

Lord Lexden

Conservative peer and historian

No praise is too high for Simon Heffer's editing of these magnificently indiscreet diaries

Henry 'Chips' Channon The Diaries (Volume 3): 1943-57

By **Simon Heffer**
Publisher **Hutchinson Heinemann**

With the appearance of this third huge volume of more than 1,000 pages, the publication of the magnificently indiscreet diaries of Chips Channon, amounting to some two million words, is now complete.

Channon, who was Conservative MP for Southend from 1935 until his death in 1958, possessed a remarkable eye for poignant and unsavoury details of life's rich pageant, and captured them for posterity with a wonderful literary talent.

He remained addicted to mischief until the very end. His final diary entry on 15 April 1957 notes Harold Macmillan's comment on Lord Salisbury's resignation from his cabinet: "It is like a boil bursting – one feels so much better." Rab Butler tells him of Princess Margaret's frequent swearing.

No praise is too high for the diaries' editor Simon Heffer. An immense cast of characters – statesmen, grandees with their wives and mistresses, gays, wastrels – march through these pages. Very nearly each one, no matter how obscure,

is identified in a snappy, illuminating footnote.

Channon excels in descriptions of great parliamentary events. On the evening of 8 May 1945, VE Day, he writes: "The Serjeant-at-Arms was in court dress; the Speaker wore his robes with gold braid. At last Winston [Churchill], smiling and bent, entered and he had a tremendous reception. Everyone (except the recently elected cad for Chelmsford)

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rose and cheered him, and waved handkerchiefs and order papers. Members wept; ambassadors appeared amazed." This, and other accounts of important occasions, read in their entirety, are profoundly moving.

Channon was never among Churchill's greatest admirers. He looked back constantly to the era of Neville Chamberlain, his political hero. In his account of VE Day, he notes tellingly that Churchill's "reception even at a supreme moment like this never equals Mr Chamberlain's many ovations".

Apart from politics, the main themes of the diaries are wining and dining, and sex. The chandeliers glittered

on endless lunch and dinner parties, at which the finest champagnes accompanied delicious fare, even during the War when strict rationing was supposed to be in force.

His lavish hospitality was made possible by the wealth of the Guinness family, into which he married. His wife deserted him after a few years. They divorced in 1945, but the family went on subsidising him generously and allowed him to retain his Southend seat, which they controlled –

Britain's last pocket borough. In the years covered

by this final volume, Channon slept with one woman, a rich American more than 20 years his junior. Otherwise his bed was filled by men.



1956 Terence Rattigan

The bedfellows included his brother-in-law, Alan Lennox-Boyd, a cabinet minister in the 1950s, whose passionate relationships with a succession of young men occupy much space in the diary.

Channon himself fell head over heels in love with Terence Rattigan, the leading playwright of the time. But after much turmoil he finally pledged himself to a gardening expert, Peter Coats, known as Petticoats. He still needed other companions; he allowed a Liberal MP to whip him.

Channon was mourned by his many friends when he died in October 1958, aged 61. They might have been less well-disposed if they had known what he said about them in his scandalous diaries. But what unending joy Channon will bring to his readers through these irresistible records of upper-class life in a vanished Britain. 🍷

