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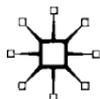
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The Berlin Embassy of Lord D'Abernon, 1920–1926

Gaynor Johnson
Lecturer in History
Bolton Institute

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In memory of Peter Wyn Williams

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Preface

While writing this book, I had the pleasure of reading Peter Neville's study of Nevile Henderson's embassy in Berlin.¹ In it, he discusses the almost unrelenting criticism his subject has received at the hands of historians. When reading material relating to the embassy of Lord D'Abernon, one of Henderson's predecessors, one is faced with the opposite problem. The published diary of his embassy has been used by historians for the last seventy years as an apparently unimpeachable source of information on German foreign policy in the early 1920s. The work of scholars, particularly Angela Kaiser, continues to confirm D'Abernon's status as one of the heroes of interwar diplomacy – the man who, almost singlehandedly, helped to prevent war for a decade by persuading Stresemann to meet Briand and Chamberlain to conclude the Treaty of Locarno.²

The present book contends that this view of D'Abernon is flawed. D'Abernon was not the architect of German security policy, nor did he have a particularly close relationship with the German government. He was never popular with the British government and had a noticeably strained relationship with Austen Chamberlain. His ideas were idiosyncratic and inconsistent. An early disciple of Keynes, D'Abernon nevertheless believed that it was possible for the German budget to be balanced at the height of the run on the mark in 1922–23. He discouraged German desires to seek financial assistance from the United States during the early years of his embassy, believing instead that assistance should come from Britain which, in practice, lacked the necessary resources. In foreign affairs, D'Abernon was never privy to major discussions about strategy and policy. The conclusion of a security agreement between Germany and the Allies, similar to that signed at Locarno in October 1925, for which D'Abernon has so often been given credit, had long been part of the strategy of the German government. D'Abernon was also unaware of the enthusiasm with which Rathenau and Stresemann sought to develop diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union and was surprised and dismayed by the conclusion of the treaties of Rapallo and Berlin.

D'Abernon's political views and attitudes were rooted in the conservatism of his youth and belied a personality that bordered on the eccentric. Herein lies one explanation for the contradictions endemic in

his actions as ambassador to Berlin. He appears to have been liked by all who met him but many thought his behaviour bizarre on occasions. Edgar Stern-Rubarth, former press secretary to Gustav Stresemann, the German Minister for Foreign Affairs after 1923, noted that D'Abernon wrote the notes for their meetings 'on his shirt-cuff with a broken blunt pencil'.³ He went on to describe D'Abernon as having a

bulky, gigantic frame, topped by a small but fine head, with thick white hair and a somewhat rough, equally white beard, his astonishing neglect of all the conventions of Savile Row, his gaping collars. His almost incredible frankness, was unforgettable. He simply asked you point-blank the question he had on his mind without trace of that diplomatic finesse which one expected in an Ambassador.⁴

D'Abernon's wife, Helen, whom he married in 1890, seems to have had an equally eccentric approach to her role in Berlin. Not famed for her tact, she liked to remind the Germans that 'Britain had *won the war!*' on the rare occasions that she visited the German capital from her villa in Italy.⁵

D'Abernon's name is most usually associated with the study of Locarno diplomacy, and yet his activities have hitherto never been scrutinised by those who have sought to debunk the 'myth' of Locarno. This is partly because the only evidence we have of D'Abernon's thoughts on German militarism and Germany's status as a world power date from his embassy, between July 1920 and October 1926. A crippling stroke, seven years before he died in 1941, left him without the ability to speak or to write at length. We therefore have no evidence of what he thought of the rise of Hitler and the re-occupation of the Rhineland in 1936. Unlike Austen Chamberlain, who had much to say on both these matters, D'Abernon never left us a memoir or other note to provide us with an insight into his views about the subsequent failure of the agreement. Thus D'Abernon's embassy stands as one of the last remaining areas of Locarno diplomacy that has yet to be reappraised. The pages which follow seek to fill this historiographical void.

Acknowledgements

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The work of the historian is made even more pleasurable because of the enthusiasm of archivists and librarians for the subject. This project on Lord D'Abernon's embassy in Berlin has been no exception. I am indebted to the staff of the following repositories for their help and for granting me permission to quote from papers in their care: the Public Record Office in Kew (Foreign Office General Correspondence files, Private Collections and xeroxed files from the German Ministry for Foreign Affairs); the British Library Western Manuscript Department (the D'Abernon and Cecil papers); the Oriental and India Office Library (the Curzon papers); Cambridge University Library's Manuscript Department (the Hardinge and Crewe papers); the University of Birmingham (the Austen Chamberlain papers); the House of Lords Record Office (the Lloyd George papers); Churchill College Archive Centre (the Hankey and Aubrey Kennedy papers) and to the Liverpool Record Office for permission to quote material from the papers of the seventeenth Earl of Derby. Considerable care has been taken to contact copyright holders, but if I have inadvertently overlooked any, the publisher will be pleased to make the appropriate acknowledgement at the first opportunity. As ever, however, the author willingly takes full responsibility for any errors that remain.