

Sir Geoffrey Butler and The Tory Tradition

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The thoughtful, pragmatic Conservatism of R.A. Butler is well known, as is the important role he played in returning the Tories to government within six years of the Labour landslide of 1945 – and as a leading member of the government before and after. But the most important political and intellectual influence on the young Rab – his uncle, Sir Geoffrey Butler – has received little attention, not least because of his early death at the age of forty-two. During his short life Sir Geoffrey made a powerful impression not only on his nephew but on a whole generation of talented young men, and his lessons on Tory philosophy – particularly a series of lectures he delivered exactly one hundred years ago – are still relevant today.

George Geoffrey Gilbert Butler was born on 15 August 1887, the eighth of nine sons. The Butlers were not a wealthy family, but were part of that ‘other’ aristocracy whose dominance over the mid-twentieth century Noel Annan described: one of ‘the intellectual families that intermarried in the nineteenth century and were in full flower between the wars’.¹ The Butlers maintained a consecutive tradition as Cambridge dons from 1794 until the end of Rab’s time as Master of Trinity in 1978. ‘No other family can claim such a galaxy of academic stars,’ noted *The Times* at the end of that impressive run, under the headline: ‘Cambridge without a Butler: like a master without a servant’.²



Sir Geoffrey Butler was an ‘ubiquitous and lively’ character who made a lasting impression on more than one generation of Conservatives.

Geoffrey happily followed in the family line, declaring Cambridge ‘my life’s work and passion’.³ After his schooling at Clifton (where he was later a governor), he went up to Trinity in 1906, where ‘his original personality and singular capacity for squeezing an extravagant infectious humour out of the most unpromising situation’ made him a popular figure.⁴ He had a glittering undergraduate career, winning a double first in history and the Chancellor’s Medal for English verse while also finding time to edit

The Cambridge Review and be elected President of the Union. Trinity (whose Master was Geoffrey’s uncle H.M. Butler) offered him a fellowship, but it was a smaller college going through a period of transformation – Corpus Christi – which attracted him.

Col. Robert Townley Caldwell was the first layman to become Master of Corpus, at a time when the fortunes of the fourteenth-century college were ‘at a low ebb’. He set about ‘importing new blood’: from King’s he recruited William Spens to become director of studies in natural sciences, and E.G. Selwyn, a future Dean of Winchester; from Trinity he lured not only Butler but another Conservative historian who would enter parliament, Kenneth Pickthorn.⁵ History was still a young subject at the university, and Corpus did not have any history fellows.⁶ ‘More than most men of his generation, [Caldwell] appreciated the changed position of the History School’.⁷ Butler’s election as a fellow in 1910 ‘led to the development of historical studies as one of the main branches of learning at Corpus, to which the College has ever since attached great importance’.⁸

The other transformation Caldwell wrought was to convert Corpus from a Whig to a Tory College. Maurice Cowling (who knew about these things, years later, at Peterhouse) declared: ‘The most important features of inter-war Corpus were that it was a small college and that it was a Conservative-Anglican plot’.⁹

During his short life Sir Geoffrey made a powerful impression not only on his nephew but on a whole generation of talented young men.

Caldwell himself was an active Tory: he was 'for some time' chairman of the Unionist party in Cambridge and declined an invitation to become its parliamentary candidate for the borough in 1905.¹⁰

'The Tory Tradition'

This climate undoubtedly suited the young history fellow. Although his main concern was diplomatic history, Butler was a committed and reflective Conservative. In 1914, he delivered a series of lectures at the University of Pennsylvania on 'The Tory Tradition'. Revolving around four great Tory heroes – Bolingbroke, Burke, Disraeli, and Salisbury – these biographical portraits sought to explain not so much their careers but the philosophy which impelled them. Butler's motive, he explained when the lectures were published in book form, had been to explain the Tory Party to an American audience which mistook it as 'the party of privilege, of rapacious mediævalism, of opposition to enlightened reform'. This struck Butler as odd, seeing as America was 'a country which in all the great things of life is essentially conservative'.¹¹ But Butler was also speaking to a British audience. At home, politics had been dominated by protracted rows over the House of Lords and Irish Home Rule. These Tory preoccupations, feared Butler, had obscured the party's concerns for the condition of the people. In his preface to the book, he regretted that recent events had 'concentrated the attention of the man in the street upon the negative rather than the constructive side of Toryism'. He sounded a clear warning in his key passage:

Resistance to predatory attacks upon property, and the like, will always form important items in the Tory programme. That Tory

doctrine loses all that is ennobling in its appeal, if it confines itself to these; if it fails, that is, to get down to the principles which lie beneath all such resistance. The great Tory leaders of the past challenge us to something more, and by their challenge show us the secret of their own irresistible example. The captains of Toryism in the past can be made the instructors of Toryism in the present: and the Tory tradition is the Tory hope.¹²

These last seven words were ones which Rab Butler was wont to quote throughout his political career; indeed, Chris Patten acknowledges that it is 'a sentence most Tory politicians have plagiarised in their time'.¹³ Through his lectures, Geoffrey Butler drew out those central tenets of

Politics without ideals loathsome[;] with wrong ideals pathetic, says G.G.B.¹⁴

This Betty was Elizabeth Levering Jones, the daughter of a 'widely known' Philadelphia lawyer who was one of the trustees of the University of Pennsylvania.¹⁵ Butler's letters to her are all that remain of his papers at Corpus Christi, and reveal the anxieties of the young author. '[T]he book is coming out next week,' he wrote to her in October 1914: 'I don't know how it will do'.¹⁶ By Christmas, it was 'going pretty well I believe ... But of course no books are really selling now'.¹⁷ It was certainly not the best time to bring out a book on political philosophy. Butler's brother Ralph – also a Fellow of Corpus – was now serving on the Western Front. Nevertheless,



Three Cambridge undergraduates: R.A. Butler, A.P. Marshall and Gerald Sparrow at the White House on the Cambridge Union debating tour of the USA, October 1924.

that Tory tradition: the belief in an organic state, in duty rather than simple 'rights', and in the importance of confronting the world as it is, not as we wish it to be. He summed up his message more pithily in a letter to his *fiancée* Betty a year after the book was published:

he had 'been sending it to newspaper editors of my acquaintance, and hope to get a good notice in the *Spectator* and *Daily Mail*. But it is a bad time to bring a book out'.¹⁸ The *Spectator* did review it, although its lukewarm verdict may not have been worth the effort. Its reviewer

questioned Butler's view of Bolingbroke 'as the real founder of modern Toryism', thought that he 'should have given some explanation of [Burke's] explanation of his attitude towards the Crown', and was nonplussed by his lecture on Disraeli: 'though Mr. Butler is full of enthusiasm, he does not impart any very large share of it to his readers.'¹⁹ The unfortunate timing of the book also coloured its reception by *The Political Quarterly*. 'What have we to do with Tories or Radicals any more?' it asked, hoping that the country would not 'go on playing our ridiculous party games, unmindful of the lessons the war is teaching, and will yet teach us'. But it was slightly more generous, conceding that 'Mr. Butler is, however, a thoughtful writer' and that the book 'would not have been without its justification if it had appeared at another period in the history of the world'.²⁰ Other reviewers were less querulous: the *Political Science Quarterly* found it 'an exceedingly readable as well as permanently valuable addition to the literature of English party history',²¹ while the *Times Literary Supplement* praised its 'admirable judgment and good temper ... Mr. Butler's slim volume will be found to be full of solid reflection and sound learning.'²²

Master of propaganda

Geoffrey Butler was unable to join his brother in active service, debarred by partial lameness and poor physical health. (His nephew Rab suffered a similar handicap: a childhood riding accident prevented him from serving in the Second World War – an omission which compounded his support for appeasement and made him unsuitable to lead his party in the eyes of many of Tory MPs.) He felt the impotence keenly. 'Oh, my dear, it will be rather horrid for you years hence to feel that I have done nothing in the war,' he wrote to Betty in January 1915: 'when all the other wives will be proud of their husbands going or serving.'²³ But the young don, with his grounding in diplomatic history, was able to play his part in other ways. 'He regarded a European war in the near future as highly probable,' recorded his friend and colleague at Corpus, William Spens, and 'did his best to ensure that the undergraduates of his college should have some idea of what such a war would



Sir Gilbert Parker, Bt., the novelist and Conservative MP in charge of propaganda for the United States.

mean.'²⁴ Both Spens and Butler were given jobs at the Foreign Office: Spens as secretary of the foreign trade department, administering the Black List of goods; Butler working in the news department. 'This will be good for Corpus,' Butler noted.²⁵ Butler helped to organize propaganda directed at the United States, overseen by Sir Gilbert Parker, Bt., the Conservative MP for Gravesend (1900–18). Sir Gilbert was ideally suited for the role: born in Canada, he was widely travelled, had married a New York heiress, and had been associate editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald* before turning to romantic fiction, writing best-selling books on both sides of the Atlantic. Employing his fame – and forceful character – he arranged for letters and articles sympathetic to the British cause to appear in American newspapers, penned by prominent British writers such as Kipling, H.G. Wells, and Bernard Shaw. He and Butler also distributed their literature to American libraries, periodicals, and colleges, building relationships with academics, scientists, doctors, and politicians – a method emulated by subsequent propagandists. Their mailing list soon encompassed a quarter of a million influential American citizens and organizations, whom they approached with no mention of the

British Government. It was, Butler told Betty, 'a very difficult job,' but one he seemed to enjoy:

We have taken up the habit of interviews which you may have noticed in the US papers – Sir E[dward] Grey, Lord Robert [Cecil], Lord Newton, Lord Hardinge ... These form a good means of putting our side before the public. Quite between ourselves my dear not a few are from the pen of one you know.'²⁶

It was evidently also a job at which Butler excelled – for it led in 1917 to his appointment as a member of the Balfour Mission to the USA. The purpose of the mission, headed by the Foreign Secretary and former Prime Minister, was to arrange for American co-operation with the Allies now the US had entered the war. Butler acted as the mission's press adviser and spokesman and was 'largely responsible' for the 'good reception' it received, winning plaudits from the Washington Press Club for his services.²⁷ When the rest of the mission returned to Britain, Butler stayed behind to run an organization – the British Pictorial Service – supplying the American press with information about the war and the role the British forces were playing in it. This developed into the British Bureau of Information, of which Butler became director (1917–19). His headquarters on Fifth Avenue 'became the centre of a very active propaganda to beguile Americans into the British camp'.²⁸ It involved extensive travel around the United States, and brought Butler into contact with powerful editors and proprietors, including Lord Beaverbrook and Lord Northcliffe, who had succeeded Balfour as head of the British War Mission. John Grier Hibben, the President of Princeton, who met Butler during this period, thought 'the public service which he rendered to his country and to the cause of the Allies could not be too highly valued or overestimated.'²⁹ He received the CBE for it in 1918, and was knighted the following year.

The Corpus Evangel

Sir Geoffrey returned to Cambridge, and to Corpus, in 1919. Col. Caldwell had been

killed in a motor accident in Scotland just after the outbreak of war, eight years into his Mastership. His successor, Edmund Pearce, was another 'strong Conservative' who served as Mayor of Cambridge in 1917 and chairman of the county council in 1927 – resigning at the end of that year to become bishop of the new see of Derby.³⁰ Butler's great friend Spens was elected his successor – completing the pair's control over the college. From their earliest days there, they had held high ambitions for the college. Butler tried to explain it in a letter to Betty at Christmas 1914: 'we aren't much interested in great individuals at Corpus, but rather in making a great institution to pursue a great idea – that idea which is the real truth as this generation ought to see it'.³¹ He and Spens methodically set about building up connections: 'Bill Spens and I had a long discussion as to the amount and nature of the entertaining that would fall upon them and us this next few years,' Butler told Betty at the start of 1915. They envisaged hosting fortnightly dinners in Cambridge:

*Then Bill will try to get elected at the Carlton which is the great political Conservative club in London: and I shall no doubt gradually get into touch with more and more people. Then one can ask interesting people outside London down to stay a week-end or to talk to my history lambs in College or something. All this spreads the knowledge of the Corpus Evangel among the people that matter.*³²

By the eve of the Carlton Club meeting which brought about the end of the Lloyd George coalition in October 1922, Butler was sufficiently plugged in to send Betty his analysis of the political situation – and to hope to profit from it:

The political muddle is complete but I am not worrying. Corpus is linked to a very active bunch of men – Horne, Birkenhead, Balfour etc. They may not be going to pull it off for the moment, but they are a living force whatever happens, in power or out; I only am interested in living forces. If Lloyd Georgianism wins, if the sensible

*wing of Conservatism means to fight, I am the natural local representative. It might come to their running me as candidate even – tho', as we know, we would rather wait a bit for that.*³³

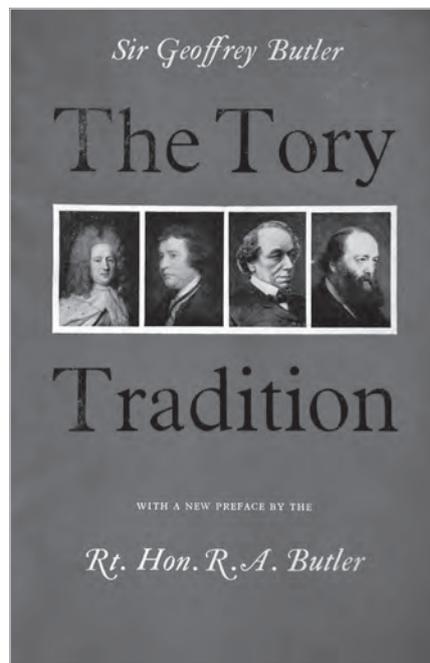
In the event, it was not a long wait. There were at that time twelve university seats in Parliament. From 1603 until the abolition of university representation in 1948, Cambridge graduates returned two 'Burgesses' as Members of Parliament. The 'normal allegiance' of the seat was Conservative, but this trend was broken in 1922 – by a Butler. Sir Geoffrey's cousin James Butler was another historian and a Fellow of Trinity. He had been approached by Sidney Webb in 1918 to be the Labour candidate for the university seat, but decided against.³⁴ But at the following election in 1922 – 'based on the weakness of the Conservative candidate'³⁵ – he was elected as an 'Independent', much to the surprise of G.M. Trevelyan, who 'took for granted that no person with an ounce of liberal views in him could ever be elected for Cambridge Univ.'³⁶ It seemed fitting that the candidate to regain the seat the following year should also be a Butler. James stood this time as an 'Independent Liberal', outpolling Geoffrey on the first

count, but falling behind on second preferences (from 1918 the university seats having been elected by the single transferable vote system).

The choice of Sir Geoffrey as a Conservative candidate was bolstered by his stewardship of the Cambridge University Conservative Association (CUCA). A number of Conservative caucuses had existed within the university to organize for elections, but it was Butler who established the first body for undergraduates. They elected him their president in 1920,³⁷ and he 'threw immense energy into his work' for CUCA, making it 'a considerable political force in Cambridge'.³⁸ One young member says that Sir Geoffrey 'saw himself as recruiting a part of the Conservative elite for the next generation'.³⁹ His nephew Rab – who naturally became chairman of the association – recalled the role he played:

*Geoffrey's subtle and interesting mind left a considerable impact on the young men of his generation, and he did much to bridge the gulf between leading Parliamentarians in London and 'the young idea' in Cambridge. Everyone seemed to wish to come to his rooms at Corpus Christi – and how greatly stimulated we undergraduates were by the lavish entertainment we received and the celebrated people we met.*⁴⁰

It was a role which Rab himself would reprise at the end of his career: as Master of Trinity, he would invite CUCA members to parties in the Master's Lodge and 'hold them in thrall with talk of his political life' and show them the political cartoons he hung on its panelled walls.⁴¹ But in the 1920s he was one of many undergraduates who benefited from Sir Geoffrey connections to meet the succession of leading Conservatives he enticed up to Cambridge. Duff Cooper, Walter Elliot, and John Buchan all came to visit – as did the Prime Minister (Stanley Baldwin) and the Chancellor of the Exchequer (Winston Churchill). Perhaps the most memorable guest, however, was Lord Curzon, who came to speak in March 1924. A dinner was laid on in his honour. The great man was



The front cover of the Conservative Political Centre's 1957 reprint of Sir Geoffrey's lectures.

dressing for it at Christ's College when he was suddenly taken ill: 'A surgeon was sent for, an operation decided upon and Lady Curzon arrived to take him away.' A fortnight later he was dead.⁴²

'The godfather of all our careers'

As a fluent speaker – hampered only by his 'high-pitched voice'⁴³ – Sir Geoffrey contributed to the House of Commons more often than was usual for university representatives. But it was outside the Chamber that his skills were best employed: 'He exercised a private rather than a public influence, and was at his best in a small circle rather than on a public platform.'⁴⁴ Despite his lifelong financial worries, he was a devoted clubman – his letters to Betty came from the Carlton, the Junior Carlton, the United University Club, and St. Stephen's ('my latest club').⁴⁵ He quickly made a name for himself on the London scene: in March 1926 he found himself next to the editor of *The Sunday Times* at a dinner at the Carlton, who 'treated me with profound, almost suspicious deference' and 'appeared to know my views – "You are a Liberal Conservative as is well known".'⁴⁶

Even as such, Butler had mixed feelings towards Baldwin, the leader throughout his time in Parliament. 'Yes it was right to stick to Baldwin,' he told Betty after the government was defeated in a confidence vote at the start of 1924, 'but I wish we had more men to stretch our imaginations'.⁴⁷ When rumours abounded on the House of Commons Terrace that Churchill was planning to 'turn him out and take his place', Butler could 'hardly believe it' and was not sure he wanted to: 'You know I don't believe in Baldwin but still less do I believe in Churchill'.⁴⁸ By 1927 he was coolly appreciative, telling Rab:

*Our strong card in the Country is Baldwin with any manner of doubt. He isn't exciting nor does he respond to every one of your and my thrills but hundreds of thousands who would have voted Liberal vote for his policy. Whether one likes it or not it is a cold hard electoral fact.*⁴⁹

He 'learned to respect Neville Chamberlain greatly – a really fine fellow'



A CUCA recruitment poster from 1924 bearing a message of support from Baldwin. Prospective members are directed to the future Ministers Rab Butler and Geoffrey Lloyd.

– and built strong relationships with other senior Tories.⁵⁰ His closest was with the Secretary of State for the Air, Sir Samuel Hoare, who – 'with his usual flair for picking the right man' – made Sir Geoffrey his Parliamentary Private Secretary.⁵¹ Hoare's biographer says that 'Butler was in many ways more an additional junior minister for Hoare than merely the hewer of wood and drawer of water of PPS tradition'. His main contribution to policy was the creation of university air squadrons – starting, naturally, at Cambridge in October 1925. But 'not less important was the wide range of contacts he made for his minister. Through Butler, Hoare met Cambridge scientists and others whose work was highly relevant to the concerns of the Air Ministry'.⁵² Sir Samuel himself was full of praise: 'I never had a better friend than Geoffrey, nor an adviser who gave me wiser guidance'.⁵³

Such was the mark Butler made, even in this junior role, that he was almost appointed Chairman of the Party. In April 1926 he wrote to tell Betty the 'wild rumour' that he was 'going to be asked to succeed Lord Linlithgow at the Central Office ... I don't know even if it were true and I were offered it whether I would consent. I suspect that I shan't be offered it'.⁵⁴ He very nearly was. Neville Chamberlain visited Baldwin at Chequers in October 1926 to discuss the party organization, reporting back to his sister in confidence that 'the present favourite for the Chairmanship is Sir Geoffrey Butler MP for Cambridge University. I don't suppose you know much of him but he is a Don with a gift for enthusing young men & is said to have done wonderful work among the undergrads'.⁵⁵ It would, says David Dilks, 'have been a most distinguished appointment; not yet

40, Butler had made a fine reputation as a public servant and inspiring tutor'.⁵⁶ But was not to be: Chamberlain had reservations about the creation of a new *chef de cabinet* role at Number 10, and persuaded Baldwin against it; the man who had been earmarked for that – J.C.C. Davidson – became Party Chairman instead.

But even without this elevation, Sir Geoffrey was able to use his growing influence in Government to advance the careers of his Cambridge *protégés*. Despite being increasingly in Westminster, he maintained a close interest in student politics: at the end of a long letter to Betty about parliamentary affairs in 1924, he switched to news of undergraduate politics: 'You will have seen that Geoffrey Lloyd was elected Secretary of the Union. I'm so glad'.⁵⁷ Lloyd was a good friend of Rab's and would also forge a career in politics. This had not been apparent when he first came up to Trinity from Harrow, however. Until Sir Geoffrey enlisted him in CUCA, the future Tory Minister was 'interested in term time only in hunting, drinking and punting on the Cam, preferably naked in inconspicuous stretches; and during vacations interested chiefly in the pleasures of Parisian life'.⁵⁸ By 1924, however, he was set on a parliamentary career. He fought his first seat in that year's general election – just four months after graduating. Sir Geoffrey did all he could to help him, getting Hoare 'to speak very warmly to Neville Chamberlain about Geoffrey Lloyd for the vacant seat in Birmingham' two years later.⁵⁹ This was Ladywood, the seat Chamberlain was vacating in favour of his native Edgbaston, having seen off a strong challenge from Labour's Sir Oswald Mosley at the preceding election. 'I don't see why GL should not pull it off,' Sir Geoffrey told Rab.⁶⁰ He almost did, losing by just 11 votes. Once again, Sir Geoffrey came to his assistance – getting him a job as private secretary to Sir Samuel Hoare until the next election, when Lloyd won the seat by 14,000 votes.

Sir Geoffrey took pride in other CUCA alumni who went into national politics: 'Lampard Vachell has been adopted for Lincoln where he has a pretty good chance,' he wrote to Rab in 1927: 'Our third actual candidate of recent vintages'.⁶¹ But Sir Geoffrey's patronage was not confined to politics. Patrick Devlin, later a high

court judge and law lord, remembers him as 'a man of great kindness and geniality', gratefully recording: 'Sir Geoffrey was the godfather of all our careers'.⁶² As there were no law fellows at Devlin's college (Christ's), Sir Geoffrey arranged for him to be supervised by Arthur Goodhart, a talented American lawyer at Corpus – which set the future jurist 'on the right road'. After Cambridge, when he was worried that he could not afford to take the Bar examinations, the pair arranged a job for him at the *Law Quarterly Review*, which Goodhart edited.⁶³

One of Butler's students at Corpus was Basil Liddell Hart, the distinguished military historian. His undergraduate career did not augur well: he scored 'a dismal Third' at the end of his first year in June 1914, and received a 'brief admonition' from Butler.⁶⁴ This poor start – and the outbreak of war, during which he served on the Western Front – meant that Liddell Hart never took his degree; when Corpus made him an honorary Fellow in 1965, he was obliged to attend in his undergraduate gown.⁶⁵ But Butler saw the potential in his erstwhile student. When Liddell Hart was invalided out of the Army in 1916 and wrote a short book on the Somme offensive, Butler sent it on to a number of his contacts, including John Buchan, who was then working for General Haig.⁶⁶ Years later, when Sir Geoffrey was working for Sir Samuel Hoare, he 'took an early opportunity' to give his new boss a copy of Liddell Hart's latest work, and arranged for the two to meet. This led to a series of discussions between the minister and the strategist 'not only about RAF affairs, but also on wider problems of defence and disarmament'.⁶⁷ When Hoare's ally Chamberlain became prime minister in May 1937, 'Liddell Hart now became the decisive intellectual influence on British grand strategy'.⁶⁸ But Sir Geoffrey was not around to see it; his death was 'a great blow' Liddell Hart, 'as I have never had a better friend, in every sense of the word'.⁶⁹

Sir Geoffrey's greatest *protégé*, of course, was his nephew Rab. He was best man at Rab's wedding to Sydney Courtauld (a fellow CUCA member from Newnham), and helped to secure a Fellowship for him at Corpus – although Rab, with his double first, was undoubtedly qualified for it. When Sir Geoffrey left Corpus in 1925 because of his growing duties at

the Air Ministry, 'another Butler, in the form of his youthful nephew, was brought into the vacant chair at the high table'.⁷⁰ And he was determined that Rab should follow him to Westminster too. While Sydney and Rab were on honeymoon, Sir Geoffrey wrote to them excitedly to say that William Foot Mitchell, the MP for Saffron Walden had taken him aside

and, after histing and swearing me to secrecy a good deal, told me he was bound to give up pretty soon and thought it had best be soon rather than late, if his successor was to get a chance of becoming known to the constituency.

Rab's name had been mentioned to him, and Sir Geoffrey wasted no time in extolling his virtues:

I do hope it will come off. I can't tell you what ill-luck I have wished that dear old man in my prayers; but I was deadly afraid that I had overdone and he would die (when I should be sorry for he is a very nice old man) or that I should underdo it and he would only get gout or German measles or a tickling in the throat. Now my black prayers have seemed to get pretty near the mark ...⁷¹

Rab was duly selected as the Conservative candidate for Saffron Walden – entering the Commons at the age of twenty-six in 1929 and holding the seat until he resigned, as Father of the House, in 1965. 'When I look back on the good fortune that attended my youth,' he wrote many years later, 'I must really count this one of the luckiest developments of my career'.⁷² But his uncle did not want Rab to have to rely on good luck. During the time between his adoption and the election, Sir Geoffrey got him a job working alongside Geoffrey Lloyd for Sir Samuel Hoare. This 'timely help' gave Rab a useful *entrée*:

Now he could slip in and out of Westminster at will. He saw all the figures of the period performing. He watched as the Prime Minister answered questions at three o'clock. He heard the last Baldwin

Budget. He lunched and often dined in the House listening to the best informed political talk of the day. All this before he had won an election.⁷³

Alas, the uncle and nephew would never sit alongside each other on the green benches: Sir Geoffrey died on 2 May 1929 – just twenty-eight days before the election which brought Rab into Parliament. Permanently lame, and of delicate health, Sir Geoffrey's letters speak of almost constant ailments. He did not allow these to hold him back, but his friends saw the strain he bore. Bill Spens had no doubt that 'his health had been affected by overwork' – particularly following a long trip Sir Geoffrey made to Ceylon from November 1927 to February 1928 as part of the Donoughmore Commission charged with writing a new constitution for the country.⁷⁴ By April 1929 it was clear that the cancer from which he was suffering was terminal. Letters flooded in from friends and well-wishers, including a tender letter from the Prime Minister. 'My dear Geoffrey', he wrote:

I am grieved to learn of your illness and I send you from my heart a message of warm affection and true sympathy. // No one has done more than you have to teach the true faith as you and I see it to those entering their life's work, and your work will bear fruit in the next generation and after

that. // There will be many who will look back over the years and see in you and your friendship the source and impulse of all that they have endeavoured to accomplish. // You were certainly an inspiration to me when I first visited you at Cambridge, now many years ago, and I bless you and am thankful for it. // Ever yours, Stanley Baldwin.⁷⁵

Baldwin's tender valediction to Sir Geoffrey would be followed a fortnight later by a letter of condolence to his widow. It was joined by countless more from his former pupils and Parliamentary colleagues, the Vice-Chancellor and Masters of many Cambridge colleges, the President of Princeton, and the Governor of Ceylon. Sir Samuel Hoare wrote immediately from the Air Ministry: 'To me it means the loss of my greatest friend in politics, and of one for whom I had the greatest admiration and affection. I can honestly say that political life will never again be the same to me'.⁷⁶ But Sir Samuel had been asked one final favour from his 'greatest friend' – to take his nephew as his PPS in his place. Sir Samuel recalls that Geoffrey's

last words to me when I visited him on his death-bed were: 'Look after my nephew Rab, and help him in his newly-started political career.' This was the history of my taking the future Chancellor of the Exchequer as my Parliamentary

Private Secretary. Of all the good advice his uncle gave me, none was better than that contained in his dying wish.⁷⁷

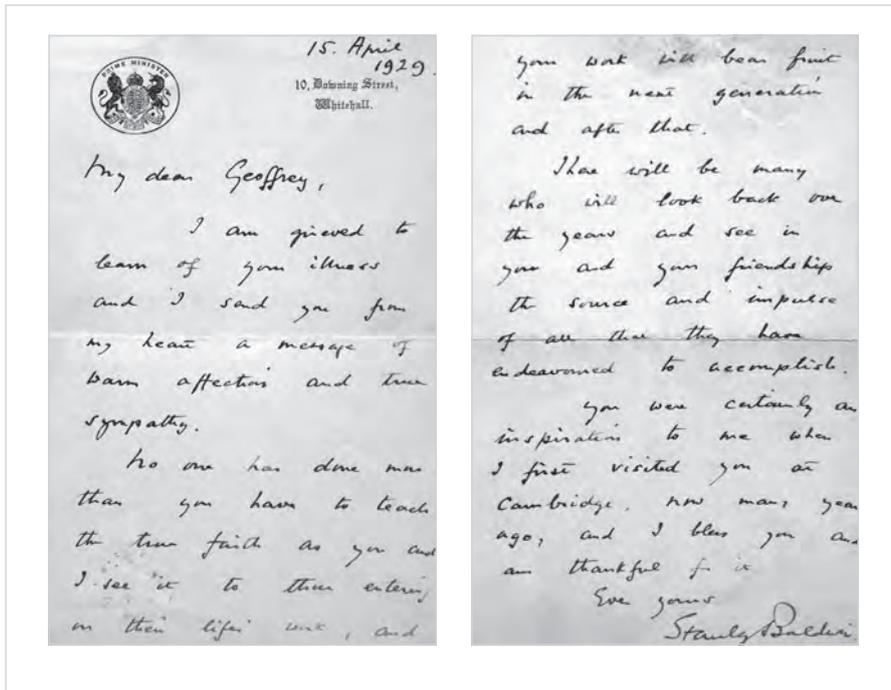
Even more important than the practical help Sir Geoffrey was able to extend to his nephew, however, was the intellectual influence he had on him. As one of Rab's biographers – and Cambridge friends – points out, 'Sir Geoffrey Butler occupied a unique position not only in Cambridge but in the wider life of the Tory Party. He was the Conservative scholar and thinker then very much in vogue'.⁷⁸ Another contemporary describes him as 'the guardian of the essence of Conservatism in a difficult period for the party'.⁷⁹ Rab himself was only too happy to acknowledge that his 'own attitude to politics' was 'strongly influenced by my uncle Geoffrey Butler's essays on *The Tory Tradition*.' Indeed, he went out of his way throughout his political life to give the essays the attention they had failed to attract in 1914. He mentioned his uncle in the opening pages of his memoirs, written in 1971, and was convinced that his essays were 'still relevant'.⁸⁰ He highlighted them again six years later when he published a history of the Conservative Party by leading historians. Just as his uncle had used the example of four leading Tory figures to adumbrate the essential tenets of Conservatism for a new generation, the nephew wanted these historical studies not only to

*indicate the themes and achievements of the greatest and longest surviving party in the State, [but] also serve as a guideline for the future activities, prospects and philosophy of Conservatism. Where there has been inspiration this can be carried forward; where there have been mistakes these can be avoided. As Sir Geoffrey Butler, the Senior Burgess for Cambridge University, wrote in his book *The Tory Tradition*, "the Tory tradition is the Tory hope".⁸¹*

The devoted nephew, writing on the eve of the Thatcherite revolution, made no apology for quoting at length from his uncle's book, written more than sixty years earlier, 'because it is I think



Corpus Christi College, Cambridge – to which Sir Geoffrey attracted leading Conservatives and keen young students to follow in their footsteps.



Stanley Baldwin's touching letter to his old friend on his deathbed.

very apt to the circumstances of today when we are hoping so keenly for a Conservative revival'.⁸² It had certainly been an inspiration – and a useful tool – for him during his great work to ensure a swift and effective Conservative revival after the Labour landslide of 1945. As chairman of the Conservative Research Department (CRD), and founder of the Conservative Political Centre (CPC), Rab Butler orchestrated the revivification of the Conservative Party, overhauling its policy programme and restoring its faith in its political creed. In his own words, 'We were shaken out of our lethargy and impelled to re-think our philosophy and re-form our ranks with a thoroughness unmatched for a century'.⁸³

The CPC, which Rab established as a 'thinking machine' for the Conservative Party, organized conferences, lectures, and summer schools, and published pamphlets on all aspects of policy. One of its publications, in 1957, was a reprint of *The Tory Tradition*. Rab explained:

We do not republish it simply to reverence a man or to revive a memory, but rather to recall a message. Geoffrey Butler's message is summed up in his own words, 'The Tory tradition is the Tory hope'.⁸⁴

In his memoirs, Rab expanded on the way he had sought to identify the legacy of his uncle's 'captains of Toryism' for a party in intellectual torment after 1945:

What they had left us, I insisted, was not a collection of causes for which we were obliged to die in a last ditch, nor a set of premises by whose consistent application we might infallibly regulate our conduct, but a mature tradition of political thought and behaviour which is neither fixed nor finished. This tradition at its best is responsive to the demands of each new age, empirical as to method, resourceful in expressing itself in popular idiom, though deeply conscious that the 'councils to which Time is not called, Time will not ratify'.⁸⁵

This was a tradition in which Rab Butler sought to conduct his whole political career, not just his work immediately after 1945. His uncle, in the words of William Spens, 'was, and remained, a convinced conservative, but was intolerant of any conception of conservatism which was not concerned to secure reforms'.⁸⁶ So too was his nephew. Sometimes the reforms he proposed – for instance, as Chancellor

of the Exchequer 1951–55 – were heartedly approved by the whole party. But there were other times, Rab found, 'when I was obliged to stand out as a champion of progress against substantial sections both in parliament and in the country'. His long career offers many examples: the Government of India Bill, which so enraged Churchill in the 1930s, and his later support for decolonization as Foreign Secretary; his Education Act of 1944 and the Industrial Charter of 1947 – regarded by some as 'pink socialism'; or his time at the Home Office where he 'incurred opprobrium for eschewing the use of birch and cat'.⁸⁷ But in pursuing his reforms, Rab was careful never to push politics beyond the limits of the possible, or to be unfaithful to the traditions of his party.

In a lecture to the CPC in 1956, Rab allowed himself a moment of satisfaction for what he and his party had accomplished:

As I see it, our achievements between 1945 and 1951 was that we showed that we were true to our Tory tradition of social progress. We gained the people's confidence because we were ready to move ahead with the times.⁸⁸

That, he said, was the key lesson for the Conservative Party – for: 'Unless our movement is deep-set in a living and spiritual philosophy it will not have the inspiration necessary to prevail'.⁸⁹ The inspiration which allowed him to prevail throughout a political career that spanned half the twentieth century – and the philosophy to which he remained true from his undergraduate days at Trinity to his time as its septuagenarian Master – were both the gifts of his wise and generous uncle. A century after his four, short lectures to the University of Pennsylvania, Sir Geoffrey Butler's influence on twentieth-century Conservatism deserves to be recognized.

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- 1 Noel Annan (Lord Annan), *Our Age: Portrait of a Generation* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1990), p. 7.
- 2 *The Times*, 24 July 1978. Actually, the dynasty continued, albeit without the Butler surname: both the daughter and grandson of Geoffrey's sister Isabel were still Fellows at Cambridge.
- 3 Geoffrey Butler to Elizabeth Levering Jones (hereafter 'GB to Betty'), August 1914, Sir Geoffrey Butler MSS, Corpus Christi College, Cambridge.
- 4 Quoted in Patrick Bury, *The College of Corpus Christi and of the Blessed Virgin Mary: A History from 1822 to 1952* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1952), p. 241.
- 5 Bury, *op. cit.*, p. 121.
- 6 Reba N. Soffer, *Discipline and Power: The University, History, and the Making of an English Elite, 1870–1930* (Stanford University Press, 1994), p. 133.
- 7 *The Corpus Association Letter*, no. 2, February 1915.
- 8 Bury, *op. cit.*, p. 122.
- 9 Maurice Cowling, *Religion and Public Doctrine in Modern England, vol. I* (Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 73–4. There is less evidence for another characteristic of the college described by Edward Upward: he wrote to his Repton friend Christopher Isherwood, who would follow him to Corpus the following year, that the college was 'a hot-bed of homo-sexualism' (Peter Parker, *Isherwood: A Life* (London: Picador, 2004), p. 91).
- 10 Bury, *op. cit.*, p. 135.
- 11 Geoffrey Butler, *The Tory Tradition* (rev. edn., London: Conservative Political Centre, 1957), pp. 11–12.
- 12 *ibid.*, p. 12.
- 13 Chris Patten (Lord Patten of Barnes), 'R.A. Butler – What We Missed' in Mollie Butler (ed.), *A Rabanthology* (York: Wilton 65, 1995), p. 103.
- 14 GB to Betty, 1 October 1915.
- 15 *Evening Public Ledger* (Philadelphia, PA), 25 November 1920.
- 16 GB to Betty, 22 October 1914.
- 17 GB to Betty, 23 December 1914.
- 18 Ralph Butler to Betty, 17 December 1914, Sir Geoffrey Butler MSS.
- 19 *The Spectator*, 2 January 1915.
- 20 *The Political Quarterly*, no. 5 (February 1915), p. 215.
- 21 *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. XXXI, no. 1, p. 184.
- 22 *The Times Literary Supplement*, 19 November 1914.
- 23 GB to Betty, 15 January 1915.
- 24 William Spens, 'Sir (George) Geoffrey (Gilbert) Butler', *Dictionary of National Biography, 1922–30* (Oxford University Press, 1937).
- 25 GB to Betty, 1 October 1915
- 26 GB to Betty, 24 May 1916. Original emphasis.
- 27 Col. W.G. Lyddon, *British War Missions to the United States, 1914–1918* (Oxford University Press, 1938), p. 35.
- 28 George Sylvester Viereck, *Spreading Germs of Hate* (London: Duckworth, 1931), p. 127.
- 29 John Grier Hibben, to Betty, 3 May 1929, Sir Geoffrey Butler MSS, Corpus.
- 30 Bury, *op. cit.*, p. 153.
- 31 GB to Betty, 23 December 1914
- 32 GB to Betty, 15 January 1915
- 33 GB to Betty, 18 October 1922.
- 34 J.R.M. Butler MSS, Trinity College, Cambridge. JRMB/H1/1, Dudley Ward to J.R.M. Butler, 13 March 1918. 'It is unlikely that you would get in,' Ward says, 'but they (the Webbs) assure me that if you stand you would then have a good claim to a safe seat next time.'
- 35 Michael Bentley, *The Liberal Mind, 1914–29* (Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 175. The 'weak' candidate was William Sorley – father of the war poet Charles Sorley, who was Rab Butler's first cousin on his mother's side.
- 36 JRMB/H2/8, G.M. Trevelyan to J.R.M. Butler, n.d. (November 1922).
- 37 'This is an honour but not lucrative,' he wrote to Betty (5 May 1920).
- 38 Spens, *op. cit.*
- 39 Patrick Devlin (Lord Devlin), *Taken at the Flood* (East Harling: Taverner Publications, 1996), p. 44.
- 40 R.A. Butler (Lord Butler of Saffron Walden), *The Art of the Possible: The Memoirs of Lord Butler KG CH* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1971), p. 15.
- 41 Mollie Butler (Lady Butler of Saffron Walden), *August and Rab: A Memoir* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1987), pp. 100, 108.
- 42 Devlin, *op. cit.*, p. 48.
- 43 S.C. Roberts, *Adventures with Authors* (Cambridge University Press, 1966), p. 11, 49.
- 44 B.H. Liddell Hart, *The Memoirs of Captain Liddell Hart*, vol. I (London: Cassell, 1965), p. 147.
- 45 GB to Betty, 8 April 1924.
- 46 GB to Betty, 17 March 1926
- 47 GB to Betty, 13 February 1924
- 48 GB to Betty, 22 July 1925.
- 49 RAB A10/4, GB to RAB, 1 March 1927.
- 50 RAB A10/2, GB to RAB, 10 November 1926.
- 51 in the words of his private secretary, Christopher Bullock. Quoted in J.A. Cross, *Sir Samuel Hoare: a Political Biography* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1977), p. 91.
- 52 Cross, *op. cit.*, p. 91.
- 53 Viscount Templewood, *Nine Troubled Years* (London: Collins, 1954), p. 71.
- 54 GB to Betty, 21 April 1926.
- 55 Letter dated 10 October 1926, in Robert Self (ed.), *The Neville Chamberlain Diary Letters, vol. II: The Reform Years, 1921–27* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), p. 367.
- 56 David Dilks, *Neville Chamberlain, vol. I: Pioneering and Reform, 1869–1929* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 485.
- 57 GB to Betty, 12 March 1924
- 58 Devlin, *op. cit.*, p. 47.
- 59 GB to Betty, 26 July 1926.
- 60 RAB A10/2, GB to RAB, 10 November 1926.
- 61 RAB A10/4, GB to RAB, 1 March 1927. The unfortunate Benjamin Lampard-Vachell did not prosper at Lincoln, nor on his other two attempts to become a Member of Parliament: he had fallen just 338 votes short in Wednesbury in 1924, and went on to lose the previously Tory seat of Barnstaple by 454 votes in 1935. He had, however, a successful career in local government, culminating as High Sheriff of Devon.
- 62 Devlin, *op. cit.*, pp. 44, 47.
- 63 Devlin, *op. cit.*, pp. 57, 75.
- 64 'Now do try,' Butler told him in a letter dated 15 June 1914. Alex Danchev, *Alchemist of War: The Life of Basil Liddell Hart* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1998), pp. 37–8.
- 65 Danchev, *op. cit.*, p. 247.
- 66 Liddell Hart, *op. cit.*, pp. 26–27.
- 67 *ibid.*, p. 143.
- 68 Corelli Barnett, *The Collapse of British Power* (Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1984), p. 502. Rather more colourfully, Barnett says that 'Liddell Hart played a strategic Jeeves to Hore-Belisha's political Bertie Wooster, laying out the elegant suits of ideas and schemes which Hore-Belisha was to wear later in Cabinet'.
- 69 Liddell Hart, *op. cit.*, p. 147.
- 70 Ralph Harris (Lord Harris of High Cross), *Politics without Prejudice: A Political Appreciation of The Rt. Hon. Richard Austen Butler CH, MP* (London: Staples Press Ltd., 1952a), p. 22.
- 71 RAB A10/5, GB to Sydney and Rab Butler, 14 June 1927. In fact, Foot Mitchell lived until 1947 – but was consoled with a knighthood after his departure from Parliament.
- 72 R.A. Butler, *The Art of the Possible*, p. 22.
- 73 Gerald Sparrow, 'R.A.B.': *Study of a Statesman* (London: Odhams Books Ltd., 1965), p. 34.
- 74 Spens, *op. cit.* For more on the Donoughmore Commission, see S. Namasivayam, *The Legislatures of Ceylon, 1928–1948* (London: Faber & Faber, 1951).
- 75 Baldwin to GB, 15 April 1929, Sir Geoffrey Butler MSS, Corpus.
- 76 Sir Samuel Hoare to Elizabeth Butler, 2 May 1929, Sir Geoffrey Butler MSS, Corpus.
- 77 Templewood, *op. cit.*, p. 71.
- 78 Sparrow, *op. cit.*, p. 30.
- 79 Cited in Francis Boyd, *Richard Austen Butler* (Rockliff Political Monographs, 1956), p. 34.
- 80 R.A. Butler, *The Art of the Possible*, pp. 3, 15.
- 81 Lord Butler of Saffron Walden (ed.), *The Conservatives: A History from their Origins to 1965* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1977), p. 9.
- 82 Lord Butler, *The Conservatives*, p. 11.
- 83 R.A. Butler, foreword to Peter Goldman (ed.), *The New Conservatism* (London: Conservative Political Centre, 1955), p. 7.
- 84 R.A. Butler (ed.), *The Tory Tradition* (London: Conservative Political Centre, 1957), p. 8.
- 85 R.A. Butler, *The Art of the Possible*, p. 28. The quotation at the end is widely attributed to Francis Bacon – although Butler presumably means 'counsels' rather than 'councils'.
- 86 Spens, *op. cit.*, pp. 148–50.
- 87 R.A. Butler, *The Art of the Possible*, p. 28.
- 88 Quoted in Sparrow, *op. cit.*, pp. 249–50.
- 89 *ibid.*