

Overall Synopsis: Making the Heavens Hum - Hugh Gault

Part 1: Kingsley Wood and the Art of the Possible 1881-1924 published 2014
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Born in 1881 in Hull where his father was a Methodist minister, Kingsley Wood's family soon moved to London. Wood was imbued with the ethic of public service from an early age but was not a natural Conservative. Nor, unlike many other Conservative politicians, had he money behind him to smooth his path; initially dependent on his own efforts he soon accrued influential contacts and patronage, both Nonconformist and more widely.

A solicitor from 1903, Wood built a thriving practice in the City, provided free legal advice to the poor in various settlements and was the Methodists' legal adviser of choice. By 1906 he was the Conservative agent for Hoxton. Prominent as the acknowledged expert, already in the public eye, he represented various interests over the 1910 proposals for state insurance. Wood thought this a threat to individual thrift, as well as to business interests, clashing with Lloyd George, co-ordinating the response of Friendly Societies and securing amendments to the Bill. Wood was notable in the Nonconformist Unionist Association campaign against Home Rule and soon one of the leading opponents alongside Balfour, Carson and others. Risks to Empire, tariff reform, increasing socialism and world war might end civilisation as the western world knew it. Big city government, particularly the London County Council, was one of the battlegrounds and in 1911 Wood, out-flanking his Labour opponent, was elected as Municipal Reform representative for Woolwich. He was re-elected in 1913 ahead of Margaret Bondfield, subsequently one of Labour's first women MPs.

During World War I Wood chaired the LCC's Building Acts, Insurance and Old Age Pensions Committees, and was vice-chairman of the special committee established to administer separation allowances for the families of soldiers and sailors. He had campaigned against enemy aliens but he also fought for pension improvements so that people did not have to rely on the Poor Law and later against the scandal of short-weight bread. He kept the focus on tuberculosis, arguing for better access to sanatoria and improved housing to combat it.

Will Crooks, who had captured Woolwich from the Tories in a spectacular by-election, was the Labour MP from 1903 to 1918. In 1918 the seat was split in two, Crooks retaining Woolwich East while Wood won Woolwich West as a coalition Conservative with a majority over Labour of more than 5,000. Wood, now Sir Kingsley, had proposed a Ministry of Health to replace the Local Government Board and he was appointed as Parliamentary Private Secretary (PPS) there in Lloyd George's coalition government. Lloyd George and Wood shared similar backgrounds of nonconformity and law, but they were otherwise poles apart. Lloyd George was ruthless and ambitious, an orator, opportunist and self-publicist. Wood was understated, almost principled by contrast, yet a competent speaker and effective strategist nonetheless and, as with all natural politicians, quick to spot opportunities – for his geographical and religious constituents and consequently for himself as well.

In his early years in Parliament Wood oversaw the "homes for heroes" programme, helped the Ministry of Health into being and campaigned for allotments, earlier shop closing and continued employment at the Woolwich Arsenal. In 1923 he fought alongside Labour and Liberal MPs in opposing Irish deportations and his party's proposed limitations on the right to trial by jury, while in 1924 he was instrumental in the downfall of the first Labour government.



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Part 2: Scenes from a Political Life 1925-1943

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Neville Chamberlain's Parliamentary Secretary at Health throughout the five years of Baldwin's 1924-1929 government, Wood delivered major programmes of health, housing and local government reform. He was the Government's Civil Commissioner in Newcastle and the north-east during the 1926 General Strike.

In the 1929 general election Wood just retained his seat, becoming the chief parliamentary critic of the Labour government of 1929-1931. In the subsequent National Government he was Postmaster General for four years with responsibility for reforming the Post Office and for overseeing the BBC. He has been described as "... the best PMG in history ...", though Sir John Reith called him "a little bounder" when they were at odds over renewal of the BBC Charter. They reached a rapprochement in subsequent years, with Wood often the "giant autocrat's" advocate in the government. Dragging the Post Office into the twentieth century, Wood provided leadership for the Bridgeman reforms, raised employee morale and introduced public relations and advertising to promote the full range of services (savings bank, telegrams, telephones as well as letters and parcels). In doing so he resisted both the revival of the penny post and those people who wanted to see the Post Office sold off. As always there was a tension between those who thought it a public service and those who believed it should be a business.

Conservative Chief of Staff in the 1935 general election he then became Minister of Health, first under Baldwin then Chamberlain. He became Minister of Air from May 1938 when aircraft production vastly increased as Britain re-armed. In May 1940 he persuaded Neville Chamberlain to resign. Wood has been described as "the indispensable Judas" when he then immediately became Churchill's Chancellor of the Exchequer. As Chancellor he supported Keynes, the economic adviser Wood had appointed to the Treasury, giving him and the rest of a gifted team Wood had around him the political endorsement they required. Cato (Michael Foot and others) identified Wood as one of "the guilty men" – not least over Dunkirk and appeasement, but the country faced increasing devastation and disaster on other fronts as well, not least how to pay for the war. Keynes described the budget that followed in April 1941 as "a revolution in public finance". In February 1943 Wood led Government opposition to early implementation of the Beveridge report, which he thought should be assessed alongside other social and physical reconstruction priorities after the war so that these were not pre-empted and - every Chancellor's refrain - the overall cost implications were tackled properly. When Wood died prematurely in September 1943, Churchill missed this "barometer of the Conservative party" – the consummate party politician with his "ear to the ground". "The keenest and most cunning of politicians" as Wood had been described.

