

JOSEPH CHAMBERLAIN

Pete Bounous and Sue Tungate



Lithograph of Joseph Chamberlain, 1900.

Joseph Chamberlain was born on 8 July 1836 in London. He left school at 16, having excelled academically, and was apprenticed to the family shoemaking business. Two years later, he moved to Birmingham to work for his uncle's screw-making company in which he soon became a partner and central to the company's phenomenal achievements. Having established himself as a highly successful businessman, he married his first wife, Harriet Kenrick, in 1861. She tragically died in 1863, three days after the birth of Austen, leaving him devastated. It was not until 1868 that he married his second wife, Florence Kenrick, Harriet's cousin and mother of Neville.

Chamberlain entered local politics in 1869 as councillor for St Paul's ward, Birmingham, campaigning for education reform. He retired from business in 1873 and became Mayor of Birmingham in November. During this time he promoted many civic improvements, including the provision of water and gas, slum clearance and the construction of libraries, municipal swimming pools and schools. Yet, in a cruel parody of history repeating itself, Florence died shortly after childbirth in 1875. Bereft of her influence,

Chamberlain, it seems, became a changed man: colder and more ruthless.

Subsequently elected MP for Birmingham in 1876, and appointed President of the Board of Trade in Gladstone's Second Government in 1880, he resigned in May, 1885, as a result of party differences. Two months later, he wrote the preface to the *Radical Programme*: the first campaign handbook in British political history. In 1886 he was offered the office of First Lord of the Admiralty in Gladstone's Third Government. When he declined, he was instead appointed President of the Local Government Board. He resigned in March 1886 in opposition to Irish Home Rule, consequently forming his own Liberal Unionist party.

In 1887 he was asked to lead a delegation to resolve a fisheries dispute between the United States and Newfoundland. In America he met his third wife, Mary Endicott, whom he married in 1888. In the years that followed, the Conservative Salisbury Government implemented a number of radical reforms which Chamberlain found himself in agreement with and much in keeping with his own advocacy of social reform.

Subsequently, the Conservatives and Liberal Unionists formed a government on 24 June 1895. Chamberlain asked for the Colonial Office with the ultimate objective of re-branding the Empire as a federation of Anglo-Saxon nations and advocated investment in the tropics of Africa, the West Indies and other so-called underdeveloped possessions. He was the Secretary of State for the Colonies during the Second Boer War (1899-1902) and visited South Africa in its aftermath, seeking to promote Anglo-Afrikaner reconciliation. It was also during this period that he helped to found and became first Chancellor of the University of Birmingham (1900).

In 1903 he resigned from the Cabinet to campaign for tariff reform but, three years later, the Conservatives and Liberal Unionists suffered a landslide defeat at the 1906 general election. He suffered a stroke on 13 July 1906 but recovered sufficiently to remain an MP until his resignation in January 1914. He died on 2 July 1914 and, following a Unitarian ceremony, was buried in Key Hill Cemetery, Birmingham. ●