the former Labour cabinet minister Andrew Adonis suggested that Grey was 'arguably the most incompetent Foreign Secretary of all time'. But the man who did more than any other to destroy Grey's reputation was his fellow Liberal minister and one-time ally, David Lloyd George. As Otte puts it: 'What Churchill did to the history of the 1930s and 1940s, his predecessor … did to the reputation of Grey. He dished him.' (p. xxiv). Though, as Otte stresses, the two men had collaborated fruitfully before 1914, their relationship soured considerably during the war and, more particularly, through the 1920s. By the time of the publication of his highly influential, but self-serving and tendentious *War Memoirs* in September 1933 – Grey had just died – Lloyd George was keen to stress the inadequacies of the European statesmen of 1914. Ignoring his own position as a senior minister in the British government of that time, he implied that, had the country's destiny been in his hands, the outcome of the July crisis would have been a much happier one. Special scorn was reserved for Grey. Lloyd George described 'a pilot whose hand trembled in the palsy of apprehension', an insular figure content with Northumberland or, at a pinch, his fishing lodge in Hampshire, who knew 'less of foreigners through contact with them than any Minister in the Government'.[1] The image is a powerful one but, Otte insists, entirely unjustified.

Grey spent his entire ministerial career in the Foreign Office. Prior to his eleven-year stint as foreign secretary, he had served from 1892–95 as parliamentary under-secretary of state for foreign affairs. Ironically, he had hoped that his first ministerial appointment might have been to the Local Government Board. Granted that his successive masters, Rosebery and Kimberley, were in the Lords, Grey achieved an early prominence that might otherwise have been denied him. In a revealing comment, the Treasury mandarin Sir Edward Hamilton noted that 'so well has Edward Grey done at the FO that but for his being a commoner R[osebery] said that he apparently possessed qualifications that might fit him for promotion some day … to the Secretaryship of State' (p. 85). That the foreign secretary should be a member of the upper chamber was at this time the norm rather than an exception. Contemporary constitutional doctrine suggested that foreign policy was an aspect of the royal prerogative.

Out of office after 1895, Grey continued to rise in the Liberal Party's ranks. He remained a Rosebery man but, by around 1903, it was clear that the brilliant but erratic earl was unlikely to play a major role in a future Liberal government. Grey seamlessly transferred his loyalties to Asquith and Haldane, but the radical streak in his attitude towards domestic politics makes it necessary to soften the usual demarcation between the party's radical and Liberal Imperialist wings. These three rising politicians botched their challenge to Campbell-Bannerman's authority as party leader, but Grey at least soon realised that he had underrated Campbell-Bannerman's considerable qualities.

Yet it might have been useful for Grey to have had at least some experience of a 'public-facing' government department. As it was, he seems, on becoming foreign secretary in December 1905, albeit as a commoner, to have accepted the prevailing doctrine. At all events, considering the length of his tenure, he made few important statements to the Commons and certainly never expected MPs to scrutinise his conduct of policy in any detail. As regards the cabinet, Otte insists that this acted 'as a considerable, constitutional restraint', but at the same time he admits that Grey 'did not believe that it should closely supervise any details' (p. 259). Otte does, however, show that later claims by radical ministers, including the Lord Chancellor, Lord Loreburn, that they had been kept in the dark by the foreign secretary were, at the very least, exaggerated.

The greatest internal challenge to Grey's authority as foreign secretary came in 1911. At heated cabinet meetings in November, his critics complained that the staff talks held between British and French officials had not been authorised by the full cabinet and were, in consequence, wholly unconstitutional. The cabinet now confirmed that no further talks, without prior cabinet approval, would be permissible which might 'commit the country to military or naval intervention'. Yet, as Otte notes, in practice nothing changed and the talks continued. (p. 422).

The author mounts a particularly strong defence of Grey's conduct in the last couple of years before the outbreak of the First World War. He argues that the fact that Europe was not plunged earlier than it was into conflict owed much to the foreign secretary's 'shrewd and subtle crisis diplomacy' in the face of a succession of upheavals in the Balkans (p. 451). By early July 1914, Grey was fully aware of the danger of an escalation of the latest Balkan crisis. He pursued the same basic strategy as in earlier moments of tension, seeking the cooperation of the French and German governments in an effort to restrain Austria-Hungary and Russia. He pursued a diplomatic solution until the very last moment. This meant leaving doubt in the minds of the French that Britain would join any resulting conflict and equal doubt in Germany that she would not. His policy of constructive ambiguity was dependent on an underlying desire in the chancelleries of Europe to avoid war. Sadly, in July 1914 that condition no longer

prevailed. War might prove disastrous for Britain, but Grey also believed that Britain would face enormous dangers by remaining on the side-lines, either in terms of a German-dominated continent or, if France and Russia were victorious, the loss of British influence over their future conduct.

The outbreak of war provided an obvious opportunity for Grey to retire, not least because of his mounting concern over failing eyesight. But he could not. Not only would this have been a public admission of failure, but resignation would have significantly weakened Asquith's government, the cohesion of the Liberal Party and national unity itself. Nonetheless, as a wartime foreign secretary Grey presented a diminished figure. He could not, in Otte's words, 'reinvent himself, Churchill-like, into an amateur strategist' (p. 544). Perhaps his greatest remaining achievement was to facilitate the entry of America into the conflict. Though this came after he left office, 'without his patient, conciliatory and yet firm handling of British policy towards the United States, it might well not have taken place' (p. 580).

When retirement did come, at the formation of Lloyd George's government in December 1916, Grey's expression of relief was in no sense feigned. 'I feel like a man who has walked 1000 miles without rest & has at last been told he may lie down.' (p. 622). Still only 54 years of age, he lived on until 1933, but his public life was now confined to the political fringe. His commitment to Liberalism, notwithstanding a growing detestation of Lloyd George's version of it, remained undimmed. Shortly before his death, Grey told the annual meeting of the Liberal Council that 'it is Liberalism which has made England what it is today, and it will endure. As long as people are what they are in this country, they will be liberal, even if they do not belong to the Liberal Party.' (p. 672).

Much of the debate over Grey's conduct of British foreign policy will no doubt continue. The scenarios presented by his critics depend heavily on the possible outcomes that an alternative strategy might have secured and can, in the nature of things, be neither proved nor disproved. But Otte has given us a superb biography of this important figure. *Statesman of Europe* is sub-titled *A Life of Sir Edward Grey*. For the foreseeable future it is likely to be *the* life of Sir Edward Grey.

In his retirement from the academic world, David Dutton continues to investigate the recent political history of South-West Scotland.

1 D. Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, vol. 1 (London, 1933), pp. 94, 98.

Rosebery's son

Martin Gibson, *A Primrose Path: The gilded life of Lord Rosebery's favourite son* (Arum Press, 2020)

Review by Paul Holden

This is the first full-length biography of Neil Primrose (1882–1917), Liberal member of parliament for Wisbech between 1908 and 1917. It is a sequel to a shorter biographical essay published by the same author in 2015.[1] Not surprisingly the five-year wait for a deeper, more exhaustive analysis has been well worth it.

Like all good biographies, this work redefines our understanding of its subject. The book succeeds in assertively portraying an eminently likeable, charmed and charming man whose wealth and influence made him want for nothing. After losing his mother, Hannah de Rothschild, at the impressionable age of 7, he was raised under the steady hand of his father, Archibald Primrose, 5th Earl of Rosebery, whose Liberal clique underwrote the young Primrose's future career in politics. His political successes, however, were very much his own, based on attributes which included his obvious popularity, his clear oratory skills and a sensible diplomatic approach. The real triumph of this biography is the author's approach to Primrose's personal life, in particular his scrutiny of the close relationships he had with his two best friends, namely his father and the Cornishman, Thomas Agar-Robartes (1881–1915).

Much of what we know about Neil Primrose before now has been contextualised by the relationship he had with his father– a relationship described by Lord Birkenhead as a 'singular love and affection by which these two men were united', adding: 'They were indeed more like brothers in their easy and affectionate intimacy than like father and son.' This closeness and tenderness is well explored throughout the book, so much so that the reader shares his father's sense of loss when Primrose's life and political potential was cut short by the First World War.

Indeed, their lives followed similar patterns. Beyond their often commented upon physical likeness, father and son both managed considerable fortunes (Neil inherited money and property from his maternal great aunt in 1907); both had challenging relationships with education (Rosebery left Christ Church, Oxford, without a degree whilst Neil graduated with a third-class degree in History); together they were united in their passion for the turf and travel (to the detriment of their educations); for different reasons both failed to achieve their political potential; and both suffered reputational damage through gossip that they were homosexuals. The author neatly narrates his way through these facets of Primrose's character and goes onto highlight how Lord Rosebery at times distanced himself from his son's political and military career in order to uphold reputations.

Primrose's initial path to electoral victory was in January 1910 when he secured Wisbech, a seat contested against a backdrop of the Conservatives trying to pit father and son's politics against each other. Although