Introduction

As Conservative party leader from 1923 to 1937 and three times Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin was one of the pre-eminent public figures of interwar Britain. This volume of his selected letters, records of his private statements, and related documents and illustrations has two purposes. It makes important evidence on political leadership and national events readily available. It also provides a documentary life and portrait of an intriguing, much-liked, but controversial statesman.

For much of his career Baldwin was unusually well respected – personally admired even by opponents of his party, and credited with a larger command over the House of Commons and public feelings and with a wider electoral appeal than any other contemporary politician. Nevertheless on occasion he suffered harsh criticism, facing rebellions within his own party as well as attacks from Labour and Liberal opponents. After the outbreak of the Second World War his reputation collapsed, under accusations that he had 'failed to rearm' the nation against the threat from Nazi Germany. In the early 1950s his first historical biographer attributed his supposed political shortcomings to deficiencies in his character and personal life.

In understanding Britain in the 1920s and 1930s, much turns on how Baldwin and his place in public life are assessed – interpretations not only of party politics and government but more broadly of public values, revealed most dramatically during the Abdication crisis. A difficulty in making such assessments has been that Baldwin published no memoirs, kept no diary and, compared to some other leading politicians, wrote few political letters or memoranda. Although he bequeathed a large collection of political papers to the University of Cambridge, these consist overwhelmingly of material he received, the letters and memoranda sent to him by ministerial colleagues,

politicians, officials, diplomats and members of the public. While these papers are certainly important for historians, they reveal little directly about Baldwin himself.[1] Biographers and historians have achieved much by exploiting other sources. A 1955 biography by his second son, Windham Baldwin, used family papers and Baldwin's speeches to defend his character and record on rearmament. The 1969 political biography by Keith Middlemas and John Barnes – an essential reference work – and numerous later party and policy histories found substantial evidence about him in government records and in the papers of ministerial colleagues and officials. It has also been argued that the special qualities of Baldwin's leadership mean that his public speeches, addresses and broadcasts should be regarded as the primary evidence about his political purposes and impact.[2]

Even so, the private sources for Baldwin are more extensive and richer than is generally appreciated, and searches by the present editors in a large number of archives and private collections have added further documents to those available to his biographers. This edition prints almost all Baldwin's surviving political letters and memoranda, material of public importance from his family papers, and the more significant or characteristic of his many personal letters. These are supplemented by records of his private conversations and statements in Cabinet. A number of documents already printed but scattered in various books and journals have been gathered but, with just a few exceptions, items published in other editions of interwar diaries and letters are not reprinted.

Although the assembled material is diverse, this has the strength of showing Baldwin in different capacities and contexts, and in discussion with individuals other than the familiar diarists of the period. The result is a collection of sources which provides considerable evidence on interwar public life and a fuller understanding of Baldwin's personality and politics, to be set alongside – and perhaps, in some cases, to counterbalance – the published papers of Winston Churchill, Austen Chamberlain, Neville Chamberlain, Leo Amery, Thomas Jones and others.

Why did Baldwin commit less of his politics to paper than some other senior politicians? What is the value of the material collected here?

[1] These political papers are not entirely complete: see Appendix E.

[2] Philip Williamson, *Stanley Baldwin. Conservative Leadership and National Values* (Cambridge, 1999). For details of other historical studies see Sources, below pp. 517–18. Philip Williamson, 'Baldwin's reputation: politics and history 1937–1967', *Historical Journal*, 47 (2004), pp. 127–68, examines the wartime and postwar criticisms, including the peculiarities of G. M. Young's 1952 biography.

The comparison with other politicians must not be overstated, nor should misleading conclusions be drawn. As will be seen, Baldwin was far from averse to letter-writing as such. Where he differed was in his style of politics, and his purposes in writing. Voluminous and detailed letters on policy, tactics and management exchanged between ministers, party organisers, MPs, officials, and media controllers have become the staple evidence for historical studies of political leadership, to such an extent that they may appear to have been the primary medium for political business and to provide a measure of political activity or commitment. Such impressions have not been to the advantage of Baldwin's reputation; the relative scarcity of his political letters seemed to indicate a lack of application.[3] Yet Churchill, the Chamberlains, and the other assiduous political letter-writers were the exception, not the norm. In any Cabinet or shadow cabinet a large proportion of its members similarly wrote few political letters, because there was no necessity to do so. Plainly enough, most ministerial and party transactions were conducted by interview and meetings. Baldwin was among those who worked chiefly by word of mouth. In his own description, he was 'in constant conference' and 'at the beck and call of everyone for 14 hours a day'.[4] Colleagues learned to accept that the letters and memoranda they sent to him on policy or strategy would normally receive a verbal reply, or be treated as briefs for Cabinet or committee discussions. Alternatively they might sometimes receive a letter drafted by a secretary from brief instructions, because Baldwin made full use of the private office staffs at 10 Downing Street and Conservative Central Office which had been formed under his predecessors precisely in order to assist them with much of their business and correspondence. Certain letters despatched over the Prime Minister's or party leader's signature had for some time been handled entirely by private secretaries, most notably, since Lloyd George's wartime tenure, the traditional letter to the King on each day's proceedings in the House of Commons.[5] Such secretarial letters have not been included in this volume.

Moreover, Baldwin deliberately conducted his politics at a different level from that of other ministers and senior party politicians. In the threatening circumstances of the 1920s and 1930s he considered the greatest task of the

[3] A. J. P. Taylor, *English History 1914–1945* (revised 1975 edn), p. 603: 'The reputation of a statesman who leaves a rich store of papers goes up. That of a statesman not given to writing letters or memoranda goes down.'
[4] Below pp. 125, 96. For Baldwin's working methods and the style and purposes of his leadership, see M&B, ch. 18, and Williamson, *Baldwin*, chs. 2, 5.
[5] See Appendix D for the Prime Minister's staff and their responsibilities in 1927 and also, for the 'King's letters', Jones *DL*, p. 262, and Lord Vansittart, *The Mist Procession* (1958), p. 349.

Conservative leader was that of general strategy, shaping opinions and gathering the widest possible support: hence the importance of his speeches. If the principal aim of the Conservative party was to conserve, there was no special advantage in activity for its own sake. Within government and party, his further task was the work of co-ordination, trouble-shooting, and seeking to restrain the sort of partisan excesses which might repel less committed voters and provoke socialist 'extremism'. He did not regard it as his job to help run departments nor, after his unsuccessful initiative on protection in 1923, to create programmes or policies. These were properly the responsibilities of departmental ministers or shadow cabinet specialists and of collective Cabinet or committee decision, so after his own period as a departmental minister in 1921–3 he felt no inclination to write policy or administrative memoranda and letters. Nor did Baldwin write documents for the record, any more than he considered writing memoirs. He had a detached attitude towards his historical reputation, believing that 'no man can write the truth about himself' and that 'whether our work has been good or not will not appear until long after we have passed away, and no worrying on our part will affect the verdict'.[6]

All this emphasises the importance of those of Baldwin's political letters and notes that have survived, while indicating something of their character. They tended to be occasional and short, responding to letters in special circumstances or reporting general political news rather than bringing forward new issues, but often giving sharp insights on his perspectives on public affairs and his estimations of his colleagues and opponents. It also explains why much and often the best private evidence about Baldwin is not in his letters, but in his reported conversations.

Here another of his characteristics should be considered, which is also pertinent to his correspondence but is especially important for weighing the value of records written by his interlocutors. On some issues and at certain times Baldwin would take particular colleagues into his confidence. Generally, however, he was very cautious when speaking with his senior colleagues, on occasion to the point of becoming reticent or evasive. This was perhaps their most frequent complaint against him, and contributed to charges that he was indecisive, inert or complacent. It is striking that only after working with Neville Chamberlain for twelve years, and then only because Chamberlain had become his inevitable successor, did Baldwin feel he should speak freely with him. There were several reasons for such restraint. He thought that few

[6] To Salisbury, 1 July 1943, Hatfield House archives 4M/188/1, and below p. 475.

of his colleagues shared his deeper views: in 1935 he gave just two, Bridgeman and Halifax, as having talked 'the same language as I do'.[7] As leader and manager of powerful and often prickly individuals, having to maintain their co-operation and to reconcile competing opinions and ambitions, he was alert to the risks of provoking unnecessary disagreements and jealousies. As he said in 1924, 'fourteen hours a day seeing people and having to be at your best and guarding every word . . . is a fearful strain . . . every smallest word is liable to burst into flame'.[8] His trait of sometimes 'closing up like an oyster' might be a reaction variously to aggrieved colleagues, tactical disagreements, unwanted suggestions, inconvenient questions, or unreasonable demands.[9] He knew that he could give the impression of being slow-witted, but this was part of his technique for 'making the other fellow talk' and divulge more than they perhaps intended. 'I am a very quick thinker but I do not like people knowing it': he wanted to listen, to learn and to give himself ample time for reflection on the often delicate issues.[10]

Consequently the most revealing of Baldwin's reported conversations – many printed in this edition – were often with trusted individuals other than his close official colleagues, because it was with those making no claims of departmental, sectional or personal interest that he felt most able to be open and forthcoming. These included King George V and the private secretaries at Buckingham Palace; a fellow Commonwealth Prime Minister, Mackenzie King of Canada, and the Swedish ambassador, who prompted him to extended comments on his career and beliefs.[11] Some individuals he valued because they could offer informed but (relatively) disinterested opinions, on anything from high policy to Cabinet appointments. This was true of Geoffrey Dawson, editor of *The Times*, but especially of Tom Jones, assistant Cabinet secretary until 1930 and a friend, confidant and speech-writer. In four published volumes of diaries and letters Jones comes nearest to being Baldwin's Boswell; valuable material which Jones omitted from his volume for the years after 1930 is printed here. In a different category are records of occasions when Baldwin thought

[7] Jones *DL*, p. 207 and see below p. 249. For Chamberlain, see below p. 478, and see p. 170 for Baldwin reported as saying that 'he told nobody his political ambitions & trend, but he knew them well enough'.
[8] *The Diary of A. C. Benson*, ed. P. Lubbock (1926), pp. 302–3 (2 Feb. 1924).
[9] Consequently some of the familiar evidence about him from his colleagues (notably the Chamberlains and Amery) almost certainly gives a misleading impression. This is especially so for periods when he felt beleaguered by some or most of them, as after the election defeat of 1923 or during the challenges to his leadership in 1929–31: see Williamson, *Baldwin*, pp. 70–3.
[10] Davidson to W. Baldwin, 29 Oct. 1952, W. Baldwin papers, and below p. 385.
[11] See Appendix C.

candour would be effective in disarming deputations of critics, as over rearmament in July 1936,[12] or discontented individuals, as with Austen Chamberlain in May 1923 and December 1935 – two striking examples of how frankness could be counter-productive.[13] Like other political leaders he also found it easy to confide in sympathetic women who lacked complicating political concerns, even when, as in the case of Kathleen Hilton Young, they were married to a member of another party. In such reported conversations Baldwin made observations about issues and personalities which have considerable historical interest, and in these too the real personal and political character of the man becomes apparent. The unbuttoned Baldwin was sometimes solemn and reflective, but often vivid, frank, mordant and funny.

Although those who confine their researches to political and government papers alone may conclude that Baldwin 'was always reluctant to put pen to paper', he was actually a prolific letter-writer with a very large and varied range of correspondents, probably broader than that of any contemporary politician except Churchill.[14] Although most of these letters were personal or social they often contain striking or moving phrases, and even apparently trivial notes were valued and kept by their recipients. One Cabinet minister hoped that 'someone would edit a volume of [his] private letters' because they 'would reveal a wise, sympathetic, humorous and subtle man'.[15]

Many of the Baldwin letters that survive in the papers of politicians and others associated with political life are, by strict definition, personal. Although they might contain a political comment or two, they were prompted by other purposes. These might, for example, be encouragement: 'My dear Anthony,/ Just a line to express my delight./ You are doing admirably./ Yours always S.B.'[16] Or they might be arrangements for a public or social engagement, advice on some private matter, or to mark birthdays, congratulation, illness, or condolence. Or they might be thanks, for letters, information, gifts, acts

[12] Below pp. 374–9. [13] Below pp. 86–92, 359–6.
[14] S. Roskill, *Hankey. Man of Secrets*, 3 vols. (1970–4), III, p. 47; and compare G. M. Young, *Stanley Baldwin* (1952), p. 11, on the paucity of political letters, with p. 19: 'few men can ever have written more [letters]'.
[15] Ernest Brown foreword to D. C. Somervell, *Stanley Baldwin* (1953), p. 14, and see similarly A. Bryant, *Stanley Baldwin. A Tribute* (1937), p. 158, and Vansittart, *Mist Procession*, p. 353. Brown's papers have become dispersed; the only known collection, in the Parliamentary Archives, does not contain his letters from Baldwin.
[16] To Eden, 9 Dec. 1934, Avon papers 14/1/259.

of kindness, or a weekend visit, like this to an MP and political hostess: 'My dear,/ Bless you and thank you for a most happy little visit./ No worst fears materialized and one's best hopes realized./ Our love and grateful thanks,/ Your affectionate/ S.B.'[17] Yet however mundane the purpose, such attentions from the Prime Minister or party leader carried special weight – and Baldwin's letters, though usually brief, had an attractive spontaneity, wit and humanity. 'No one', he wrote, 'writes a letter to be a literary essay: one just likes to hear a friend talk to one naturally and without constraint.'[18] The letters were an aspect or extension of what made him so likeable and difficult to cross or, when political differences did arise, impossible to hate. There could be a winning or indiscreet sentence, or a barbed observation on some mutual irritant. He could play up amusingly to his own or his correspondent's traits or ailments. He might evoke shared associations, in his own love of books and the countryside, or else contrasting interests, in his colleagues' love of sport or gardening. He would subordinate public disagreement to private friendship or, with trade unionists and socialists, bridge social or ideological distances by expressions of fellow feeling. In these ways – spreading goodwill, recognising the importance of matters other than the political, applying the light touch to troublesome tensions, ever so gently offering warning – Baldwin lubricated political relationships and assisted his management of the government, the House of Commons, and the party. Such letters were an instrument for what his cousin Rudyard Kipling early recognised as his 'quiet faculty for bossing men and things'.[19] In this sense, any sharp distinction between his 'political' and 'personal' correspondence would be misleading, and so a selection of the best of these personal letters is included in this edition.

Even in his more obviously personal and social correspondence there could be a public aspect. 'Writing charming, if brief, epistles to sweeten the existence of his friends and acquaintances' was for Baldwin a form of relaxation from the burdens of office.[20] The substance of most of these letters is too historically inconsequential to deserve publication, though a few containing characteristic comments or displaying his manner of addressing public figures outside politics are printed. It is, rather, the range of this correspondence that is significant and deserves reflection. Addressees included novelists, poets, historians, classical scholars, literary critics, teachers, clergymen and free

[17] To Lady Astor, 2 June 1935, Thomas Jones 'diary', Jones papers.
[18] To Joan Davidson, 24 Jan. 1921.
[19] Kipling to Louisa Baldwin, undated but early 1900s, Kipling papers 11/2.
[20] *The Times* [Thomas Jones], *Lord Baldwin. A Memoir* (1947), p. 21.

church ministers, artists, musicians, and scientists. Together with his speeches on 'non-political' subjects to a great variety of organisations, these letters attest to his contact with many aspects of national life and to the breadth of admiration he could attract on grounds other than the party-political.[21] Another type of correspondence was with friends in 'Society'. Although he sometimes attended Grillions, The Club and other all-male dining clubs where he could meet leading figures from other parties and other professions, he did not much enjoy social dinners, parties and balls (and he took his lunches in the unpolitical seclusion of the Travellers' Club). But he enjoyed visits to country houses – Hatfield, Blair Atholl, Chevening, Longleat, Wynyard – whether as the base for speaking engagements or for relaxation, even though he had no interest in the typical landed pursuits of hunting, riding, shooting or fishing. The flavour of these visits is given in an account of a weekend at an Essex house in July 1935.[22] On such occasions, and at small private dinners in London, at his own preferred social meal of breakfast, or less commonly over a weekend at Chequers, he met some of the leading men and women of Conservative and Liberal society. The former provincial manufacturing employer and wealthy City director had friends and acquaintances in numerous ranks and occupations, but it is striking that these also came to include great hostesses such as Lady Desborough, the Countess of Stanhope, and the Marchionesses of Salisbury and Londonderry. The social milieu of interwar Conservative leadership has been little studied, but it is plain that for all the structural shifts in the distribution of political power since the Victorian period, much remained that would have been familiar to the senior politicians of that era.

Two further sets of letters – to his family, and to his chief personal correspondent – require special comment, not least because these contradict the claim that 'a certain discomfort in his nearer relationships' was a key to Baldwin's public career.[23] His mother Louisa seems to have kept every letter she received from him, from early childhood onwards. From 1908, after she was widowed and after Baldwin became an MP and moved to London, until her death in 1925, over four hundred letters survive. Many naturally consist of family news,

[21] Examples of such letters not published here are those to Helen Waddell, the writer on medieval subjects, in Monica Blackett, *The Mark of the Maker. A Portrait of Helen Waddell* (1973).
[22] Below, pp. 335–43.
[23] This was the main theme of Young, *Baldwin* (see esp. p. 23), which left its mark on numerous later accounts.

as Baldwin wrote to 'cheer her in her lonely life'; nor was she greatly interested in politics. Even so a good number from the period of the First World War and its aftermath contain important indications of his early political attitudes and moral values. Baldwin himself re-read the letters in 1940–1, and thought that a selection might be published together with other family papers.[24] Those which deal most fully with public affairs are printed, while significant sentences or phrases from others are included in the commentaries. Baldwin's letters to his father do not survive, which is almost certainly a serious loss. Alfred Baldwin was a Conservative political organiser and MP as well as a considerable businessman, and their correspondence presumably contained much on public matters. What Alfred's journals and both parents' few surviving letters to Baldwin ('My very dear Stan . . . Your loving father') do show is their secure pride and love for their only child: 'You have been a joy & a comfort to me all your life, as you were to your dear Father.'[25]

Nor have Baldwin's letters to his wife Lucy ('Cissie') been preserved.[26] Probably few were written, because they were so rarely apart; but there are indications that whenever separated they wrote to each other every day. Windham Baldwin considered the letters that still survived at their deaths to be so private that he burnt them, after transcribing extracts relating to the August 1931 political crisis: these are printed here in full. Lucy Baldwin was a substantial public figure in her own right, involved in the Young Women's Christian Association and other charitable bodies for women, most notably in those concerned to improve maternity care, after having herself suffered difficult pregnancies.[27] As vice-chairman from 1928 of the newly established National Birthday Trust Fund, she was an active member of its policy committee, and in

[24] Arthur Baker, *The House is Sitting* (1958), p. 43. A number of these letters were quoted in *My Father*, esp. ch. 5.

[25] Louisa to Stanley Baldwin, 2 Aug. 1924, SB add. papers; and for Alfred see *My Father*, pp. 53–4, for a twenty-first birthday letter, and p. 61 for a 1891 journal comment: 'a satisfactory son in every way'.

[26] It should be added that little has survived from Baldwin to his large extended family of uncles, aunts and cousins – both the Baldwins and, on his mother's side, the much-studied Macdonald clan: see the family trees in Appendix A. Of his closest early companions, Harold Baldwin's letters from Baldwin were destroyed by his widow (Baldwin to Constance Marshall, a Baldwin cousin, 26 Dec. 1927, Baldwin WCRO collection 9229/12ii); Ambrose Poynter and Philip Burne-Jones left no papers; and – the chief disappointment – although there are Rudyard Kipling collections, the frequent meetings between the two men and, perhaps, their tendency to reinforce each other's brevity of style, meant that Baldwin's letters to him are very short and contain nothing on public matters.

[27] A. Susan Williams, *Ladies of Influence. Women of the Elite in Interwar Britain* (2000), ch. 2, is a pioneering study of Mrs Baldwin, whose independent public work has largely escaped authors writing on her husband.

1929 founded the Anaesthetics Fund, which she assisted by speeches, broadcasts and fund-raising. This too developed into a national campaign. One of her supporters and donors built a Lucy Baldwin Maternity Hospital in the Baldwin home town of Stourport-on-Severn, and her lobbying contributed to the 1936 Midwives Act, which created a national midwifery service. Although she and her husband had differing temperaments and interests, and her own political views were so artlessly moralistic as to bemuse the sophisticated, Baldwin plainly relied upon her support and discussed important political matters with her, most clearly when his own career was at stake, in October 1922 and March 1931. She also wrote valuable notes of two major episodes, the fall of the Lloyd George Coalition and the Abdication crisis, which draw on her husband's verbal reports and which are printed here. As her occasional surviving letters to Baldwin also suggest – 'Darling heart . . . Fondest Love my precious/ Always thine own most loving Cissie' – there is no reason to doubt the closeness and warmth of their marriage.

The Baldwins had six surviving children (their first was stillborn).[28] Within a world of servants and boarding schools, and with Lucy taking the leading part in the household, Baldwin seems to have been a loving father but one who in the Edwardian style was not closely involved in his children's lives. It was Lucy who created a small theatre at Astley Hall where for many years the children, with their cousins and neighbours, performed their own reviews and plays. All of them developed strong and free-spirited characters, to the extent that both parents joked that 'having a child is like letting loose a bomb on the world. You never know when it will explode or how, nor why it does.' Of the daughters, only the youngest, Betty, had serious political interests (she spoke on some Conservative platforms in the 1930s), while the second son, Windham, early settled on a business career. With Lucy keeping up the family correspondence once they left home, Baldwin himself only wrote to his children occasionally – typically on birthdays or anniversaries – in letters which hardly ever alluded to public matters. But they were good, and certainly sincere, father's letters. Consider this extract to his third daughter: 'Darling Margot,/ Blessings on the day that brought you into this very odd world, for you do it a lot of good./ . . . Thank you for being my daughter and not somebody else's/ Your own loving/ Father.' Or again 'you are a very dear daughter and there is nothing better on earth'. His correspondence with the young Windham included exchanges of schoolboy jokes, and this from

[28] See Appendix A.