Why Do the People Hate Me So?

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Extract

PROLOGUE

A dozen or so distinguished authors, from Wickham Steed to Roy Jenkins, have already written biographies on the inter-war years premier Stanley Baldwin. There are also portraits of him in the memoirs of a good half dozen of his contemporaries and more than a score of essays about him that appear within various books and journals. Yet despite all these works he still remains, according to one of these essayists David Cannadine, amongst the least remembered or recognised of Britain's twentieth century prime ministers.

Baldwin died more than half a century ago, so it can be of no great surprise that the name now means little to today's generation. Yet he has not been entirely forgotten; a few of the contestants in one of the now popular pub quizzes correctly answered the question 'which prime minister dealt with the abdication of Edward VIII?'. His name surfaces occasionally still in the papers and on TV, sometimes seriously, such as on environmental issues, and sometimes in jest. An episode of *Open All Hours* contained an exchange between Arkwright, the stammering skinflint of a shopkeeper and the love of his life, Nurse Gladys Emmanuelle. 'It's mother - her mind keeps wandering - she thinks it's 1935'. 'Ah well! When I come round later for a bit of supper, you can tell her I'm S-s-s-stanley Baldwin'.

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Prologue

Stanley Baldwin was the leading political figure for most of the inter-war years. He had entered politics a little reluctantly some time before the Great War of 1914-1918, mainly to please his father Alfred Baldwin, a wealthy Midlands ironmaster and businessman. As the President of the Board of Trade, he played a prominent role in bringing to an end the Lloyd George coalition and then, upon the death of Bonar Law in 1923, he unexpectedly found himself propelled into the premiership.

The era over which Baldwin was to preside for the next fourteen years became known as 'The Baldwin Age'. In reality it was only in as much as he was a kind of national anachronism, having little in common with the crazes of the times - 'the roaring 'twenties' - whether these be dancing the Charleston or speedway racing. Classical music, cricket and country walking seemed more his scene.

For all these frivolities, they were also times of great economic and social difficulties. The world had changed. The Great War had been the greatest conflict the world had known: it had taken eight million lives – almost a million from Britain and its Empire: it had robbed the world of its order, structure and beliefs: it had dealt Britain an enormous economic blow, breaking networks of international trade thus forcing industrial economies into a condition that was unstable, leading to the great depression. The Europe of pre 1914 that had seemed so permanent had been swept away – dictators were to come soon enough to replace the toppled monarchs. Everywhere the threat of revolution was in the air. The 'land fit for heroes' that the returning British soldiers had been promised proved to be a mirage. Indeed all strata of society had made what they felt had been great sacrifices to the common weal during the war, and all were to be disillusioned by the peace. Young men of all social classes became cynical at the way their leaders had sacrificed tens of thousands of young lives. Baldwin's own eldest son Oliver was one who had learnt this new cynicism.

The War also changed Britain's relationship with its overseas Empire, and there was a shift towards the concept of 'Commonwealth' and greater autonomy. This was to be vehemently opposed by Winston Churchill and led to a serious rift with Baldwin. But Churchill's stance lacked realism; the Empire had come about largely by accident, the result of early industrialisation, and decline was inevitable. Baldwin successfully saw off these challenges (Chapter 9) and, to the Marxist writer John Strachey, he was the perfect statesman for an empire in decline.

Prologue

The Representation of the People Act of 1918 had brought universal suffrage to Britain for the first time; the electorate was now vast, and predominantly working class. Baldwin believed that the Conservative Party had nothing to fear from this greatly extended franchise. Nonetheless, softening the asperities of class, through patience and tolerance, was the formidable task that he set himself.

Such an aim was soon to be put to the test. A fifteen year period of great strikes culminated in the General Strike of 1926. Although a straightforward labour dispute, that had started in the coal industry, there was a widespread fear, bordering on paranoia, amongst the establishment classes that the Communists might infiltrate the legitimate trade unions and gain control of the strike. Baldwin's leadership was still tenuous, and his right wing opponents saw the strike as their chance to ditch him. They failed. Firebrands in the unions and militants in the Cabinet might well have provoked this volatile yet very British affair into civil war, had they been allowed. The emollient appeals for calm of Baldwin are given rein here.

It had been generally expected in the nineteenth century that representative government would gradually replace all despots throughout Europe. The early nationalists had made little headway, so this had been a not unreasonable assumption. Nonetheless, the European concert of the nineteenth century had been undermined by economic and imperial rivalry, giving an impetus to popular nationalism, and the twentieth century proved to be as much an age of dictators as democrats.

It is taken as almost axiomatic nowadays that Britain could not have done other than continue along its democratic path. It is true that other nations proved to be more fertile grounds for the new ruthless totalitarian creeds of facism and communism, but no country was immune. The new democracies were often weak, unable to maintain the stability of money and failed to live up to people's expectations. The 'twenties ended abruptly with the Wall Street Crash that brought to a close the American boom and plunged the world into slump, bringing misery to most nations. Particularly hard hit was Germany, with six million unemployed by 1932, thus leading to the disintegration of the Weimar Republic. This Republic had been Germany's all too brief experience of democracy. To this backdrop of social and political unrest, Adolf Hitler came to power in January 1933, with his violently nationalist, and racist, Nazi party.

The world-wide slump had other far reaching consequences. The peaceable world of the 'twenties had been fragile; the peoples of Europe,

and elsewhere, had lived under the shadow of almost permanent crisis since 1918. The economic disaster of 1929-31 soured relationships between the major states and brought to an end international collaboration, exacerbating tensions. Yet not even the worst pessimist would have predicted that the world would have been at war again before the decade was out.

The certitude of Britain's continuing democracy seemed rather less than certain to those who lived through the depression. Not only liberal capitalism, but parliamentary democracy itself, seemed to be failing; many contemporaries anticipated that the slump would allow extremist parties to flourish in Britain and had to be better than democracy. That they did not do so owed much to Baldwin's personality and Christian beliefs; parliamentary government in general and the Conservative Party in particular easily adapted to these challenges. The coming of these new Caesars in foreign lands, and how Baldwin guided his nation through turbulent days is one of my principal themes.

Many a book and television programme has been scripted which have set out to compare Adolf Hitler with Joseph Stalin, Winston Churchill, F.D. Roosevelt and, most recently, Charlie Chaplin! Chaplin's film *The Great Dictator*, a bitter satire on the Nazi regime, provoked hilarity and horror in equal measure when first released in 1940. But almost overlooked by the historians was that it was Stanley Baldwin, once Hitler had become the German Chancellor, who found himself in the unenviable role of the dictator's principal western adversary for the following four years.

Baldwin had long warned of the dangers of malignant rhetoric in stirring the emotions of the mob and setting these in motion. In the introduction to an anthology of Twentieth Century Speeches the editor Brian MacArthur nominates Hitler as the greatest speaker of the century, with Churchill only as the main contender, while Baldwin's own prosaic style of oratory is considered simply unequal to that of his German adversary. Hitler was, nonetheless, the prefect example of the destructive power of oratory, and in rousing Germany to barbarity he made Baldwin's case.

Adolf Hitler appealed to his people's feelings of paranoia and xenophobia, exploiting their festering resentments. He was rather a verbose, repetitive speaker - foreign visitors found his speeches tedious; it was his intensity that set him apart from other orators. He would rise to a pitch of near hysteria, screaming as he now inveighed his audience;

men hissed, women sobbed involuntarily, caught up in a spell of the powerful emotions of hatred, from which all restraint had been removed.

Stanley Baldwin's speeches, in distinct contrast, appealed to the nobler sentiments of man, to those of tolerance and forbearance. During times of great difficulty for most Britons, the slump they were experiencing the worst the country had ever known, this must have been all the harder to do. His perorations would, sometimes, come to an almost biblical ending, with the last few phrases spoken practically in a whisper, such that all stilled to listen.

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It has been suggested that the democracies which had themselves avoided a fascist takeover, watched fascinated but paralysed by the rising tide of violence in the fascist states. On the flap of his biographical essay, Roy Jenkins opines that from the threat of the dictators, 'Baldwin was more inclined to avert his eyes.'

Memories of the Great War had never been far away and were to be awakened by a number of celebrated anti-war books which came out in the late 'twenties. To Baldwin fell the task of reconciling a now deeply pacifist nation to the realities of the new dangers in the world, and to persuade a reluctant public of the need to strengthen Britain's inadequate defences. This had become urgent once the International Disarmament Conference of Geneva, at which it had been hoped to obtain agreement on arms limitation, had stalled in October 1933.

The strength of public feeling was revealed in a Peace Ballot, organised by the League of Nations Union in 1935. Though unofficial, it was not something the Government could ignore. It showed that most people still favoured a general commitment to disarmament. Although a narrow majority supported military action as a last resort, nearly five million had rejected the idea of military measures under any circumstances. This was a great embarrassment to Ministers trying to educate the public as to the facts of Europe.

Winston Churchill had started warning the British people of the dangers posed by resurgent German military nationalism from 1933 onwards. How his warnings allegedly went unheeded became later to be very widely accepted. But the British Government, of which Baldwin was then the Lord President, was never as unaware of these dangers as Churchill publicly made out, nor as unresponsive, as the extensive

chapters on rearmament will endeavour to show. Baldwin was even prepared to move a little ahead of public opinion as exigencies dictated.

He had already announced an increase in the size of the R.A.F. in July 1934. Then in March 1935, in a major shift in British policy, he had unveiled proposals for the expansion of all three armed services. 'Our attempt to lead the world towards disarmament by unilateral example has failed' he had said. An overall commitment to rearmament should first, he believed, receive popular assent, and called for an election in November 1935, a year earlier than required, to obtain such approval. There were considerable gains to be derived, in his view, from the co-ordination of free effort, only possible in a democracy. Mindful of how strongly anti-combatants felt he was careful on some platforms to make his pitch a qualified one. He was later to be widely accused of deceiving the electorate. But there had been much in the election manifesto on defence, a fact not lost on the Labour Party, and during the campaign they were to charge Baldwin's Tory Party with resuming its historic role of militarism.

Upon succeeding the rapidly declining Ramsay MacDonald as Prime Minister in June 1935, Stanley Baldwin had immediately chosen a dynamic Yorkshireman, Sir Philip Cunliffe-Lister (later Lord Swinton), as Air Minister. He regarded the post as being of the greatest importance at this critical time. Swinton set in motion a huge enlargement of the R.A.F., equipping it with modern aircraft, put his faith behind Radar (the only detection scheme that then offered a realistic prospect of working) and, crucially, instigated plans which ensured that industry had the capacity to produce an adequate quantity of aeroplanes for another major war.

The illustration of a Spitfire, with its caption, I hope enhances the text in the chapters; this elegant plane came in a unique way to symbolize the preservation of democracy itself. The successful outcome of the Battle of Britain in 1940 – upon which the future of Christian Civilization depended in the view of Winston Churchill – owed much to Baldwin's administration of the latter 'thirties and to Swinton in particular. This has never really been fully acknowledged, and the roles they played in rearmament are here given extensive coverage.

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The First World War also precipitated great changes to religious life and beliefs. Before 1914 Britain looked like a Christian country, but by 1940 many Christian traits seemed to have disappeared from public life as the

nation became increasingly secular. In theory it still was a Christian country – almost all school children began the day with Christian worship – yet Stanley Baldwin had been the only Prime Minister between 1916 and 1945 to have been a Christian in any strict sense. Though now Anglican, his ancestors had been of staunch Methodist stock and his father Alfred much influenced by Charles Kingsley in his beliefs that religion and secular life were inseparable. This had determined the paternalistic way that Alfred conducted his business; though ambitious, his companies were not driven with the ruthlessness of so many a Victorian capitalist. The son soon became deeply imbued with the same ethos. How, as national leader, he came to view the role of religion with regard to everyday life is examined here alongside the counter attractions of nationalism that took hold in so many European countries at this time.

Though his family had long been industrialists, Baldwin still retained a great spiritual affinity with the countryside and his much admired addresses on rural subjects became famous. Though his mystic idyll was dismissed long ago by his many critics as overly romanticised, as well as being inaccurate as a prophecy for the future, the emergence of 'green' issues have given such pastorals a relevance to us once more. Inevitably the concerns of the twenty-first century for the survival of the planet, rather than rural beauty, have given to these causes a secular theme rather than the spiritual one of Baldwin's day. Though brief extracts of the best known of these orations are to be found in many books, they are worthy of reiteration, and more extensive passages can be read in Chapter 7. How Baldwin the country man is perceived in our own times is one of the topics discussed in the Epilogue.

Rather less well known that Baldwin's rustic image was the importance he attached to what was then known as 'popular' education, almost as novel in his day as universal suffrage, and which the Great War had shown to be woefully deficient. He was acutely aware that democracy could not function unless it embraced an educated people, able to make informed decisions; his confidence that the electorate would not make a wrong choice at the 1935 election proved to be justified. Before the industrial revolution, the grammar school had made for the unity of the nation; to Baldwin's aims of greater harmony following the Great War unrest education had a special role, and indeed was needed more than ever. *Popular Education* describes the early involvement of the State in the tutelage of its citizens and the advances that were made during the so-called Baldwin Age. A selection from his

speeches and pledges illustrate the role that Baldwin personally had played in what became to be seen as a silent, social revolution.

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When Baldwin resumed as Premier in the spring of 1935 he felt he had only a little more to offer the nation – he gave himself another two years but no more. His final years were to be the most controversial. Shortly after the 1935 Election a crisis over Abyssinia (Ethiopia) nearly brought his government down; there was a widespread feeling that the pledges given in support of the League of Nations had been just a sham. In January 1936 both George V and Baldwin's own cousin Rudyard Kipling died. A moving tribute to the late King helped to restore Baldwin's reputation as a trustworthy leader. The year, though, proved to be laden with foreboding; a series of international and domestic problems threatened to overwhelm him, so that by the summer he seemed spent and he was advised to taken an extended holiday.

He returned in the autumn much refreshed, but was soon embroiled with Churchill over defence. In a famous philippic, Churchill damned Baldwin for his indecision. In a frank reply, Baldwin explained how he had chosen the earliest moment when he believed the public would be willing to accept the rearmament measures his government considered necessary. But in doing so one phrase in particular proved fatal to his good name, and haunted him to his grave.

A crisis over the Monarchy – seen as the remaining link with Britain's Dominions – also blew that autumn. Edward VIII's wish to marry a twice divorced American was seen, by the mores of the day, as being beyond the pale. Whether from motives of opportunism or simply romantic sentiment, Churchill gave his support to the new King. This time it was to be Churchill – appearing all blustering absurdity – who was to find himself wrong footed. Baldwin – appearing the calm statesman of reasonableness – the one who was to guide the sovereignty skilfully from Edward to his younger brother George.

There was to be one last, decisive executive act which Baldwin took which is germane to the theme of this book. He had agreed in February 1937 to increase defence expenditure of £1,500 million over five years, involving borrowing for the first time, and was to maintain Britain's military deterrence and its bargaining power. He finally retired soon after George VI's coronation in May 1937 in a blaze of glory, which he was not expecting to last, adorned with the Knight of the

Garter and an earldom. Little over a year later, during what became known as the Munich crisis, his friends urged him to return, believing he would have managed this affair better than did his successor Neville Chamberlain. The final chapter will be examining this conjecture.

The opening chapter is set primarily in 1940. After the succession of military reversals that culminated in the fall of France in June, there came a mood of national revulsion against politicians who could neither keep Britain out of war nor effectively wage it. Chamberlain had remained in Churchill's Cabinet, which sought to protect its ministers from public criticism, thus leaving Baldwin particularly exposed. He was widely accused of dereliction of duty and of failing to appreciate the threat which Hitler and his armies posed, often by the very same people who had so obstructed his rearmament programme. Many of his critics were to make him pay dearly for some of his disclosures, the Secretary to the Air Ministry Sir Maurice Dean remarking 'He had the unhappy knack of coining memorable phrases remembered long after and often out of context'. Indeed few people's reputation can ever have been so marred by the subsequent way in which a mere handful of lines were misconstrued.

The opprobrium continued posthumously. In the first of his war memoirs *The Gathering Storm* Winston Churchill accused the pre-war National Government of fecklessness, adept only at wooing the electorate, and gave the damning judgement 'Thus an administration more disastrous than any in our history saw all its errors acclaimed by the nation.' Whatever little of Baldwin's good name that remained was finally extirpated by his official biographer G.M. Young, who treated his subject, according to A.J.P. Taylor 'slightly and slightingly'.

Many authors have, of course, long since written to refute these calumnies, notably Baldwin's younger son Windham, who took exception to the pronouncements made about his late father by Churchill, Young and others. Nevertheless, the previously given impression, that Baldwin had neglected the nation's defences in perilous times, is the one that has largely persisted in the public consciousness. Typical was an article in the *Sunday Times* a quarter of a century after his death in 1947, which stated that in his last lonely years, he had asked the rhetorical question 'Why do the people hate me so?'. The columnist had opined that it was because he had had no policy towards Hitler, and hence he had kept the dangers of the Nazi threat hidden from the people.

Baldwin was observed through his powerful years by a self-improved Welshman, Thomas Jones. Dr. Jones had been recruited from

academic life in 1916 and had become deputy secretary of the Cabinet. Then on his retirement in 1930 he became secretary of the Pilgrim Trust (Baldwin was its sometime Chairman) and a close confidant of and adviser to Baldwin, although not always seeing eye-to-eye with one another, especially over German rapprochement. Inevitably the war changed perspectives, so that even Dr. Jones – keen as he had been to cut a deal of some kind with Nazi Germany – was minded to write in *The Times* in the early 'fifties that Baldwin had deluded the public with a false image of pre-war Germany. Even more forthright was the late Sir Robert Rhodes James who asserted in *The Independent* in 1991, that Baldwin had simply been no good, and had reduced Britain from being the greatest power in the world to its knees.

Extensive passages from many of Baldwin's famous broadcasts and addresses are quoted within the chapters in their original contexts and occasions, allowing today's reader to form their own opinion. One of these 'memorable phrases' had been 'The bomber will always get through.' It was thought to have about it a sense of fatalism and helplessness. But it had been made during an appeal for the abolition of aerial bombardment when it was still hoped that an International Air Convention could be realised. And no-one who saw the devastation to the cities of Britain, Europe and Japan at the war's end could say it had not been true. Some of the best known of these aphorisms are reprised in Chapter 16 and the *Epilogue*, either for the insight they offered, or because they have a particular resonance for us today.

Baldwin had said that he was content to leave his reputation to the judgement of history. Posthumous fame - the applause of posterity - he had never sought. He had only hoped that one day the people might recognise once more what he felt he had done in maintaining the unity of the nation, in spite of all the perils from within and without. He did not expect this to happen for some time, as a valedictory speech of his reveals: 'The ultimate place of any soldier, or any statesman, can never be decided in the life-time of the generation to which he belongs. Among one's own contemporaries the voice of criticism and controversy is always loud'.

'The one thing wrong with the English legal system' the American economist John Galbraith once claimed 'is that the dead cannot sue.' Biographers can, perhaps, change public perceptions. Perhaps too the present generation can appreciate better than the old what this countrified businessman had done during the turbulent inter-war years for the maintenance of civilised values.