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Lord Beaverbrook: Historian Extraordinary

One hundred years ago William Maxwell Aitken was born in the village of Maple, Ontario. Not by this unremarkable name, however, did he make his mark on the twentieth century. To various famous people he became the one and only Max, a "foul-weather friend" on many an occasion. To the editor of *Debrett's* he was knight, baronet, first (and last) Baron Beaverbrook of Beaverbrook in the Province of New Brunswick and Cherkley in the County of Surrey. But to the world at large he was much more. Press magnate who built up the *Daily Express* and other newspapers, crusader for Empire, member of wartime ministries in both world conflicts, adviser and friend of prime ministers, and, by no means least, ineffable mischief-maker in British politics. In truth this product of a rural Ontario manse became, in his own words, "a somebody." Though he has been dead these fifteen years, his soul goes marching on. Nor is this too surprising, even if Fleet Street is beginning to forget and other things are gone forever. It happened that in the last years of his life Beaverbrook made a name for himself as an historian. "In ten years' time," he wrote to Charles Wintour in 1963, "if I am remembered at all, it will not be for my newspapers. It will be for my books."¹ These were prophetic words indeed. Lord Beaverbrook's revealing treatment of high politics in Britain during the Lloyd George era earned him a reputation that is scarcely diminished today.

There were several reasons for this success. He had become something of a legend in his own lifetime, in part the result of his accomplishments in publishing and government. It was also a case of fame by association, for he had long been close to Winston Churchill and other great figures of the age. Beaverbrook was not the least bit reticent about his importance and his connections. In the Introduction to one of his books he wrote: "It may be asked: 'Were you there?'" And in answer to his own question there followed a resounding "I was there!"² Then too there was his distinctive literary style—vigorous, pithy, candid, dramatic—fortified by his own vivid recollections of men and events which he rein-

forced from a wealth of private papers. Foremost among the collections which he acquired, and used extensively, were the papers of two prime ministers, David Lloyd George and Andrew Bonar Law. In 1956 at the age of seventy-seven Lord Beaverbrook had his first great success with *Men and Power, 1917-1918*, which was followed by several lesser volumes on other subjects and then in 1963 another singular triumph with *The Decline and Fall of Lloyd George*. Other volumes on inter-war politics were contemplated, although by now he was an old man and could scarcely hope to see them accomplished. It was the praise showered upon *Men and Power*, however, that encouraged Beaverbrook to take another step. Impatient that historical writing was a slow business and wanting to score again, he decided on a second edition of his one substantial work of earlier days, *Politicians and the War*. It is this book that throws a most interesting light on Beaverbrook as an historian.

The reappearance of *Politicians and the War* nearly thirty years after the initial two-volume edition was Beaverbrook's own inimitable way of saying "I told you so." It had been coolly received in those far-off days. In fact as a piece of serious historical writing it was definitely a non-starter. Only a handful of English newspapers thought otherwise, and their praise was qualified. The *Manchester Guardian* was content to say: "A lively and intimate record of events." The *Daily Telegraph* went little further: "A lively narrative, full of intimate personal touches." And from the *Yorkshire Post*: "Of outstanding importance for one peculiar feature: its devastating candour." The *New Statesman's* praise contained a sting: "An extremely revealing document. Seldom has political intrigue been so candidly described by one of its chief promoters." In other words, *Politicians and the War* contained a lot of good stories about important people, those who had figured in the fall of Herbert Henry Asquith in 1916 and the rise to the premiership of Lloyd George, but amounted to little more than that.

Only one or two risked the opinion that the book would prove of lasting value. The *Sunday Times* ventured that "Lord Beaverbrook's lively narrative will be part of the evidence on which the historian will pass judgment." And J.L. Garvin, loquacious and outspoken editor of the *Observer*, commended the work as "vivacious, minute, ironic. It is certain to live like Walpole and Wraxall, Croker and Creevey; or like some French memoir of the revolutionary and Napoleonic epoch." Yet it is doubtful if this encomium had much effect, for Garvin's influence had waned of recent years. Probably most people in those depressed times agreed with the *Birmingham Gazette*: "What does it all matter now?"

Evidently this was the opinion of the serious reviews, which passed Beaverbrook's effort over in silence, including the two heavyweights among academic journals, the *English Historical Review* and the *American Historical Review*. Of course the professional historians, still convinced that history ended in 1901 (or was it 1878?) had no time for the brash amateur writing of recent events from his own experience. Certainly not one whose chief claim to fame in their eyes was ownership of the *Daily Express* empire.

Beaverbrook's decision to bring out (in one volume this time) a second edition of *Politicians and the War* in 1960 was more than justified. Times had changed greatly and brought renewed interest in the First World War, a conscious recognition that this was the great watershed of modern history. Now reviewers tumbled all over each other to shower compliments upon this long-neglected *exposé* of strange goings-on in high places. "Terse as Sallust, pithy as Clarendon," enthused John Raymond. "A classic," wrote Michael Foot, adding that it "combines a real appreciation of the grandeur of human courage with an almost feline understanding of the weaknesses of human nature." A.J.P. Taylor made his point succinctly: "Tacitus and Aubrey rolled into one." More unusual perhaps was Paul Johnson's "an historical Ian Fleming without the sex." All this was most gratifying to the author, and it looked as if Garvin's estimate had been vindicated after all. Clearly the pendulum had swung the other way with a vengeance, perhaps too far. If so, much of the credit can go to one of the most powerful historians of our day, A.J.P. Taylor, with whom Beaverbrook formed a close friendship late in life. Admittedly this relationship did not lead to blind adulation in the very rich biography that appeared in 1972. Taylor gives enough glimpses of how Beaverbrook wrote history to make the reader more than a little wary. This is titillation. Though compelled to question some of Beaverbrook's methods and pronouncements, his esteem for the old man (they were kindred spirits), coupled with the conviction that "the enduring merits of the book are really beyond cavil," allowed Taylor to pass lightly over some things that might be deemed unacceptable in someone else. Thus his assessment of *Politicians and the War* is only a partial antidote. Other historians should not be content to leave it at that. A closer look at the available evidence concerning December 1916 may serve to counter some of the intoxicating effects of Beaverbrook's heady prose. And to the great advantage of objectivity and historical accuracy.

Taylor admits frankly that Beaverbrook was not unbiassed in his portrayal of all the men and all the events. He points out that the various

drafts of the book reveal how the author's mind changed during the 1920's as he assumed the role of hagiographer to his dead friend, the Unionist Party leader Bonar Law. The process of revision is certainly an interesting study in itself. Beaverbrook began with three pages of rough notes which he jotted down soon after the crisis, probably during Christmas week of 1916. Next, likely within a month or two, came a 47-page document in two parts, apparently dictated, and entitled 'Report on Cabinet Crisis 1916'. Some time later, still during the war years it seems, he employed a 'ghost' to give literary form to his tale, now rechristened 'History of the Crisis' and approaching book length. From then until publication of the first volume in 1928 and the second (which is the heart of the story) in 1932, he made successive revisions and additions as fresh material reached him and as his own feelings about the crisis congealed into a certain form. Inevitably there were many differences between the published work and the earliest drafts, not merely in terms of detail but also in perspective. The end result saw some of the participants in Asquith's overthrow come out of it well, others badly.

The method chosen to unveil the second volume of *Politicians and the War* was somewhat unusual to say the least. In the concluding paragraph of the first volume Beaverbrook had written: "All that happened to produce the change of Government in the autumn of that year [1916] I wrote down at the same time in something approaching a diary form."⁴ As we have seen, the 'diary form' consisted of three pages of rough notes scribbled down three weeks after the crisis had run its course. Doubtless this gave him an idea. This was to serialize the second volume in the *Daily Express* before the book was placed on the market. Perhaps a good story—and Beaverbrook always loved a good story—could be made even more striking in this fashion. But now the qualifying words 'diary form' were dropped, and the first instalment was heralded with the pronouncement: "This diary, in narrative form, was kept all through these dramatic days." Essentially the same words were used over successive excerpts, and the reader could hardly fail to conclude that he was getting the inside story from the man on the spot, and written at the time. Taylor makes no attempt to shield his subject's use of this device, remarking drily: "No diary has survived, and it is as certain as any negative can be that none ever existed."⁵ Perhaps the only explanation of the 'diary' tactic is that on this occasion Beaverbrook the newspaperman triumphed over Beaverbrook the historian. It did little to enhance his credibility in the latter role.

No great amount of research is necessary to show that at times Beaverbrook's approach to factual precision was very casual. The Nigeria

Debate is but one example. This occurred on 8 November 1916 and was a celebrated trial of strength in the House of Commons between the supporters of the coalition ministry (which was headed by Asquith and included Liberals, Unionists and Labour) and its opponents. In fact since the real parliamentary opposition at this time consisted of disgruntled Unionists under the Ulster chieftain Sir Edward Carson, the debate threatened to split the Unionist party in disastrous fashion. By devoting an entire chapter of *Politicians and the War* to the Nigeria Debate, Beaverbrook placed heavy emphasis on one point, namely that Bonar Law was in a position where he must resign if a majority of his own party went into the opposition lobby on a crucial vote. He wrote that when the coalition government was formed in May 1915 Bonar Law had said to his party:

I say quite plainly that if I found that in this new position I had lost the confidence of our party I should feel I was of no further use to the Government. Certainly, so long as I myself believe that, whatever its defects, I can see no better way of carrying on this war, I should not oppose it, but if the party to which I belong had lost confidence in me I should not for a moment dream of continuing to be a member of the Government.⁶

This seems clear, if somewhat heavy on the personal pronouns. But did Bonar Law ever use such words to a party gathering? It is true he addressed a Unionist meeting on 26 May 1915 and his speech was fully reported in *The Times* next day. Nowhere, however, did he say anything that came close to the words quoted above. Yet it is most unlikely that such a commitment would have gone unreported or unremarked. There was another party meeting at the Queen's Hall on 9 August 1916 when Bonar Law attempted to pacify his uneasy followers and justify continuance of the coalition. Possibly this is what Beaverbrook had in mind, though again one searches in vain for this passage. If the words in question were never used at a party meeting, where did Beaverbrook get them? Perhaps they were used in private within his hearing. A likelier possibility is that they were fabricated to suit the story. An essential feature of Beaverbrook's tale was that a political situation existed, or might exist momentarily, that had been foreshadowed eighteen months earlier. Thus for Bonar Law the hour of decision was at hand when he must resolve to break the old regime lest the coalition as constituted under Asquith should drag the country down until the war was lost. This is compelling and dramatic. It is even more dramatic when the force behind the scenes turns out to be Sir Max Aitken himself.

A firm, resolute Bonar Law was therefore conjured up by Beaverbrook. In *Politicians and the War* the Unionist leader is made to appear strong and clear-headed, determined from an early stage of the crisis to back Lloyd George through thick and thin. Though matters reached a climax in the days of 5-7 December, when Asquith resigned and Lloyd George emerged as prime minister, the pace had quickened appreciably by 30 November. It was then Bonar Law revealed to his chief Unionist colleagues a scheme for a three-man 'war council', consisting of himself, Carson, and with Lloyd George as chairman, which would have overall control of the direction of the war and in effect supersede Asquith. From this point in the story onwards, Beaverbrook strove to mould Bonar Law in the image of a strong man. Accordingly his readers were treated to sentences such as these: "Bonar Law made it perfectly plain that he was not going on under the existing system of war control." (p. 365); "Bonar Law stood to his guns." (p. 367); Bonar Law acted "with a cold determination." (p. 381); "Bonar Law had gone so far that on parting with his colleagues he had left them with the impression that he would either have the war council or resign." (p. 385); "He had overcome his distrust of Lloyd George [by 1 December] and was genuinely on his side in the struggle." (p. 390). There were others in similar vein.

What actually happened was rather different. On Wednesday, 29 November, the day preceding the confrontation between Bonar Law and his colleagues, the cabinet had agreed in principle to scrap the old war committee, which was a kind of inner cabinet, and establish instead a two-committee system, one to handle the military and the other the domestic side of the war effort. Bonar Law now suddenly woke up to the fact that he was trying to ride two horses at once. A two-committee system was diametrically opposed to the three-man omnipotent 'war council' idea. Thus he had some explaining to do to his Unionist colleagues. Clearly the meeting of 30 November was not a happy occasion, the other Unionists reacting violently and accusing him of "ruining the Conservative Party by dragging it at the coat-tails of Lloyd George."⁷ Beaverbrook devoted twenty-three pages of his book to this encounter and the arguments Bonar Law was supposed to have used. By contrast, Bonar Law himself, in a lengthy account of the crisis which he dictated at the end of December 1916, did not so much as mention the stormy encounter of 30 November. It appears that Beaverbrook's version, in particular his analysis of the workings of Bonar Law's mind, is excessively contrived. For the truth was that Bonar Law, far from making up his mind irrevocably on that Thursday, had edged away from Lloyd George and was trying to put further distance between them. Or

as Beaverbrook himself admitted in his original account of the crisis, he was "clearly inclining in the Prime Minister's [i.e. Asquith's] direction."⁸ Taylor puts it more forcefully: "Law continued to hesitate until 5 December. But that did not suit Beaverbrook's later presentation of him as hero and was therefore obscured."⁹

In another sphere Beaverbrook was unusually well qualified to write with authority. This concerned relations between politicians and the Press. For he himself was a great 'press lord' with a host of political contacts, and an ex-minister of information in Lloyd George's coalition government into the bargain. It is therefore instructive to observe how his true relationship with the *Daily Express* at the time of the 1916 crisis was deliberately blurred. He wrote in *Politicians and the War*: "I did not at that time own the controlling shares of this newspaper."¹⁰ In fact he had acquired full control of the *Daily Express* on 14 November 1916, after exerting considerable influence over the editor, R.D. Blumenfeld, for several years. This sheds much light on the role played by that newspaper in bringing the crisis to a head. As an instance, on Saturday, 2 December, the *Daily Express* and the larger and more influential *Daily Chronicle* blazoned forth identical stories. Each proclaimed with great certainty that a situation had arisen in Downing Street and Westminster out of which was likely to come a new body to run the war. Clearly these effusions were inspired by someone behind the scenes. Beaverbrook claimed it was solely his doing, and that he had acted for the best possible reason: "To the man in the street, who was heartily tired of the incompetence exhibited in high places, their news contained the hope of salvation. The revolting section of the Press was viewed as a benefactor."¹¹

He was at pains to point out that this manoeuvre was executed without the sanction of the man who would be chief beneficiary of a palace revolution, Lloyd George. In other words, where the *Daily Express* and *Daily Chronicle* stories were concerned, Lloyd George was not guilty of "trafficking with the Press", a charge frequently levelled against him (and with good reason). If so, then Beaverbrook deserves much credit for all that happened subsequently, as the news stories of 2 December speeded up the process that led to Asquith's fall. Taylor accepts this, saying Beaverbrook wished to guard against Lloyd George's disapproval. "If Lloyd George, as seems likely, aimed at an amicable arrangement with Asquith, he would not want publicity which might provoke a crisis."¹² But Beaverbrook was determined to blow Asquith sky-high and therefore had to act without Lloyd George's knowledge. Looking back more than a decade later, Beaverbrook was convinced he

had manipulated Lloyd George into a position where either compromise with Asquith or retreat would be virtually impossible. Plausible enough, perhaps, but from what we know of Lloyd George and his methods it is more probable that the impulse for the stories in the two popular dailies came from that worthy himself. He recalled very clearly how in May 1915, when a coalition replaced the old Liberal government, newspaper publicity had forced Asquith to make swift changes to forestall a dangerous crisis. The same thing might be effected again. Therefore Lloyd George's campaign for a small 'war council' would not be hurt by publicity at this moment. On the contrary, since on the previous day he had given Asquith an ultimatum which might well lead to his own resignation, it was crucial for his position that the reasons for such an action should be known and understood. There is no evidence that Lloyd George at any time showed annoyance with Beaverbrook for priming the Press, yet the *Daily Express* story could have been the work of no other person. Thus it seems likely that Lloyd George was cleverly using Beaverbrook all the time, or at the very least that collusion existed between the two.

There is greater certainty about other features of the news stories of 2 December. Beaverbrook quoted at some length from the *Daily Express* and then added: "The suggestion of a new War council was made, and the names mentioned in this connection were those of Lloyd George, Bonar Law and Carson." His next sentence read: "The *Daily Chronicle* on its front page also voiced general dissatisfaction with the conduct of the war, and put forward the same list of names for the War Council."¹³ It is quite true that the *Daily Chronicle* published the same list of names as the *Daily Express*. But in each case there were *five* names, not three: Asquith, Lloyd George, Bonar Law, A.J. Balfour (first lord of the admiralty and ex-Unionist prime minister), and Carson. This puts a very different light on the matter, and it is clear that Beaverbrook was falsifying for the sake of his story. Other features of the *Daily Express* story are worth noting as well. Since one of the chief aims of Lloyd George and his fellow schemers was to rid the admiralty of Balfour, whom they deemed a failure there, why should a paper owned by Beaverbrook name him to an all-powerful 'war council'? Secondly, the *Daily Express* quoted with evident approval a remark by Arthur Henderson (Labour's lone member of the cabinet) that "Mr. Asquith is the indispensable man to lead us to the end of the war and lead us successfully." Either Beaverbrook and Blumenfeld were of different minds (which seems highly unlikely) about the absolute necessity for ousting Asquith and Balfour, or else Beaverbrook's own mind was not nearly so clear as he would have us believe in *Politicians and the War*.

Other events which were shaped to suit the author's purposes produced equally unhistorical results. On Sunday, 2 December, there occurred a celebrated wrangle between Bonar Law and several of his Unionist colleagues. This resulted from publication that morning in *Reynolds's Newspaper*, a popular weekly, of a sensational story that Lloyd George was about to resign from the government. Insiders guessed, correctly, that Lloyd George had inspired the story, since he and the proprietor of *Reynolds's* were old cronies. The effect was that of a bombshell dropped into a delicate political situation. Since the previous Thursday the Unionist members of the cabinet had been on tenterhooks, trying to decide if Bonar Law was going to join Lloyd George in a venture that might wreck not only the Asquith coalition but both old parties, Liberal and Unionist, as well. It seemed their worst suspicions were confirmed, and now they confronted Bonar Law in their fury.

What followed occupied fully a chapter in *Politicians and the War*, testimony to the importance Beaverbrook attached to this encounter. There was a reason for this. By the time he was ready to publish, Beaverbrook had determined to exalt Bonar Law. In order to make his dead friend look rather better and more heroic, it was necessary to make some others look rather worse. Accordingly four of the leading Unionist ministers—Lord Curzon, Austen Chamberlain, Lord Robert Cecil and Walter Long—were pilloried as well-meaning but obtuse men, blindly attached to Asquith and completely unable to grasp that Britain could be saved only if Lloyd George and Bonar Law were put in charge. So Bonar Law “stood absolutely alone” on this Sunday, while opposed to him were ranged “the whole array of Tory leaders” who were “more Royalist than the King [i.e. Asquith].”¹⁴ Despite these and similar graphic phrases, other sources make it clear that Beaverbrook presented a very distorted picture of the situation in the Unionist camp on this Sunday morning. The fact was that, far from being enamoured of Asquith, the four offending Unionists thought there was little to choose between him and Lloyd George. What they wanted was an arrangement of offices in which they would have maximum influence irrespective of who was prime minister. This is evident enough from the contemporary letters of Curzon and Chamberlain. Between Bonar Law and his colleagues there was certainly a considerable gulf; but not because he wanted Lloyd George and they wanted Asquith. Their solution to the political crisis was one in which they would count heavily in a reconstructed ministry and where Bonar Law (whom they loved not) would be of little significance. This is what angered Beaverbrook and prompted him to lash out as he did.

Unionist ministers were not the only ones to suffer at his hands. Where leading Liberals were concerned (excluding Lloyd George), surmise and prejudice sometimes took the place of analysis and evidence, with results that can only be described as fanciful. A good example of bias against Liberal ministers is found in Beaverbrook's handling of the events of Monday, 4 December. The previous evening Asquith had announced that the government would be reconstructed, and of course this appeared in all the Monday morning papers. The Press release, said Beaverbrook, was a "disastrous statement" which

came as an absolute bombshell to the greater part of the political world. It brought the politicians out the following Monday morning buzzing like so many flies. Downing Street was besieged. Imagine the surprise of the Liberals—of Asquith's colleagues and intimates!¹⁵

Certainly this makes a vivid picture, and many writers have accepted it quite uncritically. Factually it is a little weak, however. To conceive of the dignified aristocrats and luminaries who constituted much of Asquith's cabinet as "buzzing like so many flies" requires no little imagination, especially as some of them had not yet returned to town from the week-end. Contrary to Beaverbrook, it is quite certain that Asquith saw none of his ministerial colleagues, Liberal or Unionist, on this Monday morning. Contemporary accounts by several cabinet ministers make no mention of such a meeting, nor do the records of Asquith's secretary, Bonham Carter, or the secretary of the war committee, Maurice Hankey. One newspaper, the *Evening News* of 4 December, said flatly: "There was no meeting of Ministers at 10 Downing Street this morning, and the Prime Minister had no important visitors."

Yet Beaverbrook built an elaborate structure on the premise that Asquith was swayed by the arguments of his ministerial colleagues on the fateful Monday morning before deciding to do battle with Lloyd George. Until then, his story goes, the old prime minister had been willing to attempt some compromise with Lloyd George's 'war council' scheme. Now he was besieged by his colleagues, mostly Liberals, who urged him to stand and fight. It was the knowledge acquired on Monday morning of "the number and strength of his own adherents and of their implacable hostility to Lloyd George" that decided Asquith to meet Lloyd George in mortal combat. Beaverbrook devoted eighteen pages to Monday morning, most of it a detailed analysis of Asquith's mental processes. This is always a daring thing to attempt; usually it sheds more light on the historian than the subject. In this instance it simply

won't wash. Beaverbrook's account of what happened at 10 Downing Street on this day is largely imaginary. It is only necessary to go back to his own first version, the 'Report on Cabinet Crisis, 1916', where was written: "Simultaneously, during the day pressure was undoubtedly brought to bear by his [Asquith's] Liberal colleagues."¹⁶ In other words, Beaverbrook was only guessing from the start what ministers were doing, and nothing he wrote later was able to transform this into incontrovertible fact. Why he did as he did can only be seen as another attempt to put down those ministers he disliked intensely.

One famous Liberal, however, an ex-minister at the time of the December crisis, fared considerably better at Beaverbrook's hands. And where the name of Winston Churchill is concerned, inevitably much interest is aroused in a reader. Churchill had been out of office for a year and in bad odour because of the Gallipoli disaster, yet he burned with desire to hold high office again. This might be his moment. Beaverbrook was a friend of Churchill and as such was loathe to publish anything that would reveal the other man in a poor light. Yet there were things he longed to tell. Thus the results were sometimes curious. For instance in *Politicians and the War* great emphasis is placed on conversations which took place at Cherkley, Beaverbrook's Surrey home, between Churchill, Bonar Law and F.E. Smith (the attorney-general and a close friend of Churchill though a Unionist). This was on the week-end of 11-12 November. By Beaverbrook's account a violent exchange between Churchill and Bonar Law made up his own mind that the time had come when Asquith must yield control to a Lloyd George - Bonar Law war ministry. Since he took considerable credit for all that happened subsequently, clearly Churchill's powerful oratory was a major factor in Beaverbrook's decision to work for all he was worth for Asquith's downfall. In fact, Beaverbrook saw the occasion through quite different spectacles when first he wrote of it:

Bonar Law suggested that he would force an election. This statement upset Churchill very much. He seemed agitated ["defeated" had been stroked out] and to foretell from it disastrous consequences to whatever views or plans he holds to. I am not certain what these are. The majority of people think they are purely selfish and interested, but while not taking that view I am at a loss to explain them.¹⁷

Hardly a heroic picture of a strong man at a critical moment in Britain's fortunes, so Churchill's image was polished up with successive drafts of the book. Something similar occurred with regard to an incident on Saturday, 2 December. That afternoon Churchill happened to

run into Beaverbrook, who described their meeting as follows: "Churchill was almost wistfully eager for news. It struck me forcibly as being so much out of character for him not to be in the very centre of events."¹⁸ Once again Beaverbrook was letting a friend down lightly. In the proofs (which he had submitted to Churchill for comment) there had been a sentence to the effect that he was unable to satisfy Churchill's curiosity on this occasion because he had no idea where he stood in relation to Asquith and Lloyd George. In other words, Beaverbrook proposed to tell his readers that he was unsure whether in the last resort Churchill would throw his weight behind Lloyd George and Bonar Law or whether he might rejoin Asquith. The implication was clear: Churchill wanted to back the winner. Churchill must have objected strenuously to this story appearing in print, for he made some comment in the margin of the proofs (which regrettably has been torn away, presumably by Beaverbrook's hand). However, the point was clear enough in the original 'Report on Cabinet Crisis, 1916', where Beaverbrook had written: "Winston was eager for news but I wouldn't and couldn't give him any with safety." So it may not have been wholly due to Unionist hostility that Lloyd George left Churchill out when he formed his administration.

A more amusing example of concealing the full truth concerns the story of a dinner party on 5 December, the day Asquith fell. This has been told in full elsewhere,¹⁹ but the main points can be stated briefly. Late that afternoon Churchill and F.E. Smith were at the Turkish Bath of the Automobile Club when the latter rang up Lloyd George to remind him that he was to dine at Smith's house that evening. On learning that Churchill was with Smith, Lloyd George immediately suggested that he be included in the dinner party. Not unnaturally Churchill jumped to the conclusion that he would be given office in the new ministry if Lloyd George were summoned by the King to succeed Asquith. The dinner party was a merry affair, for all present, and this included Beaverbrook, were in high spirits at the prospects before them. Lloyd George had to leave early, and he took Beaverbrook with him. In the taxi he commissioned the other man to perform a most invidious task. He was to return to Smith's house and drop a broad hint to Churchill that he would not be a member of a Lloyd George ministry. Beaverbrook did as he had been directed, at which Churchill exploded: "Smith, this man knows that I am not to be included in the new Government."²⁰ Thereupon he strode into the night, hatless and coatless, disregarding Smith's pleas to remain.

A.J.P. Taylor and others accept this story as it stands. Upon comparing it with earlier drafts, however, it is apparent that Beaverbrook had decided not to tell all. Clearly he and Churchill had had some harsh words for each other, which portrayed Churchill in particular in a very unflattering way. In the proofs Beaverbrook had sentences such as these: "Then he abused me in unmeasured terms and I made lame and halting replies in kind." And, "Churchill had called me bright and early in the morning [Wednesday] on the telephone. He wanted to apologize for the abuse he had given me the night before."²¹ Though Churchill protested vigorously when he saw the proofs, saying that their enemies like Stanley Baldwin and Neville Chamberlain would get huge pleasure out of this revelation, Beaverbrook refused to excise it altogether. He did, at least, make enough changes so that Churchill was partially mollified. But the untold story was undoubtedly a far more accurate version of what really happened at F.E. Smith's dinner party.

As a final instance of Beaverbrook's preference for the good story over strict veracity, the tale of his peerage is unbeatable. This has been fully dealt with by Taylor in his biography and can be summarized in a few words.²² In *Politicians and the War* Beaverbrook had described how, on the day after Asquith's fall, his own part in the crisis seemed finished. No more interviews, no more telephone calls, no more the busy go-between. He thought he had been promised high office as president of the board of trade, but was mortified to learn that it had gone to another. Finally Bonar Law appeared upon the scene with the offer of a lesser position which Beaverbrook had no wish to accept. There was, unfortunately, a complication. On the assumption that he would receive the board of trade, he had informed his constituency association, for in those days acceptance of office meant that an M.P. must stand for re-election. So, the story went on, he now telegraphed his wife to stop the campaign which she had promptly begun on his behalf. Two days later Lloyd George offered him a peerage and that seemed to be the end of the matter, his work for the new chief duly rewarded. But Beaverbrook represented a constituency in Lancashire, whose uncrowned king was the great territorial magnate the Earl of Derby. Derby now protested strongly to Bonar Law that other Lancashire M.P.s had better claims to a peerage than did Beaverbrook, so Lloyd George's offer had to be withdrawn. Then came a final twist. The newly-appointed president of the board of trade, Albert Stanley by name, needed a seat in parliament, therefore Beaverbrook would have to yield his to make way for the newcomer. So he was off to the House of Lords after all, but by now very much against his will.

Close examination of these few days in December 1916 revealed to Taylor that things had happened quite differently. In fact Beaverbrook had never been promised the board of trade, a far more important office that he had any right or reason to expect. There survive lists of proposed ministers, drawn up while Lloyd George was forming his government, and only once does Beaverbrook's name appear. This was a tentative suggestion that he be made a parliamentary secretary, a very humble office indeed. As for a peerage being offered, then withdrawn, and finally being forced on a reluctant Beaverbrook, all the evidence suggests that this was imaginary. It seems much more likely that he was immensely pleased and flattered at his elevation to the Lords, a remarkable triumph for a young Canadian who had arrived in England an unknown six years earlier. Taylor suggests that Beaverbrook made up the tale to take some attention away from his account of F.E. Smith's dinner party, perhaps to appease Churchill somewhat. And as for the version that appeared in *Politicians and the War*, Taylor concludes: "This is a good story in Beaverbrook's best vein, even though at his own expense, a price he was always prepared to pay for a good story. It is also a very unlikely one."²³ We may add that the inclusion of this curiosity in a biography is only proper, as it casts an interesting light on the subject. But for Beaverbrook to present it as unvarnished truth when purporting to describe accurately the events of December 1916 is something else again.

It may be argued that there is nothing particularly heinous in what Beaverbrook did in *Politicians and the War*. Could we not say, along with the *Birmingham Gazette*, "What does it all matter now?" Or else forgive his little ways for the sake of a richly entertaining account of a great political crisis? The short answer must be that it will not do. The Beaverbrook version of the fall of Asquith has just too many flaws—inaccuracies, biases, disregard of fact, elevation of fancy to the level of truth. Perhaps most important, it must be remembered that *Politicians and the War* has had a profound influence on British historical writing of the period. Roy Jenkins, who knows something of the subject, makes the essential point:

So completely has his account come to dominate the field, that his views of when and why Asquith or Curzon or Chamberlain acted as they did are now widely accepted as indisputable facts. Innumerable books on the subject . . . lean heavily, with or without attribution, upon Lord Beaverbrook's version. . . . It is therefore often the case that, at first sight, a statement appears to be overwhelmingly confirmed from about six dif-

ferent sources; but on closer examination the six "sources" all turn out to be subsidiaries of the central Beaverbrook fount. This does not matter so long as the original "fact" was within Lord Beaverbrook's field of highly reliable knowledge. It matters greatly if it began life only as a surmise.²⁴

Unquestionably Beaverbrook was very close to several key figures in the crisis, and therefore able to write of them as no other man could. On the other hand it is undeniable that he was very far removed from many of the others—chiefly Asquith and his Liberal colleagues (save for Lloyd George), but also such leading Unionists as Balfour, Chamberlain, Curzon and Lansdowne. Therefore he was not competent to speak with authority of their actions, let alone delve very deeply into their mental processes. Yet he did both, unhesitatingly and unblushingly.

The doughty Sir William Robertson, chief of the imperial general staff for much of the war, was wont to say when unimpressed with an argument, "I've 'eard different." Commendable words in certain circumstances. Notwithstanding the place Beaverbrook achieved as an historian of the Lloyd George era, it will be the wise reader who from time to time murmurs, "I've 'eard different."

NOTES

1. A.J.P. Taylor, *Beaverbrook* (New York, 1972), p. 619.
2. Lord Beaverbrook, *Men and Power, 1917-1918* (London, 1956), Intro., p. xliii.
3. Taylor, *Beaverbrook*, p. 102.
4. Lord Beaverbrook, *Politicians and the War*, 2 Vols. (London, 1928 and 1932), Vol. I, p. 227.
5. Taylor, *Beaverbrook*, p. 105.
6. Beaverbrook, *Politicians and the War*, One-volume edition (London, 1960), p. 288.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 366.
8. Beaverbrook Papers, House of Lords Record Office, London. Deed Box 4, Folder XXIV, 'Report on Cabinet Crisis 1916', Part II, p. 7.
9. Taylor, *Beaverbrook*, p. 113.
10. Beaverbrook, *Politicians and the War*, p. 396.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 399.
12. Taylor, *Beaverbrook*, p. 114.
13. Beaverbrook, *Politicians and the War*, p. 398.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 412.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 438.
16. Beaverbrook Papers, Deed Box 4, Folder XXIV.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
18. Beaverbrook, *Politicians and the War*, p. 406.
19. J.M. McEwen, "A Churchill Story: Dinner at F.E. Smith's, 5 December 1916", *Queen's Quarterly*, Summer 1976, Vol. 83, No. 2, pp. 273-77.
20. Beaverbrook, *Politicians and the War*, pp. 489-93.
21. Beaverbrook Papers, Deed Box 4, Folder XIV.
22. Taylor, *Beaverbrook*, pp. 121-24.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 122.
24. R. Jenkins, *Asquith* (London, 1964), pp. 422-23, n. 1.