

## Literary Club Paper – Poor Neville

If a great historian is able to make and break the reputations of those about whom he writes then Winston Churchill was not only a titan as prime minister but also a master of penmanship. He was certainly a superb character assassin. As he reputedly declared about his predecessor, Neville Chamberlain, "Poor Neville will come badly out of history. I know, I will write that history". In *The Gathering Storm*, his account of the road to the second world war, Churchill savaged Chamberlain as a weak leader who had cowered before Hitler and sacrificed any chance of prematurely ending the German dictator's career, with his policy of appeasement which, as Churchill sneered in 1940, was akin to feeding a crocodile in the hope that it will eat you last.

Such barbs had an easy target. The vision of Chamberlain returning from the Munich peace conference with Hitler, in which he had handed over a fifth of the Czechoslovak state to Nazi rule, waving a scrap of white paper with the German dictator's signature on it and declaring 'peace with honour, peace in our time' has haunted generations of Britons ever since. When, to give only one example, David Cameron, just prior to the Brexit referendum, returned from all night negotiations in Brussels waving a piece of paper listing the various concessions he had obtained from the sleepless eurocrats, a colleague of mine told me 'I never thought we would see a repeat of Chamberlain's humiliation in my lifetime.'

Ever since Chamberlain, appeasement has been a dirty word, levelled by politicians of all persuasions at their opponents who have

placed their faith in negotiations rather than confrontation. I have never come across a politician who proudly calls himself an appeaser. Nevertheless, I propose to, later in this paper, offer a defence of Chamberlain and of the policy of appeasement. Let me begin, however, by noting that the long shadow of the second world war has obscured so much that was interesting and impressive about those two decades before the outbreak of hostilities often referred to as the interwar period. Indeed, to take one example, the remarkable achievements that poor Neville notched up in domestic policy through the 1920s and 1930s, as first Minister for Health, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, and finally, from 1937 to the May of 1940, Prime Minister, should, by rights, have earned him the accolade of a great reformer and perhaps even a great politician. Instead, the war left his reputation, as it left a large swathe of Europe, devastated. As he himself lamented on national radio at the outbreak of the war 'Everything that I have worked for, everything that I have hoped for, everything that I have believed in my public life has crashed into ruins.'

Part of the problem with Arthur Neville Chamberlain was not that, by the 1930s, he came across as singularly ill-suited to the modern world. Like all good lies, Churchill's central allegation that Chamberlain was out of his depth because he was out of his time contained a kernel of truth. By the time he sat down with Hitler in 1938 to sign the infamous Munich agreement that carved up Czechoslovakia he was already 69 years old. He was born in 1869, to Joseph Chamberlain, an industrialist turned politician, who had moved from London to Birmingham in search of wealth and found it! Not only did Joseph make his fortune in a city that by 1900 had close

to a million inhabitants and was a stronghold of manufacturing earning the moniker 'the city of a thousand trades' but he also made his political reputation as the Lord Mayor of what one visiting journalist called 'the best run city in the world'. Slum clearances, comprehensive rebuilding, and municipal pride combined to ensure that Joseph Chamberlain's statue still adorns the centre of England's second largest city. In time, Joseph entered parliament rising to the rank of paymaster general in the last great liberal government before a stroke in 1906 curtailed his political career.

Much of Birmingham's Victorian architectural splendours, libraries, public baths, shopping arcades were replaced by brutalist monuments which have, in turn, been torn down in favour of an eclectic array of architectural whimsies born aloft by the conviction that they will finally lead their occupants to the promised land of urban regeneration. It still remains, however, a place that few tourists visit. The old manufacturing hub has lost much of its lustre and is now divided into enclaves of prosperity and impoverishment that are brought together by the British obsession with shopping that cuts across all the social classes. Oddly enough, I like Birmingham for its good natured, down to earth feel that has something of the mid-west about it although it now lacks that fundamental optimism which it once held when the Chamberlain family ran the place, and which I still sense can be found here in Cincinnati.

Poor Neville does not, at first glance, appear to have been raised with Birmingham, let alone mid-western values. Instead he acquired the style, speech and rigid self-control of the fading English aristocracy. His dress sense was quintessentially late-Victorian and upper class, all three-piece suits and starched collars. His accent,

drilled into him at Rugby boarding school where the sport of Rugby was first invented, was that old version of Received Pronunciation which the current Queen herself spoke when she was younger – the ‘a’ becomes a clipped ‘e’ so Cabinet is pronounced ‘Cebinet’, Paddington becomes ‘Peddington’ and so on.

As an aside, it was a long-standing tradition in Britain, and one which some of my family scrupulously adhered to, that on Christmas Day, at precisely 3pm, everyone should pause their festivities to listen to the Queens speech, a short summary by the reigning Monarch of her experiences over the previous year that always concludes with a rousing rendition of the National Anthem, before everyone resumes, once again, to tuck into their Christmas pudding.

My mother, an Ohio women who emigrated to the United Kingdom but never entirely abandoned her republican instincts always made a grand display of marching out of the room as soon as the Queen’s voice began to emanate from the television, but the record of 66 queen’s speeches and counting has provided linguists with a useful insight into the changing speech patterns of the British aristocracy. Her Majesty has certainly changed the way she speaks, and much else besides, to fit the vicarious fashions of the British public. There is nothing left of the clipped pronunciation that make audio recordings of Chamberlain’s speeches sound so anachronistic to a modern audience.

Chamberlain never made concessions to modern fashion. His own immediate predecessors as prime minister were a fiery Welshman, Lloyd George who made a point of emphasizing his mining background, Ramsey McDonald, a stolid sounding scotsmen, and Stanley Baldwin whose earnest radio speeches, dulled the

opposition into near continuous submission from 1924 to 1937. All three men spoke in recognizably modern tones. Chamberlain didn't. It also didn't help that Neville was, by instinct, reserved, perhaps even cold in public. He deliberately cultivated an austere reputation as 'the nation's doctor, the nation's bookkeeper, the nation's stern, unflinching leader' although, as so often happens, in private he could be warm and even humorously self-deprecating, laughing uproariously, for example, at the latest antics of Charlie Chaplin and revelling in the wit and repartee of good theatre and great literature.

It was his public image as small 'c' conservative, old-fashioned, austere, the sort of man who regarded Opera as too emotional and never voluntarily took a holiday on 'the continent', that made him a natural fit with the conservative party which he joined at the end of the First World War. His father, Joseph, the family patriarch had been a liberal party member for his entire life for that was the natural party of religious dissenters and self-made industrialists. In contrast, the conservative party was dominated, prior to Chamberlain, by aristocratic-minded Episcopalians. These men knew, however, how to build a political machine that has gone on to become the most successful party in European history. In contrast, the old liberal party went into perennial decline at the beginning of the twentieth century. It should not be surprising therefore that much to their father's chagrin, both Neville and his older half brother Austin Chamberlain threw in their lot with the conservative party in order to advance their political prospects.

Austin, a remarkable politician in his own right also had a successful career in politics rising to the rank of foreign secretary, and winning the nobel peace prize in 1925 for his efforts to secure

European peace. His lifelong ambition was, however, to become prime minister but he was never fully trusted by his party and parliamentary colleagues who were convinced that his conversion to conservatism was insincere. The cutting comment about Austin Chamberlain was that 'he always played the game and he always lost'.

In contrast, Neville Chamberlain's conversion to conservatism came later and appeared genuine. True, he had betrayed his family's ecclesiastic, industrial and political roots for a safe seat in parliament and a slow climb up the greasy pole of politics. But by the time Neville entered parliament in 1918 the Liberal Party's era was evidently over, the socialist Labour Party was the rising force in progressive politics, and conservatism was as entrenched in power then as it is now. There was, it was widely understood, no alternative for an ambitious man who wanted to make a difference.

In truth, as I too have been forced to admit, we are all our parents' children. That droll truism has, for me, been a hard thing to realize, yet as I grow older I see my parents' imprint in my thoughts and actions and I see the same parental influences shaping Neville Chamberlain. Like his father, Neville was a Unitarian who had lost his faith. From childhood onwards he never voluntarily attended a church service (except funerals) and refused to describe himself as either religious or a Christian. When pushed, he preferred to call himself a 'reverent agnostic', again just like his father. He did, however, hew to the general principles of the Unitarian faith. He rejected the absolutist claims of all creeds and idealized the principle of personal independence, personal responsibility and personal discipline. He always remembered his father's advice to tell the truth,

to do what he was told, to only question instructions after the fact, and, most importantly, that whatever he did he should do it well.

Like his father, Neville also entered the metalworking business in Birmingham where he spent nineteen quietly prosperous years as managing director of 'Hoskins and Sewell Ltd, manufacturers and patentees of all classes of metallic ship berths and portable wood cabins', whose most notable client had been the great ship Titanic. And like his father, who as mayor had pioneered what was then termed municipal socialism, Neville first committed himself to making an impression in local government, rose to become Lord Mayor of Birmingham, and helped found both the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra where Britain's best conductor, Sir Simon Rattle, first came to prominence. He also displayed an innovative approach to finance when he established a local council-backed municipal bank that could provide ultra-cheap loans to trusted local businesses. Reflective of his desire to improving the lot of the working man, Neville also took a particular interest in public health, and in his spare time he served as a trustee of the local general hospital. It should not, therefore, be surprising that he first came to national prominence as minister of health, a post he held almost continuously from 1924 to 1931.

Chamberlain never thought of himself as a socialist and he never favoured free health care for all, but he did believe that it was both in the national interest and, crucially, a moral duty to ensure that all working men were well enough to keep on working. As one of his relatives put it rather neatly, 'we always understood as children that as our lives had fallen in pleasant places it behoved us the more to do what we could to improve the lot of those less happily placed.'

Chamberlain's priority was, therefore, to develop the government-subsidized system of health insurance that had been pioneered in Germany in the 1870s by Bismarck and brought to Britain in rudimentary form just before the First World War. Making the national health insurance system work, just like making a hospital work, was humdrum, painstaking and perfectly suited for a politician like Chamberlain who cared about getting the little things right. Not far from where I teach in London is a solitary plaque to his efforts. It commemorates the beginning of construction of the School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine which has, ever since, served as a centre of training and research into public health and rare diseases. Chamberlain had never obtained a university degree but he believed in education and in training a new corps of doctors who would advance British medicine. The small plaque, placed low on the side of the building, stating that... is testimony to the enduring legacy of that ambition.

Ultimately, however, Chamberlain was aware that real progress could only be made if there was sufficient money to pay for it. He lived in a time when governments still believed in paying down their debts as quickly as possible and a government was expected, at least in peacetime, to balance the books. That challenge was particularly acute when Chamberlain became Chancellor of the Exchequer and took charge of the government's finances in 1931 in the depth of the Great Depression.

The financial agony into which Britain and much of the western world had plunged threatened all of his efforts as earnest philanthropist and minister of health. Britain, which had already faced down a general strike in 1924, was confronted by increasingly

bitter labour unrest and a sense of gloom that the promise of a better life for those who had fought the First World War had been betrayed. Chamberlain's solution to the financial crisis was three fold. First, he made sure the pain was shared around as he slashed the salaries of government bureaucrats who had previously been exempt from the cutbacks that had been forced on the government by the reduction in tax revenues.

Secondly, Chamberlain focused on reducing the punishing debt burden through a complicated series of renegotiations. Fellow governments, notably Roosevelt's administration, offered no relief but private banks proved more accommodating as they grew more confident that Mr Chamberlain would not preside over a government default. Interest rates on government bonds were brought down from over five to a more manageable 3 percent and the amount of government revenues soaked up by debt repayment was halved, and as a result of all this the government budget was returned to surplus.

The final prong in Chamberlain's economic trident was to strictly correlate an increase in government spending with a broader upturn in the economy. His generosity was directed once again at working men, boosting unemployment benefit on the grounds that men who could not find work through no fault of their own were deserving of generosity. He also devoted considerable resources to home building, slashing restrictions and subsidising a building spree by local councils.

Under Chamberlain more houses were built than in Britain in the 1930s than in any other decade of the twentieth century. It was then that metroland emerged fuelled by the spread of the London tube system and electric railways that promised the quiet of the

newly constructed village within easy reach of the centre of the great metropolis. It was the 1930s when London and other British cities swelled outwards into the countryside.

I live part of the week in Oxford which is about 50 miles from central London. A return ticket on the train costs close to 100 dollars so when I can I take the bus. For the first forty miles we head down the motorway, through green fields, but then 10 miles from the centre of London we hit the houses Chamberlain built. The roads are spacious, and through the gaps splashes of green, parks, squares become occasionally visible. But it is the houses themselves that dominate, row upon row crowned by their then necessary chimneys, functional but with a hint of elegance even grandeur that became a marker of what it meant to be middle class. By the 60s such houses seemed dated, by the 90s drab and unfashionable. And now it is bijou apartments and executive housing that are the hallmarks of Britain's upwardly mobile classes.

But even for the poet John Betjeman, Chamberlain's houses evoked not only nostalgia but also a certain joyful optimism when he wrote of what he called metroland that had been built over old rural England for the sake of modern housing. The first verse of his poem about Middlesex, an old county on the northwest edge of London that was transformed into a gigantic suburb in the 1930s is worth quoting. He wrote of one particular newly built station:

'Gaily into Ruislip Gardens runs the red electric train  
With a thousand Ta's and Pardons, daintily alights Elaine,  
Hurries down the concrete station, with a frown of concentration,  
Out into the outskirts' edges,

Where a few surviving hedges,  
Keep alive our lost Elysium – rural Middlesex again.'

Chamberlain, however, even his father's son still hewed to the old liberal creed of progress at all costs. He loved the countryside, was an avid bird watcher, adored attending flower shows, and even carefully recorded the wildlife that visited the garden of 10 Downing Street, the official residence of the prime minister but at heart he was an urban man, for whom the countryside was a curiosity, a distraction.

Those who actually work in the countryside, I often find, see the land without either pity or romance; nature is a challenge to be overcome, tamed and made profitable; it is the urban dweller who tends to take a palpable curiosity in nature as a hobby, delights in all its glorious variety, or worries unendingly about the fate of the countryside. Betjeman, who chronicled in his poems the disappearance of rural England, ensconced himself in central London, Chamberlain too went out for hikes or shoots but he was, at heart, always a city man. The first thing he always carefully copied into each fresh diary were the train timetables that he used to take him back home to his beloved Birmingham.

One thing Chamberlain was not was naive. If there was more money in the government's pot it had to be spent not only on making life better but on preparing for the worst, and in the 1930s the worst meant war. Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini, war in Abyssinia, war in Manchuria. And as Europe entered into a new arms race, Chamberlain made sure Britain did likewise. It was with the money that Chamberlain prudently invested, that Britain obtained, for example, a first class air force with a first rate radar system that

would help win the air war with Germany in 1940. To build those magnificent spitfires that would win the Battle of Britain took, however, time and that was one reason for appeasement. As Churchill himself said of the pilots in 1940, 'never in the field of human conflict had so much been owed by so many to so few'. The great orator left unmentioned, however, that it was Chamberlain whose sound budgeting and policy of appeasement had given those pilots their marvellous flying machines.

To put it bluntly, had war come two years earlier, as the opponents of appeasement such as Churchill had wanted, there is a very good chance that Britain would have been defeated. In 1938, as Chamberlain was fully aware, Britain wasn't ready for war. He couldn't say so but he knew so. There weren't enough planes and not enough pilots. The reports he commissioned as prime minister from the military experts spelled out the need for more money, more investment and, above all, more time. The private cabinet debates were equally revealing. Britain simply lacked the means to fight a foreign war. Even in September 1939, when Britain declared war on Germany there was nothing she could do to save Poland except carry on rearming and prepare for future conflict. And we should make no mistake, Hitler wanted war in 1938. He was privately furious with that 'man with the umbrella' who had made a deal with him in Munich had averted, if only temporarily, a new global conflict.

There was, however, a larger reason why Chamberlain chose appeasement. He knew how painful a war could be. He lost relatives in the first war and everything told him the next war would be worse. At a speech he gave in 1939, he warned his audience what a new war could be like. 'How horrible' he declared 'that we should be trying on

gas masks'. The expectation that aerial bombardment would be aerial gas bombardment was ingrained in military planning. Through 1938 and 1939 the population of London and other cities was trained in the art of putting on a gas mask. When war finally broke out, all children were evacuated from London on the assumption that the entire city would be gassed and depopulated. The Second World War turned out to be dreadful, but Chamberlain and many of his contemporaries expected it to be worse.

To endure the horror of war required, in a democracy, a rock-solid belief that it was right to fight. That the death and destruction could be justified by one single phrase – it was worth it. Had Chamberlain gone to war to prevent German soldiers reoccupying the demilitarized German Rhineland in 1936, or gone to war in 1938 to prevent Austrian Germans uniting with German Germans, or gone to war to prevent 3 million Czechoslovak Germans being incorporated into Germany, or gone to war in 1939 to prevent the rump dictatorial Czechoslovak state being broken up, would the British people have felt their sacrifice was worth it? Would they have really endured six years of conflict for, as Chamberlain put it at the time of the Czechoslovak crisis, 'a faraway country about which we know nothing.'

In fact, by allowing Hitler's ruthless ambitions for unlimited conquest to be fully exposed, Chamberlain was able to convince himself and the British people that the second world war was a war worth fighting. As he put it in his most belligerent speech, given in 1940 to a meeting of evangelical churchmen 'Every day that passes gives us some new demonstration of Germany's utter disregard of religion, of mercy, of truth and of justice. If they were to triumph in

what they are doing, why then every fortress which has been built by civilization upon the principles of Christianity would go down and the world would relapse into that barbarism which, until a little while ago, we thought we had buried under centuries of progress.' It was this apocalyptic vision of a clash between progress and barbarism, good and evil that had been revealed by the patient policy of appeasement and ultimately made all the sacrifices bearable.

I am no pacifist. I grew up firing toy weapons and when my mother took them away from me I fired wooden spoons and anything else that looked to me like a rifle, pistol or sub machine gun. I supported each of the military interventions that the west has waged in my lifetime and I still defend the wars in Korea and Vietnam as the right thing to do in the circumstances.

But I have also come to believe that war must only be used when every other method has failed. That it must never be rushed, and that diplomacy is always worth trying. Surely talking to our enemies is precisely why we have diplomats or are they only there to make nice with our friends? And if talking leads to concessions, deals and even bouts of false optimism, so be it. In the long run we can only say that war is justified, if we have truly tried and truly excluded every other option; and exhausting every other option is another way of describing appeasement. It isn't easy, its often messy, but it is, and it was, necessary to keep the public resolute after war finally broke out. Chamberlain died in the dark days of 1940 and never saw the final victory in 1945 but in preparing Britain militarily and morally he did as much as Churchill to make that victory possible. It was not, however, to Chamberlain but to his greatest critic that the power and the glory would be given. Please don't misunderstand, there is much

too admire in good old Winston Churchill. The sight of that photo of him, in his three piece pinstriped suit chomping on a cigar while clutching a tommy gun always makes my heart beat a little faster. The new Oscar winning film of him in Britain's darkest hour is superb. I encourage you all to see it. But as someone who still believes in the virtue of appeasement, may I ask you, my fellow literarians, please don't forget poor Neville.