

# HISTORY SOCIETY

## 'SIR EDWARD GREY AND THE MAKING OF MODERN BRITAIN'

Report by Simon Wilton

**S**ir Edward Grey was Foreign Secretary from 1905 to 1916 and thus in office at the time World War 1 started. He is mostly known nowadays for his remark when looking out from the Foreign Office in the summer of 1914: 'The lamps are going out all over Europe. We shall not see them lit again in our life-time'. As Professor Otte, in his lecture on 7 July, explained: 'Europe's descent into war left Grey with a sense of impending ruin of the civilised world'.

Yet Grey's public life was uncommonly interesting not just because of his role in guiding British foreign policy at a critical time, but also for the part he played in liberal Britain before the Great War, for the way he sought to learn from that disaster, and for the way he looked forward to the new and uncertain world it brought into being. He also had an unusual and accomplished life away from the FO desk.

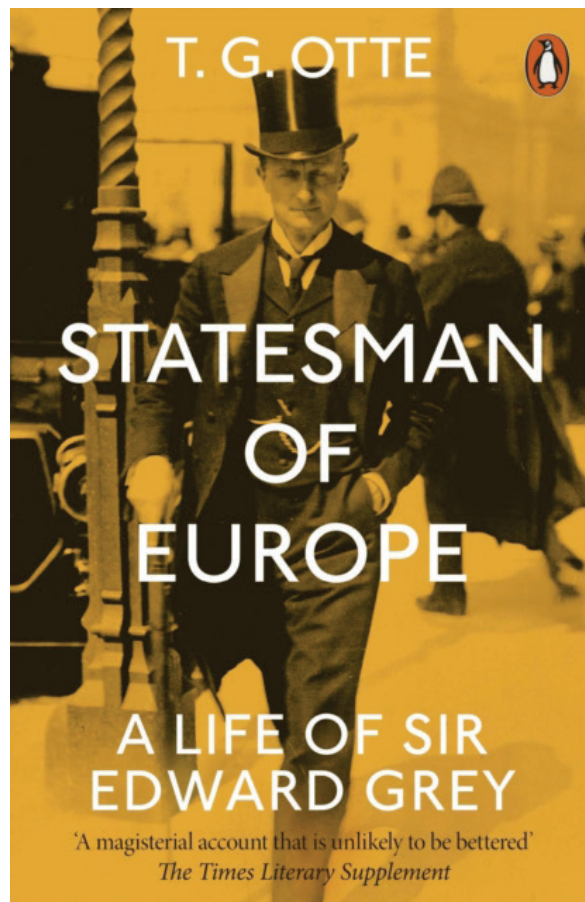
### THE BIOGRAPHY

Thomas Otte, Professor of Diplomatic History at the University of East Anglia, and a leading historian of Great Power politics, delivered a fascinating lecture on this and much else. He was very well qualified to do so by reason of the publication in 2020 of his acclaimed and highly recommended biography: *Statesman of Europe – A Life of Sir Edward Grey*. One impulse for the biography appears to have been the desire to set the record straight about Grey's achievements as Foreign Secretary, his reputation having suffered because of the highly critical account given by Lloyd George in his memoirs.

Professor Otte began by noting the critical view derived from Lloyd George and repeated by later historians, which blamed Grey for a supposed lost opportunity to avoid the descent into war. As a result, there clung to Grey 'the whiff of a civilian version of the "donkeys" that supposedly led the British army "lions" into the Great War, a gentleman unquestionably, well-meaning certainly, but unsuited ultimately to high office'. That criticism stuck in part because of Grey's aloof personality. But on closer examination there was little to disapprove of and much to praise, both in his work as Foreign Secretary and in his private interests.

### PRIVATE INTERESTS AND THE RISE TO HIGH OFFICE

Grey was a politician of the utmost personal integrity with a definite hinterland. He read widely, took a keen interest in literature and the arts, was very proficient at fly-fishing (he wrote a book on the subject), a keen ornithologist, a great lover of his native Northumberland, and somehow found time to be a director of the North Eastern Railway (which in a previous generation had provided a station serving the Greys' Fallodon estate in return for permission to build across the land). He was also a devoted husband until the early death of his wife, and a loyal friend. That was the measure of the man who took office at the time the European State system bristled with increasing hostility in the years leading to the Great War.



Professor Otte explained that Grey had an exceptionally long career at or near the top of British politics. First elected in 1885 at the age of 23 and representing the same Northumbrian constituency for 31 years, he made a name for himself as a young radical reformer, eventually becoming Foreign Secretary, an office he held for 11 years – the longest, continuous tenure of any Foreign Secretary. He then moved to the House of Lords, where he played an influential role until his death in 1933.

### THE LIBERAL IMPERIALIST

Grey was something of a paradox. Though rooted in 19th century Whiggism and driven by a patrician sense of public duty, he appreciated that his class was on the way out and part of his task was to smooth the ascent of working men representatives and middle-class professionals while maintaining the parliamentary system, and without interfering with individual liberty or introducing class politics. He was representative of the 'New Liberalism', a reform programme around 1900 that embraced the use of state power to ameliorate social ills. He was in favour of salaries for MPs and female suffrage and advocated educational and constitutional reforms and devolution in Ireland. In all such respects he displayed pragmatism rooted in realism, an acceptance of the facts of a given situation, and a realisation that ideas had to be put into practice and therefore reformers had to prove their competence if they wanted to change the country. To such an end Grey was very well suited because of his

widely-acknowledged integrity, and dignified simplicity. Professor Otte explained that Grey was a 'Liberal Imperialist', which did not imply a desire to expand the Empire but a desire to consolidate it and use it as a vehicle for reform. At the same time, he brought to the task of Foreign Secretary cautious instincts paired with shrewdness and practical prudence, free from the delusion that Britain was (or is) the pivot of international politics and that she could (or can) determine the policies of other countries or that they owe it to her to comply with her wishes. He was no Little Englander. Rather, he had a shrewd sense of Britain's strengths and limitations, and the range of practical options available to any British government.

### THE SITUATION BREWING IN EUROPE

It was not an easy time to be Foreign Secretary. There was no longer a functioning balance of power that kept the Great Powers in check. Britain's strategic calculation was complicated by the steep decline of Russia following its defeat by Japan and revolution in 1904-5 and then its resurgence after 1912. Russian weakness meant that Britain had to tack closer to France to shore up the Franco-Russian alliance, as a way of balancing Austro-German power, albeit Grey was careful to pursue a policy of constructive ambiguity and did not, as Professor Otte put it, nail his colours to the entente cordiale mast.



Professor Otte.

Grey was prepared to support France in the Franco-German war scares in 1905 and 1911 but he again held off from binding commitments which might pull Britain into unwanted disputes. At the same time advantages were derived from a 1907 convention with Russia which reduced the potential for conflict in Central Asia and the Near East. But Russia then became increasingly interested in Turkey and the Balkans, which threatened entanglement with the Austro-German powers, an ever more acute problem with the resurgence in Russian power from 1912.

The impression one gets is that Grey and British foreign policy were walking a tightrope exposed to increasingly violent gusts of wind. For some time his subtle and intelligent policy helped maintain balance and contain the risk of escalation, most notably during the Balkan Wars

of 1912-13, when an international conference promoted by Grey was critical to preventing further hostilities. For such successes the American ambassador called him 'the preserver of Europe's peace', but the high wire act could only last so long.

### WAR BECOMES INEVITABLE

Professor Otte's discussion of the outbreak of the Great War confronted the criticisms of Grey directly. However, with a new crisis in the Balkans sparked by the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand on 28 June 1914 'once Vienna and Berlin had embarked on a course of escalation, the Foreign Secretary had no power to halt the descent into war'. The simple fact was that all the Chancelleries of Europe no longer wanted to preserve peace in July 1914. The time for international conferences or arbitration was over and Britain had neither the standing army nor the willingness to form an offensive alliance with France and Russia that might have deterred Austria and Germany. Nor was there much of an opportunity to take preventive action and the unfairness of Lloyd George's criticism that Grey should have done more was further exposed by the fact that on 23 July 1914 Lloyd George declared that peace had never looked more assured.

Professor Otte left his audience with the impression that Grey was of the very best of his time, but that deeper forces were at work than could be contained by even the most skilful manipulation of the levers of Great Power diplomacy. The machine was no longer responding to the controls, such as they were, and rushed on to its doom regardless.

### AND THEREAFTER

Grey sought to learn the lessons from these extraordinary events. Professor Otte highlighted his promotion of a form of League of Nations which grew out of his pre-war advocacy of arbitration and cooperative frameworks for settling international disputes, an idea taken up by Woodrow Wilson.

Grey continued to be an advocate for the League of Nations as long as he lived. Sadly, he also lived to see the rise of Hitler and anti-semitism in Germany. Although he had been losing his sight even while in office, Grey had lost none of his acuity, and in his last public appearance in April 1933 he warned of the danger of Hitler and against the temptation to appease his regime and condemned the persecution of Germany's Jews. Meanwhile Lloyd George hailed Hitler as 'the resurrection and the life'.

In closing Professor Otte made a powerful case for the rehabilitation of Grey's reputation. He personified the dilemma of a liberal in an age that was increasingly less liberal but he strove to forestall the Great War even if he ultimately failed. He followed a policy of arbitration which foreshadowed later forms of international governance, and he had a realistic appreciation of the strengths and weaknesses of Britain's international position and advocated a coherent and engaged foreign policy that accepted Britain's European and global role. At home, he foresaw the corrosive effects of 'class' and pursued reforms to improve social conditions, boost educational attainment, and enhance democratic accountability. ■