



NOTE

A Tragic Tory Leader and His Diaries

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Sir Stafford Northcote, a tory with many liberal instincts, was leader of the Conservative Party in the Commons from 1876 to 1885 (outranking the leader in the Lords after 1881). Subjected to much harsh criticism during this period, his significant achievements over his long political career as a whole have been largely forgotten. His diaries contain a great deal of information about his activities in, and beyond, politics. Most of them exist today only in typescript copies. By a set of curious chances, four of the original diaries came into the possession of a lawyers' clerk. In 2017, they were added to Northcote's surviving papers in the British Library. All four relate to travel, mainly on important public business outside Europe. The final section of this note provides an indication of the interest and significance of these diaries.

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Sir Stafford Northcote, 8th Baronet, FRS (1818–87) of Upton Pyne, near Exeter (a modest estate by Victorian standards, of some 5,700 acres), became tory leader in the Commons in 1876 when Disraeli, then aged 72 years, went to the Lords for a quieter life. Disraeli died in 1881 while the tories were in opposition, to be succeeded by the 3rd marquess of Salisbury ('the great Lord Salisbury', as he was later to be known) as leader in the Lords. From that point Northcote took first place in the affairs of the Conservative Party, in accordance with the convention of the time which provided that, if neither leader had been prime minister, the holder of the post in the Commons had precedence. The formal position of leader of the Conservative Party did not come into being until 1922.

There is a colossal statue of Northcote in the central lobby of the house of commons, seen by hundreds of visitors every day, but it seems to prompt no interest in his career. It is tempting to describe him as a forgotten tory leader. That is undoubtedly true as far as people at large are concerned; like Austen Chamberlain, son of a famous father, who led the party briefly in 1921–2, he has no place in the public memory. He is, however, far from being forgotten by historians of the late 19th century. By them he is frequently recalled. In books on the period he appears as one of the most conspicuous victims ever of the cruel business of party politics.

After Disraeli's death, this extremely able man with long experience of government and the house of commons (he had been an MP since 1855) found himself in political circumstances to which he was completely unsuited. His party looked to him to assail Gladstone's second ministry with unsparing ferocity. That was emphatically not Northcote's style. He knew how to attack political opponents with effective arguments and had won golden opinions from Disraeli, but his tone was always measured and responsible.

Tory back benchers grew restive. Some said that he showed undue respect for Gladstone, whose private secretary he had been for eight years in the 1840s when the future People's William had been the rising hope of the stern unbending tories. The two men shared a passion for the classics (in which both held Oxford firsts) and religion. They had much in common. Northcote managed the most unusual feat of admiring both Gladstone and Disraeli.

Other tory MPs provided the vicious partisanship from which their leader shrank. A small group with reputations to make, stole the headlines with rude speeches about Gladstone and his policies. They called themselves the Fourth Party. Sir Winston Churchill's father, Lord Randolph, a young man in a hurry (he did not expect to live long), was the most zealous and ingenious of them in devising new ways of insulting the government.

Churchill did not stop there. He cheerfully insulted Northcote, too. He conferred a humiliating nickname on him, 'the goat', and harried him mercilessly with an eloquent, mocking tongue. Memoirs of MPs active in the 1880s are full of tales of Churchill's scurrilous wit employed at Northcote's, as well as Gladstone's, expense. Historians of the period have recycled them to lend colour to their narratives. I included a number in my short history of the Primrose League.¹ This organisation, the first to harness mass support for a political party in Britain, was founded to enable Churchill to take his effective brand of irresponsible politics from the Commons' chamber to the country at large. Northcote was eclipsed on the wider public stage as well as at Westminster. Nevertheless, as the senior of the two party leaders, he felt bound to accept appointment as one of the League's first two Grand Masters, along with Salisbury, in 1883.

Northcote was not ousted from the Commons' leadership while the tories remained in opposition, but the universal belief in 1881 that, as the senior of the two tory leaders, he would be the next Conservative prime minister, vanished. After Disraeli's death, Queen Victoria led him to expect that she would send for him when the moment arrived,² but when it finally came, in June 1885, the premiership was immediately entrusted to Lord Salisbury whose stock had risen sharply since 1881, thanks to his combative political style and Churchill's support.

Northcote felt the humiliation acutely, but bore it bravely in public. As happens occasionally, the historic post of first lord of the treasury was split from the premiership and given to him. He was in office but without power. To underline the point, he was kicked upstairs (the phrase seems to have been invented for him) as earl of Iddesleigh.

An unkindly providence proved remorseless. In July 1886 he was given a real job as foreign secretary, but failed to satisfy Salisbury (himself one of the greatest of all foreign

¹Alistair Cooke, *A Gift from the Churchills: The Primrose League, 1883–2004* (2010).

²The queen 'constantly' told her private secretary, Sir Henry Ponsonby, 'with great heat that she intended to have her trusted friend, Sir Stafford Northcote, for the leader' of the next Conservative government: Elizabeth Longford, *Victoria RI* (1964), 438.

secretaries) and paid the price after only a few months in January 1887. It was the final humiliation. He called at Number 10 to take leave of Salisbury and suffered a fatal heart attack in the prime minister's presence. It seemed to shocked, guilt-ridden Tories, a modern version of one of the Greek tragedies that Northcote had been so fond of quoting.

2

Here, then, is a man who has been defined for posterity by the failures of his last few years and the circumstances of his death. Little attention has been given to the many achievements of a long, productive career. Only the famous Northcote-Trevelyan report of 1853, which heralded the start of the modern civil service recruited on merit through examinations, tends to be held to his credit. Conspicuous by its absence is any recognition of Northcote's contribution to social reform widely, but wrongly, regarded as Disraeli's exclusive domain. Industrial schools and reformatories for boys were his special interests. Oblivion, too, has descended on his six years as Disraeli's chancellor from 1874 to 1880. He pioneered progressive taxation while reducing income tax to its lowest level ever in the years 1874–6, eclipsing Gladstone's fiscal achievement.³

No one has made any attempt to study his character, political beliefs, interests and personal relationships since 1890, when a biography in two volumes was published by a well-known Scottish writer and poet of the time, Andrew Lang.⁴ It is laden with information, uncritically assembled, and attempts no serious evaluation of its subject's work. There is no route to a proper appreciation of Northcote through its pages. Lang was ill-suited to the task. He detested politics, but needed the money.

Northcote, the tragic Tory leader, awaits an adequate biographer. There is abundant material in the 52 volumes of the Iddesleigh papers, deposited many years ago in the British Museum and now in the British Library. They include a set of diaries, vital for the elucidation of character and the understanding of political motive, which Northcote kept intermittently between 1866 and 1886.

Northcote's grieving widow, Cecilia, mother of their ten children, seems to have been unwilling to entrust the diaries themselves to his biographer, even though these records of a blameless life almost certainly contained nothing that was potentially embarrassing. Devoted widows tend to take no risks with the reputations of their beloveds. Typescript copies were prepared for Lang who included large extracts in his biography, but he felt no compunction about amending them freely as he went along. Severely mangled versions of material in the typescripts ended up in print. Just one portion of the typescript diaries in the Iddesleigh papers, recording a political visit to Ulster in October 1883, has been published in an accurate edition.⁵

What became of the original diaries? The current Lord Iddesleigh offers no clues. It seems almost certain that most of them no longer exist. By an extraordinary chance, however, four, all relating to visits abroad, ended up safely in the possession of a total stranger. At

³I am indebted to Professor John Vincent for this point.

⁴Andrew Lang, *Life, Letters and Diaries of Sir Stafford Northcote, First Earl of Iddesleigh* (2 vols, Edinburgh, 1890). A new edition, with text unchanged, was published in one volume in 1891.

⁵A.B. Cooke, 'A Conservative Party Leader in Ulster: Sir Stafford Northcote's Diary of a Visit to the Province, October 1883', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, lxxv (1975), section C, 61–84.

some point before the Second World War, the four, bound up together in two small blue volumes, found their way to the law courts in the Strand. It is impossible to establish how they came into the clutches of lawyers; Northcote's successors do not seem to have been involved in litigation to which they would have been relevant.

All that is known is that a clerk in the chancery division, named Stanley Holloway (no relation of the famous entertainer), who loved collecting curious objects, spotted them among the litter at the courts and took them home. He later recorded that he found them 'in a heap of old books and waste paper during a "waste paper drive" at the Law Courts during the Second World War'.⁶

In 2017, the rescuer's daughter gave the four 'Holloway diaries' to the British Library where they now form part of the Iddesleigh papers. They record what a prominent English politician in the late 19th century made of parts of the world of which few at Westminster then had any first-hand knowledge. Northcote journeyed to more places outside Europe than any other tory of cabinet rank at that time.

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How significant are these travel diaries which have survived so miraculously? The last of them (begun on 24 November 1882 and maintained until 9 February 1883) contains nothing relating to public affairs. It records a contented holiday in the Mediterranean with family and friends aboard the steam yacht *Pandora*, loaned to Northcote by W.H. Smith, the famous bookseller and MP who would become tory leader of the Commons four years later. Calling in at Monte Carlo on 27 January 1883 ('did not go into the gaming house'), Northcote ran into his tory persecutor, Lord Randolph Churchill and his wife. The following day, 'on returning to yacht found that the Randolph Churchills had been there and had given Lady N. a beautiful bouquet'.⁷ Clearly, a fierce political quarrel was not allowed to disturb the civilities of private life. This holiday diary would provide a useful source for a study of the leisure habits of the Victorians.

The other three diaries provide valuable supplements to the records of notable events which have not received a great deal of recent scholarly attention. They are: the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869; the enlargement of the Canadian Confederation in 1870; and the Washington Treaty of 1871.

Northcote was the only leading tory present at the opening of the Suez Canal in November 1869, viewing the proceedings from the yacht *Deerhound*,⁸ the first British steam vessel to enter the canal, on which he was the guest of his Devon neighbour, the former MP for Barnstaple, Sir George Stucley, Baronet. Northcote's visit to Canada in the spring of 1870, accompanied by his wife and two of their sons, was the result of a spur-of-the-moment decision, not wholly welcomed by his fellow directors of the Hudson's Bay Company, of

⁶Note to the author from Mrs Anne Oldroyd, daughter of Stanley Holloway, 31 Oct. 2016. Her late husband, the Rev. Prebendary Colin Oldroyd, was the first to realize the significance of the diaries which he discussed in the *Conservative History Journal*, i, no. 10 (2011), 4–8. The four diaries remained in family hands for at least 20 years. They were included, along with one other diary, in a privately printed volume in 1907: Iddesleigh, Stafford H. Northcote, 1st earl of, *Diaries 1869, 1870, 1871, 1875, 1882*.

⁷BL, Deposit 11014: Diary, 27, 28 Jan. 1883.

⁸The logbook of the *Deerhound* is in the National Maritime Museum.

which he had become chairman the previous year. In 1871 he was the sole tory on the commission whose successful work in resolving a number of bitter Anglo-American disputes, stemming in large part from British bias towards the Confederates during the civil war, led to the widely applauded Treaty of Washington. His diaries contribute reflections and insights, unavailable anywhere else, to the history of these important international events.

The tolerant, liberal instincts of this moderate, intensely curious tory frequently asserted themselves. At Gibraltar, en route to Suez, he acknowledged that 'our occupation must be galling to the Spanish nation', and observed with satisfaction a sharp reduction in tension, noting that a new Spanish government 'has allowed houses to be built and improvements made near the Spanish lines contrary to the traditional policy of their predecessors'.⁹

Northcote did not believe that British values should be stamped upon the world. At Suez itself the high point of the celebrations for him was 'the summoning of a host of Arab chiefs from Upper Egypt'. He was fascinated by a way of life utterly unlike his own:

It was a wonderful sight to see this great host of dwellers in the wilderness thus brought together under our eyes. Of course it is not the same thing as seeing them at home in the desert, but in many respects we got an idea of their tent-life We noticed their mode of tethering the horses, their squatting round their tents, their manner of eating and of smoking, their prostrations, and other things of which we had been reading all our lives. Altogether the sight was worth coming all this way to see, if it had been the only thing to reward us.¹⁰

Invited to enter the tents, Northcote and his companions politely declined: 'we should not have liked to defile their handsome carpets with our sandy feet'.¹¹ Stopping off at Athens on the way home, he showed the same instinctive reverence for ancient civilisation which his compatriot, Lord Elgin, whom he mocked, had notoriously defiled:

We were horrified to find that [the Greek] Government are actually erecting a hideous modern building, intended for a museum, on the Acropolis itself, close to the very Parthenon. Its instant demolition ought to be insisted on by united Europe, and war declared if it is not effected within a month. I was amused at seeing the clock erected by the marbled Lord Elgin, as some compensation for his robbery of the Parthenon.¹²

In Canada a few months later, he worked alongside its senior politicians as an equal, not as a grand visiting imperial statesman. During his time with them at Ottawa and Montreal in April and May 1870, legislation was taking shape to create the new province of Manitoba and establish the North West Territories out of the seven million acres that the Hudson's Bay Company had transferred to the Confederation. Rebellion broke out at Fort Garry (now Winnipeg) on the Red River led by the charismatic Louis Riel, a key episode in the making of modern Canada. Northcote followed events closely in his diary, where he recorded his

⁹BL, Deposit 11014: Diary, 29 Oct. 1869.

¹⁰BL, Deposit 11014: Diary, 18 Nov. 1869.

¹¹BL, Deposit 11014: Diary, 18 Nov. 1869.

¹²BL, Deposit 11014: Diary, 6 Dec. 1869.

wide-ranging discussions in detail. On 11 May, for example, he met Sir Alexander Galt, the Confederation's first Finance Minister:

He thought the question of colonial relations a very difficult one in itself, and that it was made more difficult by the failure of Englishmen to distinguish between the circumstances of different colonies. He told me he had advised Lord Granville [colonial secretary in Gladstone's first government] in December to take the Red River into the hands of the imperial government and to settle the questions which had been raised before transferring it to Canada. I told him this was precisely the advice I myself had given, and we agreed that if this course had been taken we should have escaped from much of the present difficulty.¹³

At the very end of his visit, a Fenian raiding party came across the Vermont border:

We reached Montreal soon after 7[pm on 25 May] and found the whole city in an uproar. The Fenians had really crossed the frontier, and there had been actual fighting at Pigeon Hill. The volunteers had gone out full of ardour. One corps, we are told, actually carried ropes with them to hang any Fenians they might catch ... Three Fenians certainly have been killed, and one gun taken.¹⁴

In his United States diary which runs from 13 February to 1 June 1871, Northcote commented with some asperity – unusual for him – on President Grant and some of his ministers for whom Northcote did not conceive a warm regard. However, public affairs frequently took second place to sightseeing and social engagements. The buildings and roads of Washington were taking shape slowly.

At present the State Department occupies a very distant building, once used as a charitable institution, now rented by the government. The streets in this 'city of magnificent distances' are laid out on a grand plan, and are of great width, but the houses for the most part are little better than log huts, and the roadway generally reminds one of a ploughed field in which excavations are being carried on ... The great National Monument to Washington, which has been in course of erection for twenty years and seems likely to take up 20 more, is a monstrosity.¹⁵

Northcote loved the informality of American society, in which he made many friends. On 21 May he wrote:

it is curious to have made oneself so much at home, and to have picked up so much interest in the small daily life of the place. The society is very easy and friendly, and though the State dinners are rather severe you may drop in quietly of an evening and find yourself in domestic circles, where you can get a cup of tea without fuss and find people very glad to see you without preparation.¹⁶

¹³BL, Deposit 11014: Diary, 11 May 1870.

¹⁴BL, Deposit 11014: Diary, 25 May 1870.

¹⁵BL, Deposit 11014: Diary, 4 Mar. 1871.

¹⁶BL, Deposit 11014: Diary, 21 May 1871.

That was not how things were done in stiff, formal London society. Northcote obviously appreciated relaxed American habits.

Northcote could not possibly be described as a great diarist, but his records of visits to far-flung places at significant moments in their history make him an extremely valuable one.