Baldwin Papers

A CONSERVATIVE STATESMAN

1908–1947

The significance of Stanley Baldwin (1867–1947) is self-evident. As Conservative party leader and three times Prime Minister, he was at the heart of most of the great political debates and national events of interwar Britain. Yet understanding the positions he adopted and his contribution to public life has not been easy, in part because of his unusual political character and in part because private evidence on him was neither conveniently assembled nor readily interpreted.

This edition contains a selection of Baldwin's letters, reports of his conversations and related documents and illustrations, with an extensive commentary. It has two main purposes. The first is to publish important documents on Conservative and ministerial politics, as perceived and practised by their leader. These deal with major issues and episodes from the destruction of the Lloyd George Coalition to the Abdication, and with relationships among leading politicians and other public figures, notably Churchill, the Chamberlains, press controllers, and three kings. Less explicit but of equal importance is considerable evidence on the environments, routines, courtesies and culture of high political society.

Baldwin's colleagues found him difficult to understand, and during a severe relapse in his reputation after his retirement the criticisms turned on supposed deficiencies in his character. The second purpose of this edition is to provide a documentary account of Baldwin himself, revealing in his own words his circumstances, personality, beliefs, friendships and enmities. Beginning with his election to Parliament in 1908, the volume contains testimony to his early values, and by continuing beyond his retirement it includes his own reflections on his career. These sources on national politics and the Prime Minister will make this edition indispensable for studies of public life in interwar Britain.

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A CONSERVATIVE STATESMAN

1908–1947

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AND

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

http://www.cambridge.org

First published 2004

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Minion 10.5/14 pt *System* LaTeX 2ε [TB]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

A conservative prime minister : Baldwin papers, 1908–1947 / edited by Philip Williamson and Edward Baldwin
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0 521 58080 3 (hardback)
1. Baldwin, Stanley Baldwin, Earl, 1867–1947. 2. Great Britain – Politics and government – 20th century – Sources. 3. Conservatism – Great Britain – History – 20th century – Sources. 4. Conservative Party (Great Britain) – Biography – Sources. 5. Prime ministers – Great Britain – Biography – Sources. I. Williamson, Philip, 1953– II. Baldwin, Edward, 1938–
DA566.9.B15C65 2004
941.083′092–dc22 2003065441

ISBN 0 521 58080 3 hardback

IN MEMORY OF

Windham Baldwin

(1904–1976)

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PREFACE

Edward Baldwin

The only written communication I have from Stanley Baldwin is a picture postcard of the interior of the church at Bourg en Bresse. It is dated 21 August 1938, addressed in mauve ink to 'Monsieur Edouard Baudouin, Astley Hall, Stourport-on-Severn, Angleterre', and reads 'Please give our love to your Parents. G. F.' Nothing remarkable: just a gently humorous message via a seven-month-old grandson from the ex-Prime Minister and his wife as they made their way to their usual summer destination of Aix-les-Bains.

He was not 'S. B.' to my generation of the family. He was 'G. F.', standing for Grandfather. Curiously our Grandmother was not 'G. M.' but 'G.' I was the youngest of the grandchildren, and was not quite ten when he died in December 1947. Although I could not have known him as well as my older cousins did, I probably absorbed as much or more of his ethos and personality by virtue of my father's unremitting efforts, as I was growing up, to counter the distortions of fact, motivation and character which attached to Baldwin's reputation soon after he retired. I grew up to hear many hurtful things said about my grandfather; and I clearly remember the climate of the 1950s in which my father found it difficult to persuade a publisher to touch his book *My Father. The True Story* (1955), involving as it did some necessary criticisms of Churchill, who had been responsible for some of the more damaging imputations, and who was still in office with the status almost of a demigod.

This edition, which owes its existence almost entirely to the efforts of my co-editor, will present new perspectives on a man who for so long puzzled his contemporaries and later commentators. The reasons for this puzzlement should be clearer in the wake of more recent historical writings. In the words of an old neighbour, writing at the time of a Baldwin centenary event in 1967:

'There was never anyone like Stan . . . He was always so different from all other politicians!'

Families, except of course where there are feuds and factions, can be expected to support their own. But I have reached retirement age without, from an extended family, ever once hearing a hostile comment about SB; and that must be unusual. From family near and distant, and from Worcestershire neighbours, the sentiments have been those of love, admiration, devotion, or all three. From a son-in-law, to my father: 'As I think you realize, I revered and loved your father, who was in many ways a second father to me.' From a grandson: 'He always had time to see me, with or without my friends, when I called in at Astley Hall. He loved the young.' The same can be heard from residents of Stourport, Bewdley, Kidderminster, some of whom still remember him from the 1930s and have a fund of stories of his kindness, humanity and humour. Not long ago, from a wider context, the son of one of his parliamentary private secretaries remarked to me 'My father *adored* your grandfather.' It was said with real intensity. This devotion to SB from those who knew him well was exceptional.

Readers will form their own impressions from these letters and recorded conversations. There is a light-heartedness that lay not far below the surface of a man who found, early in his tenure of the top job, that public humour carried too high a risk of misunderstanding. The minister who told the House of Commons when introducing a finance bill 'The next clause is incomprehensible. I can't understand it and you won't either, but it's all right', became more careful when speaking as Prime Minister. But the Baldwin who appeared calm and phlegmatic at the centre of affairs could be high-spirited, vehement, incautious, and surprisingly critical when he felt it safe or appropriate to unbutton his feelings. There was never malice, however, and always the desire to see good in his fellow man.

I wish I had truly known him. The humour does not surprise me, nor the sharp and often striking use of language, nor the engaging whimsicality which sometimes shows through; these can be seen in other generations of the family as well. Perhaps the passion does, when I watch videos of old newsreels and see the energy which Baldwin put into big speeches, giving the lie to epithets such as 'bovine' which were coined by commentators in later times. But it should not, for how else could he have held audiences and commanded a following in a way that few others were able to do? You do not achieve that simply by being the 'nicest' Prime Minister of the twentieth century, as he has sometimes been called. And if the nervous output often left him spent, how essential to

ensure that he had the rest and the holidays which he knew his constitution demanded, acknowledging the strains of an unbroken twenty-year period in office when his leadership of the opposition is included. If he was right in his stated belief during his premiership that half the bad decisions since the war had been taken by tired men, he would have been irresponsible to do otherwise.

His family and friends could experience his quickness of mind and his breadth of reading and knowledge, which unusually for one of his calling he did not parade much in public. ('S. B. went through his correspondence at an incredible speed' wrote a manager who worked under him in business, while adding how 'My chief's sly humour was always peeping out.') 'Avoid logic' is an injunction of his that many find difficult. Did he really believe that 'no one was ever persuaded by argument'? It may, as *My Father* has suggested, have been a way of bringing calm when his children were fractious. It was also, without doubt, a denial of the *primacy* of the intellect, which caused obvious problems for his later reputation with certain articulate sections of society. Baldwin, while intensely practical, operated much in the realms of the heart and the spirit, which was why so few colleagues talked 'the same language' as he did, or grasped what (in his own words) he was 'driving at'. It was a form of realism in his public life, not to say wisdom, to recognise that most people make up their minds on grounds deeper than logic, and that this was the level on which, with perfect integrity, any discourse must be directed.

'Be yourself always' was the advice he gave Sir John Reith when the latter entered the House of Commons in 1940. It was largely because Baldwin was so obviously himself, and this self was more concerned with service than power, that he was trusted and respected by an unusually wide spectrum of British society. If oratory to him was the harlot of the arts, it was because of what he saw as its falsity. Many of Baldwin's speeches were humdrum: others, on big themes such as peace in industry, India and the Abdication, drew extravagant praise from old political hands for their eloquence, sincerity, emotional force and lofty vision. *Ars est celare artem*, perhaps: the art that conceals art. If Baldwin was an artist, however, there was not much artifice in him, in the sense of a wish to dissemble. An exception might be made for his tendency to portray himself as slower and less intelligent or informed than he really was, another curious trait in a politician. Part of this was due to a genuine modesty, and part perhaps to his ever-present desire to break down barriers, to be the 'one of you' which he so strongly felt himself to be, even if it was one who

was 'called to special service'. It led to him being consistently underestimated by those who did not know him well, an advantage of which he was surely aware.

He had a broader awareness, too, that probably ran deeper than most. As Prime Minister his days as a managing director in industry and as an efficient departmental minister were behind him. It was his task now to think out strategic directions: the restoring of high standards to public life in the early 1920s; then the 'binding together of all classes' into a healthier and more united society; then the emphasis on the spiritual foundations of democracy when faced with the rise of totalitarianism, leading to practical measures of rearmament in the early to mid 1930s as the electorate were weaned away from a near-pacifist mentality which had outlived its time. These were not the product of chance, or political tactics, or justification after the event. They sprang from a thoughtful and wide-ranging intelligence, as his contemporary speeches make clear. Baldwin's combination of the reflective and the practical, and his sense of duty and honour, were familiar to those who knew him of old, and they can be seen in many of the letters in this collection. And he made little attempt to disguise his blunders, of which he certainly had his share in public life. Indeed he could be over-quick to apologise, which endeared him to the public if not always to the more combative elements of his party.

All this made for a character uncommon in its breadth and depth and, as his Worcestershire neighbour remarked, in significant ways different from other politicians. It is hard to get the true essence of a personality after sixty years of conflicting interpretations and confused psychology. Those who were closest during his lifetime knew best what he was made of. One who started working for him as an office boy wrote on his death: 'The name of Lord Baldwin was a household word with the . . . family, and my late Father held him before his family and before all comers a great ideal [*sic*], and as one who had few equals and no superior.' Another workman wrote: 'He was a grand man, and I feel too big for this little world of intrigues and selfishness.' A Downing Street private secretary, recalling that 'It is 26 years since I came within his influence', went on 'It is a wonderful thing to work with someone one loves – quite different from working with someone one just likes . . . I never met anyone who possessed so much essential sweetness and sanity or carried so much "of the herb Hearts Ease in his bosom" or, at any rate, could give so much of it away to other people.' 'God rest his dear heart & soul', wrote another parliamentary private secretary who had recalled 'his genuine affection and concern for close colleagues in the Govt', as well as 'the kind of impish chuckle

with which he used to greet the foibles of correspondents or minor errors in service on the part of his staff'.

Two who did not know him well shall have the last word in describing the man. The writers Hesketh Pearson and Hugh Kingsmill decided to visit Baldwin at Astley in the year before he died, and recorded in *Talking of Dick Whittington* (1947) the conversation of a long May evening in which the three of them looked back over people and events in Baldwin's life. Their account ends with the words; 'As they drove off, Pearson murmured "Very, very lovable", and Kingsmill gave an assenting nod.' If this edition leaves something of that impression, whatever else it may show of Baldwin's motives and actions in a long public career, then those who knew and admired him as family, friends or neighbours will be content.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This edition has been made possible only by the assistance of many individuals and institutions. It consists of a selection from a considerably larger number of letters and other documents dispersed across Britain, the former British Dominions and the USA, in public, institutional and private collections of papers. We are much indebted to the staff in the many record offices, libraries, manuscripts and special collections rooms listed in the Sources, for advice, arranging access to collections, locating fugitive letters and memoranda, and supplying copies. We are particularly obliged to Godfrey Waller, Peter Meadows and the staff of the manuscripts room of Cambridge University Library; Colin Harris, Helen Langley, and Elizabeth Turner at the Bodleian Library, Oxford; Lady de Bellaigue and Pamela Clark at the Royal Archives; Philippa Bassett, Christine Penney and their staff at the University of Birmingham Library; Katherine Bligh at the Parliamentary Archives; John Graham Jones at the National Library of Wales; Alan Kucia and Allen Packwood at the Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge; A. M. Wherry and R. Whittacker and their staff at the Worcestershire County Record Office; Lawrence Aspden at the University of Sheffield Library; Miss S. J. Acton of the Shropshire Records and Research Centre; Anne Craig at the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland; Naomi Evetts at Liverpool Record Office; Aline Faunce of the Oxford Group archives; Mary Flagg and Patti Spencer at the Harriet Irving Library, University of New Brunswick; John Hodgson of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester; Mrs S. M. Laithwaite at Devon Record Office; Kate O'Brien at the Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, King's College, London; Mrs L. Richardson at the Centre for Kentish Studies; Jonathan Smith of Trinity College Library, Cambridge; Jeff Walden of the

BBC Written Archives Centre; and Dr C. M. Woolgar at the Hartley Library, University of Southampton.

Much important material remains in private collections. For documents from papers of members of the Baldwin, Macdonald and Ridsdale families, we are grateful to Charles Yorke, Mrs Meryl Macdonald Bendle, and Sir Julian Ridsdale for the supply of copies; and to Mrs Jill Lumsden, Miles Huntington-Whiteley and Christopher Walker for their hospitality, access to papers, and assistance with illustrations. We are also indebted to Lord and Lady Crathorne and to Richard Oldfield and Lord Davidson for access to their family papers; to Victoria Zinovieff and Simon Craven for the loan of papers; and to Robin Harcourt Williams at Hatfield House Archives. Copies from further collections were kindly supplied by Jane Anderson at Blair Castle; Viscount Brentford; Peter Day at the Devonshire Collections, Chatsworth House; Sister Philippa Edwards at Stanbrook Abbey; Martin Farr; the Earl of Sandwich; and Peter Stansky.

For advice and for assistance in obtaining material, we are indebted to Stuart Ball, John Barnes, Michael Brock, Kathleen Burk, Anne Chisholm, Maurice Cowling, Jeremy Dobson, David Dutton, Judith Flanders, Peter Ghosh, Cameron Hazlehurst, Alan Heesom, James Hollis, Mira Luethje, Andrew Lycett, Ian McBride, Michael Meznar, Thomas Pinney, Mark Pottle, David Rollason, Patrick Salmon, the Hon. Jean Strutt, and John Vincent. Pauline Annis and Melvyn Thompson have supplied useful material on Stourport and Worcestershire, and we also thank those who responded to a request for information placed in the Worcestershire local newspapers. For answering enquiries about the Lord Baldwin Fund, we are grateful to Bill Rubinstein, Joanna Newman, and especially Chana Kotzin. Susan Williams has given invaluable advice about Lucy Baldwin; and special thanks are due to her and to Gervase Hood for greatly easing the collection of material at the National Archives.

For permission to print or cite documents, we thank Lady Avon, Lady Warner and Mrs Jane Anderson; the Earl of Balfour; the Master and Fellows of Balliol College, Oxford; University of Birmingham Library; BBC Written Archives Centre; Viscount Brentford; the Trustees of the Broadlands Archives; the National Archives of Canada; Carmarthen Record Office; the Trustees of the Chequers Estate; the Sir Winston Churchill Archive Trust, the Churchill Archives Centre, and the Master and Fellows of Churchill College, Cambridge; Mr Ron Citrine; Lord Cobbold; Lord Crathorne; the Earl of Crawford and Balcarres; Mr Stanley Clement Davies and Mr John Graham Jones; the Earl of

Derby; the Elgar Foundation; Lord Elibank; Vice-Admiral Sir Ian Hogg; Mrs P. D. Howard; the Clerk of the Records, House of Lords Record Office, acting on behalf of the Beaverbrook Trust; Lord Kennet; the Trustees of Lambeth Palace Library; the Trustees of the Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives; Lady Lloyd; Mr Alan Maclean; the Director and University Librarian, John Rylands University Library of Manchester; Dr Alexander Murray; the Deputy Keeper of the Records, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland; the Marquess of Salisbury; the Earl of Sandwich; the Keeper of the Records of Scotland; Mrs Anne Stacey and the Trustees of the Bridgeman family archive; the Master and Fellows of Trinity College, Cambridge; the National Library of Wales. Material from the Royal Archives is used with the gracious permission of Her Majesty the Queen. Extracts from Cabinet and government department records are Crown copyright.

Philip Williamson was assisted by research funds from the University of Durham and its Department of History. Wendy Shoulder and her staff in the History Department office helped considerably to convert copies of documents into a word-processed text. Peter Ghosh made helpful suggestions on the introduction; Christine Woodhead and Duncan Bythell read and commented on the whole text. We thank them all.

ABBREVIATIONS AND CONVENTIONS

AC	Austen Chamberlain papers, University of Birmingham Library
AC Letters	*The Austen Chamberlain Diary Letters*, ed. Robert Self (Cambridge, 1995)
Amery Diaries	*The Leo Amery Diaries*, ed. John Barnes and David Nicholson (2 vols., 1980, 1988)
My Father	A. W. Baldwin, *My Father: The True Story* (1955)
Bridgeman Diaries	*The Modernisation of Conservative Politics. The Diaries and Letters of William Bridgeman 1904–1935*, ed. Philip Williamson (1988)
Cabinet	(with number and year) Cabinet conclusions, i.e. minutes
CAB	Cabinet records, in the National Archives
CP	(with number) Cabinet paper
Crawford Papers	*The Crawford Papers*, ed. John Vincent (Manchester, 1984)
CUL MS Add.	Cambridge University Library, additional manuscripts
Davidson Memoirs	*Memoirs of a Conservative. J. C. C. Davidson's Memoirs and Papers*, ed. R. Rhodes James (1969)
DBFP	*Documents on British Foreign Policy*
FO	Foreign Office papers, in the National Archives
HC Debs	*House of Commons Debates*, 5th series
Jones *DL*	Thomas Jones, *Diary with Letters 1931–1950* (1954)
Jones *WD*	Thomas Jones, *Whitehall Diary*, ed. Keith Middlemas (3 vols., Oxford, 1969)
M&B	Keith Middlemas and John Barnes, *Baldwin* (1969)
NC	Neville Chamberlain papers, University of Birmingham Library

NC Letters	*The Neville Chamberlain Diary Letters*, ed. Robert Self (4 vols., Aldershot, 2000–4)
PREM	Prime Minister's office papers, in the National Archives
PRO	Public Record Office class of files, in the National Archives
RA	The Royal Archives, Windsor Castle
SB papers, SB add. papers	Stanley Baldwin political papers and additional papers, Cambridge University Library
T	Treasury papers, in the National Archives
WCRO	Worcestershire County Record Office
WSC	*Winston S. Churchill. Companion Volumes IV–VI* (each in several part-volumes), ed. Martin Gilbert (1976–94)

Unless otherwise stated, letters are handwritten.

Letters indicated just by 'to', without being preceded by the writer's name, were written by Baldwin.

Ellipses indicate omission of material with no reference to Baldwin, or of no historical or biographical interest. Otherwise the main texts are as close to the original as possible, retaining the original punctuation, abbreviations, ampersands and spellings (including, for instance, Baldwin's use of 'shew' and 'develope'). Exceptions are the expansion of initials or other forms of names in order to assist identification, where this is not obvious; and, in a handful of cases, the supply of a word evidently omitted during composition. The symbol '[ ]' indicates such editorial insertions, unless otherwise explained. Very occasional slips of the pen have been silently corrected. The sign '/' indicates a line break.

Addresses are given in full on the first mention, and thereafter abbreviated. Where Baldwin is writing from an address different from that of his notepaper (e.g from Astley Hall but using 10 Downing Street paper), the address is given in square brackets.

All letters to Louisa Baldwin are in SB add. papers.

Original diaries – e.g. Tom Jones diary, Mackenzie King diary – are easily located among the papers of the diarists, as listed in the Sources: accordingly no precise source reference for these is given.

Unless stated otherwise, the place of publication for cited books is London.

Contemporary money sums are also expressed in approximate modern (i.e. about the year 2000) values, using the Economic History Services program on EH.NET.