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Edited by Geoffrey Hicks, John Charmley and Bendor Grosvenor

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

Conservative foreign policy

The Conservative Party served four terms in government between 1846 and 1880. It did so three times in a parliamentary minority under Edward Geoffrey Stanley, the fourteenth Earl of Derby, and then with a substantial majority from 1874 until 1880 under Benjamin Disraeli, later the Earl of Beaconsfield (for ease of reference, referred to here as Disraeli throughout). During that time, foreign policy was dominated by the Stanleys: Derby closely monitored that of his governments, in the first two of which the Foreign Secretary was his close lieutenant, the third Earl of Malmesbury; thereafter, Derby's son, Lord Stanley, served as his father's Foreign Secretary from 1866 to 1868, then as Disraeli's in 1868 and between 1874 and 1878, by the last period having succeeded to his father's title as the fifteenth Earl of Derby.

This volume is designed to assist those seeking to explore the histories of both Conservatism and foreign policy. The historiographical moment is opportune; the political history of the nineteenth century has been reshaped in the last thirty years. However, while ever more sophisticated views of nineteenth-century Liberalism have emerged, it is only recently that the Conservative Party of 1846–1868 has received sustained attention from historians. In the last few years, the publication of Angus Hawkins's two-volume biography of the fourteenth Earl of Derby, the first for fifty years, has galvanized the process of reassessing mid-Victorian Conservatism.¹ In parallel developments, historians of Liberalism – notably Jonathan Parry and David Brown – have placed foreign policy firmly centre-stage, while another group of historians (mainly based at the University of East Anglia in Norwich) have started to reconsider the role of the Conservatives in foreign policy.² Recent research has also begun to challenge what might be described as the 'orthodox' narrative of

¹ Angus Hawkins, *The Forgotten Prime Minister: the 14th Earl of Derby*, 2 vols (Oxford, 2007–2008).

² See, e.g., John Charmley, *Splendid Isolation? Britain and the balance of power, 1874–1914* (London, 1999); David Brown, *Palmerston and the Politics of Foreign Policy, 1846–55* (Manchester, 2002); Jonathan Parry, *The Politics of Patriotism: English Liberalism, national identity and Europe, 1830–1886* (Cambridge, 2006); Geoffrey Hicks, *Peace, War and Party Politics: the Conservatives and Europe, 1846–59* (Manchester, 2007); David Brown, *Palmerston: a biography* (New Haven

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foreign policy in the 1870s. In this, perpetuated by historians from the 1930s to the late twentieth century, the fifteenth Earl of Derby presided over a policy of drift, from the ‘War-in-Sight’ crisis of 1875 to the Treaty of San Stefano in 1878, despite Disraeli’s attempts to provide firm leadership.³ While the orthodox account still has its adherents, among whom might be included T.G. Otte and Miloš Ković, this view has been challenged by others.⁴ Derby’s tenure as Foreign Secretary represents an area of increasing debate.

Until recently, Disraeli’s victory over Derby in the policy disputes of 1878 had led to a version of events being constructed by the winners. Before the 1950s, the fourteenth Earl of Derby had no serious biographer;⁵ his foreign secretaries – his son and Malmesbury – still await theirs. Although the crises of 1874–1878 have more readily attracted historians, they are still considered within a framework designed by Disraeli’s first biographers, W.F. Monypenny and G.E. Buckle, whose work casts a long shadow.⁶ Their forensic examination of Disraeli’s papers enabled them to produce a coherent narrative of his life and career, with verisimilitude provided by primary material. Their thorough editing, supported by judicious admission of some of Disraeli’s errors, created a picture in which the line of perspective was guided always to his triumph at the Congress of Berlin in 1878, when the Prime Minister collaborated with Bismarck and Austria to outfox the Russians. The extent to which he undermined his Foreign Secretary during the Great Eastern Crisis was obscured. A chain of evidence was constructed to give Disraeli’s analysis of foreign policy a coherence that it rarely possessed at the time, and sometimes placed him at the centre of events in which he had played a subsidiary role or none at all. Only recently have historians started to challenge these conclusions about his role.

Academic fashion has played its part. The study of a Conservative Party dominated by aristocrats, like the history of diplomacy, was

and London, 2010); Geoffrey Hicks (ed.), *Conservatism and British Foreign Policy, 1820–1920: the Derbys and their world* (Farnham, 2011).

³See e.g., R.W. Seton-Watson, *Disraeli, Gladstone and the Eastern Question: a study in diplomacy and party politics* (London, 1935, 1962); Richard Millman, *Britain and the Eastern Question, 1875–1878* (Oxford, 1979).

⁴See, e.g., T.G. Otte, “‘Only wants quiet riding’?: Disraeli, the fifteenth Earl of Derby and the ‘War-in-Sight’ Crisis”, in Hicks, *Conservatism and British Foreign Policy*, pp. 99–127; Miloš Ković, *Disraeli and the Eastern Question* (Oxford, 2011). For alternative views, see, e.g., Charmley, *Splendid Isolation?*; Bendor Grosvenor, ‘Britain’s “most isolationist Foreign Secretary”: the fifteenth Earl and the Eastern Crisis, 1876–1878’, in Hicks, *Conservatism and British Foreign Policy*, pp. 129–168.

⁵Until W.D. Jones, *Lord Derby and Victorian Conservatism* (Oxford, 1956).

⁶W.F. Monypenny and G.E. Buckle, *The Life of Benjamin Disraeli, Earl of Beaconsfield*, 6 vols (London, 1910–1920).

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all but washed away in the historiographical tsunami of the 1960s and 1970s. Disraeli survived, because his cultural, literary, and racial identity made him different, exotic, more recognizably ‘modern’, and, compared with his aristocratic colleagues, a much more attractive subject for new forms of historical enquiry: social, cultural, ethnographic, and interdisciplinary. This process emphasized his centrality and meant that Conservatism was seen through a Disraelian kaleidoscope. Meanwhile, the study of foreign policy became a niche interest unless it was determinedly of a twentieth-century nature and could help explain the causes of wars.

There was, however, another reason for posterity’s neglect. Any student of nineteenth-century Conservatism has been hampered by the limited availability of source material. The papers of the earls of Derby and Malmesbury were not readily accessible to scholars until the 1980s. The diaries of the fifteenth Earl were only discovered in the late 1970s, and his papers have been awaiting full cataloguing ever since. On the Liberal side of British politics, not only have papers been available for many years, but a slew of primary material has been published, including the multi-volume editions of Gladstone’s diaries and Cobden’s letters.⁷ The published documents include much valuable material on foreign relations. Fascinating insights into the construction of Liberal policy are provided by the Kimberley letters and diary, and by Agatha Ramm’s edition of the Gladstone–Granville correspondence.⁸ Much less has been forthcoming on the Conservative side. For example, barely a letter of the fourteenth Earl of Derby’s has appeared in print since Monypenny and Buckle reproduced some of his correspondence with Disraeli.

That said, two very significant sets of Conservative documents have been published. The Disraeli Letters project at Queen’s University, Toronto and John Vincent’s editions of the Derby diaries have presented invaluable material.⁹ Given the enormous extent of the

⁷M.R.D. Foot and H.C.G. Matthew, *The Gladstone Diaries*, 14 vols (Oxford, 1968–1994); A.C. Howe’s edition of *The Letters of Richard Cobden* is projected to extend to four volumes, two of which have been published thus far (Oxford, 2007 and 2010).

⁸John Powell (ed.), *Liberal by Principle: The Politics of John Wodehouse, 1st Earl of Kimberley, 1843–1902* (London, 1996); Angus Hawkins and John Powell (eds), *The Journal of John Wodehouse, First Earl of Kimberley, 1862–1902* (Cambridge, 1997); Agatha Ramm (ed.), *The Political Correspondence of Mr Gladstone and Lord Granville, 1868–76*, 2 vols (London, 1952).

⁹Eight volumes of the *Benjamin Disraeli Letters* (hereafter *BDL*) have so far been published (Toronto, 1982–2009), with a number of editors, principally M.G. Wiebe, John Matthews, J.B. Conacher, and Mary S. Millar; the ninth volume, anticipated in 2012, will go up to 1867 and constitute the halfway point of the projected publication; J.R. Vincent (ed.), *Disraeli, Derby and the Conservative Party: Journals and Memoirs of Edward Henry, Lord Stanley, 1849–1869* (Hassocks, Sussex, 1978) (hereafter *DDCP*); *A Selection from the Diaries of Edward Henry Stanley, 15th Earl of Derby (1826–93) between September 1869 and March 1878* (London, 1994) (hereafter

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former task, however, it may be decades before we see all of Disraeli's letters in print, particularly from his later career. And, vital though that work is, it inevitably emphasizes his role at the expense of his colleagues'. The Derby diaries give us another important Conservative perspective and essential context for the policy-making process, but were of course not themselves part of it; policy was constructed in a process of discussion and correspondence. The lack of published correspondence is not for want of material: in the record offices of Liverpool and Winchester there are significant numbers of letters written by Malmesbury and the elder Derby, while in a range of archives the debates of 1876–1878 have left their mark in hundreds of letters. The huge value for scholars of the Disraeli letters and the Derby diaries underlines the importance of more such material being collected, edited, and made widely available.

The case for producing a volume of this kind becomes all the more pressing when one considers the momentous nature of the events that embroiled the Conservative governments of 1852, 1858–1859, 1866–1868, and 1874–1880. These include the declaration of the French Second Empire, the first of the wars of Italian unification, the crises that followed the Austro-Prussian War, and, of course, the Great Eastern Crisis of 1876–1878, which left Ottoman power propped up for another forty years. With the publication of documents on topics such as these, the part played by Conservative ministries can be the better examined, considered, and re-inserted in the historical narrative.

The documents

This book does not purport to be a comprehensive collection of all that was written on foreign policy even by the principal members of those governments. Such a work would be enormous, and would contain a great deal of material that would be either trivial or unnecessarily obscure. To make the collection both coherent and useful, the editing process has been guided by certain principles. It was decided to end with the fifteenth Earl of Derby's resignation from the office of Foreign Secretary on 28 March 1878 (to be replaced by the third Marquis of Salisbury), when a consistent strand of policy also came to an end. Geographically, the correspondence contained in this volume relates to Britain's European and Near Eastern policy. Much of it concerns relations with the four 'great powers': Austria (Austria-Hungary from 1867), France, Prussia (Germany from 1871), and Russia. From 1861

DD; *The Diaries of Edward Henry Stanley, 15th Earl of Derby (1826–93) between 1878 and 1893* (Oxford, 2003).

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Italy took its place in the first rank of geopolitics and was accordingly the subject of intense interest. The Ottoman Empire, and the problem of managing its decline – the so-called ‘Eastern Question’ – takes up a similarly large place in the collection, particularly in the chapter dealing with the second Disraeli government. But almost all territories that constituted political nations on the European continent (and several that did not) are the subject of correspondence reproduced here.

The editorial decision to focus on European and Near Eastern policy is not intended to diminish the significance of other material. In the archival collections on which this edition draws, the papers on foreign policy also include material dealing with imperial affairs, relations with America, and the minutiae of diplomatic appointments. All three warrant separate consideration. To maintain the coherence of the collection, and to make it manageable (no small consideration, given the hundreds of documents examined), we have largely excluded material falling into those three categories. This being an art and not a science, our principles have occasionally had to be set aside when material has been found relevant to the broader themes of the collection.

One other exclusion, which the aficionado of the Great Eastern Crisis will immediately note, is the Constantinople Conference of late 1876 and early 1877, the gathering of great powers that was held to consider the deteriorating situation in the Near East, but which failed to prevent the Russo-Turkish war of 1877. Salisbury attended as Britain’s representative; accordingly, there is in the Salisbury, Derby, and Disraeli papers a great deal of correspondence relating to its proceedings. After some consideration, it was decided to exclude documents dealing with the detailed discussions at Constantinople, which are worthy of collection in a separate volume. To include them here, in bowdlerized form given the confines of space, would not have done the conference justice either as a separate diplomatic episode or for its place in Salisbury’s career. The natural home for material generated by the conference is with other documents relating to Salisbury’s contribution. Given the conclusion of this collection in March 1878, when he succeeded to the Foreign Office, the exclusion of the earlier Salisbury endeavour seemed logical, and it enabled us to include other unpublished material. In the broader narrative of the Eastern Question, the caesura is not significant: the failure of the conference meant that the unfolding crisis in the Near East went unresolved and events careered on regardless.

In the first three chapters, the correspondence is overwhelmingly that generated by a small group of ministers. In Chapter One, it is all but a bilateral exchange between the elder Derby and Malmesbury; in Chapter Two, their letters still form the bulk of the

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collection, although their correspondence with and about Disraeli takes on a greater significance. In these two chapters, however, we have the immense advantage of being able to examine documents alongside those published in the Disraeli Letters, which have not been reproduced here, being already in the public domain in very fine editions. In Chapter Two, we have added a number of extracts from the unpublished diary of the Earl of Malmesbury, which he used as the basis for memoirs that were published in 1884. Unfortunately, only snippets of the diary survive in his papers. What little remains from 1852 is almost identical to the published memoirs, but that from 1858–1859, while brief, is rather different from what was published and, we hope, illuminates contemporary events. In Chapters Three and Four, dealing with a period for which the Toronto editors have not yet completed their labours, Disraeli's correspondence takes a more significant place than in the earlier sections. Chapter Three is, for the most part, a three-way exchange between Derby, Stanley, and Disraeli.

We make no apology for the limited number of correspondents in the first three chapters. It is an accurate reflection of their contributions to policy-making. In foreign policy, a small number of ministers guided, decided, and occasionally collided. In the first three Derby governments, the rest of the Cabinet were kept informed as much as was necessary, which for the most part meant not very much. Their contribution to policy was limited to commenting after the event or in Cabinet, where unfortunately no record was kept. Of course, many Conservative politicians, both in Cabinet and out, did discuss foreign policy in Parliament. That material, too, is under-utilized by historians, but not for want of opportunity, given all the volumes of *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates* (now collectively present on the Internet). Nevertheless, while speeches in Parliament presented policy and debate for public consumption, the private correspondence published here was generated in the substantive process of policy-making.

In its range of material, Chapter Four is different. For the first time in the nineteenth century, a Conservative Cabinet was filled with men with strong views about foreign policy and a readiness to express them. Such had often been the case with Whig and Liberal Cabinets, and Viscount Palmerston had long had to deal with incursions into his departmental territory, but Conservative ministers (the Duke of Wellington and Disraeli aside) had meekly deferred to their leaders and foreign secretaries. By contrast, Disraeli's Cabinet was full of armchair foreign-policy experts. The problem for Disraeli and Derby was that the armchairs were in departments of state, and the experts could not be so easily dismissed as could commentators in the press or Parliament. The Cabinet nearly shattered over foreign policy in 1877,

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and the range of interlocutors reflects the complexity of debate about the Eastern Question.

Others who played a significant role in foreign policy included Queen Victoria (and, before 1861, her husband, Prince Albert) and, of course, British officials at home and in foreign postings. Where royal contributions affected policy-making or illuminated policy-makers' intentions, material relating to them has been retained; but, in the Queen's case, it cannot be said that she has suffered from the neglect of posterity, nor that there is a paucity of primary material available for the historian. Her contribution has been amply served by the nine collections of her letters and the six subsequent volumes publishing her correspondence with her eldest daughter. For the Eastern Crisis of 1876–1878, the Buckle volumes also provide a wealth of material from Disraeli's exchanges with the Queen. But these publications have played their part in distorting our view of British foreign policy. While much heat was generated from Windsor, Balmoral, and Osborne, there was little light. The monarch's *influence* was significant, and when she could frustrate, delay, and harass ministers, as she made it her constitutional duty to do, she did. In 1876–1878, of course, she also took the opportunity of Cabinet divisions to intervene, as the fifteenth Earl of Derby recognized and deplored but could do little to stop. As the correspondence in this volume demonstrates, however, the Queen did not have *power*: she neither initiated nor directed policy, even if it suited Disraeli's purpose to foster the illusion that she did. For that reason, this work treats the monarch as one of several 'noises off'.

Britain's diplomatic representatives, as the agents of foreign policy on the ground, are a continuous presence in this book. The contributions of various ambassadors, ministers, consuls, and other officials were vital; they were the instruments of day-to-day policy, and their role excited comment, approbation, and disapproval. Like the Queen, however, they did not direct policy. Some, notably Lord Cowley in Paris, were given a great deal of latitude by virtue of seniority and experience. Others, such as successive representatives in Constantinople, were so far away that they sometimes had to act before directions could be received from London. But they were the agents, not the instigators, of policy. In 1858, for example, Cowley played a vital role in mollifying Napoleon III after a series of difficulties, but he did not determine policy. While diplomats might bemoan the political leadership they received, particularly if they were not of the same political hue as their masters, they could do little about it. Notable exceptions to this rule were Austen Henry Layard, who acted as much as Disraeli's agent in 1877 and 1878 as he did Britain's ambassador in Constantinople, and Colonel Frederick Wellesley, who played a similar (if more junior) role for Disraeli in Russia. Documents

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illustrating their contributions are therefore incorporated. Broadly speaking, however, this book treats the periphery as peripheral. It provides the correspondence of those at the centre of power. All of the documents in this collection would usefully be augmented with material from other archives, but this volume incorporates the ‘core’ of policy debate and decision.

The Derby governments of 1852, 1858–1859, and 1866–1868

The problems with which Conservative governments wrestled may be divided roughly in two. The principal concerns of the fourteenth Earl of Derby’s three minority governments, and Disraeli’s first, were generated by French revisionism on the European continent. By contrast, the second Disraeli government of 1874–1880 faced problems that lay as much outside Europe, and that blew up within a political landscape defined by Bismarckian conservatism.

While both Italian and German nationalism acted as catalysts, the Conservatives’ major foreign-policy difficulties between 1852 and 1868 were caused by Napoleon III’s foreign policy. In 1852, both over Belgium at the beginning of the first Derby government’s period in office, and over the Second Empire at its end, France generated the most concern. The great powers feared that France was about to invade Belgium in early 1852, and were troubled by the potential consequences of Louis Napoleon Bonaparte’s declaration of his new empire (and himself as Napoleon III) in December 1852. In both cases, the Conservative government played a key role in resolving the crises. In 1858, the first weeks in office were spent mending relations with France. These efforts followed the political row that had brought down Palmerston’s government, after French refugees in Britain were revealed to have been involved in the Orsini plot to assassinate Napoleon at the beginning of the year. Palmerston had been heavily criticized in Britain for bowing to French pressure and bringing in a Conspiracy to Murder Bill; the Conservatives had to mollify both French and British opinion. The summer of 1858 was overshadowed by French naval expansion; 1859 was dominated by French intervention in Italy. At Plombières in 1858, Napoleon had conspired with Count Cavour of Piedmont-Sardinia to provoke Austria into a war in which France would support Piedmont. This duly came to pass in the spring of 1859, and, as the diplomatic situation deteriorated in the prelude to war, the Conservative government tried to mediate. Caught between France (Britain’s liberal ally from the Crimea) and Austria and Prussia (with whose desire for stability it

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sympathized), Derby's government failed in its efforts, but maintained British neutrality.

France was not, however, the originator of difficulties in the first month or so of the 1866–1868 government, which was dominated by the Austro-Prussian War. The Prussians won comprehensively and took advantage of their victory to create a North German state, embodying a greater Prussia. The conflict itself was over so quickly that it barely required a British reaction. Derby and his son (for simplicity in this section referred to as Stanley) were determined to keep Britain out of the diplomatic manoeuvres that surrounded its conclusion. Much greater difficulties stemmed from Napoleon's desire to secure compensation for the expansion of Prussia. He sought his recompense for wounded French pride by precipitating a row with Prussia over the contested territory of Luxembourg. Ultimately, the only way in which the crisis could be resolved was for Britain to take the lead in mediating at a conference and, with great reluctance on Stanley's part, to agree to a European guarantee of the grand duchy. In keeping with their non-interventionist instincts, the Foreign Secretary and his father then did their best to draw back from that commitment in Parliament.

In the period covered by the first three chapters, there were also several minor difficulties that generated a disproportionate amount of publicity. In 1852, for example, the opposition made hay with the fact that the Conservatives mishandled the case of a young Englishman, Erskine Mather, who was injured in a scuffle with an Austrian soldier in Tuscany. The northern Italian duchy was one of a series of Austrian puppet states in the region, so first the Conservatives had to address the question of who was the proper power with whom to negotiate for compensation for Mather (the Whigs having made very little progress with Austria). While the Government resolved this successfully, two British diplomats in Florence, Scarlett and Barron, then accepted an ill-advised settlement, which Malmesbury and Derby did not check thoroughly, but which – when revealed to the public – gave their opponents ammunition to accuse them of abandoning British interests. This left them open to unflattering comparisons with Palmerston's bravado over the Don Pacifico affair in 1850. The Conservatives faced similar dangers in 1858 over the case of two British sailors, Watt and Park, captured by the Neapolitans aboard a Sardinian ship, the *Cagliari*, that had been engaged in piracy. Over this, however, they negotiated much more effectively, successfully mediating between Sardinia and Naples and obtaining the release of the sailors, with compensation. This was in stark contrast to their Whig predecessors, who had failed to produce a settlement before losing office in 1858.

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One of the most important questions raised by this volume is whether, in dealing with problems of any kind, there was an identifiable ‘Conservative’ foreign policy. Although others may draw different conclusions, it is certainly our contention that there was. Examining the way in which Conservative administrations handled business prior to 1868, certain patterns emerge. The fourteenth Earl of Derby and Malmesbury in 1852 and 1858–1859, and Derby and Stanley in 1866–1868, appear to have deployed four guiding principles: to pursue good relations with all states regardless of systems of government; to resist being drawn in to any of the great continental struggles of the day; to mediate in international disputes; and to contain and underplay differences between states.

In relations with the great powers, they sought to mend fences and avoid disputes with both the autocrats and Bonapartist France. In 1852, overtures were made to Austria and Russia after Palmerston and his Foreign Secretary, the second Earl Granville, had left relations in a fragile state. Russia was consistently seen as a partner, for example over the Belgian crisis in 1852 and the Italian crisis in 1859. In 1866–1868, Stanley was still trying to take opportunities to appease the Russian court, especially if a cheap benefit could be obtained by, for example, giving the Tsar the Garter that he desired. While the Liberals, too, had of course sought good relations with France, Malmesbury went to great lengths to woo Napoleon in 1852, and was publicly criticized for doing so. In 1858, during a war scare, the Conservatives mended relations with France, while at the same time seeking to augment Britain’s defences. In relations with the minor powers, a similar placatory approach was adopted. With Tuscany over the Mather case in 1852, Conservative policy-makers rejected the unsuccessful Liberal method of doing business with Austria. In 1859, Derby and his ministers sought to mend fences with Naples; they deplored an earlier Liberal decision to break off relations, given the problems that it had caused for them in resolving the question of the *Cagliari*. In 1852, a secret mission had also been sent to see if diplomatic relations could be established with the Vatican. Although they were unsuccessful in restoring diplomatic links with either court, their attempt was characteristic of a pragmatic, almost technocratic approach to foreign policy, in which instinctive cultural reflexes were ignored or set aside.

Throughout the correspondence in the first three chapters, one may perceive a deep concern about the extent to which Britain might be drawn into the political struggles of the European continent. In 1859, over the Italian crisis, while Derby and Malmesbury were happy to intervene as peacemakers, there was a frustration with French dabbling, Piedmontese ambition, and Austria’s reluctance to embrace moderate reform. Once war had broken out, that frustration was