

## Flickering Lamps

*Statesman of Europe: A Life of Sir Edward Grey*, **T.G.Otte**, Allen Lane, pp. 896, £35.00 (hardback)

Not a single success is accorded to Sir Edward Grey (1862-1933) in the public memory and he is now recalled only as the man who failed to avert the First World War. Foreign Secretary in Liberal and coalition governments from December 1905 to December 1916 (eleven years to the very day and the longest unbroken stint that anyone has done in that great office since it was created in 1782) he has become one of history's most notable casualties.

The war's outbreak drew from Grey comments that were to become one of the best-known political quotations of all time. The famous words were spoken at the windows of the Foreign Office as the lamp-lighter went about his work at dusk on 4 August 1914 when it was clear that there would be no reply from Germany to Britain's ultimatum. 'The lamps are going out all over Europe. We shall not see them lit again in our lifetime', Grey said quietly to his friend J.A. Spender, a leading Liberal journalist who had been his contemporary at Oxford over thirty years earlier.

Grey's university career, like his entire early life, was utterly undistinguished; he scraped a third after 'a life of pleasure', as he himself put it, preferring fishing to scholarship. His college, Balliol, recorded that he had been 'repeatedly admonished for idleness' and had 'shown himself entirely ignorant of the work set him in vacation.' He was not the last Balliol politician of whom that could be said. Undergraduate laziness is, however, the only thing Grey has in common with Boris Johnson. The longest-serving Foreign Secretary held himself to the highest standards of probity and professionalism throughout his political career which began in 1885 when he was elected for a marginal Liberal seat in Northumberland where his family had been substantial landowners since the middle ages. Fame came to them through the tea named after Grey's great-great uncle who passed the Great Reform Bill of 1832.



The little-loved Foreign Secretary made some powerful forays into domestic party politics. He was among his Party's most vociferous radicals. He rejoiced that the days of the landed classes' domination of national affairs were coming to end, and gave an enthusiastic welcome to the first Labour MPs when they arrived at Westminster. He was perhaps the first to propose a 'system of apprenticeships' with state backing, which politicians are still trying to implement today. The rich needed to be squeezed by the taxman: 'people should contribute to the public resources of the state in the proportion which they were best able to afford.' Local councils should be given the power to acquire land and use it in the public interest, heady stuff from the Liberal benches at that time. He first called for women to be given the vote in the 1880s, putting him far ahead of his old-fashioned leader, Mr Gladstone.

He believed that the unelected Lords should be sent packing and replaced by a proper democratic upper house. 'I want a Second Chamber', he said in 1909, 'but I do not like entrusting real powers to one unless it is mainly elective'. A new body might have 'about 50 of the best peers for life and 200 members elected, each for large areas by proportional representation and not elected at the same time as the House of Commons'. He set the scene for much future debate about Lords reform, which has yet to be concluded. What on earth would he have said about today's 830 unelected peers (of whom some 500 turn up each day, few with anything to do) and the current prime ministerial appetite for creating even more of them?

All this has been forgotten as a result of the intense criticism that his performance as Foreign Secretary attracted. His enemies, who were well represented in the ranks of his own Party, said that if he had been a more accomplished political operator, the lamps might not have gone out. They put it around that he was a thoroughly decent, but unimaginative English country gentleman, outmanoeuvred by the wily, sabre-rattling leaders of continental Europe. Lloyd George, whose career Grey saved at the time of the Marconi scandal in 1913, repaid his loyal friend by denouncing him after his death in 1933 as 'a calamitous foreign secretary before and during the war'. His fate was sealed. No one came to his rescue. He continues to be denigrated. Andrew Adonis, my historian friend on the Labour



benches in the Lords, regards him as ‘arguably the most incompetent foreign secretary of all time’.

In this new biography, Professor T.G. Otte of the University of East Anglia, an outstanding diplomatic historian, turns the tables on the critics. In 700 pages of clear, well-paced prose (followed by another hundred with end notes), he restores Grey’s reputation, drawing on well over a hundred collections of private papers as well as on all the relevant official documents of the period, where the real truth is to be found. Grey emerges from this door-stopper as a diplomatist of quite exceptional skill. He defused a series of acute crises in North Africa, the Near East and the Balkans which, without his dexterity, could well have led to catastrophe before 1914. While preserving ententes with France and Russia, he was careful to avoid firm alliances with anyone. That was the secret of his success.

He played the great powers of Europe off against each other with unerring astuteness in the cause of peace. In Germany his talents were widely admired. In June 1914, just weeks before war broke out, he wrote that ‘we are on good terms with Germany now and we desire to avoid a revival of friction with her’. Berlin returned the compliments, cooing that ‘they are very anxious to be on good terms with England’. In September 1914, Grey was due to visit Wiesbaden to consult an eye specialist about his failing sight, an expedition that would hardly had been planned if war clouds had been on the horizon. This progress went largely unreported. Grey’s work was done behind closed doors, out of sight of ill-tempered parliamentary critics. Thomas Otte’s detailed study of the documents, which record his shrewd moves on the complicated diplomatic chessboard, has at last revealed the true scale of his achievement.

It sometimes seemed as if he was married to the Foreign Office. His wife died shortly after he had taken up the post, plunging him into unending sorrow which long hours of work relieved. She had refused him sex since shortly after their wedding. Rumours abounded about his affairs with other women and the children he had fathered. Otte dismisses the tittle-tattle. ‘There is little evidence of any dalliances, or of illegitimate offspring’, he tells us primly. He sees no reason to doubt that Grey had a blissfully happy, chaste marriage. Unless letters to lovers come to



light (many of Grey's own papers were destroyed in a fire in 1917), those who have claimed that he had a complicated personal life are unlikely to prove their case.

What went wrong in 1914? As the fateful year approached, Grey's most senior official wrote that he had 'not seen such calm waters' for some time. Suddenly, the hurricane arrived. Austria's decision to punish Serbia severely after the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand roused fury in Russia, the self-appointed guardian of the Slav peoples; after a period in eclipse, it was determined to show that it was back as a major player on the European stage. Only German intervention to restrain its impetuous Austrian ally could have saved the situation. Grey used every conceivable diplomatic ploy with Germany right up to the moment when its armies moved against France, leaving Britain with no alternative but to fight. If it had been possible, Grey would have stopped the lamps going out, as Thomas Otte shows in this superb book. Anyone who wants to try and resuscitate criticism of our longest-serving Foreign Secretary will have a very difficult search to find convincing evidence.