

Lord Lexden

Conservative peer and historian

Editor Simon Heffer deserves the greatest praise for his handling of Chips Channon's irresistibly scandalous diaries

Henry 'Chips' Channon
The Diaries, Volume 1 1918-1938

Edited by **Simon Heffer**
Publisher **Hutchinson**

Books which cover the 1930s habitually give prominence to opponents of so-called appeasement and to critics of King Edward VIII. Who now recalls that Neville Chamberlain spent nearly 50 per cent of GNP on rearmament, or that, as Prince of Wales, Edward was the most famous man in the world with a gift for making perfect impromptu speeches during long journeys throughout the Empire?

Mrs Simpson, whom he knew well, as "a good kindly woman who has an excellent influence on the young monarch." Even so, he could not see how in 1936 she could become Queen Wallis "with around half the country against her."

Channon's admiration for Chamberlain bordered on idolatry. This was remarkable since they were poles apart. Chamberlain, a devoted family man, worked round the clock on public affairs. Family wealth sustained Channon in idleness until he became an MP. He was a handsome, high-living, promiscuous bisexual

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with an interest in flagellation. It was a taste that in 1928 a learned Roman Catholic priest in Richmond was most anxious to help him satisfy, though the diaries suggest he only succeeded once.

Prostitutes are recorded as beating him in the 1920s. He often visited them in white tie and tails after glittering parties in the company of George, Viscount Gage. In his diaries for these years, he poured out his love for Gage, a member of the Tory front bench team in the Lords. While returning Channon's affection, Gage pined unsuccessfully for the future Queen Elizabeth, then Duchess of York. Many complicated human relationships are on display in these irresistible diaries.

A huge array of people, saints as well as sinners, make an appearance, all of them identified by Simon Heffer in footnotes where I found only a handful of small factual slips in 950 pages. The editor deserves the greatest praise. He has rightly included everything that brings Channon's shimmering, brittle world alive.

Channon calmed down considerably after his marriage in 1933 into the

Guinness family who put him in the Commons as MP for Southend, a seat where their influence was decisive, making it Britain's last rotten borough (his son Paul, a future Cabinet minister, inherited it on his death in 1958).

Channon adored the Commons, relishing every detail of its life and customs. His accounts of great occasions, such as George V's lying in state in Westminster Hall in January 1936 and the Commons debate on 28 September 1938 when Chamberlain dramatically announced Hitler's invitation to Munich, are amongst the finest things in this book. He had a gift for the sharp, striking phrase which bring great events to life. If diaries are to achieve immortality, the diarist must be a first-class writer. Channon passes that test with flying colours.

At the end of 1927, Channon writes: "As I reread my diary I am horrified by the scandalous tone it has; one might think we lived in a world of cads and rotters; this is far from true, but the weaknesses of the great and of one's friends are more amusing to chronicle than their dignified conduct which one takes for granted." Nor did he spare his own weaknesses. There are two more scandalous volumes to come. 🏰



1917
Henry
Channon

Henry Channon, a thoroughly anglicised American known always as "Chips," was firmly on the side of both Chamberlain and the unfortunate King. He regarded

