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Neville Chamberlain's Umbrella: 'Object' Lessons in the History of Appeasement

Abstract

Neville Chamberlain's umbrella was ubiquitous during the Munich Crisis and in its aftermath, as material object, as commodity, and as political emblem that came to represent the temperament and character of the 'Man of Peace' who had brought relief to the world by striking a 'gentleman's peace' with Hitler on 30 September 1938. This culminated in the damning portrayal of the Prime Minister as the 'Umbrella Man' in 'Cato's' *Guilty Men* (1940). Throwing the spotlight on the material object of the umbrella can illuminate the popular dimension of these highly charged diplomatic events, and offer some insight into how foreign policy was lived across the social spectrum and across borders. We can chart dramatic fluctuations in both mediated and visceral public opinion in the changing symbolic uses of the umbrella, by politicians, by journalists, by cartoonists, and by consumers themselves. The study of appeasement has been stuck in certain methodological ruts, and has not hitherto taken the cultural turn, nor paid much attention to popular responses to the prelude to the People's War. By blowing the dust off Chamberlain's old umbrella, this article suggests an alternative perspective on the politics and culture of appeasement, evoking the sights, sounds, textures, feelings and tastes of a crisis that was played out at the level of diplomacy but also very much as a 'People's Crisis'.

The history of appeasement has traditionally been told from the vantage point of international relations, high politics, or in biographical mode animated by dramatic scenes of suspense and intrigue involving ensembles of great men.¹ Over the past 75 years the bountiful

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¹ The scholarship on appeasement is vast, but a few illuminating synopses of the long-running historiographical debates are available. See Sidney Aster, 'Appeasement: Before and After Revisionism', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 19 (2008), 443–80; Daniel Hucker, 'The

scholarship on appeasement has passed through various stages, from an indictment of the 'Men of Munich', countered by revisionists, and contested in turn by counter-revisionists and post-revisionists. Of these great and guilty men, the leading man has inevitably been the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, a figure whose reputation has lurched from hero to villain, from self-styled 'Man of Peace' to Hitler's gullible dupe.² At the zenith of his popularity, Chamberlain was encouragingly informed by Bill Astor that his 'prestige abroad is enormous. His name is almost a synonym for peace'.³ Portrayal of Chamberlain's saintliness was constantly reinforced with the visual hook of the umbrella, and PPS to Rab Butler at the Foreign Office 'Chips' Channon, one of the Prime Minister's most infatuated supporters, observed how on his way to Munich the 'Saviour of Peace, got quietly into his car, umbrella and all'.⁴ However, it did not take long for Chamberlain's detractors and satirists to rain on his parade, and the Premier was demeaned and damned through a process of objectification. In 'Cato's' stinging denunciation of 1940, *Guilty Men*, Chamberlain was given a starring role among the band of fumbling and bumbling appeasers, but more specifically, he was cast as the metonymous 'Umbrella Man', becoming one with the quintessentially utilitarian English accoutrement that so often supported his elongated but curling septuagenarian frame—he would turn 70 on 18 March 1939.⁵ *The Star* predicted that the umbrella, 'stiff, straight, rigid, tightly rolled up, rather like its owner, may take its place in history'.⁶

In fact, umbrellas, and Chamberlain's umbrella in particular, were omnipresent in the visual and material culture, and in the rhetorical constructions of the Munich Crisis and in its aftermath.⁷ Chamberlain's umbrella was easily the most produced and reproduced political emblem of late 1938–9, represented in a wide range of textual and

Unending Debate: Appeasement, Chamberlain and the Origins of the Second World War', *Intelligence and National Security*, 23 (2008), 536–51; and R. Gerald Hughes, *The Postwar Legacy of Appeasement: British Foreign Policy since 1945* (London, 2014).

² See Robert Self, 'Neville Chamberlain's Reputation—Time for Reassessment', *Historically Speaking*, 8 (2007), 18–20.

³ Letter from Neville Chamberlain to Ida, 13 November 1938, in Robert Self, ed., *The Neville Chamberlain Diary Letters: Volume 4: The Downing Street Years, 1934–1940* (Aldershot, 2005), 362.

⁴ 28 September 1938, Robert Rhodes James, ed., *'Chips': The Diaries of Sir Henry Channon* (London, 2003), 172.

⁵ Comedy singing team Flanagan and Allen also had a hit with 'The Umbrella Man' in 1938, which did not make direct reference to the PM but was about an umbrella maker.

⁶ Quoted in David Reynolds, *Summits: Six Meetings that Shaped the Twentieth Century* (London, 2007), 54.

⁷ Any interest that there has been in the material culture of appeasement has been popular rather than academic. See Nigel Rodgers, *The Umbrella Unfurled: Its Remarkable Life and Times* (London, 2013), and Max Everest-Phillips, *Neville Chamberlain: The Art of Appeasement* (London, 2013).

visual forms in the media, and in consumable forms as accessories, adornments, novelties, souvenirs and edible delicacies. In Britain and abroad, and especially in France, the umbrella came to stand for a distinctly British form of diplomatic engagement. The *Yorkshire Post* asked: 'Is there any other single object that could be turned to so much political symbolism? Perhaps it was the association of ideas between Mr Chamberlain's mission and the purpose of the umbrella that struck foreign imagination. . .the umbrella has no bellicose connotations. It is shelter, protection (originally against sun as well as rain)'.⁸

New directions in political history scholarship—taking into account linguistic, visual, affective, material, rhetorical and consumption turns, and a spate of biographies of individual objects—make the study of the umbrella as political symbol and as material entity especially apropos.⁹ As Frank Trentmann has declared, 'things are back', and 'the material world has too much history in it to leave it to the social sciences'.¹⁰ In her recent object biography of the gas mask, Susan Grayzel has demonstrated how it functions as 'a device with which to explore the war within and beyond its seemingly natural borders of time and space'.¹¹ Symbolizing the diametrical opposite of the gas mask, Chamberlain's umbrella was indubitably the other pervasive emblematic object of the crisis. By searching for the meanings of the gamp,¹² this essay therefore offers an evocation of the Czechoslovakian Crisis/Munich Crisis as it was seen, tasted and felt, both in terms of sentience and sentiment. If the approach taken here includes some elements of a *jeu d'esprit*, it is because this echoes the whimsical ways in which Chamberlain and his umbrella were represented in the sources. In tracing how the umbrella was initially used to fête but very soon discredit its owner, we can unmask neglected discourses and levels of experience in the prelude to the People's War.

The multiple and malleable meanings of Chamberlain's umbrella can be deduced by reflecting on its symbolic, discursive, performative and very material embodiments. These meanings can be uncovered by, first,

⁸ 'Umbrellas', *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 24 October 1938.

⁹ See Tony Bennett and Patrick Joyce, eds., *Material Powers: Cultural Studies, History and the Material Turn* (London, 2013); Lyn Pykett, 'The Material Turn in Victorian Studies', *Literature Compass*, 1 (January 2003-December 2004); Erika Rappaport, 'Imperial Possessions, Cultural Histories, and the Material Turn: Response', *Victorian Studies*, 50 (2008), 289-96; for the 'rhetorical turn' in modern British history, see Richard Toye, *Rhetoric: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2013).

¹⁰ Frank Trentmann, 'Materiality in the Future of History: Things, Practices, and Politics', *Journal of British Studies*, 48 (2009), 283-307.

¹¹ Susan R. Grayzel, 'Defence against the Indefensible: The Gas Mask, the State and British Culture during and after the First World War', *Twentieth Century British History*, 25 (2014), 418-34.

¹² The etymology of the gamp is from Charles Dickens' *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-1844), and named after the character Mrs Gamp, the drunken nurse, who always carried an umbrella.

charting the textual construction of Chamberlain's umbrella in the press, providing insight into the spectrum of and shifts in public opinion on the appeasement policy in Britain and abroad. Secondly, it will consider how the changing representations of the umbrella relate to the re-construction of Neville Chamberlain's political persona by the media, the Conservative Party, the public and himself.¹³ Thirdly, it will examine the marketing and the commercialization of the crisis, and the ways in which certain hallmarks of national identity were diffused through popular cultural forms in these tense months that proved to be the countdown to the Second World War. Fourthly, it will reflect on the quasi-religious significance accorded the umbrella—immediately after the Four Powers Conference, Chamberlain's umbrella was instantly recognized as an artefact of deep historical significance, a museum piece, and even a relic. Fifthly, and perhaps most obviously, the umbrella became the metaphoric stick with which to beat Chamberlain, and in textual, visual or theatrical form the umbrella was evoked to denote a misguided and bankrupt foreign policy.

Due to the irrefutable diplomatic failure of the Munich Agreement signed on 30 September 1938, at each juncture in the reassessment of appeasement historians, political scientists, and generations of politicians too have tried to identify the underlying lesson to be learned, whether strategic, ethical, or psychological. Munich has consistently been conjured as an object lesson in international relations, an example of a how negotiations with dictators should *not* be conducted, and used to serve as a practical example of a principle or an abstract idea.¹⁴ But the concern here is with another type of *object lesson*, namely the lessons we can learn from the main object, the artefact, of appeasement. Indeed, objects can act as 'political symbols, vehicles of community, ingredients of the public sphere, and instruments of political communication'.¹⁵

Unlocking Secrets of Signification by Unwinding Chamberlain's Umbrella

Modern political history is replete with examples of leaders who are identified with and as their signature pieces, whether it is Stanley Baldwin's pipe, Hitler's moustache, Neville Chamberlain's umbrella,

¹³ Nicholas Pronay, 'Rearmament and the British Public: Policy and Propaganda', in James Curran et al., eds, *Impacts and Influences: Essays on Media Power in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1987), 53–96, and T. J. Hollis, 'The Conservative Party and Film Propaganda between the Wars', *English Historical Review*, 96 (1981), 359–69.

¹⁴ M. Vedby Rasmussen, 'The History of a Lesson: Versailles, Munich and the Social Construction of the Past', *Review of International Studies*, 29 (2003), 499–519.

¹⁵ Frank Trentmann, 'Materiality in the Future of History: Things, Practices, and Politics', *Journal of British Studies*, 48 (2009), 283–307.

first Winston Churchill's hats¹⁶ and then his cigar, Margaret Thatcher's handbag, or John Major's cricket bat or his y-front underwear (see Figure 1). Charting the deliberate cultivation alongside the changing meanings and charges of these personal symbols allows us to assess fluctuations in the popular appeal and the reputations of these political leaders.¹⁷ In fact, Churchill, as Chamberlain's chief rival in the appeasement polemic, was understood to be losing the argument and the popularity contest because he had yet to develop his autograph brand. 'Sartorially', Churchill 'has been a chameleon and suspect among his countrymen'. It was pointed out that 'a statesmen should be known by one or two features, not for variety'. In the Edwardian period Churchill had acquired a reputation for wearing distinctive hats, but his



Figure 1
'Neville Chamberlain' ceramic toby jug by Gibsons. © Parliamentary Art Collection WOA S552.

¹⁶ The author is grateful to Richard Toye for allowing me to preview his work on 'Winston Churchill and the Golden Age of Journalism', an essay where he discusses how Churchill acquired a reputation for wearing distinctive hats, which he used to his advantage in building his reputation and distinctive brand.

¹⁷ For the politics of reputation in modern Britain see Philip Williamson, *Stanley Baldwin: Conservative Leadership and National Values* (New York, 1999), and Richard Toye and Julie V. Gottlieb, eds., *Making Reputations: Power, Persuasion and the Individual in Modern British Politics* (London, 2005).

trademark cigar chomping had not yet permeated public consciousness by 1938, whereas ‘monocle and orchid were priceless assets to Joseph Chamberlain... Everyone thought of Gladstone in terms of collars. Stanley Baldwin’s homely pipe caught the popular fancy, suggesting gaiters, muddy boots, and pigs. Lloyd George’s purple smoking jacket and patriarchal cloaks created a diverse character. Neville Chamberlain’s umbrella is as notorious as Sairey Gamp’s’.¹⁸ Political emblems are important both for crystallizing image and message in the heat of political competition, and they also serve as a vital mnemonic device in securing legacies in the longer term. For example, the design for the Chamberlain toby jug is made up of his head as cup and his umbrella as handle.

In addition, Chamberlain’s umbrella has not been the only symbolically resonant broly, and he competes for exclusive rights to the umbrella as metonym of English national identity with the Hollywood version of *Mary Poppins* (1964), and the *Avengers’* (1961–9) umbrella-carrying, bowler-hat topped unflappable Cold Warrior John Steed (played by Patrick Macnee). Experts on the John F. Kennedy assassination will also be familiar with the mysterious ‘umbrella man’ who stood along the route of the Dallas motorcade, and conspiracy theorists believe he was either signalling to the assassin or that he may have shot a poison dart at the President from the tip of his gamp.¹⁹ Much more recently, the umbrella has emerged as a powerful political trope, again outstripping its quotidian utility, when in the autumn and winter of 2014 the Occupy Central protestors in Hong Kong found that umbrellas were the only effective defence against the armed police’s pepper spray and the harsh midday sun. This popular movement for democracy has been dubbed the ‘Umbrella Revolution’.

What is the meaning of the umbrella and what does it stand for in the specific context of Britain in the 1930s? It is first and foremost a functional object, providing protection mainly against foul weather. It elicits English virtues of pragmatism, the boy-scout wisdom about always being prepared, and that rather uninspiring Baldwinian catchphrase ‘safety first’. Further, the broly alludes to a national

¹⁸ ‘Mr Churchill’s Dress’, *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 24 November 1938.

¹⁹ ‘Then along came Chamberlain, and it immediately became associated with losers who trusted Hitler, so much so that Joseph Kennedy, the American Ambassador to the Court of St James’s, and, in his time, a fervent supporter of appeasement, came to loathe any mention of umbrellas. His son, the future President John F. Kennedy is said to have inherited his father’s umbrellaphobia. This prompted a man called Louis Steven Witt to take an umbrella to Dealey Plaza on November 22, 1963, with the intention of opening it as the President’s car passed and thereby poking fun at him.’ Craig Brown, ‘Good golly, the Broly has been Jolly Significant’, *Daily Mail*, 8 October 2009. For a review of the pejorative meaning attached to the umbrella in American politics due the Chamberlain connection, see Edward H. Miller, ‘Umbrella Man’, <<http://histsociety.blogspot.co.uk/2013/11/umbrella-man.html>>

obsession with the weather, with meteorologically oriented subjects the most acceptable in polite company across the social spectrum. 'In England this [the weather] is an ever-interesting, even thrilling topic, and you must be good at discussing the weather'.²⁰ The English virtue of always being prepared for a rainy day was captured in a spot of 'mass observation' conducted by *Daily Mail* reporter Charles Graves from a front table at Oddy's, Piccadilly in the spring of 1938. He recorded the 'ratio of umbrellas to walking sticks was about 8 to 1. Five pessimists carried mackintoshes: twenty or thirty wore overcoats despite the warmth'.²¹ An actual Mass-Observation, identified as a lady social worker (age 40, London), felt it 'so undignified to send that old man over there [to Germany] with his umbrella; Baldwin may not have been much use, but at least he had some presence and personality'.²² In George Orwell's famous exploration of British national identity, 'The Lion and the Unicorn', the umbrella completes the outfit of his much disdained Whitehall-based colonial administrator: 'Well-meaning, over-civilized men, in dark suits and black felt hats, with neatly rolled umbrellas crooked over the left forearm, were imposing their constipated view of life on Malaya and Nigeria, Mombasa and Mandalay'.²³ In social terms this piece of attire supports middle- and upper-class standing. In terms of gender, the long black umbrella tends to be male-identified by the 1930s, whereas it had been female-identified when weaponized by the suffragettes a generation earlier.²⁴ According to George Mosse's taxonomy of the image of modern man, the clean-cut Englishman is the ideal masculine type in Britain, pitted against the emergent virile Continental figure of the New Fascist Man.²⁵ Peter Mandler has argued that the conflation of Englishness with gentlemanliness was an inter-war development as a conservative minority sought to adopt the hitherto liberal notion of national character for their exclusive, anti-modern ends. Mandler has identified cartoonist George Strube's 'Little Man' as 'the exemplar of the new type: an imaginative compound of the City gent and the "man in the

²⁰ George Mikes, *How to be an Alien* (London, 1946), 16.

²¹ Charles Graves, 'Personality Page: I See Life', *Daily Mail*, 24 May 1938.

²² Day Survey Respondent 638, April 1938-September 1938, Mass Observation Archive, University of Sussex Special Collection.

²³ George Orwell, 'The Lion and the Unicorn', in Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, eds., *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters: Vol.2 My Country Right or Left, 1940-1943* (Harmondsworth, 1968), 93.

²⁴ A generation earlier, the umbrella had been female or female fanatic-identified in anti-suffragette propaganda. See Maria Grever, 'The Pantheon of Feminist Culture: Women's Movements and the Organization of Memory', *Gender and History*, 9 (1997), 364-74.

²⁵ George L. Mosse, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (New York, 1996). See also Julie V. Gottlieb, 'Body Fascism in Britain: Building the Blackshirt in the Inter-war Period', *Contemporary European History*, 20 (2011), 111-36.

street," dressed in bow tie and bowler hat and armed with tightly furled umbrella', while also small, modest and endearing.²⁶ Therefore dominant codes of gentlemanliness are inscribed on the umbrella as it is the stereotypical Englishman's accessory of choice. As Susan Kingsley Kent argues, 'the figure of Neville Chamberlain, impeccably tailored, with his bowler hat and umbrella, returning from Munich with "peace in our time," seemed to exemplify those qualities of [Little Englandist] masculinity that would help keep Britain out of war'.²⁷ In Martin Francis's assessment, Chamberlain possessed 'a celebrated aloofness, rooted in deep loathing of displays of public emotion or sentimentality'.²⁸

But what happened to the English gentleman, and by extension to the popularity of his trademark umbrella, when peacetime gave way to war? Marcus Collins has suggested that with the outbreak of war the gentleman was relegated to a bygone age, he was feminized, and he was identified as the exemplar of a corrupt gerontocracy. While the Tory 'Chips' Channon confided in his diary upon hearing about the Munich terms that it was 'a Chamberlain, respectable gentleman's peace', and he joined in as the 'whole world rejoice[d]', the very gentlemanliness of the agreement helped to undermine the Prime Minister's position only a few months later.²⁹ The form and design of the umbrella therefore expresses an intrinsically gentlemanly aesthetic, referencing a tightly wound and self-retrained etiquette, stiffness (of the upper lip variety), and aspirational middle-class and patrician taste for a well-cut suit and a top hat, while eschewing anything overtly martial.

The relative infrequency of the umbrella-carrying habit among the labouring classes is in itself significant, as the gamp is very much a marker of upwardly mobile class aspirations. It was partly for this reason that the umbrella also became a subversive symbol, and the National Unemployed Workers' Movement staged a number of demonstrations in early 1939 in which protestors carried a black coffin inscribed with the words 'He did not get his winter relief' and enclosing an umbrella.³⁰ The burial of Chamberlain's umbrella (labelled 'appeasement') also featured in Cummings' cartoon in the United Front's *Tribune*.³¹ In short—but especially in its elongated design that allows it to double as a walking-stick—the umbrella is an emblem of

²⁶ Peter Mandler, *The English National Character: The History of an Idea from Edmund Burke to Tony Blair* (London, 2006), 165.

²⁷ Susan Kingsley Kent, *Gender and Power in Britain, 1640-1990* (London, 1999), 309.

²⁸ Martin Francis, 'Tears, Tantrums, and Bared Teeth: The Emotional Economy of Three Conservative Prime Ministers, 1951-1963', *Journal of British Studies*, 41 (2002), 354-87.

²⁹ 30 September 1938, Robert Rhodes James, ed., 'Chips', 172.

³⁰ 'Coffin Parade in Middlesbrough', *Manchester Guardian*, 14 January 1939. See also 'A Procession with Umbrellas', *Manchester Guardian*, 23 February 1939.

³¹ 'Appeasement is Dead; Long Live Appeasement', *Tribune*, 24 March 1939.

Englishness, reifying national tastes for all things rainproof and respectable, civil and civilian, urban and urbane, and practical and protective. It is no accident that the umbrella is often used in advertisements and as a logo for insurance companies. In fact, 'umbrella insurance' is the term given to extra liability insurance.

Chamberlain's Styling and Self-Styling as the 'Umbrella Man'

The umbrella has a longer history in British fashion as part of the dominant sartorial code, and as it just so happens the story of its provenance and integration into British men's fashion was newsworthy in July 1938, when the umbrella carried by Jonas Hanway through the streets of London in 1750 was being sold at auction in Tavistock. The philanthropist Hanway brought umbrellas from Persia and made them popular in England, when it had 'needed moral courage for a man to use a luxury article that was regarded by men as something thoroughly effeminate'. Then it was a 'great soldier, James Wolfe, who, writing as a civilian from Paris in 1752, lamented that Englishmen should be so slow to recognise the "amicable advantages" of the umbrella'. However, 60 years later 'the Duke of Wellington, disparaged the umbrella as an "unmilitary" weapon. At Bayonne in 1813 he noticed some young Guards' officers protecting themselves from Biscayan squalls beneath umbrellas, and he wrote this scathing reprimand: Lord Wellington does not approve of the use of umbrellas under fire, and will not allow the sons of gentlemen to make themselves ridiculous in the eyes of the enemy'.³² Over a century later the umbrella would again provoke controversy, and again on the basis that it sent the wrong message to an enemy bent on European domination. It was no match for the sword. Predicting the proliferation of umbrella imagery already in August 1938, anti-appeaser and National Labour MP Harold Nicolson remarked: 'Britannia, for several years, has discarded her trident for an umbrella'.³³ A more light-hearted solution to the military impotence of the umbrella was the invention, presented at an Institute of Patentees exhibition in Manchester in May 1939, of an umbrella with a shooting-stick attachment, which would 'have interest for Mr Chamberlain when he next goes to Munich'.³⁴

In the specific context of Chamberlain's premiership from 1937 to 1940, no other public personage challenged him to be distinguished as the umbrella man. 'Mr Chamberlain is the man behind the new European boom in the old umbrella. . . Our Mr Chamberlain—far from a

³² 'Miscellany: The Early Gamp', *Manchester Guardian*, 6 July 1938.

³³ 'Sayings of the Week', *Manchester Guardian*, 21 August 1938.

³⁴ 'In Manchester', *Manchester Guardian*, 25 May 1939.

fashion-plate, I'm sure you'll agree—has done for the umbrella what the Duke of Windsor once did for the straw hat; what Anthony Eden has done for the Homburg; Lord Baldwin for the pipe; Mr Gladstone for the bag.³⁵ Chamberlain's umbrella emerged as one of the most repeated synecdoches in the 'discursive profusion' unleashed by the Munich Crisis.³⁶

The study of Chamberlain's umbrella fits under the wider conceptual framework of a relational history of politics and fashion, and the fashioning of politics. In the age of cinema, newsreels, and pictorial newspapers, politicians made deliberate fashion statements, and their dramatic posturing and the very visual performativity of diplomacy suggest an acute awareness of the camera. The newsreels that were watched by as many of 19 million per week lost no filmic or photo opportunity during the Crisis. 'The greatest triumph for propaganda was the extraordinary coverage given by the newsreels to the Munich agreement, Gaumont British offering an almost hysterical endorsement both of the agreement and of Chamberlain personally'.³⁷ Of course, the Conservative Party was particularly successful at harnessing cutting-edge political technologies before and between the wars, and the Conservative Party Film Association had taken advice from film moguls Alexander Korda and Michael Balcon on how to craft the PM's public image.³⁸ This was brilliantly satirized by cartoonist David Low in his 'Low's Topical Budget' where Chamberlain was being made ready for his close-up by Korda, and under the heading 'A Star is Born'.³⁹ Correspondingly, the pictorial news market was only expanding, and, significantly, Edward Hulton launched *The Picture Post* on 1 October 1938. *The Illustrated London News* published a 'Record Number. The Crisis and the Agreement', narrating the momentous week with more images than text, including an article 'Personalities in Crisis'. It was noteworthy that of the eleven personalities here featured, those not carrying an umbrella were American Ambassador Joseph Kennedy, Halifax, Attlee and Sir Robert Vansittart, while all the other Tories and cabinet ministers were pictured in stride with their umbrellas—Anthony Eden, Sir John Simon, Churchill, Duff Cooper, Samuel Hoare, Hore-Belisha, and Chamberlain.⁴⁰ This was a crisis as photo montage,

³⁵ Graham Stanford, 'The Chamberlain Gamp is A La Mode Now', *Daily Mail*, 25 October 1938.

³⁶ Kate McLoughlin, 'Voices of the Munich Pact', *Critical Inquiry*, 34 (2008), 543–62.

³⁷ Malcolm Smith, *Britain and 1940: History, Myth and Popular Memory* (London, 2000), 22.

³⁸ See Jeffrey Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in 1930s Britain* (London, 2010).

³⁹ David Low, 'Low's Topical Budget', *Evening Standard*, 9 October 1937.

⁴⁰ 'Personalities in Crisis', *Illustrated London News*, 8 October 1939.

carrying a message that these powerful men were using their fingers to grip umbrellas rather than poisoning them on the trigger.

The Sudeten Crisis and the Battle of Dress

That the crisis was both recorded by and inevitably given added emotional charge by two dimensional and moving pictorials meant that at a certain level too deteriorating Anglo-German relations were explained as, what I would term, a *battle of dress* (Figure 2). Shortly preceding the Sudeten Crisis, another kind of sartorial contest had played itself out on the British domestic front as the 'battle of the shirts', and involving Mosley's Blackshirts, and the 'Reds', and, to a lesser extent, the Greenshirts. All were disrobed and thereby disarmed of this powerful form of spectacular propaganda with the banning of political uniforms under the Public Order Act (1936), or so the National Government had intended.⁴¹ Certainly there was a correlation between the divestment of the British Union of Fascists' blackshirt trademark and its terminal decline. The fear of private armies and their standing in British law had been reignited by Mosley's Blackshirt movement in 1934,⁴² and this may well provide some of the context for the negative coverage of the dictators' martial fashion choices at Munich. It was widely noted that Hitler's and Mussolini's military uniforms were a clear projection of their bellicose intentions and embodied the essence of dictatorships, whereas Chamberlain's well-tailored civilian costume, with the inevitable accompaniment of his umbrella conveyed his pacific aspirations and identified him as a representative of bourgeois democracy. As Mr Leslie Burgin (Minister of Transport) told the House in the post-Munich debate: 'Students of history would remember that the Premier was in morning dress and travelled in a civilian passenger plane—(Opposition laughter)—and this unarmed individual went to the commander of the other side at his headquarters surrounded by soldiers. That was a factor of enormous potential consequence'.⁴³ Even the anti-appeaser journalist, and newly elected Independent member for Bridgewater, Vernon Bartlett could 'admire the courage with which the Prime Minister, armed only with his now famous umbrella, went to Germany and reviewed those terrifying

⁴¹ See Philip Coupland, 'The Blackshirt in Britain: Meanings and Functions of Political Uniform', in Julie V. Gottlieb and Thomas P. Linehan, eds, *The Culture of Fascism: Visions of the Far Right in Britain* (London, 2004), 100–15.

⁴² See Herbert Morrison, 'How I Would Procure Peace', *Daily Mail*, 5 July 1934, where he suggests that the Blackshirts threaten to return Britain to a state before law and order when 'physical combat between individuals, mobs, and even private armies was common'. See also 'Fascists and the Law: No Offence in Drilling or in Black Shirts', *Manchester Guardian*, 19 May 1934.

⁴³ "'Man in the Streets' Views', *Manchester Guardian*, 5 October 1938.



Figure 2

Sidney 'George' Strube [no caption], *Daily Express*, 3 October 1938. Strube/*Express Newspapers/N&S Syndication*, and *British Cartoon Archive Ref. No. GS0496*.

guards of honour in their black steel helmets and their big black boots', although for Bartlett that did not mean that it could be ruled out that 'the Prime Minister's policy may be mistaken'.⁴⁴ Only a couple of months later when Chamberlain paid his state visit to Italy in January 1939, there was a sense of relief among the South-west Lancashire Women Conservatives that for that occasion Mussolini had worn 'a well-cut Bradford suit', and the MP who addressed these Tory women diagnosed that '[o]ur problem seems to be how quickly can we get Herr Hitler and Signor Mussolini into a bowler hat and carrying an umbrella'.⁴⁵

Britain's suave bachelor Ambassador to Berlin Neville Henderson was himself something of 'the fashion-plate diplomat'. He had a 'perfect tailor's figure'; he was a trend-setter for 'wearing woollen pullovers except on the most formal occasions'; and his signature red carnation button-hole was 'almost as well known to Berlin politicians as Mr Chamberlain's umbrella is to the world's cartoonists'.⁴⁶ According to this *Daily Mail* write-up, the imperturbability of this old Etonian, arch-appeaser, and prototypical clean-cut Englishman was clearly conveyed through his deliberate choice of attire. We should not

⁴⁴ 19 December 1938, *Hansard*, 2573.

⁴⁵ 'The Bowler Hat: Dictators and British Friendship', *Manchester Guardian*, 20 February 1939.

⁴⁶ 'The Man we Sent to Hitler', *Daily Mail*, 24 August 1939.

underestimate the importance of 'power dressing' in the culture of diplomacy.

Of course, Hitler had no intension of 'dressing down' for the satisfaction of the British Prime Minister. He was reported to have said after Chamberlain's departure from Munich: 'If ever that silly old man comes interfering here again with his umbrella, I'll kick him downstairs and jump on his stomach in front of photographers'.⁴⁷ As if right on cue, already on 6 November 1938, in a very public display, Hitler turned against Chamberlain by taking a swing at the PM's umbrella. Speaking at the Gautag of the Thuringian National Socialists in Weimar, Hitler decried, 'those umbrella-carrying prototypes from the heyday of our bourgeois party world' who 'have been eradicated and shall return no more!'⁴⁸ His audience greeted this allusion to Chamberlain with roars of laughter and frantic applause.⁴⁹ Lloyd George did not take Hitler's umbrella-inflected insult of the PM kindly, telling Parliament that he had been

amazed to see in a speech of Herr Hitler's a reference to: Umbrella-carrying statesmen of the past, who, thank God, are extinct in Germany. I think it is rather insulting from a man who has treated you as a friend and whom you have treated in the same way—whom you trusted in a perfectly candid, straightforward and courteous manner, going out of your way to meet him. (Interruption.) I think it was. It was mean, anyway. But it is not merely that. The general attitude of the whole of the Press there is hostile, and in a country like that the Press means the Government. It is really official—essentially so.⁵⁰

By the winter of 1945 when it was clear that Germany would lose the war, according to Hugh Trevor-Roper, Hitler believed that the outcome would have been different had Germany gone to war in September 1938, and that it was the fault of the 'arch capitalist bourgeois, Chamberlain, with his deceptive umbrella in his hand'.⁵¹ On the one hand, Hitler came to see the umbrella as a modern-day Trojan horse.

On the other hand, Chamberlain's umbrella was laden with references to his personal history, and it identified him as a second-

⁴⁷ Quoted in Richard Overy, *War and the Economy in the Third Reich* (Oxford, 2002), 228.

⁴⁸ Max Domarus, *The Complete Hitler: A Digital Desktop Reference to His Speeches and Proclamations 1932-1945*, 1232.

⁴⁹ Dr Wilhelm von Kries, London correspondent for the *Lokal Anzeiger*, was similarly umbrella-fixated but far less critical of the British position when he said that 'Chamberlain's badge of office, the essence of his dignity, and the expression of his personality is the umbrella'. 'Sayings of the Week', *Manchester Guardian*, 22 January 1939.

⁵⁰ Mr Lloyd George, Hansard, HC Deb 19 December 1938, vol 342, col. 2550.

⁵¹ Hugh R. Trevor-Roper, ed., *The Testament of Adolf Hitler: The Hitler-Bormann Documents February-April, 1945* (London, 1961), 84.

generation Victorian entrepreneur, in business as in politics. Before boarding the commercial airliner for Munich on 29 September, his carefully crafted short prologue to his peace mission referenced his Victorian childhood and the ethos of Samuel Smiles-variety self-help. He began with 'if at once you do not succeed, try, try, try again', and then quoted Hotspur in Shakespeare's *Henry V* 'out of this nettle, danger, we pluck this flower, safety'. Reflecting on the theatrical quality of these political scenes, Chamberlain told his sister: 'That the news of the deliverance should come to me in the act of closing my speech in the House was a piece of drama that no work of fiction ever surpassed'.⁵² And yet his political rise was much more prosaic and provincial. It is important to bear in mind that Chamberlain had his start as Lord Mayor of Birmingham and then, already in late middle-age, he rose through the ranks of the Conservative Party via appointments as Minister of Health and then Chancellor of the Exchequer. (He was not an aristocrat; he had no experience in foreign policy and it was his half-brother Austen who had served as Foreign Secretary; and he had been too old to serve in the war and had no military record, distinguished or otherwise). His political trajectory from the world of business, to municipal politics, and then back to the business of government on the national scale, combined with his preference for an old-fashioned black tailcoat, stiff winged collar and full tie, explains why his critics provided him with other alter egos, such as the 'provincial undertaker',⁵³ or 'a tough old businessman' representing the 'hardware of Birmingham'.⁵⁴ Lloyd George called him 'a good mayor of Birmingham in a lean year', while *Tribune* defined his mind set as 'sordid provincialism'.⁵⁵ Incidentally, it was his father Joseph Chamberlain, whom a young Winston Churchill said was 'the one who made the weather'⁵⁶ in recognition of his bold policies at the height of Britain's imperial power. Indeed, Joseph Chamberlain was a dapper dresser, always seen in public in silk hat, frock coat, with a fresh orchid in his button hole, and a gold-rimmed monocle. While it was his first son Austen who showed filial devotion by donning the exact same garments, even when they were a generation out of style,⁵⁷ Neville too must have learned important lessons in cultivating his personal imagery and political showmanship from his father. The umbrella was an essential prop of his theatre, as inextricable from his public persona

⁵² Letter to Hilda, 2 October 1938, in Robert Self, ed., *The Neville Chamberlain Diary Letters: Volume 4: The Downing Street Years, 1934-1940* (Aldershot, 2005), 349.

⁵³ See Robert Self, *Neville Chamberlain: A Biography* (Aldershot, 2006), 7.

⁵⁴ 'Cato', *Guilty Men* (New York, 1940), 68 and 46 respectively.

⁵⁵ Quoted in 'Open Letter to No.10 Downing Street', *Tribune*, 26 August 1938.

⁵⁶ Quoted in Peter T. March, *Joseph Chamberlain: Entrepreneur in Politics* (New Haven, 1994), 408.

⁵⁷ Robert Self, ed., *The Austen Chamberlain Diary Letters* (Cambridge, 1995), 5.

as Charlie Chaplin's Little Tramp's signature bowler hat and cane—nor will it come as a surprise that the two iconic figures, Chamberlain and Chaplin, were often blended in caricatures. As such, the umbrella was not merely an inanimate object but served as a cast member in the unfolding drama of the crisis, and it had almost been lost in the scenes of jubilation in Downing Street on the night of 30 September, only to be found the next morning, with considerable relief, by the Premier's chauffeur under the rug of the car in which Chamberlain had travelled from Heston.⁵⁸ This tale of lost and found was widely reported in the press, and a similar fictive incident was the subject for the cartoon 'London Laughs' in which a police officer on horseback charges through the crowds around 10 Downing Street, umbrella in hand, to reunite the Prime Minister with his mislaid item.⁵⁹

The umbrella-cum-walking stick was very much part of Chamberlain's style of performance. He clung as tightly to his identity as the umbrella man as to the gamp itself, even when this piece of apparel became the butt of so many jokes at his expense. He was delighted that letters and gifts 'rain[ed] in'⁶⁰ to Number 10 in the weeks after Munich, telling his sister about 'five fishing rods and innumerable flies, two gold watches, two clocks, an umbrella and quantities of rubbish'.⁶¹ His Foreign Secretary, Lord Halifax, used the language of the umbrella to fortify his Prime Minister's position and provide a populist explanation for why appeasement had to be accompanied by the build-up armaments: 'the right conclusion to my mind in this matter of armament for national defence is that there is a good deal of sense in the old-fashioned idea that an umbrella often helps keep the rain away'.⁶² Chamberlain himself confessed to an audience in Blackburn in February 1939, that 'When one has to pass through, as I have often, many hours of anxiety, it is the greatest possible encouragement and support to me to think that I have under the old umbrella so many of my own fellow countrymen and countrywomen who believe with me that peace is the greatest blessing that any country can enjoy'.⁶³ Support for the PM at the grassroots was expressed by Alderman W. H. Hoare at the East and West Midlands Areas of Association of Conservative

⁵⁸ 'Clouds Had Gone So...' *Hull Daily Mail*, 1 October 1938.

⁵⁹ Joseph Lee, 'London Laughs: 10 Downing Street/ The Day He Left Without It', *Evening News*, 7 December 1938.

⁶⁰ 'Our rooms are a bower of flowers & gifts rain in, even a gold watch from a Dutch admirer and fishing rods from a tackle maker.' Letter to Ida, 19 September 1938, in Robert Self, ed., *The Neville Chamberlain Diary Letters: Volume 4: The Downing Street Years, 1934-1940* (Aldershot, 2005), 348.

⁶¹ Letter to Ida, 24 October 1938, in Robert Self, ed., *The Neville Chamberlain Diary Letters: Volume 4: The Downing Street Years, 1934-1940* (Aldershot, 2005), 358.

⁶² 'Nation's Defence Calls for Service from All: Lord Halifax and "Wave of Feeling"', *Daily Mail*, 25 October 1938.

⁶³ 'Peace under My Old Umbrella', *Daily Mail*, 23 February 1939.

Clubs, Birmingham, with the opinion 'that it is better to have an umbrella in the hand of a righteous imperialist than a sword in the hand of a blustering Nazi'.⁶⁴ Chamberlain's most fawning constituency was the Conservative Women's Association,⁶⁵ and he told its assembly on 11 May 1939:

I seem in these days to be the target for a lot of rotten eggs, but I can assure you that does not keep me awake, because I believe that I have the support of the women of the country and that they have a clearer vision than some of those whose sight is obscured by party and personal prejudice... For that reason, you have, as I know from my correspondence, followed the events of the last 12 months with the closest attention. You have watched the old umbrella going around, you have, I believe, approved our efforts, strenuous, and up to now successful to keep Europe out of the war.⁶⁶

It probably would have caused him little offence that in the *Picture Post's* crossword of 20 May 1939, the solution to 27 (across), 'The umbrella man?' was, of course, PM Chamberlain.⁶⁷ Meanwhile, the Pensions for Spinsters Movement offered the Prime Minister a 70th birthday present of a £3 15s umbrella, hoping it may jog his memory to introduce the legislation they were pleading for, and enclosing a note 'asking for protection under his umbrella for middle-aged spinsters'.⁶⁸ Tributes continued to be expressed through umbrella imagery during the war, and when Mrs Annie Chamberlain inspected three companies of the Auxiliary Territorial Service in Hull, 'after watching a march past in columns of three, she viewed the kitchens, and at once began to laugh. One of the ovens bore the name Neville and had an umbrella painted on it'.⁶⁹ Indeed, many biographers have alluded to Chamberlain's domineering manner, his autocratic style, and his deluded self-belief, and his apparent willing participation in this transformation of his figure into the loveable umbrella man provides further explanation for his persistent pursuit of appeasement.⁷⁰

⁶⁴ 'Umbrella is Better than Nazi Sword', *Derby Daily Telegraph*, 27 March 1939.

⁶⁵ See Julie V. Gottlieb, 'Guilty Women', *Foreign Policy and Appeasement in Inter-war Britain* (Basingstoke, 2015).

⁶⁶ 1939/7 The Prime Minister's Great Speech: Peace through Strength: Mr Chamberlain's Great Speech delivered at the mass meeting of women Conservatives at the Royal Albert Hall, London, on Thursday, 11 May 1939, Oxford, Bodleian Library, Conservative Party Archive.

⁶⁷ 'Crossword', *Picture Post*, 20 May 1939.

⁶⁸ 'They Seek £4,500,000 for £3 15s. Umbrella', *Daily Mail*, 13 March 1939.

⁶⁹ 'Mrs Chamberlain Sees Sign of the Umbrella', *Hull Daily Mail*, 24 November 1939.

⁷⁰ See Graham Macklin, *Chamberlain* (London, 2006), and Nick Smart, *Neville Chamberlain* (London, 2009).

Production and Consumption of Chamberlain's Umbrella

The success or happy accident of Chamberlain's self-branding as the umbrella man was evidenced by the surge in popularity of all things umbrella-form. The Munich Crisis was packaged for sale in a number of ways, but for our purposes the most remarkable manifestation of the collision of market forces with public support for 'peace at any price' was the branding (the product placement) and the conspicuous consumption of Chamberlain's umbrella. Appeasement trinkets were targeted at a mainly female market, and even more specifically at grateful mothers, suggesting the subtle ways in which appeasement was gendered and woman-identified, and foreign policy domesticated. Frank Trentmann has identified the rise of the citizen-consumers, a new identity forged in and for the Free Trade nation. These citizen-consumers possess agency, and are 'part of civic life—not just customers in a shop. . . Instead of a retreat from public life, consumption would foster civic participation and, over time, raise the quality of production'.⁷¹ By the late 1930s, as women invested in the 'accessories of appeasement' and adorned themselves with the Chamberlain brand, by extension, they became the accessories *to* appeasement, exercising political control through consumer choice.

The story of the commodification of Chamberlain's umbrella is a multi-national one, with a spike in the sale of actual umbrellas as well as myriad homages to Chamberlain's umbrella in the spheres of fashion, commercial design, haute cuisine, and cocktail mixology. The umbrella was even more unambiguously an emblem of British national identity abroad than it was at home. 'Indeed, in the Continental mind the Premier's umbrella has eclipsed Lord Baldwin's pipe as an expression of all that is most British'.⁷² Across Europe after Munich, the furled black umbrella became known as a 'chamberlain', the very epitome of Englishness. Indeed, as one reporter noted, 'so closely has the umbrella now become identified with the British Prime Minister. . . that a friend of mine, who left his in a Paris cinema was recalled with the words, "Eh, Monsieur, vous avez oublier votre Chamberlain!"'⁷³

The umbrella effect was tangible. In the wake of the Munich crisis there was a reported increase in the sale of umbrellas in the European market. 'The men who make money out of umbrellas are wild with delight. There was a slump in the "gamp."' And even the rain wouldn't shift it. But now that should change'.⁷⁴ Apparently, the Chamberlain umbrella boom began in Belgium 'where rain is a ritual', and then

⁷¹ Frank Trentmann, *Free Trade Nation* (Oxford, 2008), 17.

⁷² 'Mr Chamberlain's Umbrella', *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, 14 October 1938.

⁷³ 'The "Chamberlain"', *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 11 October 1938.

⁷⁴ Graham Stanford, 'The Chamberlain Gamp is A La Mode Now', *Daily Mail*, 25 October 1938.

spread to France, and was just expected to break in Britain where an umbrella seller told a reporter that ‘There has been a wan in the umbrella-carrying fashion. Along comes Mr Chamberlain. Whenever you see him you see AN UMBRELLA. It should be good for business’.⁷⁵ In London, the umbrella shop in St. James’s Street, Piccadilly, placed a placard in the window reading ‘This is where the Chamberlain Umbrella was bought’.⁷⁶ It was even suggested that ‘Mr Chamberlain’s umbrella has had an encouraging effect on the umbrella market in Bombay’, and in anticipation of the monsoon season there was an even brisker than usual trade in umbrellas because from Chamberlain’s example ‘people had acquired “umbrella sense”’.⁷⁷

The French connection is the most illuminating, and it was in Paris that the consumption of Chamberlain’s umbrella was the most apparent.⁷⁸ Chamberlain was deeply moved by the outpouring of French support for his policy, and, as he told his sister Hilda, he even organized the visit for himself, Halifax and their wives on

my own initiative... I felt it to be the right thing for many reasons—to give the French people an opportunity of pouring out their pent up feeling of gratitude and affection,— to strengthen Daladier and encourage him to do something at last to put his country’s defences in order and to pull his people into greater unity—to show France and Europe too that if we were anxious to make friends with Germany & Italy we were not on that account going to forget our old allies—and, finally, to make it possible for me to go to Rome in January which is what I am trying to arrange.⁷⁹

In anticipation of the visit, it was predicated that the Paris ‘crowd that welcomes them will be keenly disappointed if they arrive without umbrellas’, and during the crisis itself the papers in Paris published a big picture of his umbrella. This was a tribute both to the man and his pacific policy, as well as reflecting a more widespread French

⁷⁵ Graham Stanford, *Daily Mail*, 25 October 1938.

⁷⁶ ‘Mein Gamp’, *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 19 December 1938.

⁷⁷ ‘Umbrella Sense’, *Derby Daily Telegraph*, 23 June 1939.

⁷⁸ See Daniel Hucker, *Public Opinion and the End of Appeasement in Britain and France* (Farnham, 2011); D. Hucker, ‘French Public Attitudes Towards the Prospect of War in 1938-1939: “Pacifism” or “War Anxiety”?’ , *French History*, 21 (2007), 431–49; and Mona Siegel, ‘“To the Unknown Mother of the Unknown Soldier”: Pacifism, Feminism, and the Politics of Sexual Difference among French *Institutrices* between the wars’, *French Historical Studies*, 22 (1999), 421–51. See also Christine Bard, ‘Le dilemme des féministes françaises face au nazisme et à la menace de guerre 1933-1939’, Liliane Kandel dir., *Féminismes et nazismes*, Paris, Publications de l’Université de Paris 7-Denis Diderot, 1997, pp. 148-161.

⁷⁹ Letter to Hilda, 6 November 1938, in Robert Self, ed., *The Neville Chamberlain Diary Letters: Volume 4: The Downing Street Years, 1934-1940* (Aldershot, 2005), 360–1.

appreciation for the 'perfectly dressed' Englishman.⁸⁰ In contrast, 'French dress designers consider that Englishwomen have poor taste where clothes are concerned'.⁸¹ The Paris visit on 23 November happened to coincide with the fête of St. Catherine (old maids day), and Paris shops were already full of 'bonnets' with which 'workgirls' celebrated the festival. As a result, 'the emblem of some of the caps is an umbrella, no less... The Catherinettes are now putting the final seal upon the sheltering Chamberlain umbrella, which, it is hoped, is a protection rather than merely blinkers'.⁸² The Premier's profile, silhouetted on a gold medallion hung 'from the coats or suit lapels of many smart Frenchwomen'.⁸³ That season the umbrella motif was everywhere to be seen, and a well-known (but unnamed) Paris couturier remarked how two Britons had influenced fashion more than anyone else, the new Queen Elizabeth and Mr Chamberlain. In the detail of dress Chamberlain's influence was plain to see, from neat little day frocks with pockets shaped like umbrellas, Chamberlain hats, actual umbrellas, and all kinds of jewellery like 'tiny gold umbrellas to pin to the lapel of your coat, medals of Chamberlain made up into brooches and Chamberlain medals dangling from key-holders, fobs and all kinds of ornaments to women's dress'.⁸⁴ The culmination of Anglo-French understanding through and under the umbrella was the design of 'Franco-British umbrellas' that 'appeared in Paris shop windows' during torrential downpours in July 1939, seen to be the 'latest expression of the "Entente Cordiale." Made of oilskin or silk cloth, the sections of the umbrellas form a circular Union Jack or a combination of the Tricolour. The handles are small wooden figures representing Mr Chamberlain or Mr Daladier'.⁸⁵ The disembodiment and fetishization of Chamberlain as umbrella had a surrealist quality about it. Umbrella pins, buttons, coins, dolls, sweets, and sugar umbrellas (instead of the usual mice) were on-trend with the designs of the surrealist Elsa Schiaparelli, a favourite of Wallis Simpson's, although it does not appear to be the case that Schiaparelli used the umbrella motif in her 1938–9 collection.

⁸⁰ "'Un Gentleman Très Piccadilly'" was the title given last night by *Paris Soir* to Earl De la Warr, President of the Board of Education [visiting Paris with his wife]. . . *Paris Soir* sees him as a supreme example of the well-dressed Englishman. 'With an aristocratic elegance, he wears his Eden hat, his Chamberlain umbrella, and an impeccable English-made suit', declares the newspaper. *Daily Mail*, 2 February 1939.

⁸¹ Walter G. Farr, 'And They're Still the Rage of Paris', *Daily Mail*, 12 November 1938.

⁸² 'The St. Catherine: Mr Chamberlain's Umbrella', *Manchester Guardian*, 24 November 1938. Photographs of some of these hats in the shape of the umbrella can be seen in 'Chamberlain Umbrella Hat for "Old Maids" Day in Paris', *Hartlepool Mail*, 23 November 1938.

⁸³ "Gadfly Finds that You Might Wear Neville—In your buttonhole", *Tribune*, 11 November 1938.

⁸⁴ 'What Smart Women are Wearing', *Aberdeen Journal*, 11 February 1939.

⁸⁵ 'Umbrella Token', *Derby Daily Telegraph*, 29 July 1939.

Sometimes an Umbrella is Just an Umbrella

Chamberlain reproductions functioned to celebrate him as the 'Man of Peace'. From the very top level of the British establishment, the House of Windsor gave its royal seal of approval by purchasing Chamberlain merchandise. Royal endorsement of Chamberlain was abundant, and it was at once symbolically important and highly controversial that upon his return to London from the Four Powers Conference as his first port of call he was invited to Buckingham Palace. He was met there by his wife, and they, with the King and the Queen, greeted the cheering crowds from the balcony of the palace. The image still of this momentous photo opportunity capturing the nation rejoicing together with the constitutional monarch was then sold as Christmas cards in December 1938, bearing the motto 'Peace on earth and goodwill to men', and available from *The Times'* shop in Queen Victoria Street, London.

Early in the new year, in February, when Queen Mary visited the British Industries Fair at Olympia, she was equally taken by children's tableware decorated with Walt Disney characters from *Snow White* (buying a child's table set in pewter ware), as by the 'Chamberlain clock', with umbrella figuring and hands in the shape of umbrellas. 'Queen Mary said she wanted to see the clock because she had read all about it in the newspapers'. In the fancy section 'Queen Mary and her daughter were amused at some combs made in the shape of Mr Chamberlain's umbrella and called "Mein Gampf"', and they ordered three dozen of these.⁸⁶ The purchase of this royal purchasing power was significant on two levels. First, it made a very public point about the monarchy's continued enthusiastic support for Chamberlain's foreign policy, which would have been reassuring to certain constituencies of the British public, and represented a savvy strategy of, what in the present would be called, cross-promotion. Secondly, the rapid production of this Chamberlain/umbrella-form paraphernalia must have been facilitated by a pre-existing production chain that manufactured royal-themed novelties for the mass market. In fact, Queen Mary was evidently much amused as she came back to the Industries Fair for a third day in succession, and this time 'bought one of the Chamberlain dolls with the umbrella, and suggested that it might be a good idea to make a similar doll of the King for sale in America during the royal visit'.⁸⁷

The Chamberlain doll craze had actually started earlier and in time for the Christmas rush. These Chamberlain mannequins were regarded

⁸⁶ 'Queen Mary at Olympia', *Manchester Guardian*, 22 February 1939.

⁸⁷ 'Court and Personal: Queen Mary Again at the Industries Fair', *Manchester Guardian*, 24 February 1939.

with some curiosity at the time, and one reporter wondered how Rip Van Winkle would have reacted had he woken from his long slumber in London in the autumn/winter of 1938: 'He would be surprised to see Mr Chamberlain masquerading as a doll (complete with umbrella), and delighted by other dolls sweetly like the Princesses. He would be intrigued by Snow White and his attendant Seven Dwarfs, and be baffled by the model Lambeth Walkers'.⁸⁸ The appeasement docudrama and Disney's animated *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* were concurrent box office hits in 1938, and it therefore makes perfect sense that they should have both been the inspiration for a variety of knickknacks; that they were both merchandized, and side-by-side, to appeal to the female-dominated marketplace and catering to children's tastes; and that satirists should enjoy shape-shifting the Prime Minister whose gullibility was symbolized by his umbrella, with the pale-faced princess, a modern Eve, who herself was credulous enough to bite into the poisoned apple.

As promised, on the menu is an alternative sensory history of appeasement, a re-enactment of how the Munich crisis was seen, felt, and even tasted. The nation's sweet tooth was satisfied by sugar paste and chocolate Chamberlains. In chocolate form 'he held an important-looking document, also in chocolate, and on his arm was a porcelain white dove'. Such a delicacy 'cost daddy 1s 3d'.⁸⁹ The celebrated Maître Chef at the grill-room at the Dorchester Hotel, Park Lane, invented a new dish called 'Coeur de Filet Neville Chamberlain', consisting of a fillet of English beef in port wine sauce, garnished with marrow on toast, and surrounded by croquettes of potatoes and almonds, asparagus points fried in the Italian way, and croustade of cherries done in the German fashion. 'Created by a French chef, and named after the British Premier, the dish is fully representative of the new "concert of Europe"'.⁹⁰ To wash down this bit of *nouvelle cuisine*, a new cocktail named for Chamberlain was launched for the House of Commons Cocktail party, called 'the umbrella',⁹¹ while at 'Parisian cocktail parties they have Chamberlain straws in their cherries... like the little umbrellas they are'.⁹²

Chamberlain's umbrella was also all the rage during the pantomime season and in various forms of popular entertainment. Not all French allusions to Chamberlain's umbrella were favourable, and already in

⁸⁸ 'Chamberlain Doll Here for Christmas', *Daily Mail*, 30 November 1938.

⁸⁹ Christopher Saltmarshe, 'Take it from Me', *Daily Mail*, 16 December 1938.

⁹⁰ 'Reflexions by Reflex', *Essex Newsman*, 8 October 1938.

⁹¹ "'Umbrella" Cocktail Attacked by Broughty Lady', *Dundee Courier*, 29 March 1939.

⁹² Graham Stanford, 'The Chamberlain Gamp is A La Mode Now', *Daily Mail*, 25 October 1938.

mid-October one of the most popular intimate revues, *Vive la France*, with Dorin as author and chief actor, included a skit on 'Snow White, with Hitler, Benes, Mussolini, Daladier, Bonnet, Goebbels and Chamberlain as the Seven Dwarfs. The last named is represented by a marionette, umbrella and all'.⁹³ It was also in Paris that the Umbrella Dance or the 'Chamberlain' was the latest mania, involving hooking your chosen partner with an umbrella.⁹⁴ In Patrick Modiano's semi-autographical *Liver de famille*, he recalled that his actress mother was part of a revue 'd'actualite' called *Demain, tout ira mieux* in early 1940: 'Elle etait au centre du tableau final. Tandis que les girls dansaient avec les parapluies "Chamberlain," on voyait ma mère s'élever sur une nacelle, la tête entourée de rayons d'or'.⁹⁵ A more salacious version of this dance was performed in Philadelphia, USA, in 1940 by a female dancer who was arrested for indecent entertainment for doing the 'Chamberlain Dance', as the only thing covering her modesty, police said, was a raised umbrella.⁹⁶

Back in Britain, at an annual school pantomime, an architectural student 'was a perfect stand-in for the Premier and sartorially correct from the waist up. Below that he wore a black crinoline, which went remarkably well with his historic umbrella'.⁹⁷ The rumour in circulation was that the pantomime joke of the 1938 season and hot favourite would be Mr Chamberlain's umbrella, and, if used 'the catchword will probably be "Mein Gamp"'.⁹⁸ And then it was a farce within a farce when thieves broke into the Communist-run Unity Theatre St. Pancras and 'stole the costume—including an umbrella—of "Mr Chamberlain," who is one of the principal characters of the political pantomime, "Babes in the Wood"... "Mussolini's" uniform was also stolen and "Hitler's" was damaged. A sum of £5, collected for the St. Pancras Children's Outing Fund, was stolen'.⁹⁹ That same season women cabaret dancers staged a sketch donning the now signature Chamberlain apparel: top hat, moustache, and black umbrella. 'Who's Talking Liberty?', which was a big draw in the panto season one year

⁹³ 'Mr Chamberlain's Umbrella', *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, 14 October 1938. There was plenty of uses of the umbrella for anti-British propaganda in Russia: 'All anti-British and especially anti-Chamberlain tendencies have disappeared from the Soviet newspapers, following the conference between Sir William Seeds, British Ambassador, and M. Litvinov, Soviet Foreign Commissar, regarding the proposed Anglo-Russian pact. The Soviet humorous weekly, *Krokodil*, which is usually replete with anti-Chamberlain cartoons, omitted them from to-day's issue. So did the French-language Moscow newspaper, *Journal de Moscou*, a weekly which has frequently made the famous umbrella a butt of humour.' ('Moscow Cuts Out Umbrella Jokes', *Daily Mail*, 25 April 1939).

⁹⁴ 'Women and their Ways: Letter from Paris', *Nottingham Evening Post*, 30 March 1939.

⁹⁵ Patrick Modiano, *Liver de Famille* (Paris, 1977), 47.

⁹⁶ 'The Chamberlain Dance', *Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette*, 15 March 1940.

⁹⁷ Christopher Saltmarshe, 'Take it from Me', *Daily Mail*, 16 December 1938.

⁹⁸ 'London's Pantomimes', *Manchester Guardian*, 9 December 1938.

⁹⁹ "'Chamberlain" Dress Taken from Theatre', *Daily Mail*, 3 April 1939.

later at the Whitehall Theatre, had as one of its principals 'Prime [?] Charming's "Dandini," the Lord High Chamberlain' and he 'was made to make remarks about going to Munich for appeasement, using an aeroplane for the purpose, about fishing in Scotland, about wearing a top hat and umbrella'.¹⁰⁰

The Umbrella as Relic and Icon of Appeasement

On the one hand, the materiality of Chamberlain's umbrella belongs to the realm of the profane and the disposable. The umbrella was an easily breakable prop, a temporary novelty, and a consumable with a short shelf-life. On the other hand, however, Chamberlain's one-of-a-kind umbrella was immediately identified as a curio, an antique, or even as a sacred object or talisman. Chamberlain was profoundly uplifted by this story, as related to him by Bill Astor, son of Cliveden Set-hostess Nancy:

Just before he left Greece he [Bill Astor] met an old peasant woman who asked whether he would be seeing Mr Chamberlain. On being told that this was possible she showed him a cross which like most Greek peasants she was wearing round her neck. In the cross was a tiny hole for the reception of a relic of the true cross (of which there is apparently an unlimited supply to be obtained). You see, she said, I haven't filled up my hole. Now when you go to London I want you to get for me a little bit of Mr Chamberlain's umbrella to put in my cross.¹⁰¹

Clearly the Prime Minister savoured his iconic status as saviour, and he was guided in his policy-making by these sentimental, spiritual and material signs of approval. For this brief moment in history the umbrella became a religious symbol, and the Rev. James Duncan described it this way in his sermon:

The people gaped, wondered, laughed, and then cheered. Its appeal was irresistible; it ceased to be just an umbrella, and was transformed into a portent. Here before their eyes was a modern Don Quixote. War clouds were heavy in the sky. At any moment might fall a great rain of bombs and bullets. Yet this Strange Fellow, stalking like a fairy with a magic wand, went aloft holding an umbrella smiling with an innocence born of faith. . . . While I am not prepared to assert it, I hazard the guess that when Britain's Man of

¹⁰⁰ Pantomime (LE), March 1940, Mass Observation Archive, University of Sussex Special Collections.

¹⁰¹ Letter from Neville to Hilda, 13 November 1938, in Robert Self, ed., 362–3.

Faith sat in solemn conclave, cheek by jowl, with three Chieftains of Europe, there was an umbrella by his side. I picture him feeling it even as Aladdin rubbed the magic lamp, and finding in the touch security, and the quiet confidence of an ultimate happy ending.¹⁰²

That this iconization of the umbrella was extended beyond Christian Orthodox lands was suggested by David Low's cartoon noting that 'Foreign museums are applying for the loan of the Chamberlain umbrella. Soon shady characters are going to start hawking genuine portions of the original sacred relic to tourists'.¹⁰³

His umbrella was also considered an object of intrinsic antique and historical value. Indeed, Chamberlain became a museum piece while still in office when his waxwork model was displayed at Madame Tussaud's in London. He was part of a wax tableaux sitting around the Cabinet table with other life-like members of his Cabinet, and as such in this indoor scene he was depicted umbrella-less. However, one day 'members of the staff found that somebody had placed an antiquated "gamp" in the table in front of the Premier'¹⁰⁴—as Chamberlain and the umbrella had become inseparable in the popular imagination. His wax effigy, complete with umbrella, was also displayed at the Grevin Waxworks Museum in Paris, and, significantly, removed together with those of Daladier, Herriot and Blum at German bidding in 1941.¹⁰⁵

The array of reproductions of the umbrella and the preoccupation with its material form were mainly, though not exclusively, means by which the policy of appeasement and Chamberlain's putative achievements at Munich could be validated and lionized by the public. There was some frivolous press banter about the provenance of Chamberlain's umbrella, and Mrs Chamberlain had been interviewed about it, explaining that she had bought it for her husband as a present 14 years earlier, and it had since been recovered four times.¹⁰⁶ But curators were taking the acquisition of his umbrella seriously. Chamberlain was invited to present his umbrella to an umbrella museum being organized at Gignese, near Stresa. 'The organisers had written asking for the one he took to Munich. But Mr Chamberlain replied that it was "too ordinary and too worn to figure in a museum of Italian umbrellas." It is believed Mr Chamberlain indicated he still has further use for it.'¹⁰⁷ A few months later, he must have relented on this point, as 'Mr Chamberlain's umbrella—the one he took to Munich—is exhibited with

¹⁰² 'Remember that Man of Faith!' by the Rev, James Duncan, Vicar of Dowdon, *Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette*, 23 December 1938.

¹⁰³ David Low, 'Topical Budget', *Evening Standard*, 14 January 1939.

¹⁰⁴ 'The Premier's Umbrella', *Derby Daily Telegraph*, 12 January 1939.

¹⁰⁵ 'The "Famous"', *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 7 April 1941.

¹⁰⁶ 'Mr Chamberlain's Umbrella', *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, 13 March 1939.

¹⁰⁷ 'He Still Needs His Umbrella', *Daily Mail*, 11 January 1939.

a number of other umbrellas and walking-sticks interesting in themselves or the property of interesting people, at Foyle Art Gallery, 113-125 Charing Cross-road, W.C. 2'.¹⁰⁸ He was also in on the joke when he donated an autographed umbrella to be auctioned during the Dunfermline Students' Charities Week in June, 1939.¹⁰⁹ Readers of the *Manchester Guardian* were asked to write in with suggestions about what material objects should be interred as memorials in Waterloo Bridge. Of the 'topical' articles selected for this time capsule, a gas mask or baby's gas mask came first, Mr Chamberlain's umbrella second, while 'a torn treaty' came third.¹¹⁰ In 1940 when the English frigate *Crescent*, which had sank off Leonstrup in 1808, was salvaged by Siguard Damsgaard, found in the officers' cabin was an umbrella, and the intention was to present this find as a gift to Mr Chamberlain.¹¹¹ While there was clearly a public fascination with and fetishization of Chamberlain's umbrella as artefact, my research has not so far been able to ascertain what became in the end of the actual umbrella that Chamberlain carried with him in those anxious months, and it might yet become the holy grail of appeasement mythology.

Chamberlain's Umbrella as Lightning Rod for Critiques of Appeasement

Finally, fittingly enough, Chamberlain's umbrella also served as a lightning rod, absorbing powerful and especially negative and hostile criticism. In addition, the worsening and ever more pessimistic national mood was commonly conveyed through climatic imagery—the profusion of meteorologically informed language reinforcing the national obsession with the weather. In representational terms, the ever-furled umbrella left the Prime Minister fully exposed to antagonistic political elements and to a torrent of parodies as the metamorphosing depiction of the umbrella functions as barometer of sea changes in mediated public opinion and press commentary. The Rev. E. Aldington Hunt of the Newington Parish Church, said in his sermon in February 1939, that 'we could thank God that we lived in England, where we could crack jokes about the Mother of Parliaments and Mr Chamberlain's umbrella, which was fast displacing the olive branch as the symbol of peace'.¹¹² The much exalted English sense of humour, and a rich tradition of political allegory and cartooning, had extra resonance in the 1930s and against the backdrop of

¹⁰⁸ 'It Happens To-day That-', *Daily Mail*, 23 August 1939.

¹⁰⁹ *Aberdeen Journal*, 13 May 1939. See also, 'Premier Signs for Charity Umbrella', *Dundee Courier*, 8 April 1939.

¹¹⁰ 'Curiosities of the Future', *Manchester Guardian*, 29 May 1939.

¹¹¹ 'Umbrellas', *Western Daily Press*, 3 January 1940.

¹¹² 'Umbrella the New Symbol of Peace', *Hull Daily Mail*, 6 February 1939.

the violent muzzling of freedom of speech and the crushing of political pluralism under dictatorships on the Continent. As Nicolson would claim, 'a sense of humour cannot prosper either in a totalitarian and classless society or in a society in the process of revolution. A special, fortuitous, and therefore transitory, balance between acceptance and revolt, between conformity and non-conformity, between the conventional and the eccentric, is needed before a sense of humour can pervade a whole society'.¹¹³ Further, what made the English sense of humour distinctive and a 'national quality possessed by all classes alike' was the combination of the sardonic humour of the proletariat and the gentle and indulged mode more typical of the bourgeoisie.¹¹⁴

Humour, according to Nicolson, and via Freud, functioned as a defence mechanism, especially so 'to reduce the menacing to a level of the comic, as when Hitler was represented not as some demonic force intent upon destruction, but as a talkative man with a moustache' (Figure 3).¹¹⁵ Arguably, the most accomplished agent of this British line of defence and psychological warfare was the fierce anti-fascist and anti-appeasement cartoonist for Beaverbrook's otherwise pro-appeasement *Evening Standard*, David Low. Virtually without fail, Low depicted Chamberlain with or as the umbrella. The ideographic picture-writing potential of the umbrella came to Low as a real boon. From time to time, he had espied Chamberlain taking his regular walks in St. James's Park, 'looking rather like a bird himself, with his small head on a long neck and unlidged eye (the glare but without the cruelty) and the inevitable umbrella tucked under his arm, poking out behind, a kind of tail'. It followed naturally that 'the umbrella stuck in my mind. Chamberlain was the sort of Englishman who carried his umbrella everywhere. I was struck by its symbolic possibilities'.¹¹⁶ In the umbrella Low saw myriad symbolic prospects, and it served as a powerful and pliable symbol on par with the palm of Peace or the clenched fist for force. Low deemed it the 'Perfect' symbol for the cartoonist, for, as he explained, it '[k]eeps the rain off, shelters from the blast, can lean on it, poke with it, may be blown inside-out, might attract lightening...After that I used the umbrella regularly as the symbol for Chamberlain Appeasement. Sometime he carried it, sometimes it carried him'.¹¹⁷ Low also inter-textualized the Munich docudrama and *Snow White*, casting Chamberlain as 'Sno-Use' and the Seven Dwarfs, his tattered umbrella now serving as a broom.¹¹⁸

¹¹³ Harold Nicolson, *The English Sense of Humour and other Essays* (London, 1956), 35.

¹¹⁴ Nicolson, *The English Sense of Humour*, 23.

¹¹⁵ Nicolson, *The English Sense of Humour*, 41–2.

¹¹⁶ David Low, *Low's Autobiography* (London, 1956), 308.

¹¹⁷ Low, *Low's Autobiography* 309.

¹¹⁸ See David Low cartoons 'Two Meetings', *Evening Standard*, 13 May 1938; 'Si vis pacem pare umbrellum', *Evening Standard*, 12 November 1938; 'Low's Topical Budget',



Figure 3
 David Low, 'Low's Topical Budget', *Evening Standard*, 12 November 1938. Solo Syndication, and British Cartoon Archive Ref. No. DL1385.

Nor did Low hold a monopoly on the umbrella as a symbol of political failure rather than gentlemanly restraint. *Time and Tide* remarked on the fact that 'Mr Chamberlain never opens his umbrella. Isn't there an allegory here? All the little States in North and Central Europe are

Evening Standard, 19 November 1938; 'Low's Topical Budget', *Evening Standard*, 26 November 1938; 'Low's Christmas Dream', *Evening Standard*, 24 December 1938; 'The Set Up for 1939', *Daily Express*, 2 January 1939; 'Low's Topical Budget', *Evening Standard*, 25 March 1939; and 'Inspection of Correspondence Column', *Evening Standard*, 17 July 1939.

looking around for cover. Hungary is the latest to run to totalitarian shelter. As umbrellas go the democratic pattern is more attractive—but it won't do up'.¹¹⁹ The passionately anti-Chamberlain *Peace and Plenty*, directed by Communist filmmaker Ivor Montagu, showed an image still of a diagonally poised umbrella in the frame just before a series of unflattering portrait shots of the PM and his key Cabinet members, while later in the film a Chamberlain marionette, complete with umbrella, has his strings pulled as he is merely the puppet of capitalism and the traditional landed elite.¹²⁰ By April 1939, Eleanor Roosevelt too amplified the changing charge of the Premier's umbrella with the quip: 'The gentleman with the umbrella, finding that appeasement does not work where ethics do not exist, has gone the whole way in the opposite direction.'¹²¹ All this had a trickle-down effect, and when the *Manchester Guardian* offered a first prize of two guineas and a second prize of one guinea for a triolet on any topic of the moment, a prevalent theme was 'our Mr Chamberlain and his umbrella, which ranged from the gently sympathetic to the almost libellous'.¹²² This entry demonstrated well how Chamberlain's umbrella had become a terrible liability.

He has always loved Peace,
 So he took his umbrella
 To attend to the decease.
 He has always loved Peace.
 (Knowing voters are geese)
 He's an honourable fella
 He has always loved Peace,
 So he took his umbrella.¹²³

On the other side of the political spectrum, the Tory photojournalist and anti-appeaser Edward Hulton used the *Picture Post* as a platform from which to call Chamberlain to arms, trumpeting in April 1939:

Down Umbrellas: The call now is 'To Arms, Citizens!' 'Statutory Citizen Service' may provide our rulers with large bodies of men whom they cannot at once organise, still less find machineguns for. But it will put the slacker on a basis of equality with the patriot, and show the Germans that we are willing to do for freedom what they are doing for tyranny. However, it is Mr Chamberlain who must seize the shield and drop the umbrella.¹²⁴

¹¹⁹ 'Time-Tide Diary', *Time and Tide*, 21 January 1939.

¹²⁰ Ivor Montagu, *Peace and Plenty* (1939) <http://player.bfi.org.uk/film/watch-peace-and-plenty-1939/>

¹²¹ 'Sayings of the Week', *Manchester Guardian*, 9 April 1939.

¹²² 'A Refrain for the Times', *Manchester Guardian*, 1 March 1939.

¹²³ 'A Refrain for the Times', *Manchester Guardian*, 1 March 1939.

¹²⁴ Edward Hulton, 'Can we Let Hitler Dominate Europe?' *Picture Post*, 15 April 1939.

Hulton's hostility towards Chamberlain was unabated after the man's death, again expressed by recourse to the umbrella: 'We went from bad to worse when the late Neville Chamberlain took it into his head that he could convert the devil by flourishing an umbrella.'¹²⁵

There was a noticeable number of American women foreign correspondents who adopted a staunchly anti-appeasement position, most prominent among them Dorothy Thompson, Virginia Cowles, Martha Gellhorn, and Helen Kirkpatrick. Kirkpatrick titled her indictment of the National Government's foreign policy *Under the British Umbrella: What the English Are and How They Go to war* (Jan. 1939). During the Munich Crisis Kirkpatrick was temporarily diplomatic correspondent for the *Sunday Times*. During her time in London, together with two other journalists, Victor Gordon-Lennox and Graham Hutton, she published a weekly newspaper *The Whitehall News* which was anti-appeasement and in opposition to Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. Apparently, among others, Eden and Churchill were readers of *The Whitehall News*. Czech-born former American Secretary of State Madeleine Albright has noted that then as now people are inclined to express their views through their dress, and, after Munich, New York department stores 'were selling a \$1 pin in the shape of a white umbrella—the symbol of Chamberlain in the color of surrender'.¹²⁶

Nicolson remarked that Hitler was 'immune to any sense of humour' and rather possessed a 'savage sense of farce'.¹²⁷ Indeed, the malicious Nazi sense of humour was illustrated in this anecdote: upon hearing from the BBC news that Chamberlain had flown without his umbrella to visit British troops stationed in France in December 1939, German airmen dropped an umbrella of British make over the lines, bearing the message: 'German airmen regret that Chamberlain is forced to go without an umbrella in such bad weather, and are sending him useful protection.'¹²⁸ By 1940 Mr Chamberlain's umbrella had become 'the official "hate emblem" of the Nazi fighting forces', and it appeared on the Bridlington torpedo, and as a badge on many German Air Force squadrons, 'one such showing the umbrella tucked under the arm of a toucan-like bird, and another depicting the PM's gamp being clutched by a cherub'.¹²⁹

While the initial spontaneous representations of the umbrella were largely harmlessly whimsical, favourable and flattering to Chamberlain, the Prime Minister's critics lost little time to show how the shadow of a

¹²⁵ 'Antony Eden in the Middle East', *Picture Post*, 20 November 1943.

¹²⁶ Madeleine Albright, *Prague Winter: A Personal Story of Remembrance and War, 1937-1948* (New York, 2012), 107.

¹²⁷ Nicolson, *The English Sense of Humour*, 47.

¹²⁸ 'Umbrella for Mr Chamberlain', *Manchester Guardian*, 21 December 1939.

¹²⁹ 'Umbrella as Emblem', *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 26 March 1940.

halo cast by his ostensible umbrella of peace was actually a terrible spectre. At first David Low came under harsh criticism for his iconoclasm and his desecration of the umbrella, as 'expressions of doubt seemed almost indecent', and because 'it was very difficult to discuss the Chamberlain policy sensibly in those days. To his friends he was a saint, to his critics rather less so'.¹³⁰ But the analytical 'deconstruction' of the umbrella was well under way by the time Hitler's troops marched into Prague. Gwilym O. Griffiths' letter to the *Manchester Guardian* critiqued the National Government's betrayal of the League, but he also drew an analogy between art and modern political culture, along the lines of Walter Benjamin's paradigm of the aestheticization of politics.¹³¹

Our statesmen have wished well to the League within the limits of a pre-war mentality, but they have been led by their nose for 'realism' to concern themselves less with world reconstruction than with temporary interests and more with capitalistic 'appeasement' than with a well-founded peace... Their policy had become 'objective' in the sense that decadent modern art is objective, dismembering and disintegrating the human image and presenting only an eye, a nose, with an aeroplane, an umbrella, or some such confusion of objects. There is no longer any integral form, no unitive conception, but an aggregation of things immediately perceived...¹³²

Indeed, there is a strong element of the surreal in the emblems and artefacts of the Munich Crisis. Fittingly, Chamberlain's ghost-like umbrella dominates the right side of the canvass in Salvador Dalí's dreamscape 'The Enigma of Hitler' (1939). As the artist explained, the painting consisted of 'a condensed reportage of a series of dreams obviously occasioned by the events of Munich...Chamberlain's umbrella appeared in the painting in a sinister aspect, identified with the bat, and affected me as extremely anguishing at the very time I was painting it'.¹³³

Remarkably, umbrella-phobia was a condition that could be diagnosed after the war in politicians who had had to rescue their reputations from the 'Guilty Men' stigma. Robert Armstrong, Lord Armstrong of Illminster, shared these reminiscences of his former boss

¹³⁰ David Low, *Low's Autobiography*, 309–10.

¹³¹ Walter Benjamin's *Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936).

¹³² 'Mr Chamberlain's Foreign Policy', [letter to the editor from Gwilym O. Griffiths] *Manchester Guardian*, 6 March 1939.

¹³³ Salvador Dalí, *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí*, trans. H.M. Chevalier (New York, 1993), 371. An earlier painting 'Telephone in a Dish with Three Grilled Sardines at the End of September' (1939) was another realization of the artist's subconscious response to the Czech crisis.

Rab Butler, for whom he had served as Private Secretary when Butler was Chancellor of the Exchequer:

once when we were walking together he was carrying a cane with a silver head. He explained that in 1938, at the time of the events in Munich, he had been a junior Minister at the Foreign Office. He said, 'It was very difficult for me. I had no responsibility for formulating the policy or deciding what the policy should be. I just had to explain it in the House of Commons because my Secretary of State was in the House of Lords. I had no share in saying what it should be'. There was a pause and then Mr. Butler waggled his cane at me and said, 'Since that time I have never carried an umbrella'.¹³⁴

Even in Tory circles the association of the umbrella with Chamberlain and his foreign policy marked the end of the umbrella-carrying habit. John le Carré's *Absolute Friends* (2003) begins with the protagonist Bavarian-based tour guide Ted Mundy's reflection on the meaning and resonances of Chamberlain's umbrella in the post-Cold War context: 'in German eyes, therefore, Neville Chamberlain's rolled-up umbrella remains to this very day, madam, the shameful emblem of British appeasement of *Our Dear Führer*, his invariable name for Adolf Hitler. "I mean frankly, in this country, as an Englishman, I'd rather stand in the rain without one."¹³⁵ The insinuation of Chamberlain's umbrella, if not umbrellas more generally,¹³⁶ is that they no longer project safety and protection. Rather, reliance on an umbrella demeans and emasculates its user.

Conclusion

Claims have often been made about popular enthusiasm for Chamberlain in the weeks after Munich, and starting in 1939 Norman Angell, in *For What Do We Fight*, 'called for the British people to face the truth about the international situation, to recognize that the strategy of appeasement had not been "completely sound and fully vindicated."' Angell charged the public with complicity, and in his ultimate indictment he stressed that responsibility lay not only with Mr Chamberlain and his Government but 'the nation, the electorate, the public as a whole. If it be true that Mr Chamberlain or his predecessors

¹³⁴ Hansard, HL, 26 February 1996, col 1284–1285

¹³⁵ [italics in the original] John Le Carre, *Absolute Friends* (London, 2003), 8.

¹³⁶ In 2007 the characterization of football manager Steve McClaren as the 'wally with the broolly' is another example of the negative and emasculating signification of the umbrella.

were leading us along a path the end of which was war, then it was the nation's job to get rid of him'.¹³⁷ The culpability for appeasement had to be more widely shared. Indeed, a history of the visual and material culture of appeasement shines light on the once cloud-covered evidence of popular support for Chamberlain, offering a 'people's history' of the Munich Crisis, as we are able to breathe new life into the sights, sounds, tastes and textures of the political climate in the autumn and winter of 1938–9. By considering the universal presence of Chamberlain's umbrella, we reveal the social imaginary of Britain at the anxious close of the antebellum, at moments of relative calm before the storm. One could even suggest that the broly is the ideal 'umbrella term' for the Munich Crisis, and especially for the very British experience of and the putatively non-hysterical public response to the 'war of nerves'.¹³⁸

¹³⁷ Quoted in Robert J. Caputi, *Neville Chamberlain and Appeasement* (Cranbury NJ, 2000), 22.

¹³⁸ A 'War of Nerves' was how the *Daily Mail* characterized the crisis cycle of September 1938, and the expression was used repeatedly to describe the countdown to war in the summer of 1939: 'the provocation, the propaganda, the movements of troops, the storming of the citadel from within. . . But the British people are not easy targets for the snipers of Dr Goebbels. We should win in a war of guns. We shall certainly not be defeated in a war of nerves'. 'The Voice of Britain', *Daily Mail*, 3 July 1939. See also G. Ward Price, 'The "War of Nerves" goes on', *Daily Mail*, 31 August 1939.