The British people and the League of Nations: Democracy, citizenship and internationalism, c.1918-45 by Helen McCarthy, Manchester University Press, 2011, 304 pages. ISBN: 978-0-7190-8616-8, Hardback, £65.00

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The third marquess of Salisbury, the oft-foreign secretary and prime minister of the late nineteenth century, doubted that the general public could ever be effectively educated in the nuances of diplomacy and thus grew fretful that extensions to the franchise would be injurious to British foreign policy.[1] His son – the great figurehead of the League of Nations Union (LNU) – Viscount Robert Cecil disagreed. Instead, he advocated the 'New Diplomacy' discourse that had developed during the First World War which contended that citizens (under the correct tutelage) should play a far more active role in international affairs and greater democratic accountability would increase the probability of peace. Helen McCarthy's examination of the British people's relationship with internationalism provides valuable insights into how successful the LNU was in achieving this goal.

McCarthy, firmly of the new political history mould, 'conceptualises the League movement as a major presence within wider political culture, and one which contributed in important ways to the recasting of social, political, religious and imperial identities' (p.6). The approach differs from the only other historical work published on the LNU, Donald Birn's institutional history, which rests on a more traditional – albeit important – empirical base comprised of the papers of state and non-state policy makers.[2] McCarthy's bibliography, like Birn's, lists the private papers of prominent individuals affiliated with the LNU and its central archive, but also includes the papers held by a large variety of national collections and the records of LNU branches spanning the United Kingdom. McCarthy also departs from Birn and Martin Ceadel's seminal study of the British peace movement, *Semi-Detached Idealists*, by adopting a mostly thematic structure. It comes at the expense of the relation of specific global events with British attitudes toward internationalism, but enables her to avoid framing the LNU's activities within historiographical debates surrounding the efficacy of the League of Nations and appeasement, and take a detour from the well-trodden road-to-war narrative.[3] More importantly, the approach allows for a greater focus on how the LNU related to the various identities and dynamics outlined below in order to better appreciate how issues gained popularity in both public and private spheres.

The sheer breadth of scope provided by the sources expose the extent to which the LNU attempted to appear non-partisan in order to attract a mass membership across divisions of politics, religion, class and gender. The task was not without its difficulties: the body was predominantly liberal, protestant, middle class and headed by a male inner circle of the executive. Nevertheless, the LNU enjoyed significant success in its goal to bring international affairs to the purview of a wider public. At its peak in 1931, its membership amounted to a little over 400,000 across 3,036 branches (p.4), one of which was located within a Debenhams London department

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[1] John Charmley, *Splendid Isolation? Britain and the Balance of Power, 1874-1914* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1999), pp.195-6

[2] Donald Birn, *The League of Nations Union, 1918-1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981)

[3] Martin Ceadel, *Semi-Detached Idealists: The British Peace Movement and International Relations, 1854-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000)

store (p.165). The LNU was especially successful in attracting women to the cause – indeed 21 of the 38 national organisations that participated in the famous Peace Ballot (1934-5) in England and Scotland were women's associations (p.199). One of the finest chapters in the book applies gender analysis to the League Movement and reveals the methods undertaken to attract both men and women through gender stereotypes. Furthermore, the chapter demonstrates well McCarthy's observed need to correct historians' neglect of the role of women in international affairs after the Fourth Reform Act (p.192).

Much of the organisation's success in gaining support can be attributed to the LNU's assumed role as educator and the greater interest in international affairs that followed Europe's first total war. McCarthy outlines the LNU's endeavours to introduce lessons on the aims and activity of the League of Nations into schools and to internationalise universities. An examination of the annual Cecil Peace Prize, which awarded £100 to undergraduates for an essay on the maintenance of international peace relating to the League of Nations, may have been illuminating in this regard. Nevertheless, McCarthy provides more than enough evidence to reveal the impressive extent to which the LNU succeeded in internationalising education. An important observation is also made on how the general public proved particularly receptive to the LNU's campaigns: it sought not to contradict nationalist and imperialist values, but rather supplement them with internationalist tenets and thus produce world citizens capable of loyalty to league, empire and nation.

However, the LNU did not go unchallenged and McCarthy reveals the extent to which the Union feared the sway of other opinion formers, including the Northcliffe and Beaverbrook press. McCarthy's final chapter (and only chronologically structured one) charts how the international crisis of the late 1930s left little time for the LNU's guiding principle of non-partisanship, undermined its unity and led to its decline. Notwithstanding the lip service paid by the National Government to the value of the League of Nations during the 1935 election, divisions between Conservatives and the LNU were already apparent during the Peace Ballot. The trend was exacerbated by the LNU's denigration of government foreign policy and its accommodation of pacifists and the communist affiliated International Peace Campaign (IPC). The IPC's inclusion was doubly unfortunate as it also earned the chagrin of anti-communists within the Labour Movement. Although, not one of A.J.P. Taylor's troublemakers, the LNU, McCarthy concludes, played a significant role in democratising foreign policy by conveying the importance of international affairs to British citizens; even if the majority of their converts were middle class liberals – 'Britain's quiet citizens' (p.253).

Although greater analysis of the origins of the 'New Diplomacy' discourse may have further enlightened the reader, McCarthy's excellent study fills a sizeable gap in the existing literature. Notwithstanding the manifest progress being made in regard to the activity of non-state actors in twentieth century Britain, the attention given to those engaged with international affairs has been limited at best. McCarthy may not offer radically different conclusions on the LNU from those expressed by Birn, but by frequently shifting the spotlight towards the LNU's interaction with the British public – rather than with Whitehall and Westminster – readers are granted a much deeper understanding of the British relationship with internationalism. Indeed, it leads one to wonder what happened to it after 1945. *The British people and the League of Nations* thus deserves a large and varied readership.