John Lancelot Butler-Bowdon, Lord Grey de Ruthyn
(1883-1963)

In the brief sketch by Osbert Sitwell, Baron Grey emerges as a genteel, learned, and eccentric remnant of the old medieval aristocracy. He exhibits a paternal concern for all his neighbors, happily receives petitioners at any time of the day, and donates much of his time to various committees and charity campaigns. His Catholic upbringing is expressed as much through his frequent recourse to Latin as through his dedication to the Corporal Works of Mercy. Sitwell records that he was, on more than one occasion, conscripted into visiting the local infirmed with the Baron.

After Butler-Bowden passed, Sitwell reflected: "...I can never traverse the stretch of flat road from Barlborough to Clowne without expecting to see him, his bowler hat looming up suddenly out of the fog that so often envelops that part of the world, and I only wish it could be so."(p.139)

Excerpts from Queen Mary and Others by Osbert Sitwell
(I couldn't find a plain text version, and didn't want to type all this up, so please forgive the screenshots ☺ .)

passed through his mind, for he had been given a good classical education at Mount St Mary's, the Jesuit School nearby. His education led him, indeed, to think of the emperors of Rome as his contemporaries, so that when I used to ask him what he was reading, he would make some such reply as, 'I am just reading a new book by Suetonius about the emperor Tiberius, dear heart: some shocking stories have come to light about him, I am sorry to say,' or, similarly, he would allude to a later date and remark, 'I am reading such an interesting chronicle of the Wars of the Roses.' When a friend of ours was staying at Renishaw and Lord Grey came over to tea and in the course of conversation was asked by our friend if he had read a book which had just come out about the recent escape of a nun, he replied, 'Yes, I remember it very well—in Alsace, at the time of the Franco-Prussian War.' But that was very late for him; for, in fact, he had a great love of history—though not of the kitchen-sink variety, since he

Sir Osbert Sitwell

was more interested in the individual than the masses; but as a rule the latest date which roused his interest was that of the Dauphin, the son of Louis XVI, and he would say, 'I've often wondered what became of him?' He had read everything that had been published on the subject. At this point I must interject that his knowledge of history, for which he had a passion, was better than his geography. I remember his receiving a postcard of Taormina, which he confused with Tasmania, that being the name more familiar to him.

Another of the effects of his Jesuit education was that to him Latin was a living tongue, a medium of communication. Thus, when we were together on the governing body of the same grammar school and attended a meeting, he would pass to me a note written in Latin, and he always refused to believe that I could not answer him in the same language, or even read it with ease.

His appearance was remarkable and had you first seen him in a train you would have wondered who he could be, but would not have found an answer easy. He might have stepped out of a suit of armour, and it was easy to picture him looking out from under a raised vizor, so that it was not difficult to believe that he possessed a hereditary right to carry the Gold Spur at the Coronation. When he was interviewed by the

He seldom left his native village even for a night, or went away at all, except for rare festivities in other Catholic families which, as a young man, he had attended, and he had once spent a week in Venice. Then he would occasionally go

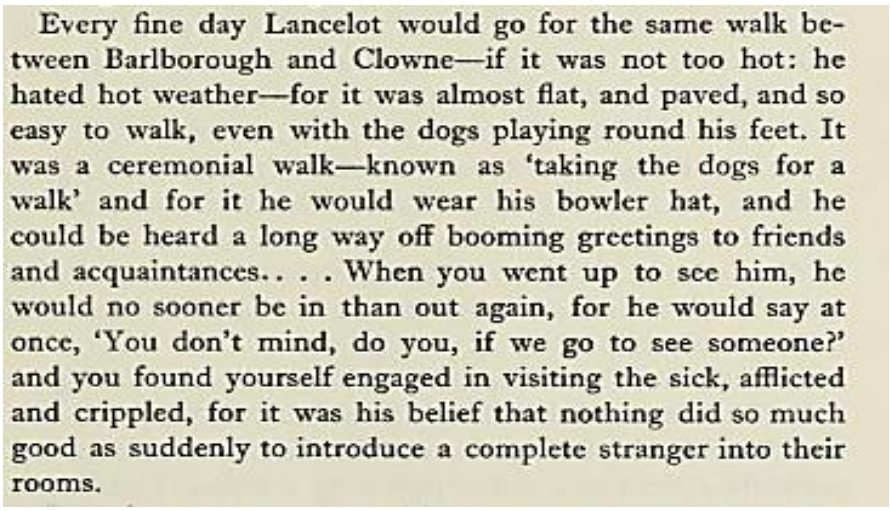
Lord Grey was very much liked in the village, and people would come to consult him at all hours about their affairs.

I recall a pleasant incident at the Renishaw Court. Lord Grey was in the chair, and a very loquacious and rambling old woman was giving evidence. At one point, she complained, 'I tried to tell the whole story to the police, but they wouldn't listen,' whereupon Lord Grey lent forward and said to the witness, 'That's all right, my dear. You come up one afternoon and tell *me* all about it. I'll listen, I promise.' I forgot to ask him what happened, but I am sure that she went up and had the time of her life, talking herself out. . . . In consequence of such an offer as this, people would turn up at all hours to ask his advice.

One night at about twelve, he thought he heard a noise downstairs, and going down to the drawing-room, he turned on the light, and then he saw a young man carrying a torch. Lancelot, thinking he might have come to consult him, had said, almost automatically, as he turned on the light, 'Good evening! What can I do for you?' Upon which the prospective burglar—for such he was—(if he had succeeded in his plan, I could not help reflecting that he would have been sadly disillusioned with his haul, unless he were collecting for some small auction of china objects of unimaginable use with 'A present from Skegness' or 'A gift from Blackpool', written on them)—the prospective burglar, I was saying, scrambled up the wall and out of a high window. He got away, but was found a day or two later, and appeared in court at Renishaw. There he explained that he had been spoken to with such kindess that he had been unable to go on with the burglary or to attack Lord Grey, and had abandoned the whole matter.

When Lancelot was very ill with pneumonia, his housekeeper was also very ill and there was nobody to see to him in the night if he wanted anything: whereupon the fathers of the village deputed a sixteen-year-old girl to sleep on a couch at the end of his bed, but at right-angles. This was quite a new application of the *droit de seigneur*.

Lancelot's whole world consisted mainly of local events. He showed a great knowledge and grasp of the life and customs of the village of Barlborough and the neighbourhood generally. He was invited to all the weddings and funerals, and I re-



Every fine day Lancelot would go for the same walk between Barlborough and Clowne—if it was not too hot: he hated hot weather—for it was almost flat, and paved, and so easy to walk, even with the dogs playing round his feet. It was a ceremonial walk—known as 'taking the dogs for a walk' and for it he would wear his bowler hat, and he could be heard a long way off booming greetings to friends and acquaintances. . . . When you went up to see him, he would no sooner be in than out again, for he would say at once, 'You don't mind, do you, if we go to see someone?' and you found yourself engaged in visiting the sick, afflicted and crippled, for it was his belief that nothing did so much good as suddenly to introduce a complete stranger into their rooms.

My entry at Wikipedia, horribly bowdlerized by their editors, is available here: [John Butler-Bowdon, 25th Baron Grey de Ruthyn - Wikipedia]