
A.J. Sylvester’s accounts of Lloyd George—Lloyd George and Neville Chamberlain—the fall of Poland, 1939—Lloyd George agitates against Chamberlain—Hitler’s peace offer—Lloyd George’s Caernarvon speech—support for peace in 1939—Lloyd George and Chamberlain’s resignation—Lloyd George, Chamberlain and Churchill—the fall of France

The man stands head and shoulders above the present crew of British politicians. He foresees the deep crisis of the Empire. Hence his plain speaking.

Goebbels, reporting Hitler’s remarks on Lloyd George, 10 October 1939 (The Goebbels Diaries 1939–1941)

I am going to try to stop this war before the Empire is smashed.

Lloyd George, in conversation with A.J. Sylvester, 3 October 1939

We last met A.J. Sylvester at the Berghof, capturing Lloyd George and Hitler with his cine-camera, and then enthusing at the view from Bron-y-de. Sylvester was Lloyd George’s private secretary from 1921 until the latter’s death in 1945. In 1947, he published a book of reminiscences entitled The Real Lloyd George. Based on Sylvester’s private diaries, it included an account of the visit to Hitler and touched on Lloyd George’s attitudes to the Second World War. The book was outspoken for its time. Churchill had on this account cut Sylvester in the House of Commons. He later changed his mind – his curiosity was too much for him – and read Sylvester’s revelations with alacrity. ‘I wanted to find out what
happened when Lloyd George met Hitler’, he explained.¹ Even so, Sylvester was relatively discreet. He warned that he had not ‘told the whole story of the Second World War’.²

In 1975, nearly 30 years later and in a less deferential age, Sylvester authorised publication of more substantial diary extracts under the title *Life with Lloyd George*. These revealed considerably more than the earlier book. In daily contact with Lloyd George for nearly a quarter of a century, Sylvester was uniquely placed to observe and analyse him. A brilliant stenographer, he took down Lloyd George’s remarks verbatim, conveying a rare immediacy. Another 20 years on, in the National Library of Wales, the present writer came across a collection of unpublished letters from Sylvester to his wife. Among the most interesting of these relate to the opening months of the war.³ Eighteen in number, they supplement the diary entries, and vice versa. Together the three sources provide a remarkably full account of Lloyd George’s day-to-day reactions from the ‘phoney war’ to the fall of France.

They are far from being an impartial record, however. Sylvester held strong views, and his attitude towards Lloyd George clearly partook of a love–hate relationship. Veneration for what he called ‘a very wonderful man’ alternates with revulsion at aspects of what he saw as a flawed and complex character. Admiration for Lloyd George the spellbinding orator is tempered by anxiety for his career and his reputation. ‘At the moment’, he wrote, only a week after his earlier effusion, ‘I am so contemptuous of him I have hardly any patience.’⁴

The reason for Sylvester’s ambivalence is simple; and for many, perhaps most readers, it may be damning and conclusive. Within days of the outbreak of war, Sylvester became convinced that Lloyd George was a ‘defeatist’: that he did not believe that Britain could win, and that he favoured coming to terms with Hitler. Sylvester’s own sentiments were straightforwardly patriotic. They prefigured the national bulldog spirit of 1940. He uses the word ‘patriot’ to describe what he plainly regarded as the only acceptable attitude. ‘What about the patriot’, he complained, ‘standing up to a man who has said that he will swallow us?’⁵ Of some pessimistic comments from Lloyd George to an American journalist he commented, ‘I think it is terrible.’ ‘If news of them got out’, he wrote, ‘he will be shown not to be a patriot.’⁶ Negotiation with Hitler ‘would mean dishonour’, and for Lloyd George to associate himself with it would be ‘to disgrace the British Empire’.⁷ These are heavy charges.