

# Cardiff Historical Papers



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and the promotion of Anglo-German misunderstanding**

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**Published by the Cardiff School of History and Archaeology, Cardiff University,  
Humanities Building, Colum Road, Cardiff CF10 3EU, UK**

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ISSN 1754-2472 (Print)

ISSN 1754-2480 (Online)

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Publication design and cover photograph: Mr John Morgan

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# **Aristocratic appeasement: Lord Londonderry, Nazi Germany, and the promotion of Anglo-German misunderstanding<sup>1</sup>**

All really depends on Hitler, whom it is very difficult to reach. In so far as he is reached by Ribbentrop he is misled, for Ribbentrop saw too much of Londonderry and Mayfair and too little of England.<sup>2</sup>

Hugh Dalton MP, 5 September 1938

## **Introduction**

It remains a popular belief that the British aristocracy, as a class, was responsible in some way for the policy of ‘appeasement’ – ‘the search for peace by the redress of German grievances.’<sup>3</sup> There is also the belief that many aristocrats were inclined towards fascism, and even that some harboured a desire to establish a fascist government in the United Kingdom. The fictional character of Lord Darlington in Kazuo Ishiguro’s 1989 novel *The Remains of the Day* epitomizes these perceptions, and in some respects resembles the eponymous subject of this article, the seventh Marquess of Londonderry (1878–1949).<sup>4</sup> It is undeniable that appeasement attracted the active support of many British notables, and that some took this a stage further by playing a prominent role in promoting better ‘Anglo-German relations’. The possession of considerable wealth, status, and a strong sense of ‘duty’ meant that politically active aristocrats could, on their own initiative, fly to Germany and receive

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<sup>1</sup> An early version of this paper was presented at the Seminar Series, Institute of Irish Studies, The Queen’s University of Belfast on 21 March 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Dalton, diary, 5 September 1938, in Ben Pimlott (ed.), *The Political Diary of Hugh Dalton: 1918–40, 1945–60* (London: Cape, 1986), p. 237.

<sup>3</sup> R.A.C. Parker, *Chamberlain and Appeasement: British Policy and the Coming of the Second World War* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> MP for Maidstone (1905–15), thereafter the House of Lords; Finance Member of the Air Council (1919–20); Under-Secretary of State for Air (1920–1); Leader of the Senate and Minister of Education in Northern Ireland (1921–6); First Commissioner of Works (1928–9); Secretary of State for Air (1931–5); Leader of the House of Lords and Lord Privy Seal (1935).

a warm welcome from leading Nazis. Motivated in part by what they regarded as the National Government's diplomatic inactivity, these self-appointed emissaries, mainly but not exclusively Conservatives, sought to demonstrate that it was possible, indeed essential, to parley openly with the Nazi leadership, to address German grievances, and thereby avoid another European conflict.

The Nazis encouraged such visits, hoping they might hasten direct contact between leading figures of each country that would pave the way for Germany to exercise a free hand in Eastern Europe. Arguments ranging from a shared hostility to communism to racial affinity were employed by Berlin to garner support amongst British Conservatives. The Conservative dominated National Government, however, was wary of the effect of an Anglo-German agreement on relations with France, and unhappy with the self-declared role of amateur diplomats. Having failed time and again to give an unequivocal commitment to French security, the British government felt it could not bind Britain unilaterally to any far-reaching settlement with a dictatorship. Amateur diplomats such as Londonderry sought to rebut this assertion, arguing that an Anglo-German agreement could be framed within a larger 'Great Power pact'. This stance was eventually adopted by the government, following Neville Chamberlain's appointment as Prime Minister in May 1937.

Chamberlain's agreement with Hitler at Munich in September 1938 fulfilled the hopes of those who had long advocated a deal with the Nazi government. Unlike the Prime Minister, however, they were relatively powerless to protect their reputations during the diplomatically disastrous months that followed. Chamberlain saved his own position by reorienting the form – if not the substance – of British policy, not least by taking steps to prepare Britain for war. Outside the government, most advocates of appeasement shrank from the public eye, reassuring everyone of

their patriotic commitment to Britain and its civic institutions. For a minority, however, including the Prime Minister, the worsening situation amplified the importance of a peace settlement with Germany. If public hostility to such utterances ensured that Chamberlain restricted his views to the privacy of Cabinet debate, then it encouraged proponents to speak out in favour of a new agreement. Amongst these the most notorious were prominent aristocrats, with the eighth Duke of Buccleuch and the second Duke of Westminster maintaining this position even after the outbreak of war on 3 September 1939. Londonderry never went quite that far, but he did call for a new agreement, and volunteered to act as an intermediary, until August 1939. He was only stopped by the intervention of the Foreign Secretary.

There have been many studies dealing with appeasement, mostly focusing on the government. There has been less interest in those outside government who were equally if not more keen on the policy. Notable exceptions include works by A.L. Rowse, Martin Gilbert and Richard Gott, Richard Griffiths, N.J. Crowson, and Norman Rose.<sup>5</sup> References to British aristocrats and the Nazis are scattered throughout most of these books, but their inclusion has more to do with their status as government ministers, or their role in pressure groups, than their class background *per se*. Only David Cannadine gives serious attention to the relationship between the aristocracy and the far right in his *Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy*.<sup>6</sup> In most of these works Londonderry's contributions to the appeasement debate are quoted, usually from the same two sources, his polemic *Ourselves and Germany*, and

<sup>5</sup> A.L. Rowse, *All Souls and Appeasement: A Contribution to Contemporary History* (London: Macmillan, 1961); Martin Gilbert and Richard Gott, *The Appeasers* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1963); Richard Griffiths, *Fellow Travellers of the Right: British Enthusiasts for Nazi Germany, 1933–9* (London: Constable, 1980); N.J. Crowson, *Facing Fascism: the Conservative Party and the European Dictators 1935–1940* (London: Routledge, 1997); Norman Rose, *The Cliveden Set: Portrait of an Exclusive Fraternity* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> David Cannadine, *Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy* (London: Macmillan, 1990).

memoirs, *Wings of Destiny*.<sup>7</sup> A far fuller picture, however, emerges when these works are set alongside Londonderry's voluminous correspondence with leading figures in the British and German governments. This vast archive was largely ignored until the relatively recent publication of Ian Kershaw's *Making friends with Hitler*, and N.C. Fleming's *The Marquess of Londonderry*.<sup>8</sup> The former is a comprehensive overview of Londonderry's recommendations to his own government on the appeasement of Germany, and a narrative of his interaction with the authorities in Berlin. The latter biography also addresses these themes, and examines the relevance of Londonderry's aristocratic background to his long political career, exploring how it shaped Londonderry's actions in the public sphere and what this reveals about interwar political culture. This article adopts a similar position, investigating how Londonderry's aristocratic status lies at the very heart of why and how he became involved in amateur diplomacy, why the Nazis encouraged him, and how the resulting mutual misunderstandings served to undermine the very cause both sought to promote.

## Motivation

If many Conservatives, including aristocrats, were sympathetic to the policy of appeasing German grievances, how individuals acted on this could differ

<sup>7</sup> Lord Londonderry, *Ourselves and Germany* (London: Penguin, 1938); *Wings of Destiny* (London: Macmillan, 1943).

<sup>8</sup> Ian Kershaw, *Making Friends with Hitler: Lord Londonderry and Britain's Road to War* (London: Allan Lane, 2004); N.C. Fleming, *The Marquess of Londonderry: Aristocracy, Power and Politics in Britain and Ireland* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005). See also N.C. Fleming, 'Lord Londonderry and education reform in 1920s Northern Ireland', *History Ireland*, 9, 1 (2001), pp. 36–9; 'Lord Londonderry and Ulster politics, 1921–6', *Irish History: A Research Yearbook*, 2 (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003), pp. 72–80; 'Old and new Unionism: the seventh Marquess of Londonderry, 1905–1921', in D. George Boyce and Alan O'Day (eds), *Ireland in Transition, 1867–1921* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 223–40; ‘“The Londonderry Herr”: Lord Londonderry and the appeasement of Nazi Germany’, *History Ireland*, 13, 1 (2005), pp. 31–5; ‘The first government of Northern Ireland, education reform and the failure of anti-populist unionism, 1921–1925’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 18, 2 (2007), pp. 146–69.

significantly, especially given the rapidly changing diplomatic situation of the 1930s. Londonderry, after all, was not the only aristocrat to visit Germany, nor the only former government minister, but it was rare for amateur diplomats to possess both attributes. Similarly, although Londonderry was far from being the only proponent of appeasement in the mid 1930s, he was one of a dwindling band who maintained this call even after the collapse of the Munich agreement. This raises the question of his motivation. Why did a retired politician with enormous wealth at his disposal engage in such a controversial campaign? The evidence points to two key factors: his contentious period in office as Secretary of State for Air and a lifelong determination to forge a successful career in politics.

The latter was drummed into him as a child by parents who actively sought to match their immense financial and social status with appropriate political office – with modest success.<sup>9</sup> After some initial difficulties, and against the prevailing trend, Londonderry's aristocratic title and immense wealth enabled him to make a successful claim on successive government offices, especially in the light of his constructive role in Irish politics during the First World War and in the early 1920s, and for his role as a 'moderate' coal owner during the 1926 General Strike. In 1928 Stanley Baldwin brought Londonderry into the Cabinet as First Commissioner of Works, a post he reclaimed – to the astonishment of political observers – in the emergency National Government of August 1935. Once in office, however, Londonderry's background tended to dispose him to place departmental loyalty above the electoral and political concerns of his colleagues, raising the heckles of those, both Conservative and Labour, who resented the appointment of a marquess to high office.<sup>10</sup> Had his critics

<sup>9</sup> Lord Londonderry, 'In the Days of my Youth', *T.P.'s & Cassell's Weekly*, 21 March 1925, pp. 806–10; Fleming, *Marquess of Londonderry*, pp. 10–12.

<sup>10</sup> See Stuart Ball (ed.), *Parliament and Politics in the Age of Baldwin and MacDonald: the Headlam Diaries 1923–1935* (London: Historians' Press, 1992).

examined Londonderry's performance in Irish politics with greater care, they might have foreseen the problems that arose in the mid 1930s. Patrician high-handedness in Ulster might appeal to sensible Englishmen wary of Ulster's sectarian politics, but its repetition during the highly-charged disarmament debates of the early 1930s proved much less palatable. Careful observers would have noted a tendency towards 'appeasement' and 'moderation' in Londonderry's attempts to create an inclusive society in Northern Ireland, in his effort to propose a resolution to the General Strike, and in his obvious sympathy for German grievances during the League of Nations Disarmament Conference.

Londonderry's appointment as Secretary of State for Air following the election victory of the National Government in November 1931 led to unproven allegations that it was the result of Lady Londonderry's hold on the Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald.<sup>11</sup> In time, disapproval on this basis would make way for more substantial criticisms of Londonderry's approach to the Disarmament Conference. His objections to a ban on aerial bombing, echoing the views of his senior officials and staff officers, challenged the position adopted by most of the cabinet, including his party leader, Baldwin, who as Lord President was Prime Minister in all but name. The arguments of the 'airmen' succeeded in producing a more equivocal British policy at Geneva, to the anger of those who had hoped for an outright ban on aerial warfare. The collapse of the Geneva conference in late 1934 produced a further crisis for the Air Ministry when, in March 1935, Hitler informed visiting British ministers that he had an air force of equal strength to the Royal Air Force. Not only was the Air Ministry's intelligence judged negligent, but the Air Minister compounded the offence by urging caution in the face of backbench calls for rapid rearmament.

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<sup>11</sup> Nicholas Owen, 'MacDonald's parties: the Labour party and "aristocratic embrace", 1922–31', *Twentieth Century British History*, 18, 1 (2007), pp. 1–53.

A Cabinet reshuffle in May 1935 removed Londonderry to the sinecure of Leader of the House of Lords and Lord Privy Seal. However, his role at Geneva and his continued presence in the Cabinet made him a bogeyman for the Labour party's new leader, Clement Attlee, who singled him out in Labour's November 1935 general election manifesto. For Attlee, Londonderry was not only an aristocrat and a coal owner, but also a warmonger – the self-confessed saviour of aerial bombing.<sup>12</sup> Many Conservative backbenchers, on the contrary, regarded Londonderry as an effete Air Minister, who was incapable of the great task of rearmament. Not surprisingly, Londonderry was dropped from the Cabinet altogether following the General Election. It left him deeply bitter towards Baldwin, who had replaced MacDonald as Prime Minister, and determined to defend himself from the accusation that he had misled Parliament on German air estimates, as well as from the more personal slur that he was a warmonger. He would do so by following the example of a number of British aristocrats, such as the eleventh Marquess of Lothian, who had flown on personal visits to the *Führer*. In this way, Londonderry hoped to recast himself as a peacemaker.<sup>13</sup>

Londonderry, like many others, admired the transformation of Hitler's Germany, but his rationale for promoting Anglo-German understanding was largely negative, based on the widespread fear of another world war and its consequences for Britain: 'We beat the Germans and I am very glad we did, and it is just because I don't want to have to do it again that I have gone all out to capture the Germans another way.'<sup>14</sup> Long before Hitler became Chancellor in January 1933, Londonderry argued for the conciliation of the Weimar Republic. Like many British observers of

<sup>12</sup> F.W.S. Craig, *British General Election Manifestos, 1900–1974* (London: Macmillan, 1975), p. 108.

<sup>13</sup> Lothian to Londonderry, 7 February 1935, Londonderry papers, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (hereafter D/3099), D/3099/2/17/56.

<sup>14</sup> Londonderry to Lady Milner, 11 March 1937, Londonderry papers, Durham County Record Office (hereafter D/Lo), D/Lo/C/237 (8).

foreign policy he had a sense of victor's guilt for the harsher provisions of Versailles. In August 1923 he criticised publicly the French government's determined pursuance of reparations.<sup>15</sup> A month later he argued that, although Germany needed some punishment, 'it was necessary to consider the future of the world and the best basis on which peace could be established.'<sup>16</sup> The following year in an Armistice Day radio broadcast, Londonderry called on the country not to harbour animosities when remembering the Great War.<sup>17</sup> In 1929, as First Commissioner of Works, he praised the Locarno Treaty for bringing Germany into the League of Nations and hoped it would establish 'for all time an understanding throughout the world that there was a desire for peace'.<sup>18</sup> Just prior to his appointment to the emergency National Government, he praised the decision of the American President, Herbert Hoover, to postpone Germany's repayment of international debts.<sup>19</sup> The following month Londonderry warned:

the world's danger was a German collapse... Communists would welcome it. They were out to destroy everything in which this country believed. If there were not a satisfactory end to the deliberations of the nations Germany would be driven into the hands of the Communists... it was our duty to give all the assistance we could to prevent it.<sup>20</sup>

As a Cabinet minister, Londonderry's sympathy for Germany was constrained by deliberations at Geneva. In November 1934 he urged fellow ministers to readmit Germany to the League so that a new settlement could be reached.<sup>21</sup> The establishment of a Nazi government in January 1933 only reinforced his view that a

<sup>15</sup> *The Times*, 27 August 1923.

<sup>16</sup> *The Times*, 25 October 1923.

<sup>17</sup> Typed copy of Londonderry's BBC broadcast, 7.35 p.m., 11 November 1924, D/3099/5/13.

<sup>18</sup> *The Times*, 1 March 1929.

<sup>19</sup> *The Times*, 25 June 1931.

<sup>20</sup> *The Times*, 20 July 1931.

<sup>21</sup> Londonderry to Lord Hailsham, 22 November 1934, D/3099/2/19/4A.

deal should be struck at the earliest opportunity; in May 1932 he had warned of their coming to power unless German grievances were addressed.<sup>22</sup> The Nazis' domestic policies did not lessen his determination: 'they were the rulers of the Reich and they were the people in the circumstances who alone could be approached.'<sup>23</sup> Londonderry's suggestion of November 1934 was buried under other government considerations, but it allowed him to argue in later years that he had been ignored when Britain might have dealt with Germany from a position of strength.<sup>24</sup>

Out of office, Londonderry no longer regarded the League of Nations as a suitable forum through which an agreement with Germany might be reached, not least because of his own intimate experience of League affairs. Instead, after some initial difficulties communicating his beliefs to former colleagues, he took inspiration from his forebear, Viscount Castlereagh, later second Marquess of Londonderry, who as Foreign Secretary under the second Earl of Liverpool had helped to establish the Concert of Europe:

I have always been guided by the doctrines of Castlereagh and the Duke of Wellington who recognised that as soon as the indemnity... was paid by France after the Napoleonic Wars, occupation should come to an end and France should have the full opportunity of regaining her equilibrium and playing her part in international affairs.<sup>25</sup>

As Londonderry wrote to his successor as Lord Privy Seal, the third Viscount Halifax, in December 1936, any new agreement should be reached between the 'Great Powers' at a conference resembling the Congress of Vienna.<sup>26</sup> Like many others, particularly on the right, Londonderry regarded a stable Europe as necessary not only for the

<sup>22</sup> Londonderry, notes for a public lecture, 4 May 1932, D/3099/2/16/22.

<sup>23</sup> Londonderry, *Wings of Destiny*, p. 158.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 118–19.

<sup>25</sup> Londonderry to McKee, editor of *Belfast News-Letter*, 5 January 1938, D/3099/2/21/A/4.

<sup>26</sup> Londonderry to Halifax, 24 December 1936, D/3099/2/18/18B.

prosperity of the continent and for Britain, but also so that both could meet the twin challenges of Soviet Communism and unrelenting American economic growth.

Londonderry's constant citation of Castlereagh also served a more personal purpose, linking him to a great European diplomat in a peculiarly aristocratic way, a connection he was keen to impress on his German hosts. The Nazis, however, needed little encouragement. Hitler and his party advisor on foreign affairs, Joachim von Ribbentrop, believed that a clash with Britain would be averted if a bilateral agreement could be reached allowing Germany to exercise hegemony in Eastern Europe. Nazi leaders admired Britain, its relative social cohesion, observation of convention, and its consequent conformity.<sup>27</sup> These attributes meant that Britain was not merely a highly appealing ally, but also a potentially formidable enemy. To ensure that the two states never again would go to war, Ribbentrop sought to woo Britain's aristocracy so that they could effectively press their government for a new settlement. In keeping with Hitler's tendency to use unconventional sources of information and methods of government, Ribbentrop ran his own foreign affairs bureau, the Dienststelle Ribbentrop, which fostered contacts with pro-Germans and anti-Communists in Britain.<sup>28</sup>

Ribbentrop's assessment of British politics was, of course, seriously flawed, based as it was on simplistic assumptions about British power and designed to circumvent official channels. Appealing to Hitler's unconventional approach to diplomacy and government in general, it was also intended to elevate Ribbentrop's importance in the Nazi government and international relations. In spite of the strategy's obvious flaws, it is not surprising that it was greeted initially with

<sup>27</sup> Gerwin Strobl, *The Germanic Isle: Nazi Perceptions of Britain* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 31.

<sup>28</sup> G.T. Waddington, "An idyllic and unruffled atmosphere of complete Anglo-German misunderstanding": Aspects of the Operations of the Dienststelle Ribbentrop in Great Britain, 1934–1938', *History*, 82 (1997), p. 46.

enthusiasm by those whose patronage Ribbentrop sought: Britain's beleaguered aristocracy. It appeared to challenge the unwelcome reality that their power had declined irreversibly, and it provided a new political role for notables that did not depend on their membership of the British government. It was, initially, a mutually satisfying embrace, for like the Nazis, sympathetic aristocrats had little moral or financial difficulty in ignoring the proper diplomatic channels. In the end, however, despite the intentions of both parties, this unusual relationship only served to encourage and heighten confusion in the two countries' relations.

### **Rationalisation**

Londonderry's advocacy of a conference of great powers was not simply a frivolous exercise highlighting his familial antecedents. It was underpinned by a widely-held belief that the League of Nations had proved itself incapable of acting as the broker and guarantor of binding international agreements. Successive failures by the League to deal effectively with international crises made it look impotent. In contrast to those who blamed this on the failure of the larger member states to enforce the League's collective will, many British Conservatives, like Londonderry, put the blame squarely on the smaller member states. Their increasing prominence in League of Nations' deliberations was an unwelcome development in itself for the United Kingdom, one of the few great powers in the League, but it was especially frustrating when it was believed to be detrimental to the influence of larger member states, particularly on matters concerning the conduct of warfare. Domestic pressure kept Britain in the League, but as Halifax remarked privately in December 1936 to Lord Cecil of

Chelwood, a champion of Geneva, the League was becoming a ‘mockery’, particularly as the USA, Japan, and Germany were not members.<sup>29</sup>

According to Londonderry and many other Conservatives, stability in Europe was best guaranteed through agreements made outside the League, allowing the great powers to settle their differences without the legalistic and internationalist constraints of Geneva. The Locarno pacts of 1925 demonstrated that such arrangements were easier outside the confines of the League, not least as it allowed the main signatories to ignore the concerns of Germany’s eastern neighbours. Rather than continue to pay lip-service to the League of Nations, Londonderry and many others on the right of the Conservative party argued that Britain should take the lead by making a definite commitment to reach further agreements between the great powers.

A minority of Conservatives, led by Winston Churchill, also believed that Britain should grasp the initiative in European affairs, and that communism was a menace to European stability, but rejected the negative view of the League held by the majority of their colleagues on the Conservative benches. By the mid 1930s, Churchill, who had once been hostile to the League, increasingly linked his vigorous campaign for rearmament with support for it, not only to build alliances across the political parties, but also to champion collective security as an alternative to Chamberlain’s appeasement of German grievances.

Chamberlain, on the other hand, believed that Churchill’s policy increased the likelihood of a disadvantageous war, not only by provoking Hitler before Britain had rearmed fully, but also because collective security increased the *casus belli*. Britain should show the way forward in Europe, Chamberlain agreed, but it should do so by encouraging the leaders of its great powers to engage in high level discussions with

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<sup>29</sup> Andrew Roberts, ‘The Holy Fox’: *The Life of Lord Halifax* (London: Phoenix, 1991), p. 55.

one another, expediting opportunities for international agreement on a range of issues crucial to the stability of the continent. Nazi Germany should be treated not as a pariah, but as a great power, and persuaded of the need to discuss its grievances with other great powers. Chamberlain hoped that through this process, Germany's rearmament could be limited, thereby lessening the threat to Britain and France. Its territorial ambitions might also be constrained, although this was not Chamberlain's primary concern. Like Churchill, Chamberlain and other appeasers believed that Britain must rearm to strengthen its militarily position, but not in a manner that risked alienating Hitler. Peace in Europe, at least in the short term, would be guaranteed by conciliating Germany – a view that attracted considerable support in Britain in the years leading up to Munich, but one that lost much of its credibility in the months that followed.<sup>30</sup> It was against this changing tide of opinion that Londonderry continued to swim.

### **First impressions**

Londonderry initiated his new political role with a private visit to Germany at the end of January 1936. Rather than viewing his action as inappropriate for a former Cabinet minister, Londonderry's saw his period in office as justification for his amateur diplomacy, distinguishing him from other visiting aristocrats, and to some extent vindicating his record as Air Minister. He met first with the German Air Minister, Hermann Göring, one of Hitler's closest henchmen, and under his supervision toured German aircraft factories and *Luftwaffe* training facilities. Londonderry, his wife, and youngest daughter spent seven weeks in Germany, receiving 'lavish' treatment wherever they went, including attendance at the Winter Olympics as guests of the

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<sup>30</sup> See Parker, *Chamberlain*, *passim*.

state, and social engagements with pro-Nazi German aristocrats including the Prince of Hesse, the Duke and Duchess of Brunswick, and the Duke of Saxe-Coburg.<sup>31</sup> At private meetings, dinners, and evening receptions, Londonderry also held discussions with senior figures in the German government, including the foreign minister, Baron von Neurath, the Deputy *Führer*, Rudolf Hess, the propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels, and Hitler himself.<sup>32</sup>

All this, of course, constituted the Dienststelle Ribbentrop's strategy for wooing what it regarded as highly influential figures in British society, and drumming into them the pressing need for an 'Anglo-German arrangement of all the complex problems surrounding present-day international affairs'.<sup>33</sup> At a day-long meeting with Hess and Ribbentrop on 1 February, Londonderry was informed repeatedly of the 'danger of Bolshevism' and the need for the British Empire and Germany to forge an anti-communist alliance. Londonderry shared such fears, but was less convinced about demands for the return of former German colonies, regarding it in typically patrician fashion as the reflection of an 'inferiority complex'.<sup>34</sup> Several days later, on 4 February, Londonderry had a two-hour audience with Hitler, which was also attended by Hess and Ribbentrop. In response to Londonderry's appreciation of being treated like an official representative, Hitler replied that he welcomed 'unofficial' visits. Like his lieutenants, the *Führer* was keen to press for an anti-communist alliance, and gave a long 'tirade' on the threat of Russia. He was notably less effusive when answering Londonderry's questions about rearmament, Germany's aims, and the League of Nations, preferring either to ignore them or to respond with veiled threats about the failure of Anglo-German understanding.

<sup>31</sup> Londonderry, *Wings of Destiny*, p. 171; *The Times*, 6 February 1936.

<sup>32</sup> See Goebbels, diary, 6 February 1936, in Elke Fröhlich (ed.), *Die Tagebücher von Joseph Goebbels, Teil 1, Aufzeichnungen 1923–1941*, vol. 3/II (Munich: Saur, 2001).

<sup>33</sup> Londonderry, *Ourselves and Germany*, pp. 81–2.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

Londonderry was aware that Hitler had been evasive, but he was clear about what the Germans wanted to communicate through him and flattered by the reception he had received throughout Germany. In contrast, he was deeply disappointed about the relative indifference shown to him in Britain on his return. Only one of his former cabinet colleagues, Oliver Stanley, expressed any interest in the visit, and Stanley was his son-in-law.<sup>35</sup> Londonderry was ignored by important figures such as Baldwin and Robert Vansittart, the Permanent Secretary at the Foreign Office, in part because it was all they could do to demonstrate their hostility to amateur diplomacy. Nevertheless, Londonderry was not ignored completely: *The Times* had followed his tour, Sir Maurice Hankey, the Cabinet Secretary, took note of his findings, and in June the backbench 1922 Committee included Londonderry on their programme of speakers.<sup>36</sup>

If enthusiasm was relatively muted, then hostility to the visit was more vociferous, and the Londonderrys' role as leading society hosts was effectively ended. As Harold Nicolson noted:

My new pal Maureen Stanley asked me to come round and meet her father who is just back from hob-nobbing with Hitler. Now I admire Londonderry in a way, since it is fine to remain 1760 in 1936; besides he is a real gent. But I do deeply disapprove of ex-Cabinet ministers trotting across to Germany at this moment. It gives the impression of secret negotiations...<sup>37</sup>

Londonderry was aware of such hostility, warning his wife, ‘we shall be left out of everything and it will be a trifle galling, but if you understand it, and are ready for it, and I have got you, I feel I don’t mind.’<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Londonderry to Dr F.W. Pick, 26 November 1946, D/3099/2/21/A.

<sup>36</sup> Crowson, *Facing Fascism*, p. 23.

<sup>37</sup> Nicolson to Vita Sackville-West, 20 February 1936, in Nigel Nicolson (ed.), *Harold Nicolson: Diaries and Letters 1930–1939* (London: Collins, 1966), p. 245.

<sup>38</sup> Londonderry to Lady Londonderry, 30 March 1936, D/3099/3.

More controversially, Londonderry returned the hospitality of his German hosts with invitations to visit his estates at Mount Stewart, County Down and at Wynyard, County Durham. In 1937 he took it upon himself to invite Göring to attend the coronation of George VI, but his invitation was turned down on account of organised opposition to the visit.<sup>39</sup> Only Ribbentrop was able to avail himself of Londonderry's hospitality, particularly after he became Ambassador to London in October 1936.<sup>40</sup> Ribbentrop became so closely associated with Londonderry through these visits and other social engagements that he earned the sobriquet 'the Londonderry Herr'.<sup>41</sup> Londonderry later claimed that he did not like Ribbentrop, but at the time he was a perfect host to the ambassador, who repaid him in turn with further visits to Germany and a sense of playing an important part in a great endeavour. Moreover, Ribbentrop shared Londonderry's desire for a return to nineteenth-century power politics as a means of accommodating German territorial expansion; he would have appreciated Londonderry's references to Castlereagh and Metternich.<sup>42</sup> In this sense, both men failed to understand Hitler, who preferred instead to see the world in ideological and racial terms. Hitler's patience with Ribbentrop's methods was largely tactical.

### **Promoting understanding**

On 6 March, two months after Londonderry's visit to Germany, the *Wehrmacht* occupied the demilitarised Rhineland. In what would prove to be a recurring strategy, Hitler accompanied this with calls for a new peace settlement. Londonderry, in

<sup>39</sup> Göring to Londonderry, 24 March 1937, D/3099/2/19/34A.

<sup>40</sup> Ribbentrop had attended the Jubilee Ball at Londonderry House, Park Lane, London in May 1935, but it did not lead to any communication with Lord Londonderry.

<sup>41</sup> Ribbentrop to Lady Londonderry, 5 June 1936, D/3099/3/35/20); *The Times*, 16 November 1936; Henry Channon, diary, 29 May 1936, in Robert Rhodes James (ed.), *Chips: the Diaries of Sir Henry Channon* (London: Phoenix, 1999), p. 62.

<sup>42</sup> John Weitz, *Hitler's Diplomat: Joachim von Ribbentrop* (London: Phoenix, 1997), p. 15.

contrast to the majority of British Conservatives' restrained reaction, defended the occupation in a letter to *The Times*.<sup>43</sup> Repeating German arguments against Versailles and the French, he advocated the Germans' right to run their country as they pleased.<sup>44</sup> The poor reaction to his letter made Londonderry question whether he should continue in his new role, but his sense of mission was emboldened by his wife's enthusiasm; she continued to enjoy her own, more intimate, correspondence with Hitler and Göring.<sup>45</sup> Londonderry also received encouragement from Lord Beaverbrook, who praised his letter in *The Times* as 'brilliantly done'.<sup>46</sup> In reply Londonderry admitted:

I am megalomaniac enough to think that we can dominate the whole situation but Baldwin can't do it. Neville is too parochial, in fact I see no one who can fill my bill. I should like to do it myself but my record is not good enough. I could not carry the people.

Whilst I know what ought to be done I have too many gaps in my intelligence to do it. Whether a democracy could do what I want I am not quite sure. So I am looking on...<sup>47</sup>

Beaverbrook replied, 'It is your duty to go back into public life. And, if you will allow me to say so, you should go without the slightest feeling against Baldwin.'<sup>48</sup>

Many Conservatives who were sympathetic towards Germany felt that the occupation of the Rhineland would be Hitler's furthest expansion westwards, and so the government dismissed the possibility of invoking sanctions in case it drove Berlin closer to Rome. Nevertheless, divisions within the party necessitated changes in

<sup>43</sup> Crowson, *Facing Fascism*, pp. 67–8.

<sup>44</sup> *The Times*, 12 March 1936.

<sup>45</sup> Lady Londonderry's correspondence with leading German figures, 1936–39, D/3099/3/35/1–42.

<sup>46</sup> Beaverbrook to Londonderry, 19 March 1936, Beaverbrook papers, House of Lords Record Office (hereafter BBK), BBK/C/224.

<sup>47</sup> Londonderry to Beaverbrook, 22 March 1936.

<sup>48</sup> Beaverbrook to Londonderry, 29 March 1936.

foreign policy, including the virtual recognition of Italian rule in Abyssinia, further diplomatic efforts with Germany, and increased rearmament. Londonderry had always been in favour of rearmament, but now he grew concerned that it was not being balanced effectively enough with diplomacy.<sup>49</sup> Although he refrained from advocating the return of former German colonies for fear of alienating himself completely in Britain, in April he repeated his call for a settlement with Hitler.<sup>50</sup> In private, he tried to moderate the situation by encouraging his cousin, Winston Churchill, the most vociferous critic of the National Government's foreign policy, to 'go easy with Baldwin', and urged Göring to avoid policies that caused anxiety in Britain.<sup>51</sup>

By July the government had begun to take some interest in Londonderry's visit, a sea-change facilitated in part by improved relations between Baldwin and his former Air Minister.<sup>52</sup> Previously, on 21 May, Londonderry had written yet again to the Prime Minister complaining about his removal from the Cabinet, adding cryptically that, 'I have had a most interesting letter from Göring to-day. It is meant for propaganda but it has a value'.<sup>53</sup> Londonderry followed his letter to the Prime Minister with a press statement denying that he had misled Baldwin on air parity with Germany whilst Air Minister. Days later, Baldwin made a statement to the House of Commons to the effect that he had not meant anyone to think that Londonderry had misled him.<sup>54</sup> Thus the way was paved for Lord Halifax to meet with Londonderry

<sup>49</sup> *Hansard 5 (Lords)*, vol. 100, cols 37–43 (17 March 1936).

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, cols 540–6 (8 April 1936).

<sup>51</sup> Londonderry to Churchill, 9 May 1936, D/3099/2/5/29; Londonderry to Göring, 3 June 1936, D/3099/2/19/28B; Göring to Lady Londonderry, 16 May 1936, D/3099/3/35/16; Göring to Lady Londonderry, 3 July 1936, D/3099/3/35/24B.

<sup>52</sup> Londonderry to Baldwin, 19 May 1936, Baldwin papers, Cambridge University Library (hereafter Baldwin), Baldwin 171, ff. 166–71.

<sup>53</sup> Göring to Lady Londonderry, 16 May 1936, D/3099/3/35/16; Londonderry to Baldwin, 21 May 1936, Baldwin, ff. 171–3.

<sup>54</sup> *The Times*, 27 June 1936; *Hansard 5 (Commons)*, vol. 314, cols 605–6 (2 July 1936).

and discuss his findings, and for their subsequent correspondence on the latter's proposals for better Anglo-German relations.<sup>55</sup>

The rapprochement was short lived. Londonderry echoed Hitler's suggestion at their first meeting, pressing Halifax to adopt an anti-communist policy that would provide common ground with Germany on which further understandings could be based.<sup>56</sup> Halifax countered this by stressing the need for a general settlement and cautioned against the alienation of Russia.<sup>57</sup> In turn, Londonderry criticised foreign policy 'drift', accused the government of 'misunderstanding' him, and warned that war loomed if they avoided talking to Hitler and merely rearmed.<sup>58</sup> In reacting badly to Halifax, Londonderry not only misunderstood the broader concerns of British foreign policy and his own role, but recklessly harmed his already low standing amongst former colleagues. The government was not interested in his personal opinion, but rather in what Hitler and other senior Nazis conveyed through him. The Lord Privy Seal, who was renowned for his good nature, easily dismissed his predecessor's outburst, assuring him that he had no intention of alienating Germany.<sup>59</sup>

Having taken months to communicate his findings to a senior member of the government and having failed to convince him of the pressing need for an Anglo-German agreement, Londonderry began to rethink his proposals. He developed his idea of a conference of great powers, to include Britain, France, Germany, and Italy, but not Russia.<sup>60</sup>

My desire is to pin Hitler down to peace under all circumstances for a period of time if necessary ... if the four great powers of Europe with no reservations took

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<sup>55</sup> Halifax to Londonderry, 1 July 1936, D/3099/2/18/7.

<sup>56</sup> Londonderry to Halifax, 4 July 1936, D/3099/2/18/8.

<sup>57</sup> Halifax to Londonderry, 16 July 1936, D/3099/2/18/10.

<sup>58</sup> Londonderry to Halifax, 17 July 1936, D/3099/2/18/11.

<sup>59</sup> Halifax to Londonderry, 25 August 1936, D/3099/2/18/12.

<sup>60</sup> Londonderry to Halifax, 19 December 1936, D/3099/2/18/17; *The Times*, 16 December 1936.

this line, there can be no war ... it is no use crediting the smaller nations with any actual power in this issue ... In default of a definite reply from Hitler in a conference of actual plenipotentiaries, which on the lines I suggest has a resemblance to Vienna ... we should announce at once that we were proposing to take the definite line of power politics and give up for the time being the doctrines which we have sought to develop.<sup>61</sup>

At the end of October, on Londonderry's way back from a tour of Eastern Europe during which he enjoyed the hospitality of King Carol of Romania and the rightwing Prince Bibesco, Londonderry had a second meeting with Hitler.<sup>62</sup> He did not record what was said at the meeting, or if Hitler approved, or indeed acknowledged, his proposal for a four-power pact, but it is implicit in Londonderry's subsequent correspondence with Halifax that the meeting dealt with the former German colonies, eastward expansion, and Hitler's dislike of the Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden. It is also certain, from what Londonderry told Halifax, that Hitler informed his guest of Germany's next move a year in advance of the Czech crisis: 'it appears to me that German policy is moving in the direction of Danzig and Polish interests, and also Czechoslovakia, and it would not surprise me if the next sudden demarche were not some movement in that direction.'<sup>63</sup>

The years of foreign policy drift under Baldwin ended in May 1937 with the appointment of Neville Chamberlain as Prime Minister. Thereafter the government articulated and pursued a two-fold policy of appeasement and rearmament.

Londonderry had always had a grudge against Chamberlain, but he welcomed the end

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<sup>61</sup> Londonderry to Halifax, 24 December 1936, D/3099/2/18/18B.

It was around this time that Londonderry felt the need to defend accusations that he was pro-Nazi, reassuring Halifax that he condemned recent speeches by Hitler and others at the annual Nuremberg rally. See *The Times*, 1 August 1936; Londonderry to Baldwin, 1 December 1936, Baldwin 171, ff. 175–7; Lloyd George to Londonderry, September 1936, Londonderry, *Wings of Destiny*, p. 176; Londonderry to Halifax, 16 September 1936, D/3099/2/18/13.

<sup>62</sup> *The Times*, 31 October 1936.

<sup>63</sup> Londonderry to Halifax, 19 December 1936, D/3099/2/18/17; Londonderry to Halifax, 24 December 1936, D/3099/2/18/18B.

of drift. Moreover, he agreed with the new leader's belief in the sincerity of Hitler's requests for a peaceful settlement, and both men believed this could be brought about by an agreement between the great powers. Londonderry did not, however, articulate Chamberlain's belief in 'economic appeasement' – the improvement of Germany's economic situation as a means of persuading Hitler to adopt peaceful policies and limit armaments.<sup>64</sup> This was not so much a difference on principle as a reflection of Londonderry's ignorance of economic matters. Despite their common attitude towards Germany, their advocacy of a four-power pact, and Londonderry's public support for Chamberlain, the two men rarely corresponded or met.

Following a promising start to 1937, Anglo-German relations suffered a series of setbacks, culminating in September with Hitler's use of that year's Nuremberg rally to demand the return of Germany's former colonies. His outburst was clearly directed at Britain and reflected the fact that Hitler no longer held out any hope of an Anglo-German agreement. Prior to the rally, Ribbentrop had come to realise, rather belatedly, that power in Britain did not lie with the aristocracy. The perceived usefulness of Londonderry and others to the Nazis was severely diminished and Hitler was now determined to seek other allies. Nevertheless, Ribbentrop continued to use sympathisers to disseminate words of reassurance and goodwill in Britain. The Dienststelle Ribbentrop's main vehicle for this was the Anglo-German Fellowship. The nine hundred members of this exclusive dining club, of which Londonderry had been a member since February 1936, continued to call for increased Anglo-German understanding, unaware that the cause they served was a sham.

It is ironic that Londonderry might have had a hand in this development, not least by demonstrating the failure of amateur diplomacy. He had returned to Germany

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<sup>64</sup> Parker, *Chamberlain*, p. 71.

in September 1937 – the same month in which Hitler hosted the Italian premier, Benito Mussolini, for a state visit – accepting Göring's invitation to join him for a hunt. In response to his host's 'less conciliatory' attitude, and his defence of Germany's alliance with Italy, Londonderry informed Ribbentrop afterwards that the meeting had been unsatisfactory, blaming its failure on the arrival of Mussolini.<sup>65</sup> In his subsequent correspondence with Göring, Londonderry protested that he had barely any influence over his former government colleagues and recommended that they deal instead with the new British ambassador in Berlin, Neville Henderson.<sup>66</sup> When Ribbentrop made his final ambassadorial report to Berlin in January 1938 before becoming Hitler's Foreign Minister, he cited a recent letter from Londonderry to illustrate his realisation that the British aristocracy lacked any authority over their government. Without the possibility of an agreement on the lines that he and British sympathisers had been advocating, Ribbentrop concluded that Britain was the Reich's main enemy.<sup>67</sup>

### Promoting misunderstanding

Just as the Nazis were downgrading the usefulness of Londonderry, the British government, contrary to his later complaints, became very interested in his recent findings: worsening relations between London and Berlin made informal contacts more valuable to the former. Following his visit to Göring, Londonderry met with Chamberlain, and even Baldwin asked for a meeting.<sup>68</sup> A poker-faced Prime Minister

<sup>65</sup> Londonderry, notes, 22 September 1937, D/3099/2/19/36; Londonderry to Ribbentrop, 26 October 1937, D/3099/4/44.

<sup>66</sup> Londonderry to Göring, 29 September 1937, D/3099/2/19/37A.

<sup>67</sup> Joachim von Ribbentrop, 'Strictly Confidential and Personal Conclusions Concerning the Report "German Embassy London A5522" on the future of Anglo-German relations', 2 January 1938, in Alan Bullock (ed.), *The Ribbentrop Memoirs* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1954), pp. 206–7.

<sup>68</sup> Londonderry to Halifax, 7 October 1937, D/3099/2/18/27; Baldwin to Londonderry, 11 November 1937, D/3099/2/19/39.

left Londonderry unhappy, but Halifax compensated by his increased interest.<sup>69</sup> It is highly probable that government interest in Londonderry can be linked to Chamberlain's desire to arrange a meeting between Halifax and Hitler in the aftermath of Germany's pacts with Italy and Japan. Londonderry was informed in confidence in advance of the proposed visit and discussed the idea at length with Halifax.<sup>70</sup> It is notable that Eden recorded at the time that Halifax's ideas for the visit included a 'Four-Power Pact'.<sup>71</sup> Officially, the visit was made in response to a hunting invitation, but its main purpose was a meeting between the *Führer* and Halifax on 19 November 1937. Prior to the visit, Londonderry went to Germany and briefed Halifax on his discussions.<sup>72</sup>

Inevitably, the Halifax–Hitler meeting heightened tensions within the government. Against the wishes of Vansittart and Eden, Chamberlain and his emissary were keen to impress upon Hitler that any revision to eastern European borders should be by peaceful evolution. Having long advocated such direct conversations between British and German ministers, Londonderry was disappointed that the two men failed to reach an accord.<sup>73</sup> He felt that mutual misunderstandings between Britain and Germany had got in the way of an agreement, his subsequent letters to Ribbentrop emphasising his concern at the damage being done to British public opinion by Nazi policies.<sup>74</sup> Having failed to persuade his former colleagues of the need to better understand German grievances, Londonderry decided to publish his views in *Ourselves and Germany*, one of many books and pamphlets on foreign

<sup>69</sup> Londonderry to Neville Henderson, 7 October 1937, D/Lo/C/237 (9).

<sup>70</sup> Londonderry to Halifax, 2 November 1937, D/3099/2/18/28; *The Evening Standard*, 13 November 1937.

<sup>71</sup> Roberts, 'Holy Fox', p. 67.

<sup>72</sup> *The Times*, 6 November 1937; Londonderry to Halifax, 2 November 1937, D/3099/2/18/28; Halifax to Londonderry, 8 November 1937, D/3099/2/18/29; Halifax to Londonderry, 12 November 1937, D/3099/2/18/30.

<sup>73</sup> Londonderry to Halifax, 13 November 1936, D/3099/2/18/31.

<sup>74</sup> Ribbentrop to Londonderry, 4 December 1937, D/3099/2/19/40A; Londonderry to Ribbentrop, 8 December 1937, D/3099/2/19/41; Londonderry to Ribbentrop, 20 January 1938, D/3099/2/19/53.

affairs jostling for public attention at the time. With this small book, which sold enough to warrant several reprints throughout 1938 as a 'Penguin Special', Londonderry increased his public profile as an arch-appeaser and apologist for the Nazi regime.

The author was selectively clandestine about his visits. Much of what was said between Londonderry and the Nazi leaders during his first visit was included in the book; what was not we know of through his correspondence with Halifax. Even partial openness, however, would backfire. *Ourselves and Germany* contained correspondence with Ribbentrop in which Londonderry addressed the Jewish question. Intended as a warning, it was also unthinkingly offensive:

I should be wrong if I minimized in any way the anxiety which is felt here in relation to your policy towards the Jews, for there is the feeling that we do not like persecution, but in addition to this there is the material feeling that you are taking on a tremendous force which is capable of having repercussions all over the world ... I have no great affection for the Jews. It is possible to trace their participation in most of those international disturbances ... on the other hand, one can find many Jews strongly ranged on the other side who have done their best ... to counteract those malevolent and mischievous activities of fellow Jews.<sup>75</sup>

For this, Londonderry earned a severe rebuke from a family friend, Anthony de Rothschild, who accused him of promoting myths about the worldwide influence of Jews and giving respectability to Nazi prejudices.<sup>76</sup> Like many others with similar views, Londonderry did not regard himself as anti-Semitic, especially as his son-in-law, Lord Jessel, was Jewish. Indeed, Nazi brutality towards the Jews only reinforced the perceived harmlessness of his own prejudices. His statements therefore reveal not only poor judgement, but also the pervasiveness and casualness of British anti-

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<sup>75</sup> Londonderry to Ribbentrop, 21 February 1936; Londonderry, *Ourselves and Germany*, p. 97.

<sup>76</sup> Londonderry to de Rothschild, 13 April 1938, D/3099/2/21/A/28A.

Semitism.<sup>77</sup> For most appeasers, the Jewish question only mattered inasmuch as it jeopardised hopes for Anglo-German understanding. Nevertheless, the bad reaction to the letter and personal lobbying from British religious groups led Londonderry to complain about the issue more frequently to his Nazi contacts, and in April 1938 he informed Hitler personally about the harm being done to Anglo-German relations by ‘reports of the plight of the Jews and those who differed from or opposed the Nazi policy’.<sup>78</sup> He was still convinced that Hitler cared.

Hitler’s unpredictable actions troubled the appeasers, but for many of them, including Londonderry, it made their resolve even stronger. So when Halifax replaced Eden as Foreign Secretary in February 1938, appeasers were dismayed by the *Führer*’s announcement of a more militant foreign policy. Fearing that a solution was slipping away, Londonderry wrote a conciliatory letter to Ribbentrop and called on Chamberlain in Parliament not to allow differences to prevent an agreement with Germany.<sup>79</sup> In private, however, Londonderry informed a colleague in the Anglo-German Fellowship that he ‘condemned the methods employed’ by Hitler and predicted a bleak future.<sup>80</sup> Yet appeasers like Londonderry were even more determined that an agreement had to be reached in the aftermath of the *Anschluss* with Austria on 13 March 1938. After all, it demonstrated Hitler’s capacity to seize control of events and the inability of other powers to control him. Londonderry openly criticised the suddenness of the *Anschluss*, but also warned of war unless there was a better understanding of German aspirations.<sup>81</sup> This was Londonderry’s public

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<sup>77</sup> N.J. Crowson, ‘The British Conservative Party and the Jews during the late 1930s’, *Patterns of Prejudice*, 29, 2, and 3 (1995), pp. 15–32.

<sup>78</sup> Geoffrey Saviour to Londonderry, 18 January 1938, D/3099/2/19/50; Londonderry to Hitler, 5 April 1938, D/3099/2/19/73.

<sup>79</sup> Londonderry to Ribbentrop, 17 February 1938, D/3099/2/19/56; *Hansard 5 (Lords)*, vol. 107, cols 901–6 (24 February 1938).

<sup>80</sup> Londonderry to Countess de la Feld, 23 March 1938, D/3099/2/19/70.

<sup>81</sup> *Hansard 5 (Lords)*, vol. 108, cols 139–44 (16 March 1938).

position; in private he admitted to a German correspondent that he did not understand Hitler's recent actions, including his continued persecution of the Jews.<sup>82</sup>

Like other appeasers, Londonderry's sense of mission blinded him to the realities of Nazism. He attributed worsening relations between himself and the regime to commentary on their policies in *Ourselves and Germany*, a book he had written to promote understanding. On 5 April 1938 he wrote to Hitler defending the publication of his book, which was sometimes critical of aspects of Nazi rule, on the basis that he needed to address issues that aroused concern in Britain. He also emphasised the damage being done to Anglo-German relations by both the persecution of Jews and the *Anschluss*. Appealing to sentiments expressed by the dictator at their first meeting in 1936, Londonderry claimed grandiloquently that if an agreement could be reached between them, Britain and Germany could rule the world.<sup>83</sup> Given his obvious inability to deliver such an outcome, it was a desperate attempt to salvage some understanding between the two men. Hitler replied with a curt acknowledgment thanking Londonderry for a copy of *Ourselves and Germany*. Subsequently the book was refused publication in Germany, until its author leant on Göring.<sup>84</sup>

Around the same time Londonderry grew increasingly sensitive about suggestions in the *Daily Express* that he was 'pro-Nazi'. He wrote to its proprietor, Beaverbrook, who had originally encouraged his activities, but far from being apologetic, the press baron retorted that his newspaper reflected public opinion.<sup>85</sup> Londonderry replied:

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<sup>82</sup> Londonderry to Ludwig Noe, 3 May 1938, D/3099/2/21/A/42.

<sup>83</sup> Londonderry to Hitler, 5 April 1938, D/3099/2/19/73.

<sup>84</sup> Hitler to Londonderry, 10 April 1938, D/3099/2/19/77; Londonderry to Göring, 18 July 1938, D/3099/2/19/115.

<sup>85</sup> Londonderry to Beaverbrook, 24 May 1938, BBK/C/224; Beaverbrook to Londonderry, 26 May 1938, ibid. A far sharper attack came from the cartoonist David Low in the *Evening Standard* of 11 March 1938.

I have had a pretty difficult time since I left the Government. I have a friendship and an understanding with Neville, because he knows I don't want anything; but he and his colleagues are just a little frightened of me and just a little jealous. I am beginning to think of throwing my hand in altogether ... I find the Socialists proclaiming me a Nazi and Fascist in my judgement two insulting terms and contrary to the whole of my point of view. Now the Daily Express joins in and I feel that if after all these years I can't get it across, then I am disposed to leave it all alone and fly aeroplanes, travel, play Bridge ... I can't go on saying I am not a Nazi, but have pleaded for justice for Germany.<sup>86</sup>

Londonderry made another short visit to Germany at the end of June 1938. Contrary to his claim in the second postscript of *Ourselves and Germany*, the visit was not confined to attending the conference of the *Fédération Aéronautique Internationale* as its vice-president. Londonderry also arranged a secret meeting with Göring.<sup>87</sup> Even the British Air Ministry was kept in the dark; only Halifax received Londonderry's report of discussions with Göring and other leading Nazis.<sup>88</sup> Londonderry noted a change in their attitude to Britain, especially on the part of Göring, who he felt was less truculent – a Nazi with whom business could be done. Göring informed his guest that Germany's final demands would be satisfied by the settlement of the Sudeten question. In contrast, Ribbentrop and Himmler spoke as though they had 'rehearsed parts'.<sup>89</sup> Once again Londonderry was left with the impression that a solution was within reach. This was deliberate. Göring's information was designed to encourage British appeasers and counter French opposition to any alteration to Czechoslovakia.

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<sup>86</sup> Londonderry to Beaverbrook, 31 May 1938, BBK/C/224.

<sup>87</sup> Oberführer Görnert to Londonderry, 15 June 1938, D/3099/2/19/95.

<sup>88</sup> Londonderry to Kingsley Wood, 21 June 1938, Public Record Office, Air Ministry papers, AIR/19/28.

<sup>89</sup> Londonderry to Halifax, 28 June 1938, D/3099/2/18/38B; Londonderry to Halifax, 20 July 1938, D/3099/2/18/39.

As the crisis intensified, Chamberlain flew to Germany for a meeting with Hitler at Berchtesgaden on 15 September. Londonderry's informal contacts were no longer useful now that the Prime Minister was meeting Hitler face to face. He was nevertheless pleased that his hoped-for summit between the two leaders was finally happening.<sup>90</sup> After a tense period of diplomatic manoeuvring, the Munich conference between the four powers convened on 29 September. The resulting agreement gave Hitler the Sudeten territories and guaranteed the remainder of Czechoslovakia through an agreement with France and Italy. The following day Chamberlain encouraged Hitler to sign the infamous letter declaring their intention never to go to war. As Churchill informed Londonderry, 'Your policy is certainly being tried'.<sup>91</sup>

Not satisfied with his cousin's concession, Londonderry sought to associate himself publicly with what appeared to be a major victory for peace.<sup>92</sup> He was in Munich at the time of the conference, talking with journalists and local people, and held a meeting with Göring and Ribbentrop, during which he received typically contradictory signals.<sup>93</sup> Far from enjoying a hero's welcome like the Prime Minister, however, the only attention Londonderry received was from leftwing critics. Rather than ignoring these taunts, Londonderry characteristically rushed to his own defence in the press.<sup>94</sup> Moreover, he undermined his reputation further when he added his name to a letter in *The Times* from the pro-Nazi 'Link' group of politicians, praising the Munich agreement.<sup>95</sup> He was not the only non-member to add his name, but his status as an ex-Cabinet minister made his involvement scandalous considering the

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<sup>90</sup> Londonderry to Horace Wilson, 17 September 1938, D/3099/2/19/124.

<sup>91</sup> Churchill to Londonderry, 5 November 1938, D/3099/2/5/33B.

<sup>92</sup> *The Times*, 3 and 7 October 1938.

<sup>93</sup> Londonderry, *Wings of Destiny*, pp. 208–9.

<sup>94</sup> *The Times*, 11 October 1938.

<sup>95</sup> *The Times*, 12 October 1938.

group's reputed connections to Berlin. He paid for his involvement with what he called a 'conspiracy of silence'.<sup>96</sup>

### The collapse of peace

The murderous outrage of *Kristallnacht* in November 1938 dissolved the campaign for Anglo-German friendship and left most appeasers with little choice but to abandon, at least outwardly, their support for Germany. An angry Londonderry wrote to Göring, complaining that on each occasion he had acted for Germany, Hitler had then embarked on a sudden action or policy that he could not explain.<sup>97</sup> It ended his direct contacts with the Nazi leadership but, in contrast to most appeasers, the rising international tension did not lead him to abandon his public calls for an agreement between the two countries.<sup>98</sup> In March 1939 the Londonderrys visited Stockholm, meeting amongst others the Swedish Royal Family. Press reports indicate that Londonderry also met the German Legation at Stockholm, although there is no record of what was said.<sup>99</sup> A few days later, on 15 March, Czechoslovakia was invaded by Germany, and divided between it, Poland and Hungary.

British public opinion was rocked by Hitler's repudiation of the Munich agreement, for it not only meant that he could not be trusted, but also that war seemed increasingly inevitable. Londonderry informed a correspondent that Hitler had 'overstepped all limits', and that he no longer had any confidence in him.<sup>100</sup> Nevertheless, although he made public noises at this time about his patriotism, as did other prominent appeasers, Londonderry, did not abandon his hope that war could still

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<sup>96</sup> Londonderry to Viscount Powerscourt, 26 October 1938, D/3099/2/21/A/107; Londonderry to Churchill, 14 November 1938, D/3099/2/5/37A.

<sup>97</sup> Londonderry to Göring, 24 November 1938, D/3099/2/19/184A.

<sup>98</sup> *Hansard 5 (Lords)*, vol. 111, cols 232–40 (30 November 1938); *The Times*, 14 December 1938; Londonderry to Marjorie D. Brooks, 14 December 1938, D/3099/2/19/202.

<sup>99</sup> *The Times*, 13 March 1939.

<sup>100</sup> Londonderry to Sven Hedin, 20 March 1939, D/3099/2/21/A/191.

be averted through renewed dialogue.<sup>101</sup> He knew, however, that the Nazis had made this virtually impossible. After a break of five months, he reopened communication with Göring to inform him that he supported Chamberlain's announcement on 17 March of a tougher attitude towards Germany, arguing that nobody in Britain would listen to his calls for better understanding as Hitler had 'destroyed' all his efforts.<sup>102</sup> In early June 1939 he indicated to the former German chancellor, Franz von Papen, now ambassador to Turkey, that he regretted it had taken the invasion of Prague for him to change his mind about Hitler.<sup>103</sup>

Despite this, and an assurance to Halifax that he had left politics, Londonderry was drawn back into the crisis by his need to play a role that might transform him into a peace-broker.<sup>104</sup> On 17 June, a month after a flurry of letters from leading appeasers to *The Times*, Londonderry placed the onus on the Germans by demanding that their ambassador in London save Anglo-German relations by challenging press reports about Nazi brutality.<sup>105</sup> A few days later he wrote again to *The Times*, this time calling for another peace settlement between the 'Great Powers'.<sup>106</sup> Londonderry had abandoned his defence of Nazism, but he remained determined to promote a peaceful solution. In early July, Philip Conwell-Evans – an ex-appeaser who had forged links with German opposition groups – arranged for Londonderry to meet the 'moderate' Colonel Count von Schwerin of the German General Staff.<sup>107</sup> Schwerin was one of a number of aristocratic senior officers who regarded Hitler's military plans as

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<sup>101</sup> *The Times*, 20 April 1939; Londonderry to Ward Price, 28 March 1939, D/3099/2/19/271.

<sup>102</sup> Londonderry to Göring, 23 May 1939, D/3099/2/19/297.

<sup>103</sup> Londonderry to von Papen, 9 June 1939, D/3099/2/19/306A.

<sup>104</sup> Londonderry to Halifax, 12 June 1939, D/3099/2/18/41A.

<sup>105</sup> Londonderry to German Ambassador, 17 June 1939, D/3099/2/19/310; German Ambassador to Londonderry, 21 June 1939, D/3099/2/19/315.

<sup>106</sup> *The Times*, 22 June 1939.

<sup>107</sup> Conwell Evans to Londonderry, 21 June 1939, D/3099/2/19/316.

disastrous. Following the meeting, Londonderry dutifully renewed contact with Halifax and relayed Schwerin's desire for British militarily force:

He ... conveyed that Hitler, being a soldier, would only be impressed by arguments given to him by soldiers, and that the political points made very little impression upon him. I, of course, retorted that if he wanted a soldier's answer the only way that that could be given was in war, which I was quite certain all peoples ... were longing to avoid.<sup>108</sup>

Halifax appreciated the information, his gratitude only leading Londonderry to believe he could perform a useful role by planning yet another visit to Germany.<sup>109</sup> As soon as Halifax was informed of this he made moves to stop it – Londonderry had over-estimated his usefulness. Initially defensive, Londonderry cited his unique contacts with the German leadership, claiming these would allow him to declare that he had been betrayed by Nazi assurances, and that he 'represented the spirit of the British Government and people in being determined to resist any further aggression.'<sup>110</sup> It was Hitler's style to leave his guests with the impression that they mattered. Halifax, himself a victim of this, replied that the visit would betray British anxiety and look too much like negotiation.<sup>111</sup> Londonderry's attempt at amateur diplomacy was at an end. He responded with much chagrin, bitterly attacking the Prime Minister for the failures of the National Government.<sup>112</sup> His anger was also a response to the Nazi–Soviet Pact of 23 August, an agreement that demonstrated just how badly the appeasers had misjudged Hitler. Politically ostracised, Londonderry

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<sup>108</sup> Londonderry to Halifax, 10 July 1939, D/3099/2/18/43.

<sup>109</sup> *The Times*, 22 June 1939; Londonderry to Halifax, 4 July 1939, D/3099/2/18/42; Halifax to Londonderry, 11 July 1939, D/3099/2/18/44; Londonderry to Dr Silex, 29 July 1939, D/3099/2/19/328; Londonderry to Count Deym, 13 July 1939, D/3099/2/19/326.

<sup>110</sup> Londonderry to Halifax, 2 August 1939, D/3099/2/18/46.

<sup>111</sup> Halifax to Londonderry, 2 August 1939, D/3099/2/18/47.

<sup>112</sup> Londonderry to Halifax, 12 August 1939, D/3099/2/18/50; Halifax to Londonderry, 23 August 1939, D/3099/2/18/51.

moved to his Ulster estate a few weeks before the outbreak of war on 3 September 1939.<sup>113</sup>

Once the ‘phoney war’ was underway, Londonderry abandoned the promotion of an agreement with Germany but not its rationale. He voiced concerns about Soviet expansion following a destructive war in the west, was the subject of press speculation that he had been interned, and remained president of the Anglo-Hungarian Society until August 1940.<sup>114</sup> It is, therefore, little wonder that when Hess parachuted over Scotland in 1940 in the hope of reaching the fourteenth Duke of Hamilton, he carried a document containing the names of sympathetic aristocratic politicians, including Londonderry. Despite the mystery surrounding this episode, it is safe to conclude that Londonderry was not a member of any ‘Peace Party’. Indeed, he had been involved in the fourth Marquess of Salisbury’s senatorial conspiracy to replace Chamberlain with Churchill. Refused wartime service in the RAF on account of his age, Londonderry’s war was spent carrying out the functionary local duties that many of his caste accepted as their only remaining public role. He also wrote his memoirs, but failed to receive government approval to publish documents he hoped might vindicate him.

Londonderry died in 1949 following a series of strokes brought on by a flying accident four years earlier. His physical pain mirrored frustrations about his political failures, not only his pre-war association with the Nazis, but also the realisation of his fears about the consequences of another total war. Internationally, the British Empire contracted, the Soviet Union expanded, and American hegemony appeared impregnable. Politically, Clement Attlee achieved a landslide victory in the 1945

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<sup>113</sup> *The Times*, 16 August 1939.

<sup>114</sup> Londonderry to Halifax, 25 December 1939, D/3099/2/18/54; *The Times*, 20 September 1939; William Goode to Londonderry, 6 December 1938, D/3099/2/20/6; Goode to Londonderry, 13 December 1939, D/3099/2/20/9; Londonderry to Goode, 27 August 1940, D/3099/2/20/17.

General Election and formed the least aristocratic government since the interregnum.<sup>115</sup> Two years later Labour nationalised the coal industry, including mines that had been owned by the Londonderry family for over a century.

## **Conclusion**

Londonderry's support for appeasement was not unusual. Indeed, it was typical of many British observers of foreign affairs. Moreover, like many other aristocrats engaged in the promotion of Anglo-German understanding, it gave Londonderry a renewed sense of political input after decades of steady marginalisation. Such participation was intensified by the lack of a clear British foreign policy, Nazi encouragement, and the universal fear in Britain of another European war, the last with its concomitant danger of Soviet expansion and further imperial decline. As a former Cabinet minister, Londonderry stood out amongst the many other noble visitors making their way to Hitler. Furthermore, he was one of the few high-profile people in the United Kingdom to promote an agreement even after the collapse of the Munich accord. Both Chamberlain and Londonderry felt compelled to do whatever they could to avoid war, holding not only that it would be futile, but also that it would leave Western Europe vulnerable to Soviet expansion. They hoped that a benign, almost gentlemanly, approach to diplomacy would tame Hitler – who encouraged such notions – and in doing so spectacularly underestimated the dictator's ambitions.

The main distinction between Londonderry and Chamberlain was that it was the latter's job to engage in diplomacy. As Prime Minister, Chamberlain was constrained in what he could do by the need to carry his increasingly sceptical Cabinet and backbench MPs. Londonderry, on the other hand, took it upon himself, with

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<sup>115</sup> Cannadine, *Decline and Fall*, pp. 662–5.

encouragement from the Nazis, to help the premier's case by creating an atmosphere of greater Anglo-German understanding. In doing so, he overestimated his role as a conduit between London and Berlin. He did have limited, if unintentional, uses for both governments, as evidenced by Ribbentrop's memorandum and Halifax's consultations, but Londonderry mistook this for high-level influence and, rather more unfortunately, for making a positive contribution. By making himself an arch proponent of appeasement through his speeches, books, and visits to Germany, Londonderry not only shared the fate of those other 'guilty men' whose reputations suffered enormously, but also promoted the belief that a lasting Anglo-German agreement could be reached, justifying Britain's refusal to forge a meaningful alliance with France. His distrust of the French political system and his sympathy with German grievances, even when uttered by Nazis, blinded Londonderry to Hitler's ulterior motives. He became an unwitting agent of Germany's strategy to divide London and Paris. In the final analysis, Hitler destroyed the nineteenth-century world that Londonderry and others hoped to save.

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**N.C. Fleming is Lecturer in Modern British History at Cardiff University.**