

THE PRIVY COUNCIL AT CLAREMONT

September 10th 1841

Introduction

There follows an article simply about the arrival of various ministers at Claremont, Esher, and more particularly the departure from Claremont of the same ministers after the Privy Council meeting on September 9th 1841, when the Whigs were defeated and the new Conservative government was sworn in by Queen Victoria. The article was originally published in The Times, written anonymously, but by “their own correspondent” and was replicated in almost every newspaper of the time.

There is, however, nothing simple about this piece of journalism! There are a few interesting details about Esher village, and a whole lot more. Without any available visual media, detailed descriptive passages were an absolute necessity in 19th century writing, and this particular journalist certainly achieved that – in flamboyant and overblown abundance. He (and of course, it was almost certainly a “he”) also manages to include a several lines of mixed poetry, a quote from a Roman Lyric Poet, a number of Latin words, one of Norman French, and if my spell-checker and Google are to be believed, at least one word of his own invention.

Not so much pure journalism, as a journalistic attempt to create Literature out of a public interest story.

But it is not for me to pass a critique on an article that was written almost 180 years ago, and neither do I need to. After typing this piece up, I then found another article, published the following day in the Morning Chronicle, by another anonymous writer, but “NOT by their own correspondent,” who clearly took gleeful exception to the rhetorical style of the original piece and wasn’t shy in saying so!



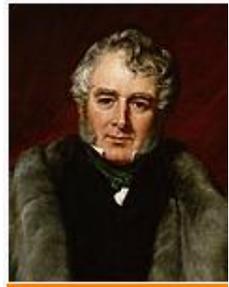
Sir Robert Peel
Conservative

THE PRIVY COUNCIL AT CLAREMONT

On Friday, September 10th 1841

Published in The Times

Written by “Their Own Correspondent”



Viscount Melbourne
Whig

This being the day appointed by her Majesty for holding the privy council, at which Sir R. Peel and his colleagues were to be formally inducted into office, the member of her Majesty's most honourable council repaired in great numbers to Claremont for the purpose of witnessing or participating in this high act of state.

The public, having been made pretty generally acquainted with the circumstances by the daily newspapers, the railway trains in the forenoon felt, like the Whigs, the “pressure from without” and several groups of pleasuring, yet apparently most anxious, spectators were to be met on various points on the road which passes from Kingston-upon-Railway through the romantic village of Esher to Claremont. The pretty lane (for it is little else) which leads from Esher to Oxshott, passing the entrance to Claremont Park, was the principal resort of the non-official metropolitan *quidance*¹ and as the dashing equipages of the outgoing and incoming Ministers of the Crown whirled up the narrow defile – for the Whigs upon this occasion plucked up a spirit – resolved to die game and put their best horses' best legs foremost – many a neck was stretched to the imminent risk of entailing upon itself a crick for life, and not a few smartly-trimmed bonnets were festooned with an extra wreath of mud as the tax for their fair wearers' overweening curiosity.

One o'clock being the hour announced for the holding of her council, her Majesty's well-known punctuality induced a corresponding degree of exactitude in point of time on the part of noble Lords and Honourable Gentlemen. Accordingly, by one o'clock, the last of the official visitants carriages had driven through the park gates. The late Whig ministers were those who first arrived, with the exception of Lord Palmerston, who was the last of all the privy councillors, Whig or Tory, who made their appearance at this grand *denouement*. His lordship was universally remarked to hold down his head, and to wear an air so observingly sombre and doleful, as could not fail to suggest to the most casual observer the reflection, that it was with mortal reluctance he repaired to the trysting-place to give back the seals and other tokens so long and so signally abused. Perhaps his lordship was of the opinion that, like Fabius, he might *cunctanda*², be in some shape enabled *restiteure*³, or possibly to tack himself to the fag-end of the new administration. However this be, it was somewhat strange that one who has been so long accustomed to the rapidity of the movements of foreign messengers should, in this instance, have been so much more like a messenger of death.

Shortly after 12 o'clock, the carriages of Lord Melbourne, Lord John Russell, the Marquises of Lansdowne and Normandy, the Earl of Minto and the rest of the late cabinet ministers, reached Claremont, whereupon a court of privy council was immediately held, at which Lord John Russell and the other secretaries of state, Lord Chancellor, Lord Privy Seal etc. delivered up their seals of office into the hands of their royal mistress. At the conclusion of this painful ceremony, the ex-ministers and members of this now defunct Melbourne cabinet, thus summarily and satisfactorily broken up, took their leave and their departure for London with all possible expedition and despatch.

The Whig noblemen and gentlemen, having made their exit, which they did not only without any flourish of trumpets, but without even a single cheer from one single adherent. All the cheering (as far as we could observe) having been reserved for Sir Robert Peel and the Duke of Wellington, her Majesty was graciously pleased to declare the Right Hon. Lord Wharnccliffe Lord President of her Majesty's Most Hon. Privy Council, and his lordship took his place at the council board accordingly. The council chamber was now occupied solely by the several Lords and Gentlemen connected with the new administration – Sir R. Peel, the Duke of Wellington, the Duke of Buckingham, the Earl of Aberdeen, Earl de Grey, the Earl of Ripon, the Earl of Haddington, Lord Lyndhurst, Lord Stanley, Lord Elliot, Lord Lincoln, Lord Ernest Bruce, Lord Ellenborough, Lord Granville Somerset, Mr. Goulburn, Mr. Gladstone etc. The Duke of Buckingham, the Earl of Liverpool, the Earl of Lincoln, Lord Elliot, Lord E. Bruce and Mr. W. E. Gladstone were sworn in privy councillors and took their seats at the board. The great seal was then handed by her Majesty to Lord Lyndhurst and the oath of Chancellor administered to his lordship. The privy seal was with the same forms, delivered to his Grace the Duke of Buckingham, and the seals of the three principal Secretaries of State to the Earl of Aberdeen, Lord Stanley and Sir J. Graham. The proceedings of the council wound up by her Majesty declaring Earl de Grey Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, the Earl of Ripon President and Mr. Gladstone Vice-President of the Board of Trade, and handing to Lord Granville Somerset the seals of the Duchy of Lancaster.

The council having thus terminated, about half past two o'clock, the new ministry took their departure for town. The Duke of Wellington was the first to quit Claremont. His Grace was in an open barouche and pair and was accompanied by Sir George Murray. The air being a little sharp, the illustrious Duke threw a white Macintosh over the Windsor uniform, in which like the rest of his ministerial colleagues, he was arrayed. The instant his Grace's remarkable profile was caught, as his barouche drove through the gates, by an eager group of spectators which crowded the centre of the road fronting the entrance to Claremont, his approach was saluted by loud and enthusiastic cheers. His Grace's carriage was followed, in rapid succession, by those of the Duke of Buckingham, the Earls of Aberdeen, Ripon and de Grey, Lords Lyndhurst, Hill and Stanley, Sir James Graham etc.; Sir Robert Peel's carriage was the last one which left the royal presence. The same tribute of heartfelt applause which as previously saluted the *avatar* of the Duke was now sent forth by the same crowd to hail the Advent of a new Premier; and as Sir Robert Peel responded to these salutations, his countenance as radiant with the triumph of an honourable ambition.

We never saw Sir Robert look to greater advantage. He was slightly flushed with the necessary elation of his new position, and the evident sympathy of the crowd and looked extremely well in the Windsor uniform. The outgoing Whig officials all wore plain clothes, and looked very plain in them, if we are to credit the testimony of numerous fair spectators of the scene. Undoubtedly, in the ladies' eyes at least, the Conservative leaders had greatly the advantage of their competitors, not alone in point of elegance (as wearing the official costume) but still more by the superiority which good temper and triumphant success gave them over sour looks and sadly disappointed ambition.

At precisely a quarter before three o'clock, the gates of Claremont closed upon the carriage of Lord Granville Somerset, which was the last in the new ministerial procession.

Up to one o'clock, the day was exceedingly fine, but at that hour a thunderstorm, which had been gathering for the previous half-hour, burst forth with great fury and rain descended in torrents. It continued to rain at intervals, and looked gloomy, until the period when the Duke of Wellington and Sir R. Peel passed through the gates of Claremont in capacity of ministers of the Crown, and at that

moment we observed the first sunburst. We are not over-given to superstition or to give our faith to omens, but we state the fact, which will not be denied by anyone who was present, or happened to pay attention to yesterday's meteorological phenomena. The elements had apparently more bowels to compensate the Whigs than any human being who happened to meet throughout the day and

“..... seemed to a fanciful few
To weep for the Whigs who had left with regret
The disturbing place where they grew”

To follow out the image, the sympathy between the Whigs and the vapourish clouds of yesterday might have arisen from the fact that for the last three years Lord Melbourne's government has been as unstable as water – very dirty water, it must be confessed, and that, to use a trope from Mr. Patrick Stewart's in the late debate, “like water they have found their level at last”. No wonder that, after their final discomfiture, sealed by the absolute and unmistakable resignation of the seals of office, the Whigs, like yesterday's weather, were in very aquaish humour. Their penitential journey to Claremont and back was no doubt unchequered by any save compunctious reflections. But if theirs was a *font lachrymurum*⁴, it must be remembered that

⁵*Hoc fonte derivita clades
In patriam populumque fluxit*

There were many, besides ourselves, who expressed themselves struck by the circumstances, that only the brief interval of fine weather, after the assembling of the council was at the moment of the new ministry passing the gates of Claremont, invested with the seals of office. After than brief moment, yesterday's meteorological phasis may be reproduced to a very simple formula:

⁶“One weak, washy, everlasting flood”

The aspect of the numerous Cockneys assembled at Esher and its vicinage was melancholy in the extreme. The rain poured in almost literal torrents as the carriages of the various Privy Councillors passed from the Oxshott Road into the village, and but for the friendly shade of the gigantic elm tree which stands in the centre of the village, their drenched and dripping finery would have been altogether annihilated. Here they had one consolation, in surveying the romantic military costume of the 72nd Highlanders, a company of which regiment is quartered in the village during the Queen's stay at Claremont and in hearing an occasional tune from the regimental pipers, beneath the flutter of gay flags with which the villagers, in compliment to the presence of royalty, had decorated the front of their houses.

The long cortege of carriages having passed, and nothing more remaining to gratify curiosity at Esher; these numerous sight-seers repaired to scene of “enjoyment” under continued cataracts of rain, having come out with the fixed determination of “killing two birds with one stone” - the Whigs and Hampton Court, but here they were doomed to a fresh disagreement – Friday being precisely the sole day on which the gates of the Palace are closed to the public. They bore up however, against this mishap with the heroism of martyrs and confessors, their satisfaction at witnessing the Whig's genuine retirement from office affording them, as they declared, an ample compensation.

- 1 *Quidance* - Norman French – believing or thinking
- 2 *Cunctanda* Latin, from *Cunctaris* - To delay
- 3 *Restiteure* Latin, from *Restituo* - To replace or restore
- 4 *font lachrymurum* Latin – Source of tears
- 5 ⁵*Hoc fonte derivita clades*
In patriam populumque fluxit
 Latin - From this source originate the calamities of the people and their country
 By Quintus Horatius Flaccus aka Horace, Roman Lyric poet
- 6 “One weak, washy, everlasting flood”
 From What’s My Thought Like – by Irish Poet Thomas Moore

And the reply:

CLAREMONT – Friday

Published in The Morning Chronicle

(NOT “From Our Own Correspondent”)

The Times, by their “own correspondent”, has given its admiring readers a lengthened account (in a mixed style, partaking of the varied beauties of “Ossian’s Poems” and “Tom Thumb”) of the Privy Council at Claremont, when Lord Melbourne gave up and Sir Robert Peel gains the seals of office.

The gathering of the multitude is first described in the following terms – “The railway trains in the forenoon felt, like the Whigs, *the pressure from without.*” Are we to infer that the railway trains were running, “like the Whigs”, to give up the seals of office, and that the old turnpike roads are *coming in* with the Duke of Buckingham and the agricultural interest? “And (it is added) several groups of pleasuring, yet apparently most anxious spectators” (what odd spectators *they* must have been!) “were to be met with on various parts of the road.”

The approach of the Whig and Tory ministers and the effect of their apparition on these “pleasuring but anxious spectators” are next described. Shortly after twelve o’clock, it is stated, that Lord Melbourne, Lord John Russell etc. arrived. They were followed, about an hour afterwards, by Sir Robert Peel, the Duke of Wellington etc. “The Whigs”, we are told, “upon this occasion, plucked up a spirit, resolved to die game and put their best horses’ best legs foremost.” (Imagine a set of Whigs hopping to court with the best legs of their best horses foremost and then, as in the song of the “cork leg,” “dying game,” but still described as going on through the “narrow defile,” elsewhere called a “pretty lane, for it is nothing else, which leads from Esher to Oxshott.”)

The effect on the multitude appears to have been awful, and many a child unborn will rue that day. The following are summed up as the principal results – “Many a neck was stretched to the imminent risk of entailing upon itself a crick for life and not a few smartly trimmed bonnets were festooned with an extra wreath of mud, as the tax for their fair wearers’ overweening curiosity.” There is reason to believe that a tax on stiff necks, and one on bonnets with wreaths of mud upon them, will form a leading item in Mr. Goulburn’s forthcoming budget.

The *personal* appearance of the two parties is hit off with the hand of a master. “The Duke of Wellington was (we are told) the first to quit Claremont.” An event here occurred of some moment, which the chronicler stoppeth to record; “The air being a little sharp, the illustrious Duke threw” – what? – “a white Macintosh over his Windsor uniform.” All I can say is that it might have been worse! The writer then describes what he calls the “*avatar* of the Duke” and the “ADVENT of the new Premier.” After these learned allusions to mythology on the one hand, and something more sacred on the other, the face of the “new Premier” is described as “radiant with the triumph of an honourable ambition;” and it is added, “We never saw Sir Robert to greater advantage. He was slightly flushed with the necessary elation of his new position and” (mark the climax!) “*looked extremely well in the Windsor uniform.*”

The Whigs, on the contrary, are described as “wearing plain clothes and looking very plain in them” and it is pronounced, that in the ladies’ eyes at least, “the Conservative leaders had greatly the advantage of their competitors!” The personal charms of the Tories would appear, therefore, to have carried the day, and the beauties of the Court of Queen Victoria may hereafter grace Hampton Court Palace as pedants to the female beauties of the court of Charles II.

The weather was, however, even more remarkable than the Tories themselves. It is described being ominous of the fate of the Whigs, though we do not exactly see how. “Up to one o’clock the weather was exceedingly fine, but at that hour (the very hour of the arrival of Sir Robert Peel and the Duke of Wellington) a thunderstorm, which had been gathering for the previous half hour, burst forth in fury, and the rain descended in torrents. It continued to rain at intervals and looked gloomy, until the period when the Duke of Wellington and Sir Robert Peel passed through the gate of Claremont in the capacity of Minister of the Crown and at that moment we observed the first sunburst. *We are not given to superstition*, or to give our faith to omens, but we state the fact.” This “burst” of the sun is, however, described as very rapid, for: “after that brief moment”, we are told that “yesterday’s meteorological *phasis* may be reduced to a very simple *formula*, ‘one weak, wishy-washy, everlasting flood.’ “

This last remark is, it must be confessed, a little severe upon their Tory friends. But the situation by which the admiring multitude is left by the historian is even still more remarkable. “The aspect of the numerous Cockneys assembled at Esher etc. was melancholy in the extreme. “ What?! Melancholy in spite of Tory charms and Windsor uniforms?!

“The rain poured in almost literal torrents as the carriages of the various privy councillors passed into the village and but for the friendly shade of the gigantic elm tree which stands in the centre of the village, their drenched and dripping finery would have been altogether annihilated! Here they had one consolation in surveying the romantic military costume of the 72nd Highlanders.”

What have the Whigs ever done to compare to this? It was reserved for the Chancellorship of Lord Lyndhurst to show us a “*phasis*” reduced to a “*formula*” and nothing less than the Duke of Buckingham as Privy Seal could have called together “pleasuring yet anxious multitudes” arrayed in “drenched and dripping finery” and assembled under the auspices of Sir Robert Peel, beneath the “friendly shade of a gigantic elm tree” to “survey the romantic military costume of the 72nd Highlanders!” Whatever next?!”

Taken from the Newspaper Archive by Terri Last