistries and subtleties'. This explains his later impatience with Salisbury's cautious statecraft, leading to his ill-judged advocacy of an alliance with Germany and of grand but impractical schemes for imperial unity. In the end, Otte concludes that Chamberlain

never quite appreciated that the principal problem in foreign affairs was that they required dealing with foreigners, who, quite properly, considered international problems in the light of their own experiences and interests (p. 40)

Such a judgement receives ample support from the next essay, Jackie Grobler's discussion of Chamberlain's reputation in South Africa. Given the strong perception that as Colonial Secretary Chamberlain bore personal responsibility for the 1899–1902 war, it is unsurprising that this reputation is not high. He was widely perceived as being duplicitous over the Jameson Raid, an illegal incursion into the Transvaal by British South Africa Company police, which took place a few months after Chamberlain became colonial secretary. Although he repudiated it while it was in progress, he then defended Cecil Rhodes in the House of Commons after he was criticised in the Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry into the incident. There remained (and remains) suspicion that Chamberlain had greater prior knowledge of the Raid than he admitted. In the years leading up to the war the confrontational brinkmanship of his diplomacy with the Transvaal led to an increasing conviction in the republic that he could not be trusted. On his famous visit to South Africa after the war, although he claimed to come in a spirit of conciliation, as Grober argues, he 'simply could not (or refused to) develop any form of empathy with the wishes and needs of his former foes'.

In contrast, as Tom Brooking shows, Chamberlain did form a constructive relationship with Richard 'King Dick' Seddon, New Zealand's longest-serving prime minister. Both were to some degree outsiders from the establishment, both political populists and imperialists and they found common cause because Chamberlain was seeking to promote imperial unity while Seddon wanted to enhance the status of New Zealand within the empire. But, although Seddon provided strong support to the British war effort in South Africa, in the longer term their collaboration proved a false dawn for the imperial idea and achieved relatively little other than the accession of the Cook Islands to New Zealand in 1901.

Rather surprisingly, the other example cited in this collection of the positive side of Chamberlain's political relationships is provided by Roland Quinault's boldly revisionist essay on Chamberlain and Gladstone. Historians normally emphasise the dysfunctional nature of their association, as evidenced by the slights and snubs delivered by the Grand Old Man to someone he is supposed to have perceived as a political upstart. The tension between them is widely believed to have contributed to the Home Rule split in 1886, which had devastating consequences for the Liberal party's fortunes over the next 20 years. Quinault, by contrast, accentuates the positive side of their relationship, pointing out for example that Gladstone appointed Chamberlain to the cabinet when he had only been an MP for four years without making him serve an apprenticeship as a junior minister. He calls into question the veracity of Gladstone's often-cited dismissal of Chamberlain's request to be made Colonial Secretary ('Oh, a Secretary of State') pointing out that the source

of this is the unreliable Sir Charles Dilke. He also highlights the mutual regard that they continued to express for one another even after 1886. Yet, while a valuable qualification of the established narrative, such revisionism can only go so far – in the end they started out as colleagues and ended up as opponents.

Chamberlain's quarrelsome side is to the fore again in essays on his relations with two colleagues who did move with him into Liberal Unionism, the radical Leonard Courtney and his Birmingham colleague George Dixon. Both received cavalier treatment at Chamberlain's hands. As Eleanor Tench shows, although Chamberlain and Courtney both initially belonged to the radical wing of the Liberal party, they were very different kinds of radical. While Chamberlain saw a greater role for the state on social questions, Courtney was primarily driven by traditional concerns of ending privilege and suspicion of state power. They fell out initially when Chamberlain as Liberal Unionist leader in the House of Commons scuppered Courtney's chances of becoming Speaker, and more permanently when Courtney opposed the South African war in 1899.

The relationship between Chamberlain and George Dixon, his fellow Birmingham educational reformer, might at first sight appear to be more harmonious, but as James Dixon (Dixon's great-great grandson) highlights here, it was far from untroubled. Dixon understandably resented being forced to stand down as an MP in 1876 to enable Chamberlain's election to the House of Commons, and this was followed two years later by a bitter row over appointments to school governorships in the city and over religious teaching in schools, in which Chamberlain showed a marked lack of sensitivity towards his colleague. Although Dixon, having returned to parliament in 1885, joined Chamberlain in opposing Gladstone's home rule bill, he was clear that this was 'half an accident' and their opinions 'just happened to coincide on this question' (p.170). They fell out again in 1896 over government proposals for educational reform, which appeared to privilege denominational schools. Dixon maintained the traditional radical opposition to church schools, whereas Chamberlain claimed to have changed his mind and vigorously defended the government's position. A further public row was avoided only by the withdrawal of the plans.

The two editors contribute an excellent chapter on Chamberlain's treatment at the hands of Birmingham satirical journals (of which there were a surprisingly large number during this period). They show that for all his domination of the city's politics, little deference was shown by those publications that did not support him politically – and even sometimes by those that did. Chamberlain, with his distinctive orchid and monocle, was to become probably the most widely (certainly the most easily) caricatured politician of his day in the national press. Cawood and Upton show how the inspiration for such portrayals originated with local Birmingham publications.

The two further essays in the collection deal less with Chamberlain directly than with the background context to his political career. Oliver Betts highlights the widespread concern across the political spectrum about the 'Condition of England' question and the need for social reform. He shows therefore that rather than a quixotic crusade, the tariff reform campaign was a rational attempt to address these issues, even if it did not ultimately convince the electorate. Andy Quail discusses nonconformity in Birmingham during the period of Chamberlain's career, showing it as far from a homogenous force and stressing the political divisions among nonconformists arising from the 1886 home rule split and the South African war.

In his conclusion, Ian Cawood considers Chamberlain's reputation and treatment at the hands of historians. He highlights the dilemma for biographers of either treating the various causes Chamberlain espoused as individual episodes or seeking to identify an overarching unity to his career – with Peter Marsh's biography which viewed Chamberlain's career through the prism of his business background rightly being cited as the best. Cawood credits Chamberlain with having put a lot of issues on the political agenda but points out that he was unable to find satisfactory solutions to any of these. His ultimate verdict is to see Chamberlain as the first modern politician – the one who grasped the need for political organisation and a model for those seeking to impose their views on political parties – he cites Thatcherites, Militant and Orange Book Liberal Democrats and had the book been published a little later might also have mentioned Corbynites and Brexiteers. He does not see this as a positive legacy, however, pointing out that it has 'increasingly ... forced frustrated voters outside the political system' (p. 238)

While the cumulative impact of these essays will hardly lead the reader to greater sympathy or admiration for Chamberlain, they reinforce a sense of him as a political force of nature and bring out aspects of his career which are not dealt with in such detail in more general biographical studies. If there is one message this reviewer draws from the collection it is the combination of Chamberlain's restless political energy and the fragility of his political position throughout his career, whether in Birmingham, the Liberal party or the Unionist alliance. His personal drive and understanding of the need for this to be backed up by organisation made him a force that could not be ignored. If Gladstone felt his own skill was about judging when a particular measure was 'ripe' to become a practical political issue, Chamberlain was always looking to force issues that were not ripe, some of which would never become so. In many ways Otte's comment, cited above, about Chamberlain and foreigners could be modified to apply to the rest of his career. He never quite appreciated that politics meant dealing with other politicians, not all of whom shared his perspective on any given issue or were willing to bend to his will. As a result, if he was a politician who made the weather, the weather he made was always stormy.

In a volume such as this there are inevitably omissions (nothing on Chamberlain as founder of a political dynasty or pioneer of political organisation) and also repetitions (Salisbury's comment that he had never come across 'so sensitive a public man' as Chamberlain is quoted in three different chapters). One might also lament that only about half the papers from the original conference have found their way into print here and hope that others may be published in [some other forum](#) [2]. Yet these are at most minor quibbles. This book is an excellent and most welcome addition to the study of Joseph Chamberlain and of British politics in the late-Victorian and Edwardian eras. Sadly, one of the editors, Chris Upton, died while this volume was in preparation and its publication is surely a fitting tribute to his memory.

The co-editor is very grateful to Dr Sharpe for his thorough and balanced review. Sadly, editorial constraints limited the collection from addressing every aspect of Chamberlain's vast career and those areas chosen for inclusion were justified by the range and originality of their approaches to his life. Having to follow as superlative a biography as that of Professor Peter Marsh did also mean that many aspects of Chamberlain's life story needed no further investigation as the editors did not feel they could add anything to what is still one of the finest political biographies in print.

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