

Mark DUNTON

***Images of The National Archives: Prime Ministers
of the 20th Century***

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British modern history is inseparably connected with the personalities of the Prime Ministers who filed past through the political scene in the twentieth century. This topic, continuously arousing interest, is presented in a very readable way, where the author writes about the facts along with glimpses into the private lives of these politicians, and thus he offers to the readers various angles of perception of the historical context.

Mark Dunton is one of the leading specialists at The National Archives in London, as well as a spokesperson on the annual releases of governmental papers. He is an expert in the British political, social and economic history of the twentieth century.

The content of the book is divided into twenty chapters, of which each is dedicated to one of the politicians, observing the chronological order in which they held the Prime Ministerial office. Except for introductory list of the date of their births and deaths, of the period when they were the Prime Ministers, and of their political affiliations, the chapters do not have the same structure. In this way Dunton

successfully avoids uniformity; on the contrary, he presents in every single chapter what he considers for the given personality to be significant and determining.

As an introduction, Dunton reminds readers of the role of the Prime Minister in Great Britain. He emphasizes the ultimate responsibility for governmental decisions, the duty to chair the Cabinet and to organize activities of the government, as well as the capacity to appoint and dismiss ministers. The Premier also advises the Sovereign when Parliament should be dissolved and general elections held. The changeability of the Prime Ministerial role over time is illustrated by a quotation of Herbert Asquith, who expressed his opinion that the form and image of the office depends to some extent on the personal attitudes and abilities of its holder. The author draws readers' attention back to the period 1721–1742, when Sir Robert Walpole held the post with all duties and competencies except the title of the Prime Minister. Dunton also points out the ways how historical events in the twentieth century, namely the de-

cline of the British Empire, two world wars and the development of the welfare state, influenced the accentuated importance of the British government, and hence the role of the Prime Minister.

The first Prime Minister, whom Dunton introduces, is Lord Salisbury, the last one is Tony Blair. With each of the politicians, the author focuses on certain aspects of both personal and professional life. He follows his personal opinion on the importance of a particular event that played a role in the formation of the personality and consequently the style of discharge and image of the Prime Ministerial office. Dunton, with certain exaggeration, states that the names of the Prime Ministers are titles of chapters of British modern history.

To exemplify, the chapter that discusses David Lloyd George begins with revealing the Premier's characteristic high self-confidence, which played an important role in his political rise, but finally in his fall. The photography of Lloyd George published here displays, by Dunton, the magnetism of this Prime Minister's personality. The readers are presented with an outline of his career beginning with his successes in the field of social reforms, namely enforcing of Old Age Pension (1908) and formulating of National Insurance programme, which included sickness and unemployment benefits (1911). In the role of the Prime Minister in wartime, Lloyd George is introduced as a politician able to mobilise (in the wider sense of this word) human and material resources effectively

focusing both on industry and agriculture. However, Dunton also reminds of his rather limited abilities as a war strategist and his far from satisfactory cooperation with the British Commander-in-Chief, Sir Douglas Haigh. From the period of the Prime Minister's post-war career, his attempts, if unsuccessful, to alleviate sanctions against defeated Germany at Paris Peace Conference (1919) are mentioned in this chapter, as well as his part on reaching a compromise in the question of Irish autonomy (1921). The author does not conceal that in the course of the last period of Lloyd George's continuance in office, the style of his work was more presidential. Consequently, his alienation from his own Liberal Party followed. A scandal concerning financial funds resulted in Conservatives' resignation from the coalition government and his fall.

The chapter devoted to Winston Churchill starts with emphasizing his skills to employ his charisma and oratory capabilities in the nation's optimism encouragement; and to use his trademark features (the homburg hat, the white-spotted bow tie and "V" sign) as some anchors or symbols to which it is possible to relate to. Which, by their immutability, provided a certain feeling of stability. Dunton uses three archival materials: part of a letter to General Ismay about the Operation Jubilee (1942); a personal minute where Churchill urges his staff to save time more effectively (1940); and an extract from his speech concerning the battle of El Alamein (1942) to illustrate his style, which was some-

times hard-hitting and pithy, at another time quite humorous and showing his mastery in playfulness with words and a witty usage of ornate expressions. The chapter reflects on Churchill's credit for the result of the Second World War. However, his part in the catastrophic fiasco at Gallipoli (1915–1916) and the Bengal famine (1943) has not been left out.

Margaret Thatcher, the first and in the twentieth century the only woman holding the Prime Ministerial office, is introduced here as a politician with a great sense for details that was manifested for example in marginalia which she wrote onto governmental documents. In this book, we can find a letter concerning a British attitude to the EEC budget and its connection with the oil in the North Sea, where the marginalia pointed out her decisiveness and unwillingness to hide her anger. Dunton points out that Margaret Thatcher held the prime ministerial office for the longest duration (1979–1990), when she was seen as the most contradictory personality in British modern political history. The author outlines principles of monetar-

ist governmental politics and its inauspicious consequences for privatized businesses which culminated in suppressing the waves of miners' strikes (1984–1985). Dunton does not try to conceal how this Prime Minister was unpopular with many but he also draws attention to victory in the Falklands war (1982) and the success of the Iron Lady in diplomatic relationships with Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan.

Dunton's book contains rich visual material, many documents from The National Archives: photographs, handwritings, memoranda, quotations. On the other hand, it lacks annotation apparatus and a more detailed specification of sources and literature. The author is not content with a mere presentation of historical facts but he introduces them in the context of important influences, personal successes as well as failures of each of the twenty British Prime Ministers in the twentieth century.

I highly recommend this book to both lay and expert readers.

Blanka Dryková