

Reviews

Edwardian Requiem: A Life of Sir Edward Grey

By Michael Waterhouse,
Biteback, £25



“The lamps are going out all over Europe. We will not see them lit again in our lifetime”.

It is for these famous words, uttered on the outbreak of the First World War, that Sir Edward Grey will always be chiefly remembered. They reflect the overwhelming sadness felt by the British statesman who had carried almost alone the heavy responsibility of trying to avert the catastrophe.

Asquith, a brilliant peace-time Prime Minister, left policy in the hands of his Foreign Secretary to an extent that would be inconceivable today. The reputation of the entire Liberal Government rested with him when he rose in the House of Commons on 3 August 1914 to give a full account of the events that had shattered the peace of Europe. A leading Conservative opponent wrote: “Grey’s speech was very wonderful – I think in the circumstances one may say the greatest speech delivered in our time.”

Grey was Foreign Secretary for 11 years, a longer unbroken period than either Palmerston or Castlereagh. Does he match them in greatness? Opinion has always been sharply divided. Grey’s critics have been numerous and persistent. This book gives them short shrift, insisting that

Grey belongs at the very forefront of the diplomats’ pantheon.

Michael Waterhouse, an accomplished and experienced writer, admires his subject profoundly. Grey was indeed an estimable person. Few successful politicians can honestly exclude ambition from the motives that brought them to Westminster; Grey



Opinion has often been divided on Edward Grey’s achievements, but Michael Waterhouse places him at the forefront of British diplomats

was one of the select few. “I was really always miserable and out of place in public life,” he confessed in old age. He found true fulfilment only in the countryside for which he felt a deep spiritual affinity akin to Wordsworth’s. He produced beautifully written, bestselling works on fly-fishing and ornithology, on both of which he was a leading expert. As Waterhouse observes, “no other public figure wrote with such colour, passion and knowledge on the countryside as did Edward Grey”. No other public figure would have preferred to have devoted his entire career to the countryside.

High ideals of public service overcame his innate distaste for political life. Arthur Balfour, the Tory leader, regarded him as a remarkable combination of “an old-fashioned Whig and a Socialist”. He wanted to transform Britain as radically as Lloyd George. He advocated the compulsory purchase of land by local authorities to cover England in small farms of 50 to 200 acres.

He condemned the House of Lords even more vehemently than Lloyd George. Whereas the Welsh wizard was content to clip its wings, Grey wanted to abolish and replace it. In 1910 he proposed “a new Second Chamber, much smaller in size than the House of Commons, based upon the elective principle, with, if desired, a minority of distinguished life-members”. What a pity that Nick Clegg has no interest in history. Grey ought to be his hero.

A paragon in public, Grey was much less virtuous in private life. His wife insisted that they live together as sister and brother.

He sought other company. Waterhouse has examined closely his dalliances with various women. He matched, perhaps even exceeded, Lloyd George in the frequency of his conquests. A bevy of illegitimate children is attributed to him, plausibly in every case, as Waterhouse shows, though there is no absolute proof.

This book provides a remarkable portrait of a double life. Famed for his calm public rectitude, Grey emerges here as a man of great private passion, promiscuously indulged.

“ This book provides a remarkable portrait of a double life. Famed for his calm public rectitude, Grey emerges here as a man of great private passion, promiscuously indulged ”

Could this complex man have stopped the lamps going out? No one could have done more for the cause of peace. Waterhouse concludes that “he prepared his country for what many saw as the inevitable conflict and, although exhausted and half blind, he was the only European statesman who fought hard for peace during the July crisis” – the supreme moment in Grey’s career which is described here in all its complexity with brilliant clarity. The odds against him were too great. As Grey himself wrote, “Germany has the most powerful army in the world and it is at the command of a madman”. The Kaiser and his military commanders who were thirsting for war, put the lamps out. Grey’s patient diplomacy in the cause of freedom is rightly and eloquently applauded in this important book which must rank among the finest political biographies of recent years. 🏰

Lord Lexden is a Conservative Peer and historian

This House The National Theatre

Journalists like to reflect on our current mood of ‘anti-politics’ – cynical electors, low turnout, UKIP hoovering up the votes with a ‘none of the above’ programme, like the Five Star ‘Grillini’ in Italy. If this is so, this sparkling performance of James Graham’s *This House* at the National Theatre could have a huge and enduring appeal. It focuses on the chaotic years of a largely minority Labour Government in 1974-9, with the Labour and Conservative whips’ offices both plunged into manoeuvres and misdemeanours. The Labour whips’ office, focusing on the deputy whip, Walter Harrison, is knee-deep in desperate skulduggery to keep a tottering administration in office for a five-year term, dragging in not just the ambulance vote but the actually dying in the person

of poor Sir Alfred Broughton, locking up the drunken Nationalist publican (and republican) Frank Maguire in a cupboard, fixing that Harrison votes simultaneously in two key committee sessions by being counted as two-thirds of a person, wheeler-dealing with the ‘odds and sods’ of Celtic minority parties, conducting late-night love-ins with the 13 Liberals. The Conservatives, turning pairing arrangements off and on like a bar-room tap, are



scarcely more reputable. What both sides share is an alleged inability to complete a sentence without swearing, be it robust Northern industrial or feline public-school smut. There is an air of permanent frenzy. One climax comes when Michael