

Lord Lexden

Conservative peer and historian

The magnificent efforts of two industrious editors have rescued these fascinating diaries from oblivion

A Liberal Chronicle in Peace and War

Journals and Papers of J.A. Pease, 1st Lord Gainford, 1911-1915

Edited by **Cameron Hazlehurst and Christine Woodland**
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Hardly anyone today will have heard of Jack Pease (1860-1943), an impecunious member of a great Quaker industrial dynasty in northeast England, who became a long-serving Liberal MP and successful chief whip. In later life, as Lord Gainford, he was the first chairman of the BBC. He let the masterful John Reith take all the decisions.

Even during his years in Herbert Asquith's cabinet, he attracted little attention. It was a star-studded team with David Lloyd George and Winston Churchill at its centre, alongside Sir Edward Grey, one of our greatest foreign secretaries. Pease was scarcely visible in this glittering political constellation.

The publication of his diaries rescues him from oblivion. They provide invaluable accounts of cabinet meetings in the days before official minutes were kept (they started in 1916). But what makes this book so magnificent is the way in which the two industrious editors, a well-established historian and an eminent archivist, have



embellished Pease's text.

He wrote tersely and rather colourlessly. In this published version, his words set the scene, which his editors enrich superbly by supplementing them with an astonishingly wide array of fascinating details which only political insiders at the time would have known.

For example, on 6 March 1911 Asquith told Pease: "I am much troubled over Crewe & the disaster." Drawing on other contemporary records, the editors insert a vivid description of what had happened. Lord Crewe, the leader of the Lords, collapsed at a dinner at Claridge's and struck his head on the floor. "What a splendid way to die," Churchill exclaimed. Another cabinet minister said: "We can now

only trust in God Almighty, but he so seldom acts when he ought to."

Kindness was evidently in short supply among the clever members of Asquith's team. Much to their surprise, Crewe made a complete recovery and lived for another 34 years.

Diverting anecdotes appear frequently, enlivening still

further the politics of the period which, as told here, never have a dull moment. Not until Brexit would Britain again go through a time of such prolonged turmoil and bitterness in party politics.

Pease and his colleagues faced crisis after crisis,

culminating in fierce party strife over Irish Home Rule which brought Ulster to the brink of civil war in 1914. Asquith became the only prime minister to be howled down at the despatch box by "3d rate Tories", Pease noted on 25 July 1911.

Unlike their successors in the years following the Brexit vote, they handled their problems extremely well, despite having no overall Liberal majority in the Commons. Their Tory opponents were repeatedly vanquished.

One victory over the Tories brought particular satisfaction. As the temperature climbed to 97 degrees Fahrenheit, the government forced the Parliament Bill curbing the Lords' veto over legislation through the upper house on 10 August 1911. The Tories collapsed in disarray in the face of the Liberals' unyielding determination to create as many peers as necessary to "absolutely swamp the House of Lords, some 300 or perhaps more", as the rejuvenated Lord Crewe told the demoralised Tories privately. Plans had been made to introduce "six peers an hour".

There are a number of books about this momentous period, but none of them captures the passion it generated as well as these diaries in their edited form. 📖

