

# Anyone for an enema?

*Henry 'Chips' Channon*

*The diaries 1938-1943*

Edited by Simon Heffer

London: Hutchinson, 2021, h/b, £35.00

## Simon Matthews

This is 1000 pages long. The opening 500, covering 1938-1941, contain the meat and potatoes. This was when Channon, as Parliamentary Private Secretary (PPS) to R. A. Butler, Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, held a significant post (albeit he calls it fagging) and featured much in Conservative counsel. Because the Foreign Secretary, Lord Halifax, sat in the House of Lords, Butler as deputy had an unusually important role in the Commons, thus enhancing Channon's position. The second 500 pages, 1941-1943, find him on the back-benches and with little to no influence, especially after the entry into the war of the Soviet Union and the USA. This part reads like an extended gossip column and, indeed, it is here that his path crosses the writers of such columns Tom Driberg (p. 579 onwards) and Godfrey Winn (p. 587 onwards).

The cast of characters is amazing. Kings, Queens, Ambassadors, Dukes, Duchesses, Cardinals, Generals, lots of young men, handsome soldiers, composers, ballet dancers and most of the political elite flit across the pages. 'Chips' was the ultimate well-connected society observer; and a wealthy Anglo-American too,<sup>1</sup> a sub-group to whom the English aristocracy were much attracted, then and now. Throughout all of this, unimpeded by a world war and rationing, he parties hard. Keeping up with his endless social activities (he is always dining, noon and night, and continually drinking) brings to mind the observation of how difficult it would be for any reader to try and emulate the alcohol intake of James Bond, and remain sober.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> In the book he calculates his income at £8,000 p.a., about £1m now. On 25 February 1941 he notes he is overdrawn by £14,000, equivalent to about £1.75m now.

<sup>2</sup> Bond's creator Ian Fleming is encountered here on p. 150.

The text of the diaries is peppered with racism, antisemitism and snobbery, as well as a sneering disdain for the lower, and particularly middle classes. Some of this was typical for the times, and especially typical for a Conservative MP. But despite it I ended up disliking him less than I imagined I would. He writes well (he published two novels and a study of the Bavarian royal family early in his life) and the outrageous, repulsive, gossipy tone would make a terrific Radio 4 Book at Bedtime, delivered in the style of Oscar Wilde. Which, given we meet Wilde's nemesis, Lord Alfred Douglas, on several occasions (from p. 874 onwards), is not a particularly fanciful notion.

Leaving the politics to one side, there is also much to ponder here about the repressed sexuality of the English ruling class. Channon was clearly gay by preference and bisexual in practice. The diary confirms he had a physical relationship with Prince Paul of Yugoslavia and also details numerous bedtime manoeuvres with Alan Lennox-Boyd MP, his brother-in-law. It also transpires that Channon, who enjoyed a good enema, had marked sado-masochistic tendencies. After an enquiry from a constituent as to whether he was a freemason, he notes: 'I thought that I should enjoy the masochistic initiation ceremonies, I think!' (22 October 1938). He later comments 'I would have done anything, given anything, to be taken into the woods here, stripped and then whipped by a fat middle aged severe woman!' (2 May 1942).

All of which means that the overall tone here is less grim than the subject matter and the peculiarities of the cast would suggest. In the purely political sphere this contains much valuable material. But does Channon put down everything he knows, hears or considers on paper? It appears not. Some matters were still so sensitive as to be only committed to memory or communicated verbally. For instance, he gives a seemingly excellent eyewitness account of the heady debates and events of 2 and 3 September 1939, the fraught hours between the German invasion of Poland and the UK's declaration of war. However, Heffer notes (p. 200) about the entries of 2–25 September 1939 inclusive: 'The original MS for these days is missing, so cannot be checked for accuracy or to see what may have been edited out.' Similarly, Channon says nothing of note in his record of 24–28 May 1940, the period John Lukacs covers in *Five Days in London: May 1940*,<sup>3</sup> and a moment when Churchill came close to having to allow peace talks with Germany via Italy. Finally, there is no mention at all here of what happened on 7 June 1940, when R. A. Butler asked

---

<sup>3</sup> London: Yale University Press, 2001 – the definitive account of Churchill becoming PM.

Kenneth de Courcy to sound out Germany for peace terms via US Ambassador Joseph Kennedy. Nor of 17 June 1940, when Butler met Prytz, the Swedish trade envoy, and discussed the generalities of a peace deal. As Butler's PPS it is inconceivable that Channon did not know of these events. A clue as to why this is being avoided comes on p. 387 (25 August 1940) with the entry 'I am burying another tin box containing my Diaries for the first year of the war.' Clearly, he was worried that some of what he was recording might be found out.

What we do learn, and what is confirmed, are the attitudes toward Nazi Germany that prevailed within much of the UK political class during the high-water mark of appeasement, 1938-1939. The events of Kristallnacht, a mediaeval-style pogrom with 91 murders, 638 suicides and 30,000 arrests, don't evoke very much solidarity. Channon commented (15 November 1938):

'Hitler never helps us and always makes Chamberlain's task more difficult. One cannot say so, but the sympathies of many people are not altogether with the unfortunate Jews.'

As events unfold, the Fuhrer's inability to make things easy for Chamberlain and his supporters causes much distress. Re: Neville Henderson<sup>4</sup> we learn (10 January 1939):

'Henderson was scathing and suggested that there ought to be concentration camps in this country to get rid of the govt's enemies!! [. . .] Henderson went on, praised Goebbels slightly; but remains true to Göring whom he definitely likes.'

For Channon it was the case (14 March 1939) that 'Hitler is never helpful – to his friends!'. For R. A. Butler (15 March 1939) it was even worse: 'Rab [familiar name of R. A. Butler] is in a rage, too, with recent events, indignant at Hitler's methods, rather than with his accomplishments'. Attacks on innocent civilians and the dismembering of sovereign nations caused little concern, it would seem. International law and the rights of small nations get an equally short shrift, with the entry (9 April 1939): 'Why shouldn't Italy take Albania, a bandit infested little country anyway?'

Attempts to accommodate Germany accelerated in the final months of peace. On 11 May 1939 Channon notes:

'Between us, Buccleuch and us, we have stopped this rot of expelling

---

<sup>4</sup> Henderson was UK Ambassador to Germany 1937-1939. Most accounts of the period ascribe naivety to him in his dealings with the Nazi regime. What Channon has recorded him as saying seems to suggest otherwise.

further Germans from this country. He says that at no time in all history has a foreign statesman gone out of his way to be so complimentary about England as was the Führer in his great Reichstag speech . . . . He is right.'

Another entry the same day states:

'I saw an unexpected letter at the Foreign Office. Halifax has arranged for Queen Mary to have copies of all confidential telegrams sent abroad.'

Really? The Queen Mother was being given all the UK's diplomatic correspondence? This suggests something afoot at the highest level, given the remarks in Karina Urbach's *Go Betweens for Hitler* p. 190:<sup>5</sup>

'In many ways, Queen Mary is the main link to the network her sons Edward VIII, the Duke of Kent and George VI had with Germany. This aspect has never been analysed, though. Letters from German relatives to Queen Mary or copies of her letters to them for the period after 1918 are not made available by the Royal Archives.'

On what basis was the Queen Mother reading all this material? Was she telling anyone else about it?

Of equal interest is the entry for 30 June 1939:

'I was lucky tonight as The Evening Standard has got hold of Geyr's secret visit to Ronnie Brocket's house where Walter Buccleuch and I met last Friday . . . Brocket and Buccleuch are both mentioned – but not me.'

'Geyr' is General Leo Geyr von Schweppenburg, formerly German military attaché to the UK (1933-1937) and, at the time of this visit, commander of the Third Panzer Division, the largest and best equipped formation of this type in the Wehrmacht.<sup>6</sup> Presumably this meeting discussed the UK abandoning, or seriously modifying, its guarantee to Poland, made three months earlier by the Prime Minister. Channon must have been at this meeting with the agreement of Butler, although his name is not mentioned.

There are more twists and turns. On 27 July 1939, in the midst of the London season – a succession of sumptuous balls and banquets,

---

<sup>5</sup> Published 2015 by OUP and the best account to date of the intricate royal networks across Europe that attempted to broker an arrangement between Nazi Germany and other countries both before and after 1939.

<sup>6</sup> Schweppenburg had no significant links with the anti-Nazi German resistance.

eloquently described here – we learn that Lord Chatfield, Minister for Co-ordination of Defence, has had ‘a confidential and secret talk’ with Prince Paul of Yugoslavia, facilitated, again, by Channon. Chatfield came to the meeting accompanied by his son-in-law Patrick Donner MP.<sup>7</sup> Donner was part of the Swedish-Finnish dynasty of the same name and, in the 1920s, had been a member of the British Fascists – at that point an ultra-right, authoritarian, extreme-nationalist pressure group within the Conservative party. MP for Basingstoke from 1935, his candidacy for that seat had been privately endorsed by Sir Oswald Mosley, which seems to confirm that Mosley and the British Union of Fascists had a small group of proxies operating on their behalf within Parliament.

None of this chatter came to anything. There was nothing on offer from Hitler that anyone could reasonably regard as a compromise, and there was now a large and vocal anti-fascist grouping in Parliament and the country as a whole. Channon, in some despair at such events, seems to have twigged as much by 2 August 1939 with his remark that ‘England was alright when she was ruled by the aristocracy, but these democratic demagogues will be her undoing.’

## **War**

**T**he outbreak of war changed little: the appeasement narrative instead became a defeatist narrative, in which Channon and his colleagues sought to extract the UK from hostilities. This view had sufficient support at the upper levels of government for peace talks – or rather talks about talks about peace – to take place. We learn (28 September 1939):

‘The “Walrus” is in London. He arrived today by plane and this time his visit is known to Hitler. Halifax and others are seeing him this afternoon. No one knows of this.’

The Walrus referred to here is Birger Dahlerus, a friend of Herman Goering, who met with Chamberlain, Halifax and Cadogan at this time. He conveyed to them the German terms for an end to the war: Germany to have returned to it the former German areas of Poland; a rump Poland to be allowed to exist thereafter, subject to its neutrality and use by Germany as an area where Jews could be resettled; Germany to either have her former colonies returned to her, or be given compensation for them and a promise of no further aggression. It seems that this had some

---

<sup>7</sup> For more on Donner and Mosley see Stephen Dorril, *Black Shirt: Sir Oswald Mosley and British Fascism* (London: Viking, 2006) p. 364. Donner’s Finnish connections are interesting given the Borenus and Ramsay missions to the UK, from Finland, in early 1941.

appeal to HMG.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the day that Dahlerus had his opening talks, the UK announced that it was suspending construction of the battleships Lion and Temeraire. In the days that followed, Channon notes (1 October 1939) 'I had a secret rendezvous at, of all places, Madame Tussaud's' – an event about which no further details are given. After which Hitler, in a Reichstag speech, confirmed a peace 'offer' (6 October) and Germany cancelled the construction of two battleships of its own (10 October 1939).<sup>9</sup>

### **Or peace?**

**W**as peace about to break out? There seems to have been quite an argument internally in the UK about this at the time. Butler, Lord Dunglass (Alec Douglas-Home) and Channon all thought the German proposal worth following up. Chamberlain didn't. Eventually (12 October) Chamberlain rejected the approach as too vague, whilst making it clear that the UK was no longer seeking anything specific for either Poland or Czechoslovakia. This was something Channon clearly disagreed with, noting on that day: 'Rab agrees with me . . . . He thinks the war a huge mistake.'

The intrigues continue. The Duke of Kent makes the first of many entries at this time on 19 January 1940 when we learn

' . . . the D[uke] of Kent suggested a walk. We drove in his Bentley for a bit, then parked the car by Regent's Park and went for a long hike for nearly an hour in the intense cold.'

We're not told what they were talking about privately for an hour. Channon is too loyal (and too careful) a courtier to dispense with *omerta*. A fortnight later he writes (2 February 1940):

'Michael Duff has made an ass of himself in Paris by going about saying that he was on an important mission . . . . The French government complained of his chatter and feverish activities: his journey there was taken on behalf of the Imperial Policy Group . . . .'

This is interesting. The Imperial Policy Group were long involved with

---

<sup>8</sup> Since 1936-1937 there had been discussions about Poland becoming a monarchy with the Duke of Kent installed as King. Had this happened it would have become the fourth nation in Europe, after the UK, Bulgaria and Belgium, with a ruling house from the Saxe-Coburg-Gotha family.

<sup>9</sup> The reciprocal cancellation of UK and German battleships at this point – a matter overlooked elsewhere – does suggest that both countries wanted to ensure that they looked serious to the other, during these talks, without jeopardising their eventual outcome.

attempts to extract the UK from a European conflict both before and after 1939. They advocated that Hitler should be appeased by almost any method – including allowing him to exterminate Bolshevism without hindrance. The only condition, it would seem, was that the security of the British Empire was not affected. Channon dismisses the notion that Duff was on any kind of ‘important mission’, but it is worth noting that Sir Michael Duff was Queen Mary’s godson.<sup>10</sup>

### **Churchill becomes PM**

Churchill’s elevation to PM hardly changes anything. Although Halifax was replaced by Eden as Foreign Secretary on 22 December 1940, both Butler and Channon remained in situ until 20 July 1941. Not that loyalty figured very much in their views, with Channon writing (5 September 1940) re: Churchill and Eden:

‘. . . they represent nothing [. . .] we must lie low, work openly with (and secretly against) them – perhaps for years. But true Conservatism will triumph once more in England.’

Treachery of this kind, with a strong defeatist flavour, was seemingly quite widespread in their circles – all the way to the very top. During the chaos at Dunkirk, we learn (29 May 1940) ‘Lord William Scott is also being much criticized as he spreads defeatist rumours and that we shall not retrieve our men in France.’ This is Lord William Montagu-Douglas-Scott, Conservative MP for Roxburgh and Selkirk and brother-in-law to both Lord Dunglass (Alec Douglas-Home) and Prince Henry, Duke of Gloucester. Later, with Dunkirk coming to a conclusion Channon himself wails (2 June 1940) ‘Are we witnessing, as for so long I have feared, the decline, the decay and perhaps extinction of the great island people?’ A few days earlier he had seen Edward Rice, a brother-in-law of Lady Cynthia Mosley, deep in conversation in the House of Commons tea room with James Maxton, Independent Labour Party (ILP) MP for Glasgow, Bridgeton and assumes they are up to something. He confirmed this (24 June 1940) with the comment: ‘Edward Rice came to see me: he is deeply involved in peace propaganda and is alleged to be strongly pro-Nazi. I don’t know: he always praises Hitler in conversation’. We’re not told, of course, what Rice was talking to him about, or on whose behalf he was acting. Even Sir

---

<sup>10</sup> Duff, whose 1936 marriage was annulled in 1937, also enjoyed dressing up as Queen Mary. See Adrian Tinniswood, *The Long Weekend: Life in the English Country House Between the Wars* (London: Cape, 2016) p. 252. An outré account of Duff’s sexuality is at <<https://tinyurl.com/ybusyrpc>> or <<https://www.popmatters.com/charles-duff-charleys-woods-interview-2513315502.html>>.

William Spens, Master of King's College Cambridge and Regional Commissioner for Civil Defence for East Anglia, shares the general pessimism, with Channon reporting (3 August 1940) 'he is disturbed, too, by "the position". He is anti-Churchill, and thinks we should have answered Herr Hitler succinctly. He is rather defeatist [. . . .] All hope for England ended when Neville resigned, he said.'<sup>11</sup> In this instance, answering Hitler succinctly means responding positively to the 'terms' Hitler offered in a speech on 6 July 1940.

Most interesting of all though is the record of his talk, whilst sharing a Turkish bath, with Sir Louis Greig (3 July 1940):

'Louis Greig . . . . is pro-peace; and he added that the King must go to Canada [. . . .] He added that if Winston were to be "bumped off" the heart of resisting spirit in this country would be pierced. Perhaps!'

Greig was very close to George VI, serving as one of his Gentleman Ushers. Between 1934 and 1935 he had been a member of Sir Oswald Mosley's January Club, a discussion and fund-raising group that aimed to attract establishment supporters to the British Union of Fascists.

### **Royals and peace plans**

**All** of which brings us to two closely intertwined themes running through Channon's 1940-1941 entries: the Royals and peace plans. The Duke of Kent features prominently in the former category. On the evening of the day that Channon and Greig had their Turkish bath comes this entry:

'We listened to the midnight radio . . . and there was an account of the sinking of the Arandora Star, a huge ship which was taking 1,500 internees to Canada. It was torpedoed and there were indescribable scenes of confusion and fighting between the Italians and Germans, many of whom were themselves probably refugees. The Kents, he especially, seemed jubilant by this unexpected turn of fate . . . .'

Yes, this is the Duke of Kent laughing about Italian and German internees (most of whom were either non-political or anti-fascist) being drowned after their ship is sunk by a German submarine. And there is more. At one of their many dinners, the Duke (4 December 1940) 'ran down nearly everyone including the King of Greece'. Hardly a sensitive remark either, given that at this point Greece was fighting Italy and therefore an ally of

---

<sup>11</sup> Spens opposed guerrilla warfare (i.e. continuing resistance after a Nazi invasion) on the grounds that this was 'contrary to international convention'. See Malcolm Atkin, *Fighting Nazi Occupation: British Resistance 1939-1945* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword Military, 2015) p. 7.



the UK. The *coup de grace*, trumping Greig's remarks in July, comes two days later via the Duchess of Kent:

' . . . the Duchess of Kent and Zoia [de Stoeckl] walked in [. . .] she [de Stoeckl] had sat next to the King at dinner . . . he seemed uneasy about the govt, thought that there must be changes etc. When she asked him who he would send for, if ever Winston resigned, he said "Rab Butler." . . . he said that there was a precedent, his father had sent for Baldwin who was not very well known . . . . But the king thought the moment had not quite come . . . . Rab was young, but the King wondered, was he "sound" about Russia?'<sup>12</sup>

By which we must assume that what is meant is (1) Churchill was not considered, by many influential people, to be an effective Prime Minister; (2) discussions had been held and a precedent found for replacing him with R. A. Butler; and (3) the time for doing this was not immediately, but whenever an unspecified event occurred which led to an awkward political situation, requiring an intervention by the Crown.

What might such an event be? Obviously, a military reversal . . . either of a severe magnitude on its own, or of a less severe magnitude but coupled with some kind of fresh approach to (or from) Germany. Such a scenario fits perfectly with the fall of Greece (April 1941) and the arrival in the UK of Rudolf Hess (May 1941). Before examining that again, however, why was George VI worried about Butler not being 'sound' about Russia'? This brings us to further material – not, it would seem, in the public domain previously – about peace deals.

## **Talking to the Soviets**

**O**n three separate dates there are entries referring to meetings between R. A. Butler and Maisky, the Soviet Union's Ambassador to the UK: 'lunched at the Yugoslav Legation [. . .] a little later Maisky and Rab retired into an adjoining room and continued their confidential conversations'. (16 July 1940) This was followed by 'Maisky and Rab were closeted together for nearly two hours!' (3 October 1940) and concluded with 'Rab had a long conference with Maisky this afternoon; the filthy communist was rude, pessimistic and obstructive'. (27 November 1940) What were they discussing? Channon doesn't say. He must have known,

---

<sup>12</sup> Zoia de Stoeckl and her husband Alfons Poklewski-Koziell, were Russian-Polish nobility. Close to the Duke of Kent, she held a senior position in the Polish Red Cross and had lived at Lancut Castle, near Rzeszow, formerly in Austria-Hungary, at the time of the Duke of Kent's visit there in 1937.

though. Presumably something that he would not wish known to a wider audience. Maisky kept a diary too, and remarkably there are gaps for all of these dates. Whatever Butler was seeking to involve the Soviet Union in, it was something about which the Soviet Union wanted to ensure there was no written record. Given the traditional solidarity between Russia, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia (previously Serbia), this suggests that it was unlikely to be anything about forming a common anti-German front in the Balkans. Clearly it was something that Butler and Channon were keen on, given how irritated they were when the Soviets refused to play along with their request. I am inclined to think that it may have been a concerted effort to try and get the Soviet Union to engage with Germany about allowing some kind of independent Polish state (minus its former German elements) as a prelude to the UK withdrawing from the war. The difficulty in accomplishing this may explain why the King was wondering if Butler was 'sound about Russia'. Did the King think Butler might have either overplayed or underplayed his hand?

Alongside these unknown discussions Channon had other interesting meetings. On 5 November 1940 we hear that 'Kenneth de Courcy dined secretly at B [Belgrave] Square with Rab. I arranged this tete-a-tete.' After which (13 November 1940) 'I drove Rab to Albury'. This is Albury Park, a country house near Guildford, Surrey. Owned by the Duke of Northumberland, it was shared at this point by Jacobo Fitz-James Stuart, Duke of Alba, the Spanish Ambassador,<sup>13</sup> and Helen Percy, the Duchess of Northumberland, Mistress of the Robes to Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon, the Queen. According to Channon, the Duchess of Northumberland 'ranted against the Socialists' during the course of the evening.<sup>14</sup> What was Butler discussing with de Courcy and what did Butler talk about with the Duke of Alba? We aren't told.

Kim Philby noted in his *My Silent War* (1968) that the Spanish diplomatic bag during the Second World War was regularly accessed

' . . . and from it [we] learnt that Alba periodically sent to Madrid despatches on the British political scene of quite exceptional quality. As we had no doubt that the Spanish Foreign Ministry would make them available to the German allies, these despatches represented a really serious leakage. Yet there was nothing that could be done.

There was no evidence that the Duke had obtained his information

---

<sup>13</sup> For those interested in such matters, Stuart was 'a Royal' too: the Jacobite claimant to the UK throne.

<sup>14</sup> Her husband, the Duke, died in 1930. He had owned and financed *The Patriot*, an anti-semitic conspiracy theory journal promoting the theories of Nesta Webster.

improperly. He simply moved with people in the know and reported what they said, with shrewd commentaries of his own.'

Did the Duke of Alba ever report the views of the Duke of Kent via the diplomatic bag?

On 29 November 1940 Channon receives an urgent message from Prince Paul, Regent of Yugoslavia asking him to travel to Belgrade. He didn't fly out until the 16 December, and then by a convoluted route that took in Lisbon, the Canary Islands, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, the Sudan, Egypt and Greece. He is away until 20 February 1941.

This section of the book, covering some 50 pages, is a brilliantly written piece of travel writing. It is clear that Channon enjoys the chance to visit Prince Paul; en route he also meets and stays with the King of Greece. If his visit to Greece and Yugoslavia was anything other than a personal break, we aren't told. On the other hand, this seems a dangerous enterprise to embark on as a holiday during a war. Was there another purpose? Given the comments of the King (6 December), could he have been asked to make the trip to pass on messages about the thinking in the UK about replacing Churchill? If so, Channon would then have been able to report back on the opinions of those in Europe who might assist in such an ousting. This may not be as fanciful as it appears. Although the request from Prince Paul predated the King's remarks, they followed the conclusion of a visit to Berlin by Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov and a cooling in German-Soviet relations. Hitler duly issued his formal directive to prepare for war against the Soviet Union on 18 December, but had already indicated that he would do as much as far back as 21 July 1940. Knowledge about a forthcoming invasion of the Soviet Union were widely known about from August that year, including among figures within the German resistance.<sup>15</sup>

Equally, although Churchill only formally committed the UK to sending an expeditionary force to Greece on 8 January 1941, with Eden in Belgrade discussing the practicalities of this on 13 January. However such a venture had been talked about by Churchill since 22 October 1940 – six days *before* Italy attacked Greece. In summary, both Hitler's intention to invade the Soviet Union and Churchill's intention to commit UK forces to the Balkans were known about prior to Channon's summons to Belgrade.

Given the attitudes that Channon's social set vent in their unguarded

---

<sup>15</sup> For foreknowledge of the attack on Russia, see Joachim Fest, *Plotting Hitler's Death: The German Resistance to Hitler 1933-1945* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1996) p. 170.

moments, one might conclude that Hitler's venture (the crushing of communism) was one they wanted to succeed, while Churchill's was one they wanted to avoid – on the not unreasonable grounds that it was likely to result in a significant UK defeat. Thus, when Prince Paul the Regent of Yugoslavia 'prayed that England would not do anything rash like sending troops to Greece; that would only bring the Germans southwards further into the Balkans', he was making a point that had many supporters. Among the guests Channon met in Belgrade was Prince Carl of Toerring-Jettenbach, husband of Princess Elizabeth of Greece and Denmark, and brother-in-law of the Duke of Kent. Channon records (15 January 1941) that Toerring-Jettenbach left for Munich shortly after their meeting.

### **Duke of Hamilton**

**A**fter Channon's return to the UK the Duke of Kent features again. We are told (17 March 1941) 'the Duke has privately approached him [R. A. Butler] and asked his aid in arranging a trip to America [. . .] Rab approached Winston who was adamant: the Duke could not go'. The next day we writes 'the Duke and Rab had a confidential talk'. By way of explanation, we are told the Duke felt under-used in the UK and wanted to help the war effort by touring the US. It is worth noting that had he been sent he would have flown the Atlantic in stages, with the first stop being in Lisbon. Reading this alongside Padfield's *Hess, Hitler and Churchill* <sup>16</sup> is striking. Padfield notes (p. 106) re: the Duke of Hamilton, Lord Steward of the Household:

' . . . it was not until nearly the end of February that Hamilton received a letter from Air Intelligence inviting him to a meeting in London; not until mid-March that the meeting took place and the Duke was asked if he would like to go to Lisbon to meet Haushofer, and "see what its all about". His response was not enthusiastic.'

Albrecht Haushofer, a personal friend of the Duke of Hamilton, was a German peace emissary, and part of a right-wing conservative grouping that wished to extricate Germany from a war against the UK prior to any attack on the Soviet Union. It would seem that the Duke of Kent's interest in travelling via Lisbon arose at exactly the same time (mid-March 1941) that the Duke of Hamilton was asked to travel to Lisbon to meet Haushofer. Had either of them actually made the flight, with non-combat wartime flights quite scarce, they might even have flown on the same plane.

---

<sup>16</sup> Peter Padfield *Hess, Hitler and Churchill: The Real Turning Point of the Second World War – A Secret History* (London: Icon, 2013)

It's hard not to conclude that this is what the Duke of Kent really wanted to do. If it wasn't, why did he have 'a confidential talk' with Butler? Through March-April 1941 there was an immense amount of speculation about peace talks occurring in either Lisbon or Madrid involving Rudolf Hess, Samuel Hoare, Admiral Canaris (who suddenly decided to have a holiday in Spain in April 1941,<sup>17</sup> much as Channon had visited Greece and Yugoslavia a few months earlier), Ulrich von Hassell, the Duke of Kent, the Duke of Hamilton and Prince Max Egon zu Hohenlohe-Langenburg. It is hard to be certain who was supposed to be meeting whom (and where) when considering these reports. Some of this may just have been wartime rumour; but what is attested to, in archives other than those held in the UK, are discussions with and involving Samuel Hoare, by the ambassadors and ministers of neutral states, about his being summoned back to the UK to take over the government.<sup>18</sup>

Notwithstanding the King's apparent preference for Butler as a replacement for Churchill – for whom the war continued to go badly – Hoare can't be ruled out as a possible substitute PM.

After the loss of Yugoslavia, and with Greece collapsing, Channon records (22 April 1941):

'Erskine-Hill came to dine . . . As Chairman of the 1922 Committee he holds a certain position in the party . . . Jay Llewellyn also here and we had the usual political discussions. They all think that John Anderson will be the next PM; I suggested Menzies.'<sup>19</sup>

Are we discussing here the 'soundings' taken within the Conservative party prior to the 'emergence' of a new leader? Quite possibly. Channon's

---

<sup>17</sup> Bassett (see note 25) p. 218 records that Canaris stated, after arriving in Belgrade: 'I can stand no more of this. We will leave tomorrow for Spain'. The precise date is not certain. However, Belgrade fell to the German army on 12 April 1941. Canaris presumably arrived a day or two after that, and then left for Spain circa 16 April.

<sup>18</sup> In this context note that that Archibald James, Conservative MP for Wellingborough 1931-1945, was a friend of R. A. Butler, and served as Honorary First Secretary, British Embassy in Madrid 1940-1941, whilst still an MP. In other words, Hoare, Butler and others had a trusted link to Madrid during a period when the chances of a compromise peace were high. After 1945 James moved to Southern Rhodesia and was prominent there in the white settler community before retiring to Worthing. Channon records a meeting with him and Butler, on 19 September 1940, at which the chances of peace are discussed.

<sup>19</sup> Sir Alexander Erskine-Hill, Conservative MP for Edinburgh North 1935-1945, and Chairman of the 1922 Committee 1940-1944. Jay Llewellyn is John Llewellyn, Conservative MP for Uxbridge 1929-1945, and later Governor of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland 1953-1957.

suggestion, Robert Menzies, Prime Minister of Australia and by virtue of that a Privy Counsellor, is interesting. In the UK January-May 1941, Menzies attended war cabinet meetings and was known to Channon as an enthusiastic appeaser: he wanted the UK to end its war with Germany so that Japan could be confronted effectively in the Far East. His candidacy had other supporters too, including David Lloyd George and Lord Beaverbrook.<sup>20</sup>

## **Replacing Churchill – Hess arrives**

**B**y late April 1941, then, we have a narrative which confirms that discussions were quite advanced on replacing Churchill, with the King aware and involved. All that was needed to trigger this in a legitimate fashion (leaving aside Greig's comments about having the PM 'bumped off') was an event that would create an awkward domestic situation for Churchill. Enter, at this point, Rudolf Hess and his flight to visit the Duke of Hamilton. On this matter Channon's diary suddenly becomes utterly anodyne and offers nothing that even the keenest detective (or conspiracy theorist) might think odd. What does raise one's eyebrows, however, is an entry for May 9 1941, the day before Hess departed, which states:

' . . . a cryptic cable came. "Mrs Woolly well now at Berchers" – I tried to understand. It can only mean that Toto Toerring is attached to Hitler and is staying at Berchtesgaten. After all he is a German and has always been a Nazi at heart. So why shouldn't he? I am not surprised. I shall tell nobody.'

We are not told who this cable was from or how it reached Channon – hardly surprising given that communicating with the enemy was an offence in wartime. What is curious, even allowing for that, is why he needed to know that 'Mrs Woolly' (Princess Elizabeth of Greece and Denmark)<sup>21</sup> was staying at Berchtesgaden. This was neither remarkable nor surprising. Both the Princess and her husband, Prince Carl, were part of the Bavarian Wittelsbach dynasty who owned much land and property in the Berchtesgaden municipality.<sup>22</sup> Did this cable mean something else?

---

<sup>20</sup> The notion of Menzies as an interim PM circa 1941-1942, allowing the UK to disengage with Europe and confront Japan in the Far East, is promoted by David Day in *Menzies and Churchill at War* (London: Paragon House, 1987). Channon's comments seem to bolster this assessment.

<sup>21</sup> Her nickname was due to her thick, dark brown hair.

<sup>22</sup> Channon had written *The Ludwigs of Bavaria* (1933), an account of the Wittelsbachs.

Given its date, was the message 'Mrs Woolly well now at Berchers' confirmation that Hess was about to fly to the UK?

If the events around Hess, the Duke of Hamilton, Duke of Kent and others in May 1941 were, say, a murder trial or an investigation into a bank robbery, peculiar diary entries by Channon – a very close friend of Kent – would be of interest to the authorities, who would question him closely as a possible accomplice. But it isn't. The Hess flight is treated, still, as a peculiar aberration by an eccentric with very little political hinterland – something for which the phrase 'more cock-up than conspiracy' is deemed appropriate. We know that Hess missed his landing place, got captured by the Home Guard and spent the rest of his life in prison. Trying to piece together what the intention of the scheme might have been remains difficult, particularly given the lack of key documents within UK archives (or the lack of access to the same).

Channon's diary does offer some additional evidence, though, that Hess was acting at the end of a chain of events that were designed to remove Churchill from power, and take the UK out of the war. Some might suppose that Churchill's refusal to let the Duke of Kent travel via Lisbon in March-April 1941 amounts to foreknowledge that Hess would make a flight to Scotland. There is no evidence this is the case. Others suppose that Hess's flight was part of a massive UK deception exercise, given that the Duke of Hamilton was asked to undertake a visit to Lisbon by the intelligence services. But did the intelligence services tell Churchill everything they knew?<sup>23</sup> What Churchill and his colleagues did know was that various people (some might even say 'the usual suspects', to quote the film *Casablanca*) were continuing to talk about peace in Spain, Portugal, Switzerland or Sweden. But people always do this in neutral countries during a war. The evidence we have suggests that Churchill didn't have specific information about Hess's actions.

In 1959, Heinrich Stahmer, Albrecht Haushofer's agent in Spain, claimed that meetings between Samuel Hoare, Lord Halifax and Rudolf Hess took place in Spain and Portugal between February and April 1941.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> On Stewart Menzies, Chief of MI6, Channon notes (5 January 1942): 'Stewart Menzies [. . .] is an old acquaintance and greeted me warmly [. . .] I found Stewart sympathetic and sensible [. . .] He is balanced and Conservative in his outlook.' Other accounts of this period indicate that Menzies knew both the Duke of Buccleuch and Kenneth de Courcy.

<sup>24</sup> Padfield (see note 16) pp. 138-139, using as its source material an affidavit sworn by Stahmer in Hamburg 20 May 1948 and a 1959 unpublished manuscript, also by Stahmer, *Wahrheit und Irrtum um Rudolf Hess (Truth and Lies about Rudolf Hess)*.

The Vichy press reported that Hess was in Spain on the weekend of 20/22 of April 1941. Richard Bassett records <sup>25</sup> re: possible peace talks: 'as the month of March gathered momentum it saw rumours of Hess imminently visiting Spain and Churchill being replaced "by some appeaser like Hoare"'. Bassett also notes that when Admiral Canaris, Head of Abwehr visited Spain (supposedly for a holiday) Ambassador Samuel Hoare absented himself from his duties at the same time. Proof that they met, substantiating Stahmer's claims, has yet to appear.

What Channon's diary strongly implies is that the Duke of Kent wasn't trusted. Which, given he was part of the UK's ruling dynasty, may well be the reason why this affair is still minimized in accounts of the politics and diplomacy of the time.

### **Game is up**

**T**he failure of the Hess flight did not end efforts by the UK appeasers to oust Churchill and reach a peace deal with Hitler. Although Russia became a valuable ally after 22 June 1941, Churchill finally moved R. A. Butler from his position as Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs on 20 July, with Channon losing his influential bag-carrying/fagging role at this point.<sup>26</sup> He went to the back benches and stayed there. But what would have happened if Russia had collapsed? By September 1941 Soviet army losses, in men killed, captured or deserting, had reached levels that no other country in history had sustained. Surely Moscow would fall, and with it the Communist regime? In this context we learn (31 October 1941) 'Beaverbrook [. . .] has been seeing Lloyd George. There are rumours of cabinet reconstructions, even of a pro-peace group.' But Churchill's luck held. In May-June 1941 he had controlled Hess's captivity and used UK Parliamentary powers to ensure that information about the flight, possible peace terms and anything else were restricted to the bare minimum, with the result that the Soviet Union entered the war before any significant faction could form against him. Now, somehow, he got through until the Soviet army counter-attacked before Moscow and the Japanese began their assault on Malaya, the Philippines and Pearl Harbour (5 December and 7 December respectively). No wonder, with announcements of these events being made to a crowded House of Commons on 8 December, Channon writes 'Russia saved the government in July; now Japan will do likewise'. He had enough political sense to know

---

<sup>25</sup> *Hitler's Spy Chief* (London: Pegasus, 2013) pp. 213-216

<sup>26</sup> Replacing him with Richard Law, Conservative MP for Kingston upon Hull SW and son of Andrew Bonar Law. A right-wing Conservative . . . but not an appeaser.



that the game was up. Churchill would survive and there was now little point in attempting to dislodge him. This was the end of appeasement.

But it wasn't the end of Channon's social life, as the final 500 pages of this account show, in some detail. Only a few political points occur in this trek through salons, dining rooms, country houses and restaurants. Both involve the Duke of Kent. His funeral (29 August 1942) was limited, by agreement, to family and friends only. There were no government representatives present . . . a highly unusual arrangement, then and now. Read into that what you will. Finally (14 January 1943) he notes 'I had a most astonishing conversation with Rab apropos the Duke of Kent.' Really? What on earth could that have been? Butler knew something about the Duke of Kent that Channon hadn't been aware of? Or vice-versa? No details are provided: Channon knew when to keep quiet. But his diary still contains much of interest to students of this period and Simon Heffer has done a very good job at presenting the material it contains in a fair and balanced fashion.

One more thing. Running through this account are echoes that have a contemporary resonance. Yes, Channon is a partisan observer and he dislikes Churchill intensely. But his descriptions of the man sound strangely familiar in 2022 . . . almost nobody in Parliament rates him, he has few real allies in the Commons, he has a tremendous reputation with the public, despite virtually everything he has done in his career being a disaster . . . the Dardanelles, intervening in Russia in 1919, the black and tans in Ireland, going back on the gold standard, the Abdication, Norway, intervening in Greece . . . he never really answers questions, offering instead an immense amount of literary obfuscation, he prefers to make speeches (which Channon admits are on occasion brilliant) and one wonders how much he actually knows about issues.

Given this, what would Channon have made of the pint-sized Churchill tribute act we have had as PM?

\*

Simon Matthews' latest book is *Looking For a New England: Music, Films and TV 1975-86* (Harpenden: Oldcastle Books, 2021)  
[www.oldcastlebooks.co.uk/LOOKING-FOR-A-NEW-ENGLAND](http://www.oldcastlebooks.co.uk/LOOKING-FOR-A-NEW-ENGLAND)