

A WOMAN'S PERSPECTIVE

BEATRICE WEBB ON JOSEPH CHAMBERLAIN

Compiled by Elaine Mitchell

Beatrice Potter (1858-1943), is best known as half of the social-reforming husband and wife partnership, Beatrice and Sidney Webb. As a young woman in the 1880s, she fell passionately in love with Joseph Chamberlain, before he married his third wife. Quotations from her diaries reveal her feelings towards and impressions of Chamberlain.



Beatrice Webb: economist and social reformer. *The Sketch*, 1894.

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3 June, 1883

Met sundry distinguished men, among others Joseph Chamberlain. I do, and I don't, like him. Talking to 'clever men' in society is a snare and delusion as regards interest. Much better read their books.

15 July, 1883

A Whig peer on one side and Joseph Chamberlain on the other. Whig peer talked of his own possessions, Chamberlain passionately of getting hold of other people's – for the masses.

Curious and interesting character,

dominated by *intellectual passions* with little self-control but with any amount of *purpose*.

26 September, 1883

He is one of many able minds who are all working for the same end and choosing the same means, yet all is darkness when I try to discover their meaning. Much might be learnt in studying the life and thought of such a man, discovering how *representative* he was, how much his convictions were the result of individual characteristics and how much they were the effect of surrounding circumstances.

12 January, 1884

By nature he is an enthusiast and a despot. A deep sympathy with the misery and incompleteness of most men's lives, and an earnest desire to right this, transforms political action into a religious crusade; but running alongside this genuine enthusiasm is a passionate desire to *crush* opposition to *his will*, a longing to put his foot on the necks of others, though he would persuade himself that he represents the right and his adversaries the wrong. In this belief, he, as a man with a vigorous reason, occasionally feels shaken. If it were to fail, the rationale of the whole tenor of his thought and action would be destroyed.

16 March, 1884

Receiving a pressing letter from Miss Chamberlain, and feeling convinced that the negotiation was off, I saw no harm in going for two days to Birmingham to watch the great man at home.

Chamberlain, the master and darling of his town, is received with deafening shouts. The Birmingham citizen (unless he belongs to the despised and downtrodden minority) adores 'Our Joe', for has he not

raised Birmingham to the proud position of one of the great political centres of the universe!...

His diplomatic talent is unquestioned and is manipulated in his administration of public and local affairs and in his parliamentary work – the only case in which he does not show it is in *la recherche d'une femme*; but then possibly he does not consider our sex worthy of manipulation.

The commonplaces of love have always bored me. But Joseph Chamberlain with his gloom and seriousness, with absence of any gallantry or faculty for saying pretty nothings, the simple way in which he assumes, almost asserts, that you stand on a level far beneath him and that all that concerns you is trivial; that you yourself are without importance in the world except in so far as you might be related to him: this sort of courtship (if it is to be called courtship) fascinates, at least, my imagination.

I don't know how it will all end. Certainly not in *my happiness*.

15 November, 1888

2 a.m. Awake – thinking of their future. This marriage will, I think, decide his fate as a politician. He must become a Tory. The tendencies of his life are already set in that direction: hatred of former colleagues, sympathy with the pleasure-loving attractive class of 'English gentlemen' with which he now associates.

18 November, 1888

One great quality, warm devotedness to those who devote themselves body and soul to him. *This* is the secret of his family's devotion: this may secure to him married happiness.

New Year's Day, 1901

Then came the catastrophe of my life. At a London dinner-party I met Joseph Chamberlain.

He had energy and personal magnetism, in a word masculine force to an almost superlative degree.

And so it came to pass that in spite of great personal attraction on both sides we did not marry one another and that after four years' storm and stress I was left bleeding and wounded while he departed to seek more attractive metal. ●

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Further Reading

John Davis, 'Beatrice Webb', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (2004-14)*, freely available online at www.oxforddnb.com using your public library ticket.

Norman & Jeanne MacKenzie (eds), *The Diary of Beatrice Webb*, Vols 1 & II (Virago, 1982).