

Lord Lexden

Conservative peer and historian

A massive and incisive work, Simon Heffer has produced a self-confident and omniscient history of Britain between the wars

Sing As We Go Britain Between the Wars

By **Simon Heffer**
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A colleague of the famous 19th-century historian Lord

Macaulay said wistfully one day that he wished he knew as much about anything as Tom Macaulay knew about everything.

Simon Heffer is the Macaulay of our times, possessing the same amazing fluency, self-confidence and omniscience, though without the great Victorian's boundless optimism that Britain would always prosper politically and economically. That is only to be expected from a writer who has throughout his career as a prolific journalist and historian viewed the world from a sceptical, right-wing standpoint.

In any case optimism is not an emotion readily associated with the years which he surveys in this massive book of over 900 pages. The dark shadows of one world war hung over them; forebodings of another gathered strength. But, as Heffer shows in this incisive work, much of the country completely

rejected the case for rearmament to meet the ever-increasing dangers that confronted it.

In 1925 Winston Churchill as chancellor of the exchequer decreed that everyone should assume that there would be no war in the next 10 years. It was an assumption that the Labour Party, supported by much of the electorate, was reluctant to shed when Churchill began to strike a very different note in the late 1930s. By that point too he had shattered his credibility by fighting his own party leaders in a vain attempt to stop

greater self-government for India, and by challenging Stanley Baldwin's masterly handling of the abdication crisis of 1936.

Heffer eclipses most historians of this period by keeping the gloom in proper perspective. While old industries languished, new ones sprang up, encouraged by benign Tory govern-

ments, to bring greater wealth to more people than ever before. Over four million houses were built. Britain acquired the most advanced health and social services in the world. Heffer tells the little-known story of Britain's inter-war success with impeccable scholarship. No wonder the uplifting film *Sing As We Go* (1934) proved so popular.

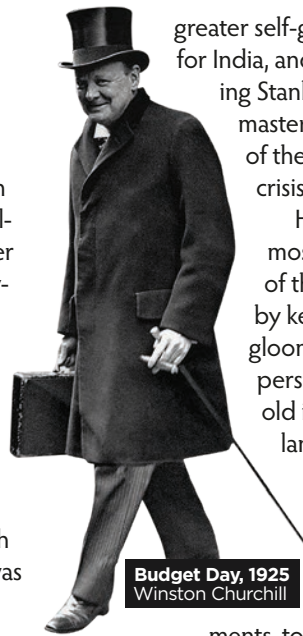
The book's greatest strength lies in its breadth. Culture and the arts receive close attention. Even more room might perhaps have been allotted to them, not least because Heffer is a leading authority on British music and musicians, about which it would have been good to have heard more. Did the

familiar story of the abdication need to be retold in immense detail, garnished with a few new revelations, such as that confided to the archbishop of Canterbury's chaplain that Edward VIII was "sexually abnormal which may account for the hold Mrs Simpson has over him"?

The book's long chapters on politics are dominated by the greatest statesman of the period, Neville Chamberlain – a man who, like Heffer, loved music and the arts, founding the Birmingham Symphony Orchestra early in his career.

In the 1920s Chamberlain's "zeal and energy" gave millions access to contributory pension schemes, and reconstructed local government, laying the foundations "of what would become the National Health Service". In the early 1930s he "excelled" as chancellor, creating the conditions for sustained economic growth. As prime minister, after 1937, he rearmed Britain believing that "martial strength, held in reserve, was the best way to preserve peace". The praise is far from being unqualified, but Chamberlain's many achievements are laid out in full.

This marvellous book deserves a prominent place in the vast literature which this controversial period of British history has inspired. 🏰



Budget Day, 1925
Winston Churchill

