

Lloyd George at Eighty

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David Lloyd George celebrated his eightieth birthday at his home at Bron-y-de, Churt, Surrey on 17 January 1943. It was an especially tense, potentially explosive occasion for the notoriously feud-racked Lloyd George family. It is a most useful and insightful vantage point from which to view, firstly, inter-relationships within the family structure, secondly, to examine Lloyd George's many very real achievements as a farmer at his home at Bron-y-de, and thirdly to dissect his often negative, even unpatriotic viewpoints on the allied conduct of the Second World War.

In 1943, nearly two years had elapsed since the death of Dame Margaret Lloyd George at her north Wales home, Bryn Awelon, Criccieth. Lloyd George had always promised his private secretary and mistress of thirty years' standing, Frances Stevenson, that, should his wife predecease him, he would, after a decent interval had elapsed, make an 'honest woman' of her. The occasion of his eightieth birthday would, on the face of it, be an ideal time for the second marriage to take place. As the birthday approached, Lloyd George's long-suffering Principal Private Secretary, A. J. Sylvester, found himself bombarded by requests from insistent journalists and reporters that the old man should at least grant them a brief interview to mark the auspicious occasion. Arrangements were also well advanced for a private family party to be held at Bron-y-de to celebrate the birthday. But personal problems abounded. Both of Lloyd George's daughters, Lady Olwen Carey-Evans (b. 1892) and Miss Megan Lloyd George (b. 1902), had adamantly refused to set foot inside Bron-y-de should Frances Stevenson also be present, and showed little inclination to back down as the date of the birthday now fast approached.

In the middle of the previous month – December 1942 – the question of the possible marriage of Lloyd George and Frances Stevenson had been discussed within the family circle. On 11 December, A. J. Sylvester recorded in his diary:

Frances telephoned me tonight after 10 pm. She had had an interview with Lord Dawson this afternoon at 3 pm. She said he was very nice and very kind. He has seen Megan again and he says she is irreconcilable. I think she must have gone there yesterday evening. He said he had thought after his first interview he might be able to do something, but he realises now that nothing he says makes any impression. She just goes round and round and comes back to this one thing – HER MOTHER.

She said repeatedly that if this thing happened [the marriage of her father to Frances Stevenson] that her relations with him are FINISHED, and her life would be finished. Apart from that, of

course, he says there is absolutely no reason why it should not go forward. There would be some criticism, including the re-opening of the criticism about the treatment of 'the old girl'. He said that to me. Some people, he said, think LG did wrong; but Dawson said that would not matter very much. For the people who would criticise him another lot would say he was doing the right thing. He did not set much store upon that.

Gwilym [Lloyd-George] would not stand in the way. Dawson knows LG wants it. He said there is no doubt that it would be a worry to him for Megan to behave like that. In that case, I shall just sit back and allow him to decide. I shall not bring any more pressure to bear; but I shall feel very bitter about it.

[...]You cannot talk to her [Megan Lloyd George] like a normal being: she does not understand. She is not a normal woman. She has this mixture of sex and religion which creates the most extraordinary obsession in her. Dawson tried to explain to her her Father's difficulties – what he calls 'divided and conflicting loyalties'. But she does not understand. There is only one person who matters, and that is loyalty to herself.

A week later, Sylvester met Lord Dawson, the highly regarded physician to the royal family and widely respected, to discuss matters:

LG had explained to him that he wanted to marry Frances. There was no doubt about that. Lord Dawson made it clear that LG would have to be prepared for possible hostility from Megan, probably Gwilym would be all right; but there would be criticism from people in North Wales, where they loved Dame Margaret during her life, and whose memory was sacred to them. He had promised to help by taking soundings. Lord Dawson said he had seen Megan whose attitude was irreconcilably opposed to the idea. It would sully her Mother's memory. If the event took place it would mean a definite break between Megan and her Father. Lord Dawson said he had seen Gwilym whose attitude was that his father was at liberty to do whatever he desired and marry or otherwise; provided nothing happened which was detrimental to the memory of his Mother he offered no opposition.

The general view was that, now that Dame Margaret had been dead for nigh on two years, it was wholly reasonable that Lloyd George should proceed to marry Frances Stevenson – as he had always intended. Frances 'had had a number of offers of marriage, all of which she had turned down because of her association with LG. What she wanted was the name'. Having had 'a very frank talk' with Frances Stevenson, Lord Dawson had formed a 'very favourable' impression of her role – 'She was an exceedingly well preserved woman who would be acceptable in any place or circumstance.' Lord Dawson tended to feel that the marriage would

prove highly beneficial to Lloyd George in the evening of his long life – ‘If LG got old slowly it might be very desirable that he should have someone like Miss Stevenson to look after his physical needs. That stage had probably already arrived. (It undoubtedly has).’¹

According to the account given by Frances Stevenson herself in her memoirs penned in the mid-1960s, Lord Dawson had volunteered to Lloyd George over lunch that he would gladly ‘interview’ all the children, and was even sanguine that he might well persuade them ‘to take a more friendly attitude’ to the proposed marriage. At the interviews, recalled Frances, Gwilym Lloyd-George proved to be generally ‘sympathetic to his father and to me’, Richard was not even consulted because of his on-going ill-health, while Olwen, ‘helpful’ on the whole, ‘said she would support anything her father wished’. Megan, however, predictably had proved wholly intractable and virulently hostile. She indeed “blew up” completely when discussing the matter and threatened all kinds of tragedies’. Dawson had indeed totally failed in his attempt to influence her.² In an attempt to pacify Megan, Frances had re-assured her that the proposed marriage would in no way change the status of her own young daughter Jennifer, born in October 1929, and that there was absolutely no question of her, too, assuming the name of Lloyd George – a significant concession designed to quell Megan’s worst fears, but one which had had absolutely no effect. Fearing that Megan, and possibly Olwen too, might well hurtfully boycott the eightieth birthday festivities, Lloyd George had reluctantly agreed at least to postpone the wedding, although he still hoped that Megan might well eventually ‘come round’ to the idea.³

From about the beginning of the year, there was much public anticipation of the eightieth birthday and detailed, generally flattering reviews of Lloyd George’s long life and unique political career and service appeared in the newspapers.⁴ The local press in north Wales reflected with due reverence on his contribution as MP for the Caernarfon Boroughs for almost fifty-three years, as one who had once even sat in the House of Commons alongside W. E. Gladstone. His record as the founder of ‘the social services’ from 1906 was underlined, as was his immense contribution to allied success in the Great War: ‘If Mr Lloyd George’s political career had ended in 1914 he would have gained for himself a high place in the long roll of British Statesmen, but it was strange indeed that Mr. Lloyd George, who had always been a lover of peace and hated war, was destined to become one of the greatest of British war ministers.’ Even Hitler’s personal testimony in his *Mein Kampf* was cited to support the adulation – ‘Mr Lloyd George appeared to have an astonishing knowledge of the masses of the people so that he could reach their hearts and “make them carry out his will absolutely”’. In September 1936, Lloyd George had actually visited and taken tea with Hitler twice at his mountain retreat at Berchtesgaden in

1 N(ational) L(ibrary of) W(ales), A. J. Sylvester Papers A52, diary entries for 11 and 18 December 1937.

2 Frances Lloyd George, *The Years that are Past* (London, 1967), 171.

3 Ibid.

4 See, e.g., *The Evening News*, 5 January 1943.

the Bavarian Alps and had formed a very high opinion of the German Chancellor, at once hailing him enthusiastically as 'the George Washington of Germany'.

Regret was expressed that the radical, interventionist proposals to revitalize the British economy which Lloyd George had unveiled with his customary panache in March and April 1929 in readiness for the general election – culminating in the audacious policy statement 'We Can Conquer Unemployment' – and again in his 'New Deal' proposals in January 1935, had been largely rejected: 'If they had been adopted, apart from their immediate aim of reducing the numbers of the unemployed, we should have been in a much better position to cope with the war situation as regards agriculture, skilled workers and transport.' His repeated appeals during the late 1930s for an agreement with Soviet Russia, whose military strength Lloyd George had estimated with uncanny accuracy, were reiterated. Ironically, it was asserted that, throughout the 'many storms and tempests' of his long political career, Lloyd George's personal and family life had been 'singularly happy', crowned still further by the success of two of his children as Liberal MPs representing Welsh constituencies, Major Gwilym (now the highly regarded Minister of Fuel and Power in the wartime coalition government) for Pembrokeshire, and Miss Megan for Anglesey. The late Dame Margaret, with whom he had celebrated his golden wedding lavishly at Cannes in January 1938, was rightly recalled as follows: 'Three years later he lost her who had been his partner in all the vicissitudes of his political career, the sharer of his joys and troubles, neither unduly elated by the one nor too much downcast by the other. It was a great blow to him.'⁵

Many agreed with Goronwy O. Roberts, a distinguished product of the University College of North Wales, Bangor, and, since 1941, the Youth Education Officer to the Caernarfonshire County Council (and one who was, in fact, destined to capture the Caernarfonshire constituency for the Labour Party in July 1945), who greeted Lloyd George as both 'the greatest living Welshman' and also 'the greatest living democrat'. In a thinly-veiled attack on 'nationalism', and expounding his personal view of the policies of Plaid Genedlaethol Cymru, which was by now beginning to have some effect on the political life of north Wales and also the University of Wales at this time, Roberts went on:

The unmitigated tragedy of our world is that he should have been out of office for so long. If he had grasped the leadership of the Left in 1926, we should have avoided the fraud of 1931, the folly of 1938, and the fruits of both in 1943 [presumably a reference to the fact that the world was then at the height of the Second World War]. Now he is the last of the great leaders of Europe, for what we have today in practically every country is not leadership, but a rabble of satellites grooming themselves for vice-dictatorships. This man today has his message to the youth of Wales. His life of democratic effort shows us that a nationalism not ennobled by a belief in the rights of man

is a horrible perversion which destroys every nation that confides in it. That is why millions of ordinary people will remember him as a pioneering architect of social security, as the brain and heart that provided for the old, the sick, the unemployed, the tubercular. To love a country is first of all to love its people, and to love its people is to serve it with necessary reform.⁶

By the middle of January, arrangements had been finalized for a number of distinguished London journalists to interview Lloyd George as part of the birthday celebrations. These included Hannen Swaffer of the *Daily Herald*, Harry Boardman, the distinguished political correspondent of the *Manchester Guardian*, and Beverley Baxter MP for the *Sunday Express*. It was also agreed that photographers and various ‘film people’ should be allowed. But Lloyd George had insisted that the interviews should be restricted in scope – ‘They are not to question him about his views on the war, either now or after the war, and he will only talk about his farm and the last war. That is the definite condition on which he is seeing them.’⁷ The following day, A. J. Sylvester recorded in his diary:

Frances phoned me tonight. Said everything was very quiet and LG was very happy. There had been no communication between Megan and LG since the House adjourned except that he had received a telegram for the New Year from her. When he last saw her, he made it clear that she could go to Churt, but only on the same terms as Gwilym and Edna which meant that Frances was not going to leave Bron-y-de. Everybody was talking of LG and his birthday, and nobody even asked about Megan. She may be seeing the red light.⁸

The *Illustrated* had indeed devoted four whole pages to a commemoration of Lloyd George’s eightieth birthday. The well-known photographer James Jarché, who had been taking pictures of Lloyd George since before the Great War, since 1907 in fact, now visited Bron-y-de for the sixth time to take a magnificent series of photographs. These included the famous portrait of LG’s revered Uncle Richard Lloyd (1834-1917); the piano in the library at the house, on which had been placed large framed photographs of the ‘celebrities’ of the Great War like General Smuts, General Foch, Presidents Woodrow Wilson and Georges Clemenceau; Lloyd George at his well-known ornamental window overlooking the lands of his estate, accompanied by his favourite pet dog, a chow; a cabinet brimful of some of the gold and silver caskets representing the freedoms of the various cities bestowed upon Lloyd George; a separate photograph of the freedom of the city of Manchester, Lloyd George’s birthplace, presented to him at his assumption of the premiership in December 1916; and one of Lloyd George seated at his bureau desk, above which hangs a painting by Winston Churchill of Marakeesh, Morocco, which the Prime Minister had presented to Lloyd George. On his sixth visit to Churt, Jarché

6 Ibid.

7 NLW, A. J. Sylvester Papers A55, diary entry for 12 January 1943.

8 Ibid., diary entry for 13 January 1943.

now found the octogenarian former prime minister ‘still brimful of energy. Up and down the room he paced with many of the old gesticulations, as we talked of Peace Conferences and Eisteddfods.’ The article closed by paying tribute to ‘hard-working, unruffled Miss Stevenson’ who had been present at all the meetings between Jarché and Lloyd George. The former prime minister noted proudly to his interviewer that he dictated all his letters and writings to Miss Stevenson.⁹

Other journalists, too, were allowed to interview Lloyd George at Bron-y-de and to view in detail his extensive estate there. Press articles, in keeping with the strict guidelines laid down by Lloyd George, tended to focus on his impressive achievements as a farmer which were unknown to many at the time. Lloyd George never tired of recounting proudly to his numerous guests and visitors there how he, who originally had merely the haziest notions of how to go about things, had converted ‘the Sahara of Surrey’ into a remarkably successful 800-acre crop farm, an awesome transformation achieved largely through the chance discovery by a woman water-diviner of a substantial lake beneath the farmlands. In time it had proved possible to make use of electric power to pump up from the lake some 500,000 gallons of water each day which could then be used, via overhead irrigation, on any part of the extensive estate. Indeed, on 20 May 1939, a high-profile launch of a local irrigation scheme had been arranged by Lloyd George – and Dame Margaret had made one of her very rare visits to Bron-y-de especially for the occasion. The ageing couple had gleefully posed for the assembled ranks of journalists and cameramen, and Lloyd George had clearly savoured every moment.

Lloyd George took a particular delight in the extent to which he personally supervised developments – in consultation with Mr. Withers, the estate bailiff. Expansion at Bron-y-de had certainly been impressive. Back in 1927, there had been only seven acres of rather poor land surrounding the newly-built house, and just seven farmhands had been employed there. The estate had then quickly been built up to about one hundred acres by the steady purchase of adjoining fields and farms as these came on to the market. Always one to appreciate and pay heed to the advice of experts in the field, Lloyd George had readily called upon the services of specialists from the Wye Agricultural College, the East Malling Research Station and the staff of East Surrey County Council. Sheep and cattle farming, and indeed arable farming, had enjoyed at best a modest success, but the profits from poultry and pig-farming soon proved substantial. By the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, no fewer than eighty-four individuals were earning their living on the large estate, and, three years later as the war progressed, half of these employees were land girls who lived in tied cottages on the estate. To celebrate his eightieth birthday, Lloyd George had several press photographs taken of himself, smiling broadly, surrounded by a group of seemingly doting land girls.

Lloyd George had availed himself of every possible opportunity over the years to buy up adjoining farmsteads and pieces of land so that an estate of considerable

extent had emerged. The apple orchard alone ran to some 200 acres, and Lloyd George apples and raspberries had achieved an especial status. In July 1935, Lloyd George had won the first, second and third prizes and also a silver cup at a Soft Fruit Show for his blackcurrants, and several other prizes followed during subsequent years. Fruit was collected continuously throughout the year in huge quantities. The orchards were adorned by several extensive glass-houses, stores where the fruit was kept, and an impressive purpose-built marketing pavilion on the main road. A large notice-board on the roadside announced to the world that the produce of Bron-y-de farm and the orchards were available for purchase there. Locals purchased their fruit and vegetables there regularly, and many tradespeople drove there in their vans and lorries over many miles to acquire regular supplies for their shops. There was also a staff canteen (which served wholesome food provided by the British Restaurant at Haslemere) where estate workers and farm-hands could have their mid-day meals. Well-known, too, were the apiaries on the estate, and jars of the finest honey, carefully labelled 'Produce of Bron-y-de, Churt', were widely considered delicacies and often given as gifts. Fans of Lloyd George proudly asserted that 'the man who won the war' back in 1914–18 was now making a most valuable contribution to the production of British food supplies, and had been since 1939.

Many of the journalists who took advantage of the opportunity to visit Bron-y-de and survey its estates on the eve of the eightieth birthday celebrations were given a detailed, informative guided tour by Miss Frances Stevenson, who invariably charmed and impressed their numerous guests. 'No man ever had a more faithful or capable secretary than this gifted woman, full of personal charm. For thirty years she has understood his ways and wishes.' She took a delight in telling visiting journalists:

I help in the administration, but there is only one boss. He has put all the genius he showed when he was Minister of Munitions in 1915–16 into farming. As a child in his uncle Richard's garden at Llanystumdwy, fruit fascinated him. Fruit-farming is his speciality. He set himself to prove what scientific cultivation could do even with impoverished soil, and you can see and judge how he has succeeded.

Details and statistics relating to the development of the estate were clearly at Miss Stevenson's finely manicured fingertips, recalled instantly. Proudly, she narrated how, at Lloyd George's personal instigation, some 15,000 trees had been planted on the estate. In the autumn of 1942, the crops had amounted to 9,000 bushels and more than 80,000 apples. She explained how each individual Blenheim Orange and Cox's Pippin was lovingly and carefully wrapped in tissue paper and then packed in boxes ready to be sold. Other impressive statistics tripped off Miss Stevenson's silver tongue – 60 tons of plums and 55 tons of tomatoes produced on the estate in just one season. At one time, Lloyd George's particular pride and joy was a herd of 500 pigs – but these had tended to consume the local barley crop which was eagerly sought by the brewers at Burton, Staffordshire, heartland

of the brewing industry, who appreciated its high quality. Overall, there existed a deep sense of pride and satisfaction amongst the members of the Lloyd George household at Bron-y-de at the location of the property high up amongst the firs on the hills of Surrey and in the fact that Lloyd George himself had been largely personally responsible for its design and execution¹⁰

Throughout much of the long 1930s, the task of researching and writing the famous *War Memoirs*, usually at Bron-y-de, had provided their author with an important outlet for his still burgeoning energies. So, too, did the development and accumulation of the estate there. Both projects brought him much applause and commendation.

On 15 January, details of Lloyd George's interview with Hannen Swaffer appeared in the *Daily Herald*. The octogenarian former prime minister readily reflected on the course of his long political career ever since the early days of 'the pettifogging Welsh attorney' in the House of Commons in the 1890s. Swaffer hailed him in 1943 as 'the Apostle of the Land' whose insistent message now was, 'We must use all the vast resources of our soil.' As ever, he was ready to point out his phenomenal success as a farmer at Bron-y-de:

Here, at Churt, I bought seven derelict farms, employing seven men altogether, and turned them into land so fertile that they now employ 84 workers and also 100 pickers in the season. Yet it's poor sandy soil, not rich like the earth in Devonshire, Cheshire or Lincolnshire. What has been done here at Churt could have been done all over the country, where vast areas were going derelict and good land was falling into desuetude, and becoming covered with weeds. Yet Neville Chamberlain merely said, 'We must buy our food from abroad as otherwise we cannot sell goods.' You cannot keep good men on the land unless you pay them well. When I began, the county rate was about 30s a week! I put it up to £2 5s. Elsewhere, the wholesale drift to the towns went on.

When I was young, the village [Llanystumdwy] was self-contained. We made our own footwear, from the hide to the boot. We made our own clothes, from the hide to the cloth and the tailor. We made our bread from the grain to the mill and the bakehouse. We made our own butter, our own cheese and our own bacon. You could not starve in the village – and there was plenty of work for everyone. We must revive the countryside. We have the best land in Europe. The skies drip fatness on the soil.

He then reflected on the terrible problem of the 'intractable million', the long-

10 *The Star*, 13 January 1943. See also the tribute by 'Celt' in the *Liverpool Daily Post*, 14 January 1943, for a perceptive assessment of the importance of Lloyd George's Welsh background to his political career.

term unemployed during much of the inter-war period, a total which had sometimes exceeded more than three million individuals – ‘Ramsay [MacDonald] was as much to blame as Baldwin. Yet there was always plenty of work that needed to be done.’ Lloyd George clearly took a real pride in his own personal role as ‘a man who, late in years, became a farmer and made it pay’, now revelling in his newly-acquired role as ‘Farmer George’, ‘the Squire of Churt’ and ‘a missionary of farming’. Lloyd George powerfully argued the case for the nationalization of the coal mines, the eradication of the slum dwellings, the re-building of the towns and re-planning of the roads. He also advocated the reform of the school syllabus so that children in the towns and those in country areas might develop in distinctly different ways, and pointed out that rural living was no longer of necessity isolationist: ‘No longer is the country dull, if it ever was. It has its cinemas, its omnibuses to take its villagers into the towns at night, and its wireless.’ He also pressed for the wholesale reconstruction of the ‘ruined’ League of Nations and the setting up of an international police force. The interview clearly strayed far beyond the restrictions previously laid down by Lloyd George for it did include some discussion of the allied progress in the Second World War:

As to the war itself, his views on that are only for the private ears of his friends. Although, over the conflict, he has never been an optimist, he retains his faith in the British peoples and their mission. ‘We are an island race which, in the past, has done so much. Safe from invasion, in which I never believed, not even in 1940, we can yet give a lead to the world.’¹¹

‘Pity he has not helped to give it, but in this war he has always refused,’ was A. J. Sylvester’s immediate reaction.¹²

On the very same day – 15 January 1943 – Lady Olwen Carey-Evans telephoned Sylvester for advice about attending the birthday party at Bron-y-de, now only two days away:

I said that nothing and no one ought to stop she and Megan going to Churt on Sunday and greeting their Father on his 80th birthday, whether Frances Stevenson was there or not. If neither of LG’s daughters were present, he would be able to point to the fact that they had both neglected him upon a most important occasion. If he should die in his sleep on Sunday night, and they had not been to see him, how great would be their remorse. I said I had never behaved generously in a case of doubt when I had had occasion to regret my action. Olwen later spoke to Lord Dawson, who gave her similar advice.

Sylvester then discussed matters with Frances Stevenson, and ‘an instruction’ came to hand from Lloyd George that ‘he would be pleased to see Olwen and her family

11 *Daily Herald*, 15 January 1943.

12 NLW, A. J. Sylvester Papers A55, diary entry for 15 January 1943.

and Megan, but it was understood that Frances would be there too'. Following this, Sir Thomas and Lady Olwen Carey-Evans decided to travel to Churt¹³

The following day, it was again Sylvester who finalized the arrangements for the presentation of a silver tankard to Lloyd George as an eightieth birthday present from the members of his immediate personal staff; 'as a token of esteem and affection' ran the inscription on one side. The other side bore ten autographed signatures including those of Frances Stevenson, A. J. Sylvester himself, Ann Parry (Lloyd George's Welsh secretary), and Eileen Brady. Sylvester considered it 'a most attractive and artistic tankard' which much pleased its recipient who proclaimed, 'It has a handle that I can get a grip on!' Arrangements were also made for the purchase of about fifteen poundsworth of 'spring flowers' to decorate Lloyd George's personal rooms at Bron-y-de. These included yellow narcissi and anemones. Two other gifts came from the eighty-four-strong farm workforce on the Churt estate – a frost detector, hailed as 'a most ingenious device to beat one of the farmer's biggest bogies'; and an ebony walking-stick with a horn handle and silver mounting, ready for an inscription to be added at a later date.¹⁴

The press interviews continued to appear too. The *Manchester Guardian* devoted two full columns to the interview by Harry Boardman, who proudly recalled that during the whole of the previous century only four former British Prime Ministers had attained their eightieth birthdays – namely Lord John Russell, Palmerston, Gladstone, and A. J. Balfour. Again, Lloyd George's pessimistic, generally defeatist attitude to the allied war effort surfaced at the beginning of the interview:

I sometimes wonder what we are doing. Here we are in the fourth year of war and we have hardly tackled our main enemy Germany at all. In the fourth year of the last war we had been hammering her through three years – from 1914 to 1917 – with the whole of our strength. I doubt if we are opposing a hundred thousand Germans in North Africa. The only country that is tackling Germany is Russia, and the same thing applies to Japan. We are not really tackling Japan. She is still fighting on the borders of Australia.

He reflected at length on the course of the First World War and its leading actors, politicians and military figures alike, and again lamented the stubborn failure of successive British governments of the inter-war years to adopt programmes of extensive public works and much more interventionist policies. At the close of the interview, the question of the appointment of a Welsh secretary of state or minister, again tentatively on the political agenda in 1943, was raised: 'You will certainly have to have a Minister for Wales. Moreover, Wales will have to have self-government for purely Welsh affairs.' 'Scotland, too?' ventured Boardman.

13 Ibid.

14 NLW, A. J. Sylvester Papers A55, diary entry for 16 January 1943; *Evening News*, 16 January 1943.

‘Certainly, if Scotland wants it,’ responded Lloyd George. ‘I don’t know whether Scotland does. But I know this: Wales does.’¹⁵ On reading in detail this lengthy, sometimes provocative interview, Sylvester wrote in his diary, ‘LG can never resist the temptation to have a dig at somebody, this time at Winston. [...] I felt very disappointed about this interview. I warned LG that Winston was at a conference abroad.’¹⁶ Press reports also focused on the ‘all-family party’ to be held on 17 January, and it was also widely noted that Miss Frances Louise Stevenson, CBE, Lloyd George’s secretary of thirty years’ standing, had been invited to attend – the only non-family member thus honoured. Nine members of the Lloyd George family were expected to attend.¹⁷

On the birthday itself, many newspapers carried long features on Lloyd George’s career, notably the *Sunday Express* which, in an article entitled ‘He saved us last time; today he is 80’ by Beverley Baxter, published an extensive interview. Baxter noted that, ever since about 1928–29, Lloyd George’s many ‘detractors’ had never ceased to assert that the fallen, possibly discredited, former Prime Minister ‘would have to die before he would live again’. She readily contrasted Lloyd George’s ‘ill-luck’ with the relative ‘good fortune’ which had befallen the American President Abraham Lincoln who had been ‘assassinated in the supreme hour of triumph’. A detailed review of Lloyd George’s political career followed. It had been ‘tacitly understood’ throughout the long interview that the tortuous course of the Second World War lay outside the permissible ambit of their discussion – potentially the most interesting theme which they might have discussed. Baxter, however, chanced her arm as they walked slowly down the long driveway leading from Bron-y-de, asking him for some comment on the progress of the allied war effort. ‘I will give you two,’ responded Lloyd George. ‘First the physique of our fighting men is better in this war than in the last.’ When pressed for the second comment, ‘all humour’ immediately abandoned Lloyd George. ‘We are in the fourth year of the war, and we have not yet come to grips with the enemy.’¹⁸ Having read the long piece, Sylvester wrote in his diary:

I am sorry that he said that. He is the last man who should have done so. He has been treated with most amazing generosity by everybody on the strength generally of his efforts in the last war. If they knew what his attitude was in this war I will guarantee he would have had a different kind of birthday. Although asked to help his country on a number of occasions, he refused, though it is within his power to render an immense contribution in her struggle for victory. As he is not in the Govt he is full of blind jealousy of those who are doing their utmost to save us. He does not even listen to the British Wireless; he is interested mostly in the German. He kids himself he discriminates between the two! In all his interviews he has not found it in his heart

15 *Manchester Guardian*, 16 January 1943.

16 NLW, A. J. Sylvester Papers A55, diary entry for 16 January 1943.

17 *Evening News*, 16 January 1943.

18 *Sunday Express*, 17 January 1943

to give one word of encouragement or even of help to the old country, her leaders or her Allies. But he has given plenty of sly crafty digs in the ribs. No mention of our gallant airmen, our marvellous Navy and the historic victory of Alexander and Montgomery over Rommel in Egypt and Libya: almost to Tripoli, some 1,400 miles! No mention of the astonishing and marvellous victories of the Russians. He does not speak of these things, because they are successes.

When things looked blackest before Stalingrad and the Germans were advancing, he said privately that the Russians were finished! Where is his faith? His part in this war so far has been beneath contempt. He runs true to form: he is trying to keep his cake and eat it! And so far he is an adept at doing it. He deserved to be thoroughly discredited, but today he is happy, for in the eyes of the public he is the centre of a wonderful picture, the victor of the LAST WAR. He will not help his country, nor will he make a declaration showing why he does not do so. Jealousy is the root.¹⁹

The family indeed duly assembled for lunch at Bron-y-de as previously arranged, 'on the strict understanding that Frances would also be present', and it must have been a considerable strain on her to fulfil for the first time the role of hostess of the house and to receive many members of the Lloyd George family there *en masse*. Recorded A. J. Sylvester, 'This is the first time the family as a whole have been there with Frances.' The elder grandchildren were serving in the armed forces and thus unable to get leave to attend the celebrations. On their arrival, Lady Olwen, Sir Thomas and their son, known as Bengy within the family circle, had greeted Frances cordially and politely shaken hands with her. Megan had 'simply ignored her'. They had all taken lunch together, but Frances had tactfully taken her leave for certain periods, and the family photographs and the toast had pointedly not included her. At tea, Olwen had sat next to Frances, with Megan seated 'some distance away'. Later on, a telegram in the Welsh language had arrived from Criccieth. Frances asked Megan if the sender was known to her, but Megan had responded by 'turning her back on Frances and powdering her nose!' There was general relief, however, on all sides that the celebrations had taken place 'without any open breach', but, when Megan Lloyd George had returned to Du Cane Road, the house owned by Sir Thomas and Olwen Carey-Evans in London, 'She just cried her eyes out, saying that she could never forgive her Father.'²⁰

The day's events had clearly been shrouded in thinly-veiled tension and acrimony. Ever since the spring of 1942, tentative plans had been made for the wedding of Lloyd George and Frances Stevenson. Frances was especially keen for this to take place, Lloyd George rather less so, tending to stall when the subject was raised. As he was now over seventy-nine years of age, and in indifferent health, Frances was understandably loathe to bully him – 'LG is an old man. I do not like to bring pressure on him.' She had even seriously considered threatening to leave

19 NLW, A. J. Sylvester Papers A55, diary entry for 17 January 1943

20 Ibid.

him once and for all in an attempt to pressurize him into agreeing to the wedding, but had then stopped short of such an extreme step. Behind the scenes, however, she never gave up on the goal of a marriage to take place at some point during 1943. There had been tentative plans for the marriage to take place to coincide with the eightieth birthday celebrations, but, once Megan had got wind of the furtive preparations, she had created such a furore, threatening to withdraw from public life completely, possibly even to commit suicide, that the idea of the wedding had quietly been shelved. As already noted, the royal physician, Lord Dawson of Penn, a long-standing personal friend of Lloyd George, had been brought into the family drama. Lord Dawson, it would seem, was already aware that the old man was suffering from the cancer which was eventually to kill him in March 1945. He had been suffering from cancer of the bowel probably since 1941, and the condition had caused a marked diminution in his energy levels and an increase in his irascibility. Although it was considered likely that he might well survive for some time, the condition would of necessity deteriorate and eventually prove terminal. This to some extent explains Lloyd George's stubborn refusal to join the government during the war years, and also elucidates his reluctance to antagonize Megan still further. Not wishing to annoy his younger daughter more than was necessary, Lloyd George gave the impression that the marriage plans had been dropped, in the hope that Megan would then more readily attend the birthday lunch. Megan had still vacillated, but had been won around, it would seem, by a long letter from Lord Dawson on 15 January:

The birthday would seem to offer an opportunity for a gesture because other members of the family will be going down [and] there will be the occasion to carry off any difficulties. And if the gesture were made it cannot be doubted it would make a great difference to your father's comfort and happiness. If you make the gesture, as I hope you will, it must be warm and really friendly in its quality. It need not last long, but you could make the short time Miss S. was there an occasion and then as it would be a family party she would probably go from the room on her own.

Now I want you to listen to me. I both understand and sympathise with your feelings and especially those which surround your mother's memory, but I am sure she would wish nothing but that the evening of your father's life should be made as smooth as possible. He is in need today of physical care and is likely in this respect to become more dependent in the future. Miss S. fills this role and there is no one else at once fitted available and acceptable for this duty.

If it be a fact that what you feared is off, as it appears to be, it must in justice be said she has now made a great sacrifice and from what she has said to me I think she has made things easy and put aside the bitterness of her disappointment. [...] You are not called upon to be a friend but only to be kindly, in the way you understand so well, when you meet her in the capacity as a necessary helpmate for your father today.

Knowing that you were brought up as a Christian there can be no question that you should make this gesture. [...] For it is a matter of Christian charity for your father's sake. He has changed his intention mainly for you. From my deep attachment to you I do urge you on the next suitable occasion to make that gesture and make it generously and you will never regret it.²¹

Megan had attended the birthday lunch believing that Frances had by now renounced the idea of marriage, but this was soon to be proved totally erroneous. Frances was still determined to press ahead.

In spite of the trauma and the family dramas behind the scenes, Lloyd George had apparently enjoyed his eightieth birthday celebrations and had been blessed with good health and vitality on the auspicious occasion.²² He had been able to walk around his home farm in the morning, savouring to the full the crisp winter air, while his secretaries had opened the mountains of letters and telegrams which had poured into Bron-y-de. The special birthday lunch – roast goose and vegetables, both the produce of Bron-y-de, apple pie and a surprise birthday cake – had gone off reasonably well, in spite of the absence of the elder son, Major Richard, who, it was reported in the press, was recuperating from an injury to his knee. In fact, the elder son was already seriously ill with tuberculosis which had been aggravated by a severe addiction to alcohol. The birthday cake, bearing eight candles, had been baked by Mrs Bennett, Lloyd George's housekeeper at Churt, who had apparently spent weeks hoarding a supply of dates because no sultanas were then available in war-time. A second huge surprise birthday cake, with eighty pink candles, had also arrived as a present from the *Daily Mirror* newspaper, and was lit by Bengy Carey-Evans. Lloyd George soon succeeded in blowing out all eighty-eight candles with very little effort.

Telegrams were received from King George VI and Queen Elizabeth, Queen Mary, and from the Prime Minister and Mrs Clementine Churchill. Messages were also received from the Speaker of the House of Commons, Anthony Eden (the Foreign Secretary), Lord (John) Simon (the Lord Chancellor), Sir Kingsley Wood, Sir Stafford Cripps, Lord Derby and Lady Atholl. One telegram read, 'Eighty is not your age, L. G., but your measure in ordinary men.' Ernest Brown, the Minister of Health, now the leader of the National Liberal group in the House of Commons, sent greetings on behalf of himself and his colleagues. In a radio broadcast after the one o'clock news, Lord Winterton underlined those qualities which Lloyd George had consistently displayed in parliament and on the stump, attributes which had made him 'a great war-time Prime Minister – immense physical endurance, a firm grasp of essentials, flashing wit, superb eloquence, a quick-silver mind'. Winterton concluded:

21 NLW MS 20,475C, no. 3172, Lord Dawson to Megan Lloyd George, 15 January 1943.

22 This account of the birthday celebrations is substantially derived from the *Caernarvon and Denbigh Herald*, 22 January 1943, and the *North Wales Chronicle*, 15 and 22 January 1943.

You belong to a noble triumvirate of past and present statesmen, of which the other members are the younger Pitt and Winston Churchill. Each of you, in his appointed time, was given to us by Providence to steer England's ship when it seemed to onlookers that nothing could save us from destruction by the mountainous waves which surrounded her. You are the embodiment of the matchless genius of our nation when it meets with grave perils and adversity – the spirit that cannot be defeated, because it never contemplates surrender.²³

At 5.05 pm, just after the evening news, the Welsh home service broadcast a 'special Welsh programme' to mark Lloyd George's eightieth birthday, introduced by veteran Liberal journalist E. Morgan Humphreys, long-serving editor of *Y Genedl Gymreig*, whose insightful editorial columns had frequently comprised lively political commentaries. Humphreys read out a Welsh poem which had been especially composed to mark Lloyd George's eightieth birthday, expressing the hope of achieving a united Wales. The programme then consisted of three tributes. Lloyd George's younger brother William George (b. 1865) reminisced on their early family life at Llanystumdwy, recollections which referred to his brother's schooldays. Then came G. Hughes Roberts, whose late father, J. Evan Roberts of Bangor, had actually served as the chairman of the Caernarfon Boroughs Liberal Association at the time of Lloyd George's first adoption as a parliamentary candidate way back in 1889. In a fascinating account, Hughes Roberts related how many of the leading Liberals in the Boroughs had entertained very real 'doubts and hesitations' concerning the young firebrand Lloyd George's adoption: 'They thought he was too young [at twenty-six years of age], too extreme and too independent.' Among those who had bravely stuck out their necks to secure the nomination of 'the boy alderman' were J. Evan Roberts and the late Principal John Price, head of the Bangor Normal College. Hughes Roberts then reflected on Lloyd George's early years as a backbench Liberal MP. Finally, Dr Thomas Jones CH, deputy secretary to the Cabinet from 1916 until 1930 and subsequently the long-serving secretary to the Pilgrim Trust, spoke of Lloyd George's period in power, underlining his unstinting support, when Chancellor of the Exchequer, for the mission of the Welsh National Memorial Association to eradicate the scourge of the 'white peril', tuberculosis. 'T.J.' also emphasized Lloyd George's inspiring role during the darkest days of the Great War. Jones had always been an avid admirer of Lloyd George, but in recent years, fed with information (generally highly critical of Lloyd George) by A. J. Sylvester, his adulation had turned to mild criticism as he viewed askance Lloyd George's generally highly negative, defeatist attitude to the allied war effort since 1939, his treatment of Dame Margaret and his relationship with Frances Stevenson. Yet in *The Observer* on Lloyd George's birthday, Jones published a brilliant review

of his political career and contribution.²⁴

The Caernarfon Boroughs constituency, too, did not forget Lloyd George on his big day. Both the Red Dragon and the Union Jack were proudly flown on Bryn Awelon (Lloyd George's former constituency home, now – since the death of Dame Margaret in January 1941 – in the ownership of Megan Lloyd George), Criccieth castle and the Pwllheli town hall. Several of the old-age pensioners at Llanystumdwy sent personal telegrams in the Welsh language. Among messages received were those from the Caernarfon Boroughs Liberal Association, the North Wales Liberal Federation, the Mayor of Caernarfon (on behalf of the Council and Burgesses of the town), and the Anglesey Liberal Association. The message from the Caernarfon Boroughs Liberal Association read:

We are proud of your long record of service to the country as our representative. We recall that in October 1939, at Caernarfon, you urged an understanding with Russia, whose military might you alone at that time appreciated. The country now recognises your foresight, but there is still much to be done. We need your guidance. Good health and happy days.²⁵

The local press in north-west Wales, not for the first time, took a particular delight in publishing the results of all the parliamentary elections, a total of no fewer than fourteen contests, which Lloyd George had fought in the Caernarfon Boroughs ever since April 1890, and listed the names of those elderly voters (all men of course) who had supported him consistently ever since his first by-election victory in April 1890 when, it was still proudly recalled in 1943, his majority was just a wafer-thin eighteen votes. All of these stalwart supporters were by 1943 of necessity upwards of 74 years of age. (Of course, given the introduction of the secret ballot since 1872, there was no firm evidence of the voting record of any one individual.)

One of these, John Williams of King's Head Street, Pwllheli, had actually served as one of the Liberal Party agents in the 1890 by-election. Within the constituency (as had happened on the occasion of the Golden Wedding celebrations back in January 1938), there was understandably some disappointment that the birthday festivities were all being held at Churt and London, particularly as by this time (since August 1939 in fact) Lloyd George was the proud owner (for the princely sum of £4000) of Tŷ Newydd farm, a potentially attractive manor house at Llanystumdwy, the village where he had spent his boyhood and which

24 *The Observer*, 17 January 1943. During the Cardigan National Eisteddfod of August 1942, Dr Thomas Jones had recorded a confidential conversation which had taken place between himself and A. J. Sylvester, 'Threat to marry F[rances] S[tevenson] led to heart to heart talk between L. G. and Megan. Reconciliation at Criccieth on a short holiday, and at Cardigan great friendliness, because M[egan] thinks danger [of Lloyd George getting married to Frances Stevenson] is past. But Sylvester says that F. S. is openly and aggressively claiming her "rights"'. (NLW, Dr Thomas Jones CH Papers A1/50).

25 *Caernarvon and Denbigh Herald*, 22 January 1943.

was only a short distance from Criccieth. There was much interest locally in the way Lloyd George, actively encouraged by Dame Margaret and by his brother William George, had built up a holding which initially had amounted to no more than thirty-seven acres of farmland by buying up the adjoining lands for several thousand pounds and creating an orchard of eight acres of land where, Lloyd George was convinced, untold riches would again emerge from the soil – Bron-y-de in miniature perhaps, and sure to impress the farmers of the locality. The rather primitive eighteenth-century house, once a parish rectory, had been extensively reconstructed and modernized during 1940, mainly by Sir Clough Williams Ellis, with a striking huge semi-circular bay window and a coved ceiling added to the library there, with quite spectacular views overlooking Cardigan Bay, the hills of Merioneth and the rolling countryside round about. It had become quite an imposing mansion house of Jacobean design, and the adjoining farm had been much improved too. Seven of Lloyd George's old school friends, who had once played with Lloyd George and his brother in the vicinity of Tŷ Newydd, still lived in the village in 1943, and many locals hoped that their hero might return there to live in due course (as was eventually to happen, of course, in September 1944).²⁶

The following day – 18 January 1943 – Sylvester was informed that it was the wish of the government of the day that some reference should be made in the House of Commons the next day to Lloyd George's recent birthday, particularly as he had for years been the Father of the House of Commons. Told of this by Frances Stevenson, Lloyd George had dismissively 'poohpoohed' the proposal, convinced that nothing would actually be said in the House.²⁷ Eventually, it was resolved that Anthony Eden, the Foreign Secretary, should salute 'the dominant statesman of his generation' on the occasion of his eightieth birthday, 'a historic and an intimately personal occasion'. Eden also hailed Lloyd George as 'a great House of Commons man [...] a champion in our midst' for more than half a century, one who had always 'given hard blows and taken them'. Beaming broadly, Lloyd George expressed his gratitude, rejoicing in the fact that 'I have for fifty-three years been a member of this honoured and this great Assembly.'²⁸ As Lloyd George had entered the chamber, 'loud applause' had greeted him, causing Clement Attlee, the Deputy Prime Minister, 'to come to a complete standstill' while reading out the answer to a parliamentary question. A. J. Sylvester confessed to feeling 'very disappointed' with Lloyd George's rather feeble response:

His reply was of a very perfunctory nature. He hummed and hawed and repeated himself so much that he might have been 180 instead of 80. I regretted that I had not offered him some whiskey beforehand. After Eden had spoken in such warm-hearted terms, the very least he could have done was to refer to him as 'my Rt. Hon. Friend', but he

26 *North Wales Chronicle*, 22 January 1943.

27 NLW, A. J. Sylvester Papers A55, diary entry for 18 January 1943.

28 *House of Commons Debates*, 5th series, Vol. 386 (19 January 1943), cc. 48-49.

did not even do that.

All in all, Sylvester considered it 'a poor reply', and soon discovered that 'there was a good deal of disappointment in the Lobby with LG's performance. Frances was not pleased either.' There was further bickering over the showing of the news films taken at Churt over the birthday weekend. Informed that these were to be shown in cinemas throughout the realm on the subsequent Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, an impatient Lloyd George had testily retorted, 'Yes, but I expected that someone from here would have seen them and reported to me.' That lunchtime, two of his staff had consequently made a special effort to view the news films – 'They both went in to him afterwards and told him what they had seen and that they had heard what he said about Russia: but he showed no interest.'²⁹

The same day, a private birthday luncheon, organized by Sir Percy Harris MP, was given to Lloyd George by the Parliamentary Liberal Party at Brown's Hotel, Dover Street, London, one of the least lavish London hotels. A rather modest luncheon comprised duckling from a Surrey farm followed by Scotch trifle, simple fare in keeping with the stringent demands of war-time. LG devotees were especially pleased that the old man had readily agreed to travel to London, a positive chore by this time for one who now displayed reluctance to leave his estate (and who by now depended on his politician children Gwilym and Megan and on A. J. Sylvester to provide him with Westminster news and political and personal gossip). With Sir Archibald Sinclair, the leader of the party (and Secretary of State for Air in the wartime coalition government) in the chair, most prominent Liberal politicians were in attendance, including Lord (Herbert) Samuel, the Marquess of Crewe, Major Gwilym Lloyd-George, his sister Miss Megan (the only woman to be present), Lord Davies of Llandinam, Wilfrid Roberts MP, Vernon Bartlett MP, Tom Horabin MP, E. Clement Davies MP, and D. O. Evans MP. In all, about thirty Liberal politicians attended, and it was recorded in the press that the intention all along had been to keep the affair small and intimate. Consequently, positively hundreds of applications to attend the function had been turned down.

It was left to Lord Crewe to propose a vote of thanks at the end of the proceedings. Now aged 85, Crewe had served with Lloyd George in the pre-war governments of Campbell-Bannerman and Asquith, and, half a century earlier than the 1940s, had even served as Lord Lieutenant of Ireland in Gladstone's last administration of 1892–94. Sinclair, in a spirited speech, asserted that he heartily 'rejoiced' that Lloyd George had been 'spared so long to inspire and infuriate but always to stimulate us'. LG had every reason to take a genuine pride when he viewed 'his monument around him in the lives of the people whose conditions he had so changed in the growth of social insurance'. In a remarkably lively reply (contrasting starkly with his lack-lustre words in the House of Commons earlier in

the day), Lloyd George confidently predicted 'a great future' for the ailing Liberal Party. Laughing gleefully, he went on, 'I will never accept that the Labour Party has replaced the Liberal Party, although the Labour Party appear to have taken most of the Liberal seats.'³⁰ On all sides, his words struck home and drew prolonged laughter and applause. A. J. Sylvester, the only person to be present at the luncheon who was not a Liberal MP or a Liberal peer, wrote in his diary:

LG spoke freer and better than I have heard him for a long time. When the carburetor of a motor car has an insufficiency of petrol the engine hisses, and that is what happens to LG. Generally now he hums and haws and splutters over some of his words. Today, however, he spoke after whiskey so the carburetors worked well! He was well pleased with his own performance because he said to me that he had made the speech of his life.³¹

The occasion was indeed all smiles, but there was no element of Liberal Party re-union about the affair. Conspicuously absent from the festivities were some of Lloyd George's political arch-enemies like Walter Runciman, Ernest Brown, and Lord (John) Simon, the former leader of the Liberal National group, now the Lord Chancellor in the wartime coalition government. Press speculation insisted that Lord Simon, LG's especial *bête noir*, had been told that there was 'no room' left for him at the birthday luncheon table. But was he present, wondered journalists, like the ghost of Banquo in Macbeth?³²

The family feuds inevitably persisted. On the evening following the luncheon on 19 January, Lady Olwen Carey-Evans telephoned Sylvester to say that she had experienced 'a terribly difficult time with Megan on Sunday night when they got back. She cried incessantly. "Megan could not get over the fact that she had been disloyal to Mummy. She said she would not go down [to Bron-y-de, Churt] ever again."' When Sylvester interjected that Megan 'was very friendly with her Father today', Lady Olwen replied, 'Yes, but Megan is not the same when Miss Stevenson is about. I do not know what we can do about it now. I suppose we shall have to put up with it. Megan has won hands down with the other thing, and we have to consider that.' Pressed by Sylvester to explain this cryptic reference, Lady Olwen continued, 'Father has told Megan again definitely that he won't marry her [Miss Stevenson].' Rather taken aback by what he knew full well to be wholly untrue, Sylvester asked her again, 'Are you sure he has told her that again and recently?' Lady Olwen still insisted, 'Yes. If I can do anything to help him now that he has promised not to do the big thing, I want to help him as much as I can. I am sorry for Megan because she is in a difficult position. I have got a husband and children, but she has nobody. She must, of course, make her own life, and stand on her own. Megan said she would never forgive Father for having

30 *The Times*, 15 and 20 January 1943; *Caernarvon and Denbigh Herald*, 22 January 1943.

31 NLW, A. J. Sylvester Papers A55, diary entry for 19 January 1943.

32 *Evening Standard*, 20 January 1943.

Miss Stevenson there.’³³

The following evening – 20 January 1943 – Sylvester and his wife Evelyn viewed a newsreel which contained interesting footage of Lloyd George filmed at Bron-y-de on his eightieth birthday:

It was good, until he opened his mouth; then it was disappointing. He said something like this: On my 80th birthday, I have (pause), it is this derelict land producing 15 to 20 times more food for the people as in previous years. As regards the war, I am delighted the Russians have been so successful in their great offensive.³⁴

In all, simply hundreds of congratulatory letters, telegrams and messages had come to hand. Even the former Tory leader, Lord Baldwin of Bewdley, who had retired from active politics just after the coronation of King George VI in June 1937, and who had always been one of Lloyd George’s foremost political enemies, felt obliged to congratulate his old adversary. Clearly touched, Lloyd George dictated a reply:

I received with great delight your kind and thoughtful message of congratulations on my eightieth birthday. For years we crossed swords on the floor of the House of Commons, and in the country, but now we are lookers-on in the conflict, and heaven knows what will be the end of it and the shape things will take afterwards.³⁵

Baldwin was perhaps fortunate to receive such a personal response. Lloyd George was anything but systematic and organized when dealing with his still massive postbag so that many of his correspondents never received any personal reply from him.³⁶ His office took weeks to respond to the greetings received on his eightieth birthday.

In his admirable tribute article in *The Observer* on the very day of Lloyd George’s eightieth birthday, Sunday, 17 January 1943, Dr Thomas Jones CH expressed sentiments most relevant to the occasion:

On October 23, 1922, he paid his last official visit as Prime Minister to the King and at four o’clock that afternoon ‘the man who won the war’ as Hitler once described him, walked out of 10 Downing-street

33 NLW, A. J. Sylvester Papers A55, diary entry for 19 January 1943.

34 Ibid., diary entry for 20 January 1943.

35 Parliamentary Archive, House of Lords, Lloyd George Papers G/1/15/1, Lloyd George to the Earl Baldwin of Bewdley, 23 January 1943 (copy). It should also be noted that on 1 November 1933, Baldwin, then Lord President of the Council in the so-called national government, had written to Lloyd George, ‘Let me congratulate you warmly on your apples. My wife was shown your Coxes at Harrods by Woodman Burbidge’. (Ibid., G/1/15/3, Baldwin to Lloyd George, 1 November 1933).

36 See A. J. Sylvester, *The Real Lloyd George* (London, 1947), 43.

alone, with his coat collar turned up, swinging a single golf club, a parting gift from a janitor, happy as a sand boy. Nobody in England that day imagined that the Prime Minister who for years had filled the world with his name and fame would never come back. His life had been full of surprises and this was the greatest. In that same week the Fascists marched on Rome and the King of Italy made way for Mussolini.

AFTER THE STORM

At home old party rancours revived. The Liberal Party dissolved into fragments; the Labour Party lost its first fine careless rapture; the Conservatives relapsed into Safety First. The mood of the country had changed. The hour for national tranquillity had struck and, with occasional alarms like the General Strike, it lasted nearly twenty years, almost long enough to prove that it was a synonym for treason. Mr. Lloyd George was far from being a retired or even a reticent volcano; from time to time he burst forth with incendiary pamphlets and speeches on planning, the land, the coal industry, unemployment. To-day these heretical fireworks look like becoming the orthodox street lamps of the New Britain. But in the thirties there were still many old scores against him. He had often lashed his opponents with merciless, if picturesque, invective, and he got back what he gave. The fires of these ancient controversies are silent in dust and ashes. To-day, on his eightieth birthday, as he watches the swaying fortunes of another World War from his home on the Surrey hills, we think of him as he stood on the bridge five and twenty years ago, the pilot who weathered the storm, as Canning said of Pitt. No one who watched him then, day by day, disciplined, dauntless, and determined on victory, will let 'gratitude sleep' or lightly suffer any criticism of him from any quarter whatsoever.³⁷

The eightieth birthday celebrations were the first major Lloyd George family event to have taken place since the death of Dame Margaret two years earlier. Most of the family gathered at Bron-y-de for the occasion, although up until the very last moment there was still some doubt about who might actually attend. There was certainly a big question mark over the intentions of the two daughters, Lady Olwen and more especially Megan. In a sense, both had been tricked into believing that Lloyd George's marriage plans had been forgotten. In reality, Frances Stevenson had simply agreed to postpone the wedding, not to cancel it. By Easter, plans were again very much afoot for a wedding later in the year. In October 1943, at the age of eighty, Lloyd George finally married Frances Stevenson.