



Diary of an MP's Wife: Inside and Outside Power
by Sasha Swire
Little, Brown, £20

Cameron is a liberal wimp, arrogant and entitled in a world of "bruised and competing egos"

Raunchy tale of pedigree chums

Jeremy Black

"It's so utterly inconsiderate to orchestrate a drama in January when we are all trying to give up the booze." (15 JANUARY 2019)

"Boris a no show at the Channel 4 debate. In mitigation, it was Father's Day and he must have had a lot of house calls to make." (17 JUNE 2019)

ANY DIARY DESERVES attention. Two basics: is it accurate? Does it matter? If accurate, is that a matter of specifics and ambience or just the latter, and, separately, a case only of what is directly recorded or also of what told indirectly? Does it matter is a matter of the constituency: for the commentator of the present, the historian of the future, the "Great British Public"; et al.

The spouse of a longstanding MP has an opportunity to offer a particular perspective, and not least if there is an entrée to the highest in society. It takes confidence to write (not just say), "I never invite idiots to my house," to invite the enthusiasm of many, to compare Shakespeare and the Greek poets, to have an easy style of considerable wisdom, and to be known for "superior judgment".

Not, I am afraid Sasha Swire (*above*), wife of Sir Hugo Swire, but Elizabeth Montagu, the "Queen of the Blue-Stockings", whose marvellous correspondence on politics, notably with William Pulteney, reminds us of what a talented and thoughtful group were there when Britain became a great power. Yet, John, Lord Hervey and Horace Walpole, with the waspishness of the epicene, captured a broader tranche of affairs, reminding us that politicians need to relax but should be careful of whom with.

SASHA SWIRE'S DIARY of the period 2010-2019 is a mildly raunchy tale of friendship, cliqueishness, salaciousness and the Camerons, a sort of white trailer trash with exalted pedigree, prerogative and pretensions. On top of that, Hugo Swire, long MP for East Devon, was not exactly the most popular of local Tories.

Those who were at some of the same occasions as Sasha, for example a Number 10 dinner hosted

by Boris, do not always have the same recollections, possibly because drink was taken, but she was accurate about the banter, and rather good at capturing some of the assumptions at play.

Sasha was scarcely inner circle and Hugo was not cabinet, and, as with most diarists, we have a very personal interpretation of things people say and events she witnesses. Sasha can offer the most salacious interpretation of things said to her, but many were indeed boorish, and her basic theme of a clique at the heart of government is true, although scarcely surprising.

Allowing for her vanity, the diary therefore presents an underlying truth, although the revelations offer few insights into weekday politics, the burden and seriousness of leadership, and the complexities of government. Cameron and Osborne dominate the entries, which misses the degree to which failure in 2016 makes them irrelevant thereafter. Sasha underestimates Gove's brilliance and May's strong sense of public duty and responsibility, as well as her ability to negotiate a deal with the European Commission.

There are some very strong positives. The love of the Devon countryside produces some beautiful writing, as on rural ponds and rivers. Having myself walked the red-earth hills near Crediton I can testify to her ability to capture the land, soil, work, buildings, and life. The very end of the book brings

a Cornish epiphany with a brilliant presentation of the land at the end of the world and the shadows in stories told: H.V. Morton (no hero he), but more poetic.

But this is the same writer who can make stupid comments about "the Jewish lobby" (14 SEPTEMBER 2015) or the NHS being "in freefall" (20 SEPTEMBER 2016). More excusable is the failure to anticipate. Diaries throw this and much else up. Indeed, many years ago, asked by one of the more senior politicians who plays a role in this book how best to keep a diary for the benefit of later historians, I suggested unnumbered pages in loose-leaf folders on the grounds that it would not be necessary to throw away an entire book in order to discard a page. So, the "downfall of Donald J. Trump" (13 OCTOBER 2016) was not noted by the electors, while the prime ministerial careers of Rudd and Raab as successors of May were not to be.

THE HEARSAY ELEMENT of the diary is striking, as in why Justin Bieber "clearly has crabs" (16 OCTOBER 2016) or Cameron and Claire Perry (14 OC-



Jeremy Black's books include *A History of Britain: 1945 to Brexit* (Indiana University Press)

TOBER 2010), but the edited quickfire tone of the diary takes you rapidly on to completely different vignettes as with the accounts of Conservative Association functions, although she can also say, "But we do love each and every one of them. And it was actually good fun, for all its colour and characters." (2 SEPTEMBER 2016).

Indeed, there is, alongside the observant waspishness, an essential charity (to some) here. Thus, Cameron is a liberal wimp, arrogant and entitled, but also has human characteristics in the world of "bruised and competing egos" that is parliament. Hugo, who goes shooting rather than being "lobby fodder" (26 OCTOBER 2016) is, she knows, not Number 10 material.

There is some fine writing about the ghastliness of grand Tory parties, an apt presentation of the pressures of being an MP, an account of a marriage at once troubled and strong, a good sense of irony: "... an early flight to Chengdu. His first port of call is an Aids clinic. It's a big success." (1-4 DECEMBER 2013).

She is marvellous on the idiocies of academe, including asking her daughter re Edinburgh: "Any idea he was a potential psychopath apologist and conspiracy-theorist nutter?"

"Pretty standard up here, Mum."

"Only last week Saffron was marked down on an essay about North Korea, her tutor saying her suggestions were unrealistic — which is rich, con-

sidering her father, who had responsibility for North Korea in the FCO, gave her the non-sensitive information." (14 APRIL 2018).

Cliques like to keep their gossip in-house, and so we end up with the ridiculous nature of much writing on recent history, let alone the actively misleading nature of obituaries. But there is a broader point about a modern Britain in which, as Sasha notes with reference to the left, "Everything is about feelings, pure 'muh feelings' emotionalism ... spiced up with huge doses of cry-bullying passive aggression" (29 SEPTEMBER 2018), or Hugo, on innocently asking a female Labour MP in the Members' dining-room queue whether she would like apple crumble or the fruit salad, being told: "You want to be careful, casting aspersions about a woman's weight. It will get you into trouble." (24 APRIL 2018). This insistent, incessant passive-aggressive wokishness is puritanism with attitude.

With her romanticism about rural values, Sasha is clearly very much not part of it, and, although she would have no time for someone like me, I like her for it. You get what is on the tin — "how I saw things at the time" — and a long love-letter of sorts to her husband. Not for the faint-hearted, and certainly wrong on those with whom Sasha cannot empathise, but a bright and breezy voice and so right on the red-earth world now being chewed up for building. ©



Hitler's British Traitors
by Tim Tate
Icon Books, £25

Britain's Nazi collaborators

By David Pryce-Jones

PRESUMABLY BECAUSE I HAVE written on this subject, a good few months ago I was sent this book, and I have seen no reviews of it. This is a surprise, for it shakes the story the nation tells itself that the British stood alone against Adolf Hitler in 1940 and went on to win the war. *Hitler's British Traitors* shows that if Hitler's planned invasion had succeeded after the fall of France he would have found collaborators as fanatical as those in all the countries the Wehrmacht had conquered.

A very thorough researcher, Tim Tate has made the most of the files of the Security Service, otherwise MI5, and now deposited in the National Ar-

chives. That agency had to follow up all possible information about supporters of Hitler, producing the evidence that allowed the authorities to arrest them, hold *in camera* trials and imprison them under emergency legislation.

Undercover agents and informers were detailed to join fascist movements and write reports. Proceedings of this kind ran contrary to the English legal tradition and often placed MI5 in the awkward position of agent provocateur, encouraging some suspect to commit treason. Declassification has been haphazard, perhaps because interested parties have been weeding. Arrogant and incompetent is Tate's opinion of Maxwell Knight, at the head of the agency and once himself a fascist.

A fantasy was at work in these otherwise ordinary people but sometimes what they did has to be taken on trust. Dorothy O'Grady, a rackety woman, committed acts of sabotage and espionage, but "since her file has been lost, it is impossible to know how she escaped execution". In the case of Mary Marita Margaret Perigoe, her original Secret Service file was for unexplained reasons destroyed at an unstated date, and a version of its