

 **Review ESSAY**

Lynne Olson. *Troublesome Young Men: The Rebels who Brought Churchill to Power and Helped Save England.* Farrar, Straus and Giroux: New York, 2007. 436 pp.

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Academic historians often face an uphill and sometimes unrewarding struggle to counter and correct popular perceptions of the past. The policy of appeasement and the actions of its leading proponent, Neville Chamberlain, offer a perfect illustration. For almost 40 years now, a steady flow of scholarly literature has sought to place both the policy and the man in a positive, or at least an understanding, light. Appeasement may not have been a successful strategy, but it was at least one for which there was a compellingly strong case in the circumstances of the late 1930s. Some writers have gone even further. According to John Charmley, for example, Chamberlain was a far-sighted statesman striving desperately to keep Britain out of a war which would involve her ultimate ruin – an interpretation which has inevitably led him also to question the once unchallenged wisdom of Chamberlain’s successor as Prime Minister, Winston Churchill. For the man in the street, however, little has changed since the early summer of 1940 when three young, left-wing journalists, writing under the pseudonym of ‘Cato’, penned their famous best-seller, *Guilty Men*, a crude but powerful indictment of those, especially Chamberlain, who had presided over Britain’s destiny in the ‘Devil’s Decade’ of the 1930s. To this day the *popular* Chamberlain remains a deluded dupe, vainly struggling to cope with the might of Hitler and the Third Reich using the weaponry of a middle-class businessman from Birmingham. Opinion polls ranking the Prime Ministers of the twentieth century usually place him firmly at the bottom of the pile, with only Anthony Eden – besmirched by the Suez fiasco – to dispute his ignominious position.

It would be unfair to suggest that Lynne Olson’s *Troublesome Young Men* has taken us all the way back to the era of *Guilty Men*. Hers is a work of some scholarship and learning. She has read widely and made particularly good use of some newly available archival material, especially the private papers of Leopold Amery, Richard Law, ‘Bobbety’ Cranborne and Violet Bonham Carter. Her understanding of the politics of the National Government is generally sound, although the National Labour MP, Harold Nicolson, is repeatedly referred to as a ‘Tory’, a designation that would not have pleased him. All the same, Olson’s book is written in the sort of heroic style that most of us thought had enjoyed its last hurrah with Gilbert and Gott’s *The Appeasers*, published in 1963. There is a perfectly respectable corpus of post-revisionist literature, critical of Chamberlain and the policy of appeasement, yet fully aware that four decades of revisionist scholarship cannot be ignored, but must be confronted head-on. For Olson, however, there seems to

be little if any appreciation of the constraints of diplomacy, finance, armaments and public opinion within which the Prime Minister and his government had to operate. It is striking that none of the persuasive articles written by David Dilkes feature in this book's bibliography. Olson even resurrects the old idea that appeasement persisted after the declaration of hostilities and forgets that there were sound arguments for keeping the war 'phoney' while Britain's rearmament gained momentum.

Olson's tale is of the struggle of good against bad, the story of how a few brave young men – the dashing Ronald Cartland, for example, the brother of the popular novelist Barbara, enjoys a prominence he probably does not deserve – struggled and eventually managed to depose Chamberlain and install Churchill in his place. In some ways the story is well told, particularly as regards the closing months of Chamberlain's premiership. Indeed, the author is sufficiently well informed to recognise that her book's title is misleading. The key figure in the anti-Chamberlain movement was almost certainly Leo Amery, who could certainly be troublesome but who, at 66 years of age in May 1940, was scarcely young. Amery is well-known for his stunning attack on Chamberlain on 7 May during the House of Commons' debate on the Norwegian campaign: 'You have sat here too long for any good you have done ... In the name of God, go!' But of altogether more importance was the way in which, at the outbreak of war, he took over the leadership of the two dozen or so dissidents who had previously gravitated towards the very much less effective Anthony Eden, giving that group a direction and sense of purpose it had hitherto lacked. It was also Amery who focused attention on the failure of Chamberlain's government to put the national economy on to a full war footing. Next in line to Amery comes the undersung future leader of the Liberal party, 56-year old Clement Davies, who helped unite the various anti-Chamberlain groups and ensure that opposition to him straddled the divides of party politics.

Yet, even retitled *Troublesome Middle-Aged Men*, problems would remain with Olson's interpretation. The author notes, but largely fails to explain, the paradox that, having replaced Chamberlain, Churchill failed to remove the former premier from government or fully to reward those who, she claims, had brought him to power. The real reason is that the change-over of May 1940 was never as stark or as total as the author tends to suggest. Churchill retained Chamberlain's services, even when it was clear that the latter was mortally ill, largely because he had come to appreciate the outgoing Prime Minister's qualities. As Dilkes and others have noted, Chamberlain and Churchill formed a pretty effective partnership at the top of Britain's war directorate during the first year of the conflict, with first one and then the other playing the leading role. Furthermore, it remains questionable whether the troublesome men, of whatever age, actually determined that it would be Churchill who succeeded Chamberlain following the crisis of May 1940. The parliamentary vote did not bring down the government. What it did was to establish the overwhelmingly strong desire for a genuinely National government. It was the decision of the Labour party that such a government could not be headed by Neville Chamberlain. Even then, Chamberlain himself, the majority of the Conservative party, most of the Establishment, significant Labour leaders and even the Royal Family

would have preferred to see a Halifax rather than a Churchill premiership. In the last resort, it was the resolution of Churchill and the (justified) self-doubt of Halifax which determined the precise course of events.

This book is, as its publicity blurb suggests, ‘immensely readable’ and it does bring to history ‘the excitement of a novel’. But if this is going to be the reader’s only insight into the Chamberlain premiership, the resulting understanding is likely to be seriously incomplete.

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