

ALAN CLARK'S DIARIES

The book you should read when arguing with your MP.

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Recently I found myself explaining to a teenager why people become grumpy as they grow older. 'When you're young,' I said, 'you look around you and think, "The world is a mess – but never mind, one day our generation will be in charge, and we'll do things better."' Then eventually the time comes when your generation *is* [italics] in charge – or at least, certain members of it are; and guess what? They make just as much of a mess of it as their predecessors – and the awful thing is that you can't see any way of stopping them.'

It is in this frame of mind that I reach for Alan Clark's *Diaries* – because they remind me, in the most entertaining way, that however frustrating and ridiculous the world of politics may seem to a layman, it is even worse for an insider.

The diaries' cardinal virtues are their candour and self-awareness. I suspect that if I had met Clark, I would have dismissed him as a spoilt, arrogant womaniser with alarmingly right-wing views; but on the page his openness to his own faults makes him tolerable and even endearing. 'Fool, Clark,' is his habitual cry as he chronicles another error of judgement or lapse into temptation. His account of trying to give a House of Commons speech after attending a wine-tasting is a classic.

Clark has the rare gift of writing amusingly about tedium, and what comes across most strongly is the sheer dullness of the daily grind in 'the bloody House of C, being yerr'd at the Box by a lot of spiteful drunks, on subjects that bore and muddle me'. A Minister's lot is slightly better than a backbencher's, but he is still 'a zombie in invisible handcuffs', at the mercy of civil servants who vie to fill every spare moment with unnecessary meetings.

Not that there is a shortage of intrigue: Clark's record of Mrs Thatcher's fall will endure for as long as there are daggers to be drawn. What is fascinating is that the habitual objects of his animosity are his fellow Conservatives, while Labour and SDP opponents are accorded grudging admiration. A political party is a monster that eats itself.

Of the three volumes, the first to be published – covering the years 1983 to 1992 – is the best. In its prequel, *Into Politics*, Clark is a bit too full of himself, while the posthumous *Last Diaries* suffer from self-consciousness. But together the trio describe a Faustian arc: seduced by the political world, he sees through its hollowness and eventually finds the courage to resign, only to find that he can't live without it; he sets about getting re-elected, and succeeds, but by then it is too late – he is too old and ill to achieve anything. Ah, Mephistopheles!

The quintessential episode is that of the Fur Labelling Order. An ardent animal-lover, Clark puts his all into legislation which will highlight the cruelty of leg-trapping. But as luck would have it, Mrs Thatcher's constituency is home to some influential furriers, and she is about to make an official visit to Canada. She asks him to drop the issue, and to his bitter shame he does.

Only when he escapes the fetid corridors of power and engages with the natural world does Clark feel fully himself. Flying over Canada, he meditates on the terror of the Northern Ice-cap, 'So *utterly* lifeless and bleak. In the desert there would at least be foxes and insects and little roots waiting to be nurtured by the rain. But the Polar route is all ice cliffs, and pale chasms of depth unknown.' The beauty of that final sentence flashes from the page, reminding us of what will endure long after Secretaries of State have been forgotten – and that poets are the true legislators of the world.