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‘This is biography as art, and a finer example one could scarcely hope to read. Why on earth does the world need another biography of Churchill? Before reading this, it would have been hard to say. Afterwards, very easy indeed – because it needed Andrew Roberts to write it’
David Olmroyd-Bolt, *Catholic Herald*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andrew Roberts is a biographer and historian of international renown whose books include *Salisbury: Victorian Titan* (winner of the Wolfson Prize for History), *Masters and Commanders* (winner of the Emery Reves Award) and *The Storm of War* (winner of the British Army Book Prize). His most recent book was *Napoleon the Great* (2014), which won the Grand Prix of the Fondation Napoléon and the Los Angeles Times Biography Prize. Roberts is a Fellow of the Royal Societies of Literature and the Royal Historical Society, and a Trustee of the International Churchill Society. He is currently Visiting Professor at the Dept of War Studies at King’s College, London, and the Roger and Martha Mertz Visiting Research Fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University. His website is www.andrew-roberts.net

ANDREW ROBERTS

Churchill

Walking with Destiny



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*For Henry and Cassia
From their proud father*

*If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster,
And treat those two impostors just the same . . .*

Rudyard Kipling, 'If'

Study history, study history. In history lie all the secrets of statecraft.
Churchill to an American student before
a Coronation luncheon in Westminster Hall, 27 May 1953

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‘Writing a long and substantial book is like having a friend and companion at your side,’ wrote Churchill of his *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples*, ‘to whom you can always turn for comfort and amusement, and whose society becomes more attractive as a new and widening field of interest is lighted in the mind.’ My thanks to my editors, Stuart Proffitt and Joy de Menil, my agent Georgina Capel, and my copy-editor, the eagle-eyed Peter James, as well as my picture editor Cecilia Mackay, and Richard Duguid and Ben Sinyor at Penguin, for their friendship, good humour, Stakhanovite work and superb professionalism. Stephen Ryan was once again a superlative proofreader.

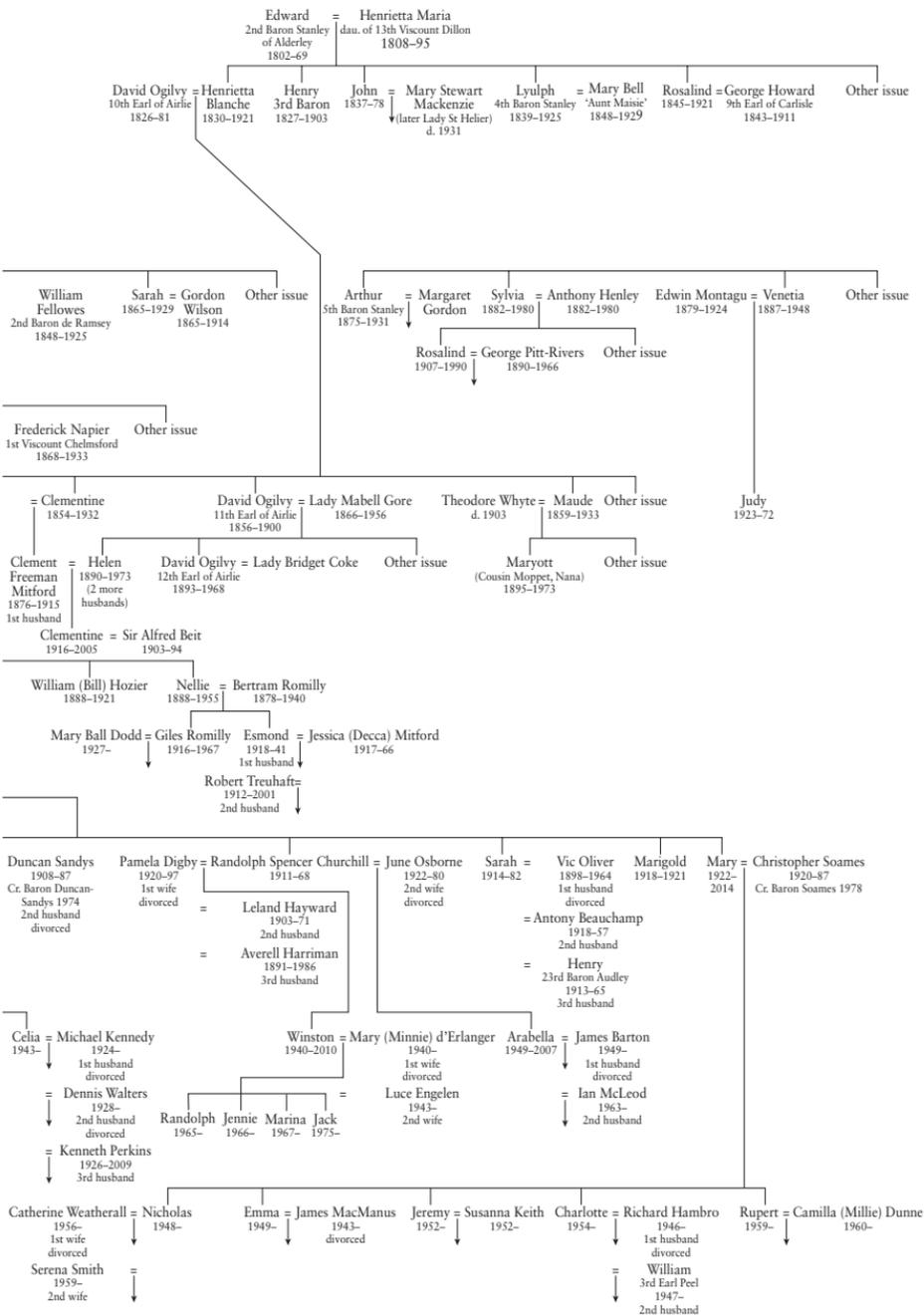
I cannot thank my wife Susan enough for visiting Gallipoli, Cuba and Hiroshima with me, and for living with this book for more than four years, giving me unfailing help, support and encouragement all along the way. As Churchill put it in the final words of *My Early Life*, ‘I married and lived happily ever afterwards.’

Andrew Roberts

July 2018

Note on Money Conversion

In 1874, when Churchill was born, £1 was worth roughly £80 in today’s money; in 1900 it was worth £101, in 1914 £91, in 1920 £41, in 1930 £50, in 1940 £52, in 1945 £35, in 1950 £28, and in 1965, when he died, £16. The pound sterling was worth \$4.86 until 1914, \$3.66 in 1920, \$4.80 in 1930, \$4.03 in 1940, \$4.00 in 1945, and \$2.80 from 1950 to 1965.

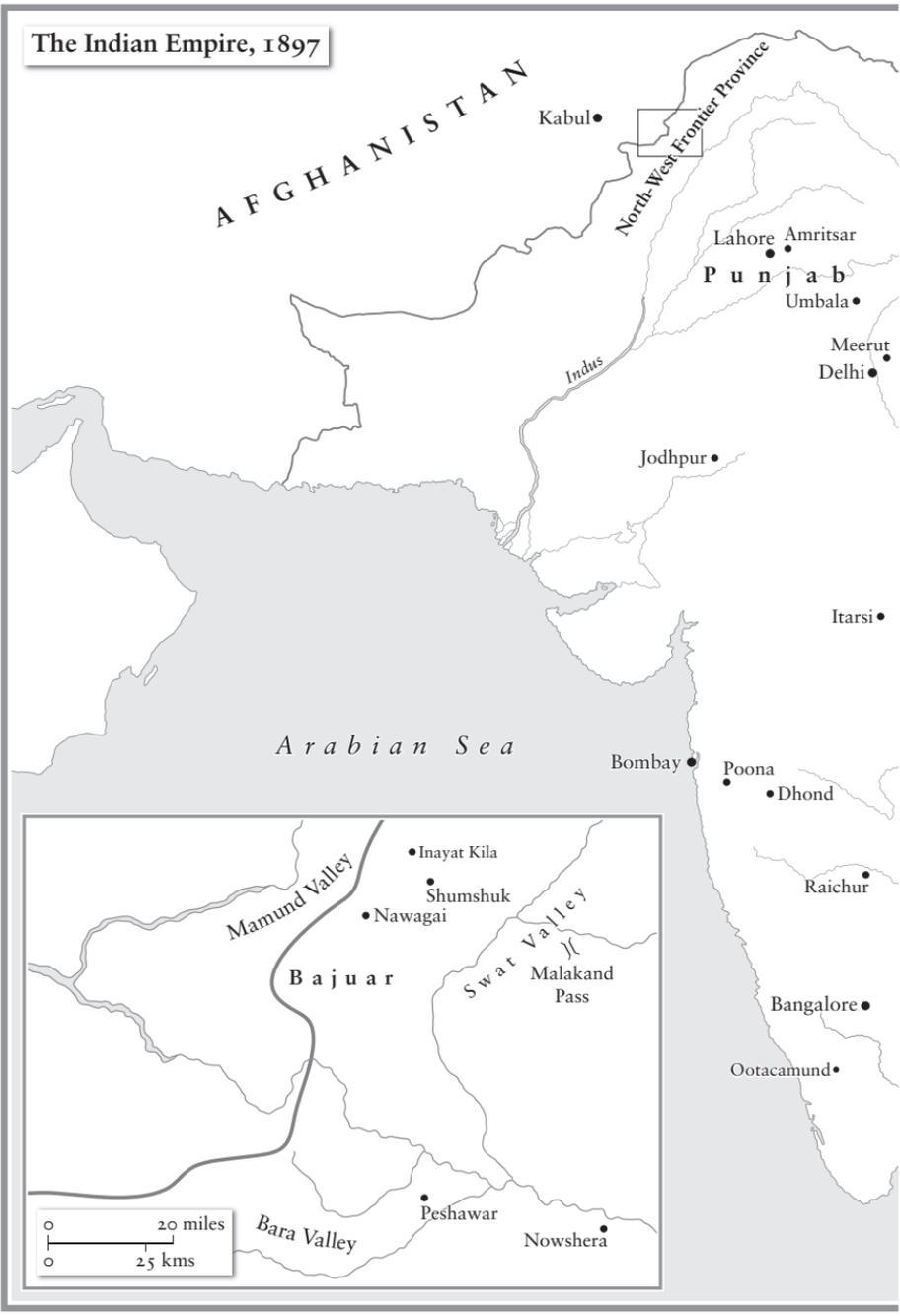


The British Isles

North Western Approaches



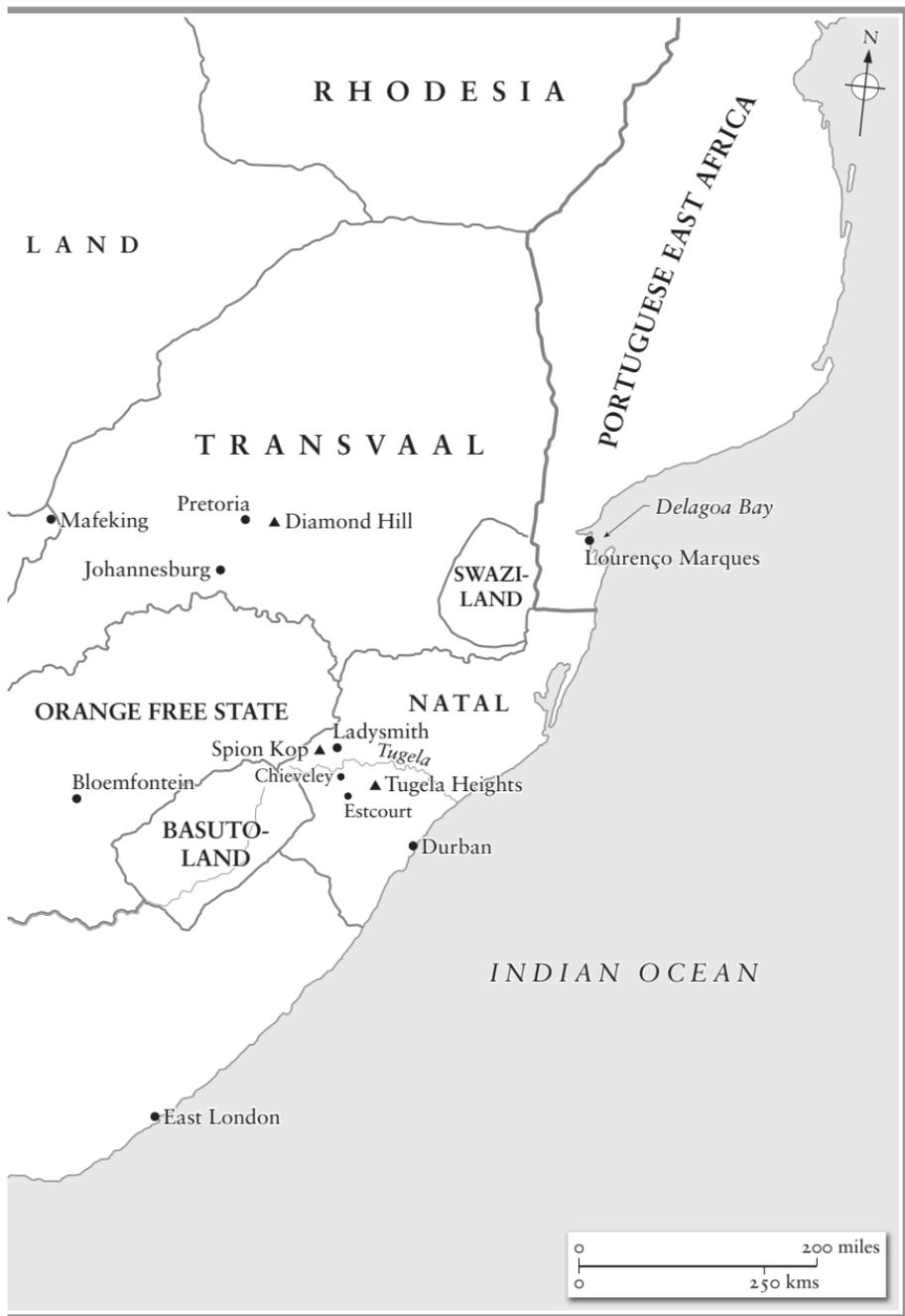
The Indian Empire, 1897



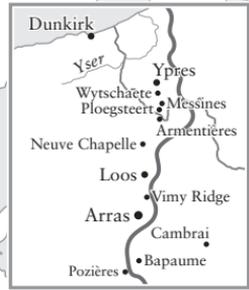


Southern Africa, 1899





The Western Front



NORTH SEA

Battle of Jutland

DENMARK

Dogger Bank

Sylt

Heligoland

Kiel Canal

Broad Fourteens

Borkum

• Emden

• Wilhelmshaven

HOLLAND

• Amsterdam

• Rotterdam

• London

• Ostend

• Zeebrugge

• Antwerp

• Calais
• Boulogne
• Château de Verchocq

• Brussels

• Liège

• Mons

• Namur

• Mauberge

• La Boisselle

Somme

LUXEMBOURG

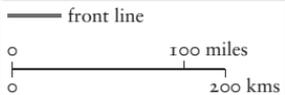
• Verdun

• Paris

Marne

FRANCE

SWITZERLAND



The Dardanelles, 1915



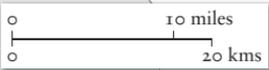
Aegean Sea

Sea of Marmara

Gallipoli Peninsula

ASIA MINOR

The Narrows

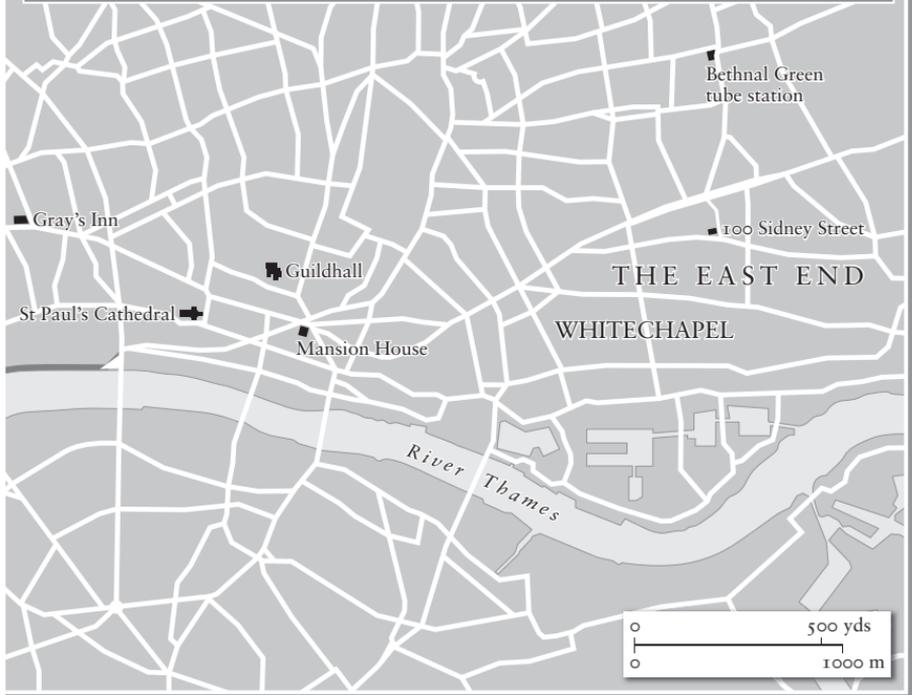
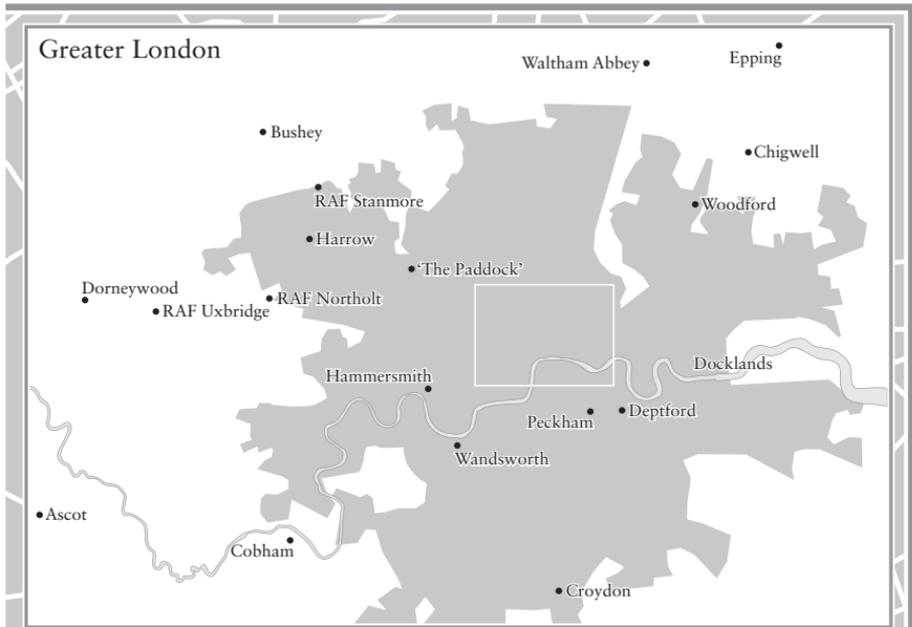


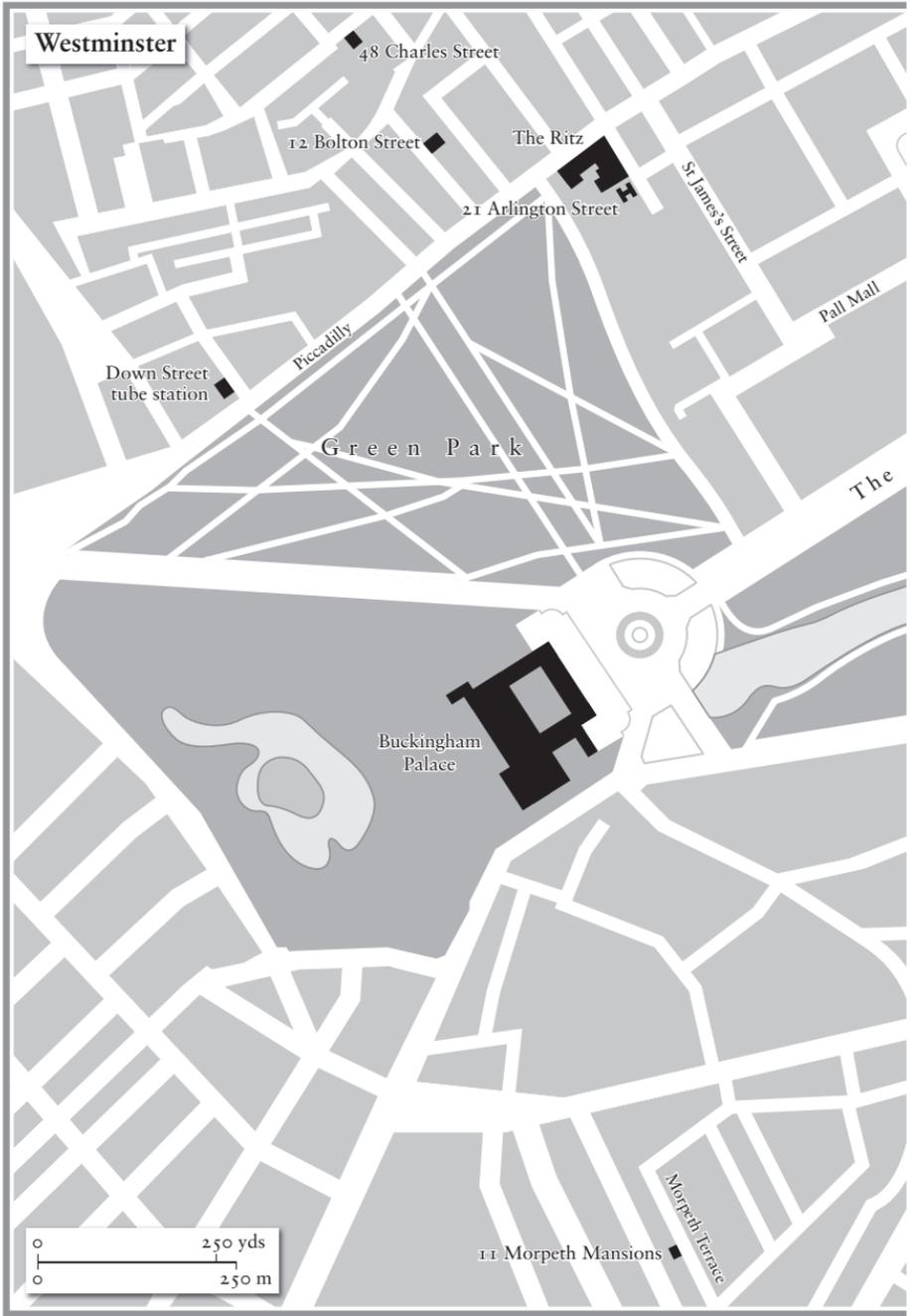
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- Kephez Point
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- Cape Helles
- Sedd el Bahr
- Kum Kale ●
- Tenedos
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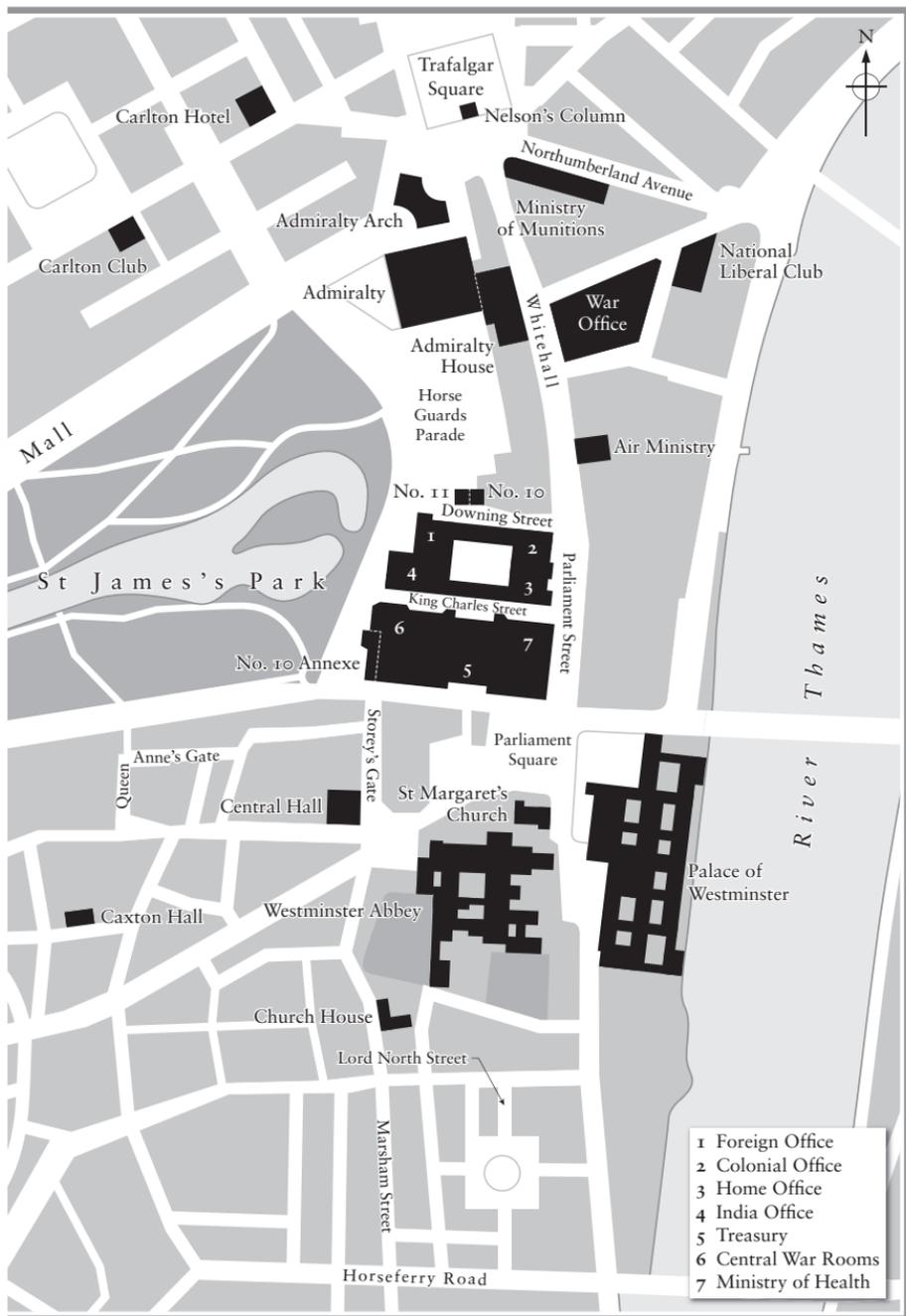
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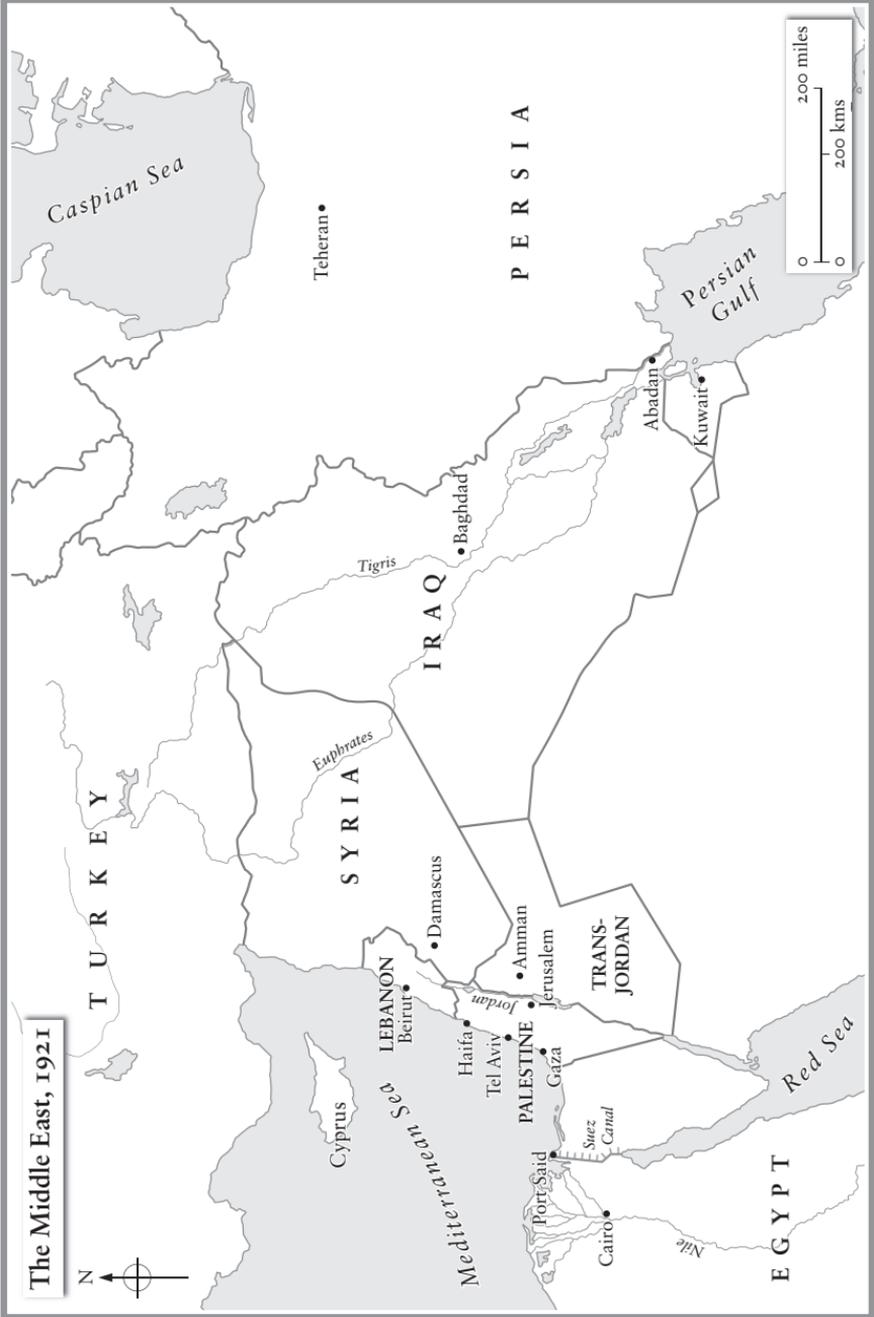
De Gaulle's Residence
HAMPSTEAD







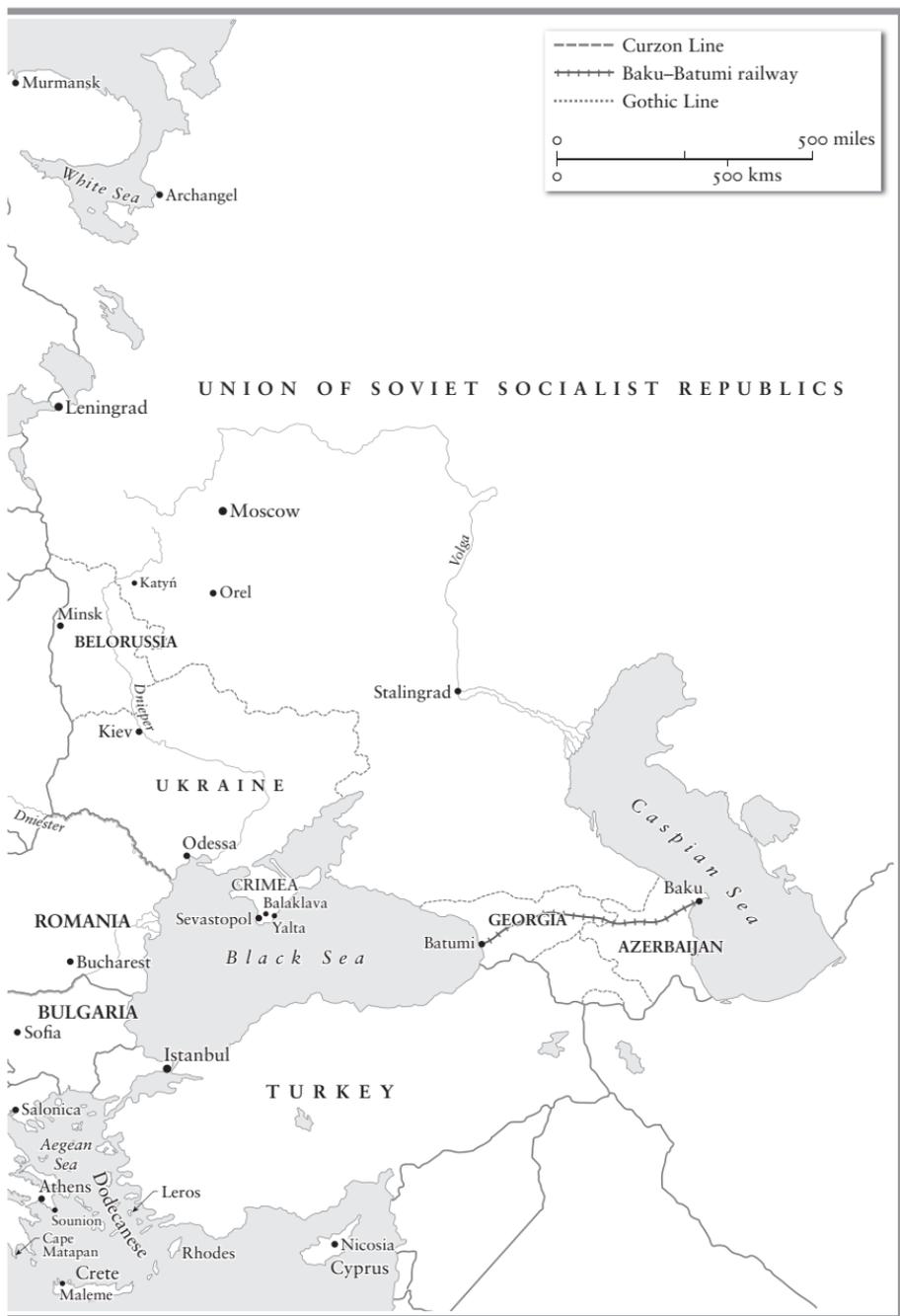






Europe during the Second World War
borders as in January 1938





France during the Second World War

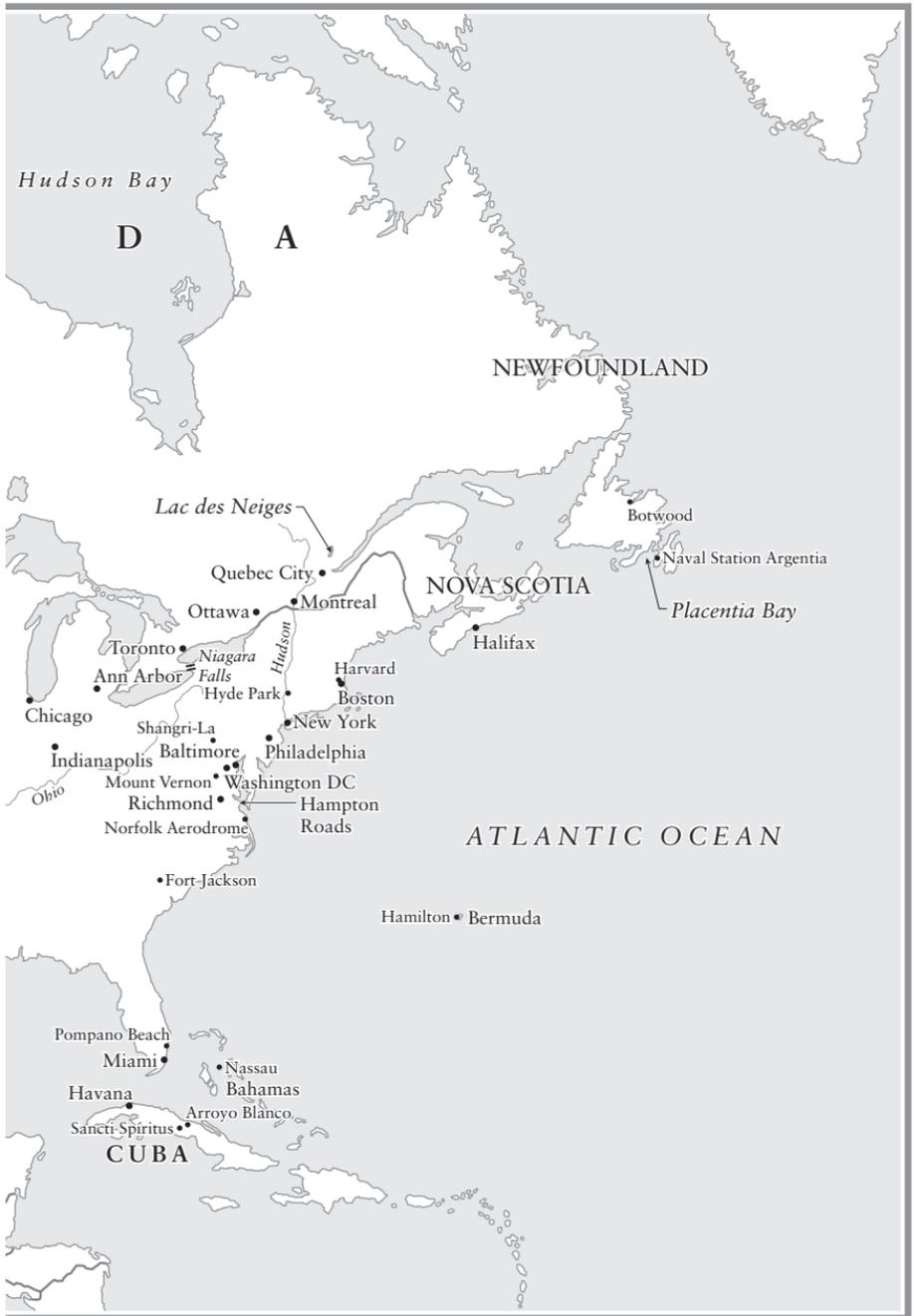




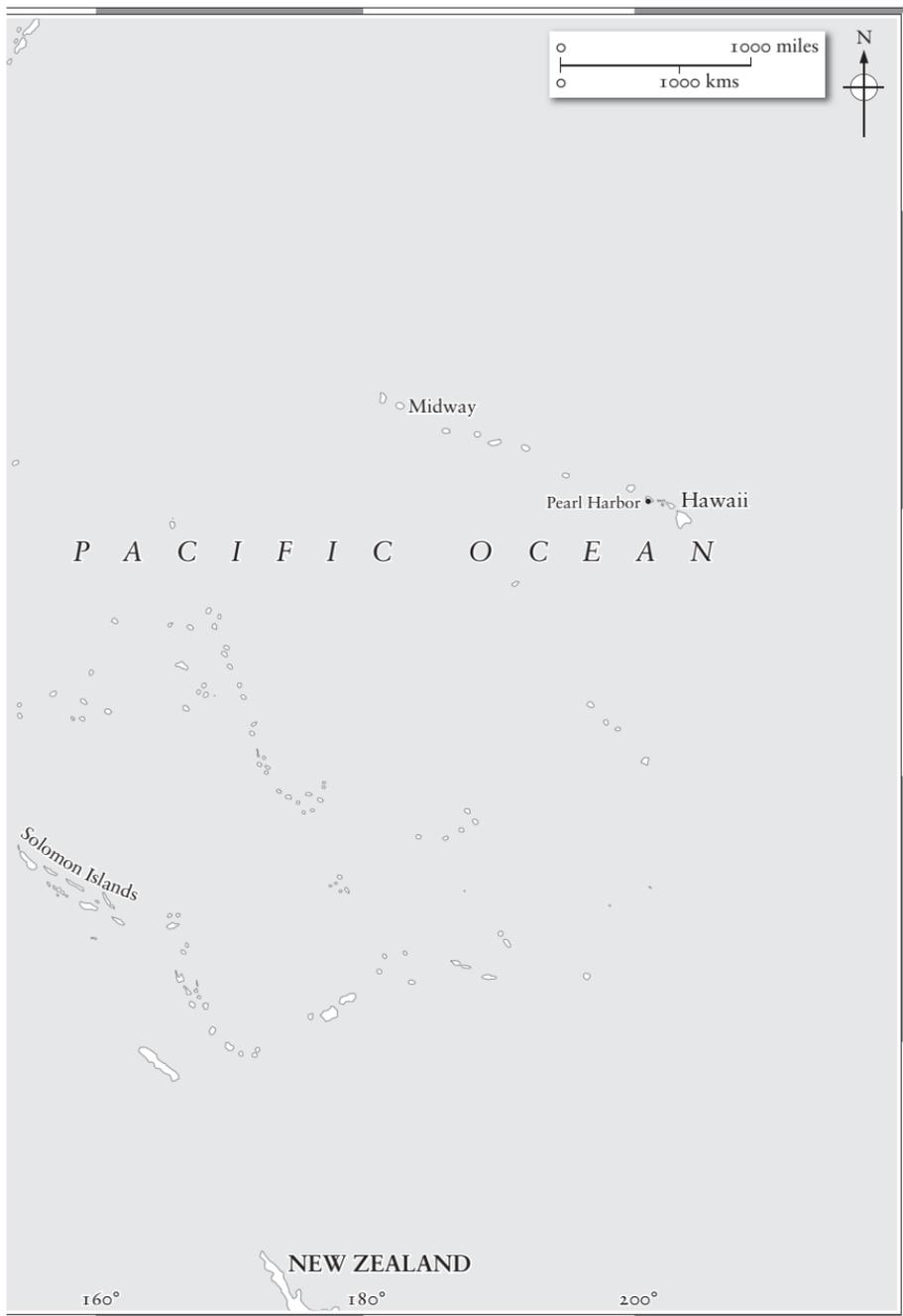












Introduction

On Thursday, 20 December 1945, the editor of the *Sunday Dispatch*, Charles Eade, lunched with Winston Churchill and his wife Clementine at their new home in Knightsbridge in London. Eade was editing the former Prime Minister's wartime speeches for publication, and they were due to discuss the latest volume.

Before lunch, Eade had waited in what he later described as 'a beautiful room with bookshelves let into the wall and carrying superbly bound volumes of French and English books', which Churchill called his 'snob library'. The walls were adorned with pictures of Churchill's great ancestor, the 1st Duke of Marlborough, and a portrait of Churchill painted by Sir John Lavery during the First World War.

The lunch reflected post-war British rationing: an egg dish, cold turkey and salad, plum pudding and coffee. They drank a bottle of claret that the Mayor of Bordeaux had just sent over. Churchill told the trusted journalist, who had lunched with him several times during the war, that he 'had got very drunk' at a dinner at the French Embassy the previous night, adding with a chuckle, 'drunker than usual'.

Over several glasses of brandy and a cigar – whose band Eade took away as a souvenir – Churchill got down to discussing the best way to publish the wartime speeches he had delivered when the House of Commons had been in secret session during the war. In the course of their hour-long talk, he showed Eade the sixty-eight volumes of minutes, messages and memoranda that he had sent to various Cabinet ministers and the Chiefs of Staff between 1940 and 1945, allowing him to open them at random.

When Eade naturally expressed surprise at the sheer volume of work that Churchill had managed to get through as prime minister, 'He explained to me that he was able to handle all these affairs at the centre, because his whole life had been a training for the high office he had filled during the war.' It was a sentiment that Churchill had expressed two years

earlier to the Canadian Prime Minister, William Mackenzie King, during the Quebec Conference in August 1943. When King told Churchill that no one else could have saved the British Empire in 1940, he replied that 'he had had very exceptional training, having been through a previous war, and having had large experience in government.' King rejoined, 'Yes, it almost confirmed the old Presbyterian idea of pre-destination or pre-ordination; of his having been the man selected for this task.' This idea was reiterated by the Conservative politician Lord Hailsham, who had been a junior minister in Churchill's wartime government, when he said, 'The one case in which I think I can see the finger of God in contemporary history is Churchill's arrival at the premiership at that precise moment in 1940.'

Churchill put his remarks to King and Eade far more poetically three years later in the final lines of his book *The Gathering Storm*, the first volume of his war memoirs. Recalling the evening of Friday, 10 May 1940, when he had become prime minister only hours after Adolf Hitler had unleashed his Blitzkrieg on the West, Churchill wrote, 'I felt as if I were walking with destiny, and that all my past life had been but a preparation for this hour and for this trial . . . I could not be reproached either for making the war or with want of preparation for it. I thought I knew a good deal about it all, and I was sure I should not fail.'

He had believed in his own destiny since at least the age of sixteen, when he told a friend that he would save Britain from a foreign invasion. His lifelong admiration of Napoleon and his own ancestor, John Churchill, 1st Duke of Marlborough, coloured his belief that he too was a man of destiny. His aristocratic birth, as the holder of the two famous names of Spencer and Churchill, gave him a tremendous self-confidence that meant that he was not personally hurt by criticism. In the courageous and often lonely stands he was to take against the twin totalitarian threats of Fascism and Communism, he cared far more for what he imagined would have been the good opinion of his fallen comrades of the Great War than for what was said by his living colleagues on the benches of the House of Commons.

The memory of his friends killed in war or by accidents (such as Lawrence of Arabia) or alcoholism (such as F. E. Smith) very often moved Churchill to tears, but so did many other things, as this book will relate. Churchill's passions and emotions often mastered him, and he never minded crying in public, even as prime minister, in an age that admired the stiff upper lip. This was just one phenomenon of many that made him a profoundly unusual person.

This book explores the extraordinary degree to which in 1940

Churchill's past life had indeed been but a preparation for his leadership in the Second World War. It investigates the myriad lessons that he learned in the sixty-five years before he became prime minister – years of error and tragedy as well as of hard work and inspiring leadership – then it looks at the ways that he put those lessons to use during civilization's most testing hour and trial. For although he was indeed walking with destiny in May 1940, it was a destiny that he had consciously spent a lifetime shaping.

PART ONE

The Preparation

I

A Famous Name, November 1874–January 1895

It is said that famous men are usually the product of unhappy childhood. The stern compression of circumstances, the twinges of adversity, the spur of slights and taunts in early years, are needed to evoke that ruthless fixity of purpose and tenacious mother-wit without which great actions are seldom accomplished.

Churchill, *Marlborough*¹

Half English aristocrat and half American gambler.

Harold Macmillan on Churchill²

Winston Leonard Spencer-Churchill was born in a small ground-floor room, the nearest bedroom to the main entrance of Blenheim Palace in Oxfordshire, at 1.30 a.m. on Monday, 30 November 1874. It was a worrying birth as the baby was at least six weeks premature, and his mother, the beautiful American socialite Jennie Jerome, had suffered a fall a few days earlier. She had also been shaken by a pony-cart the day before the birth, following which her labour-pains started. In the event there were no abnormalities, and the baby's father, Lord Randolph Churchill, the younger son of the 7th Duke of Marlborough, was soon describing him as 'wonderfully pretty' with 'dark eyes and hair and very healthy'.³ (The hair soon went strawberry blond, and great tresses of it from when he was five can be seen in the birth room at the Palace today; thereafter Churchill was red-headed.)

The name 'Winston' recalled both Sir Winston Churchill, the child's ancestor who had fought for King Charles I in the English Civil War, and Lord Randolph's elder brother, who had died aged four. 'Leonard' honoured the baby's maternal grandfather, a risk-taking American financier and railway-owner who had already made and lost two great fortunes on Wall Street. 'Spencer' had been hyphenated with 'Churchill' since 1817, the result of a marital alliance with the rich Spencer family of Althorp, Northamptonshire,

who at that time held the earldom of Sunderland and were later to become the Earls Spencer. Proud of his Spencer forebears, he signed himself Winston S. Churchill, and in 1942 told an American trade unionist that 'of course his real name was Spencer-Churchill and it is in this way that he is described, for example, in Court Circulars when he goes to see the King.'⁴

The child's paternal grandfather was John Winston Spencer-Churchill, owner of Blenheim Palace, which has been described both as the English Versailles and as 'the greatest war memorial ever built'.⁵ Named after the most glorious of the battles won by John Churchill, 1st Duke of Marlborough, in the War of Spanish Succession in 1704, its magnificent structure, tapestries, busts, paintings and furnishings commemorated a victory in a conflict that had saved Britain from domination by a European superpower – in this case, the France of Louis XIV – a message that the young Winston did not fail to imbibe. 'We have nothing to equal this,' King George III admitted when he visited Blenheim Palace in 1786.

'We shape our buildings,' Winston Churchill was later to say, 'and afterwards our buildings shape us.'⁶ Although he never lived at Blenheim, he was profoundly influenced by the splendour of the Palace's 500-foot frontage, its 7 acres of rooms and its 2,700-acre estate. He absorbed its magnificence during the many holidays and weekends he stayed there with his cousins. The Palace was – still is – pervaded with the spirit of the 1st Duke, the greatest soldier-statesman in British history, who, as Churchill was to describe him in his biography of his ancestor, was a duke 'in days when dukes were dukes'.⁷

For his late Victorian contemporaries, the young Winston Churchill's name conjured up two images: the splendour of the 1st Duke's military reputation and Palace of course, but also the adventurous career of Lord Randolph Churchill, the child's father. Lord Randolph had been elected a Member of Parliament nine months before Churchill was born, and was one of the leaders of the Conservative Party from the child's sixth birthday onwards. He was controversial, mercurial, opportunistic, politically ruthless, a brilliant speaker both on public platforms and in the House of Commons, and was marked out as a future prime minister – as long as his inherent tendency to recklessness did not get the better of him. In politics, he followed the precepts of the Conservative leader Benjamin Disraeli, which combined imperialism abroad with a progressive programme of social reform at home. Lord Randolph was to call his version Tory Democracy, and it was to be imbibed in full by Winston. His slogan, 'Trust the People', was to be used many times in his son's career.

Although Lord Randolph was the son of a duke, he was not rich, at least relative to most of the rest of his class. As an aristocratic younger son in the era of primogeniture, he could not expect to inherit much from

his father; and although the father of his American wife Jennie Jerome had been enormously rich in the recent past – he was once nicknamed ‘the King of New York’ – he had seen massive reverses in the American stock-market crash of 1873. Nevertheless, Leonard Jerome still lived in a house that covered an entire block on Madison Avenue and 26th Street, and which boasted extensive stabling and a full-size theatre. He had owned the land where the Jerome Park Reservoir is today, founded the American Jockey Club and co-owned the *New York Times*.

By the time of Jennie’s wedding the year after the crash, however, Jerome could settle only £2,000 per annum on his beautiful daughter, the Duke of Marlborough contributing £1,200 per annum for his son. Along with the leasehold on a house at 48 Charles Street in Mayfair, courtesy of Jerome, that ought to have been enough for the couple to live upon comfortably, had they not both been notorious spendthrifts. ‘We were not rich,’ their son recalled during the Second World War. ‘I suppose we had about three thousand pounds a year and spent six thousand.’⁸

Lord Randolph had met Jennie at Cowes Regatta on the Isle of Wight in August 1873. After only three days he had proposed and been accepted. They married in the British Embassy in Paris after a seven-month engagement, on 15 April 1874. Although the Marlboroughs gave their formal blessing to the union, they were absent from the wedding, because the Duke – who had sent agents to New York and Washington to try to ascertain Jerome’s genuine net worth – thought it a *mésalliance* and Jerome ‘a vulgar kind of man’, ‘a *bad* character’ from ‘the class of speculators’.⁹

Churchill was proud that his parents had married for love. Writing in 1937 about a libel action he was launching against a book which had described him as ‘the first-fruit of the first famous snob-dollar marriage’, he told a friend:

The reference to my mother and father’s marriage is not only very painful to me, but as you know is utterly devoid of foundation. This was a love-match if ever there was one, with very little money on either side. In fact they could only live in the very smallest way possible to people in London Society. If the marriage became famous afterwards it was because my father, an unknown sprig of the aristocracy, became famous, and also because my mother, as all her photographs attest, was by general consent one of the beauties of her time.¹⁰

(He eventually won £500 in damages from the publisher for the libel, plus £250 in costs, but not the apology for which he had been hoping.)

Winston Churchill was born into a caste that held immense political and economic power in the largest empire in world history, and that had not yet

become plagued by insecurity and self-doubt. Churchill's sublime self-confidence and self-reliance stemmed directly from the assurance he instinctively felt in who he was and where he came from. In his obituary of his cousin 'Sunny',* the 9th Duke of Marlborough, he wrote that he had been born into one of 'the three or four hundred families which had for three or four hundred years guided the fortunes of the nation'.¹¹ He knew he came from the apex of the social pyramid, and one of the key attributes of that class at that time was not to care overmuch what people further down it thought of them. As his greatest friend, the Tory MP and barrister F. E. Smith, later Lord Birkenhead, was to write of him, 'He was shielded in his own mind from self-distrust.'¹² This was to prove invaluable to Churchill at the periods – of which there were many – when no one else seemed to trust him.

The social life of the Victorian and Edwardian upper classes was partly based upon staying in the country houses of friends and acquaintances for the 'Friday-to-Monday' extended weekend. Over the coming years, Churchill was to stay with the Lyttons at Knebworth, his cousins the Londonderrys at Mount Stewart, the Rothschilds at Tring, the Grenfells at Taplow and Panshanger, the Roseberys at Dalmeny, the Cecils at Hatfield, the Duke of Westminster at Eaton Hall and on his yacht *Flying Cloud*, his cousins Lord and Lady Wimborne at Canford Manor, the John Astors at Hever and the Waldorf Astors at Cliveden, as well as paying frequent visits to Blenheim and very many other such houses. Although he occasionally experienced social ostracism as a result of his politics in later life, he always had an extensive and immensely grand social network upon which he could fall back. This largely aristocratic cocoon of friendship and kinship was to sustain him in the bad times to come.

The Victorian English aristocracy was a distinct tribe, with its own hierarchies, accents, clubs, schools, colleges, career-paths, vocabulary, honour-codes, love-rituals, loyalties, traditions, sports and sense of humour. Some of these were quite intricate and almost impenetrable to outsiders. When as a young subaltern Churchill was introduced to the caste system in India, he understood it instantly. His political opinions essentially stemmed from Disraeli's Young England movement of the 1840s, whose sense of *noblesse oblige* assumed eternal superiority but also instinctively appreciated the duties of the privileged towards the less well off. The interpretation Churchill gave to the obligations of aristocracy was that he and his class had a profound responsibility towards his country, which had the right to expect his lifelong service to it.

* So nicknamed because of his earliest courtesy title, the Earl of Sunderland, rather than because of his disposition.

The British upper classes of the last quarter of the nineteenth century could on occasion seem quite separate from the rest of society. Lord Hartington, heir to the dukedom of Devonshire, had never heard of napkin-rings, for example (because he assumed that table linen was washed after every meal); the statesman Lord Curzon was reputed to have taken a bus only once in his life, when he was outraged that the driver refused to take him where he was ordered. Similarly, the first time that Churchill dialled a telephone number himself was when he was seventy-three.¹³ (It was to the speaking clock, which he thanked politely.) He did not believe he depended on household servants quite as much as he did. ‘I shall cook for myself,’ he once proudly told his wife in the 1950s. ‘I can boil an egg. I’ve seen it done.’¹⁴ (In the end, he did not.) Aged fifteen, one of the postscripts to his letters reads: ‘Milbanke is writing this for me as I am having a bath.’^{15*} Two years later he complained bitterly about having to travel in a second-class compartment, writing, ‘I won’t travel Second again by Jove.’¹⁶ When older, he rarely went anywhere without a valet, even to the battlefields of the Boer War and Second World War, and while in prison in South Africa he had a barber come in to shave him. He ordered food at the Savoy that wasn’t on the menu, and as prime minister, if he wanted a fly swatted, he asked his secretary to call for his valet to ‘Wring its bloody neck.’¹⁷ Churchill was emphatically not representative of the coming Age of the Common Man.

Like a true aristocrat, he was no snob. ‘What is the sense of being against a man simply because of his birth?’ he wanted to ask Adolf Hitler of the Jews.¹⁸ His closest friends were taken from a wide social circle; indeed, if anything, he had something of a weakness for parvenus, such as his friends Brendan Bracken and Maxine Elliott. ‘Imbued with a historic sense of tradition,’ a close friend wrote, ‘he was quite untrammelled by convention.’¹⁹ This was seen in his eccentric dress-sense such as siren suits and zip-shoes, as well as the highly irregular hours he kept. He enjoyed disregarding the rules of hierarchy, often to others’ fury. ‘I am arrogant,’ he once said of himself in a perceptive piece of self-analysis, ‘but not conceited.’²⁰ In the modern world, a sense of aristocratic entitlement is considered reprehensible, but Churchill was replete with it and it affected his attitude towards everything – it explains, for example, his readiness blithely to spend money that he did not have. He lived his life in an aristocratic way even if he could not afford it, but that was in itself aristocratic. He demanded extended credit, gambled heavily in casinos and as soon as he was properly solvent – which was not until he was in his seventies – he bought racehorses.

* Sir John ‘Jack’ Milbanke later won the Victoria Cross in the Boer War.

Many are the memoirs that condemn Churchill for his insensitivity to other people and their views, but they fail to appreciate that just such a rhinocerine hide was essential for someone who was to become as addicted to controversy as he was. 'You are one of the few who have it in their power to bestow judgments which I respect,' he wrote to Lord Craigavon who had fought in the Boer War and was prime minister of Northern Ireland, in December 1938, at one of the lowest points in his life.²¹ Like the Marquess of Lansdowne, who promoted peace with Germany during the First World War, or the Marquess of Tavistock, who much more reprehensibly did so during the Second, the aristocrat in Churchill encouraged him to say fully and exactly what he thought, regardless of the consequences.

Churchill spent his early years in Dublin, where his parents lived at Little Lodge, close to the Viceregal Lodge* in Phoenix Park, where Lord Randolph worked as private secretary to his father. The 7th Duke had been appointed viceroy and lord lieutenant of Ireland by Disraeli in January 1877; Lord Randolph had to leave London because he was being socially ostracized by the Prince of Wales after trying unsuccessfully to blackmail him over a scandal involving Randolph's elder brother, the Marquess of Blandford, some compromising love-letters and a married former mistress of the Prince. It was one of the very many unedifying scrapes in which Lord Randolph found himself during his short, unstable but undeniably exciting life. The elephantine Prince had a long memory, and Lord Randolph was not permitted to return to London for over three years.

Churchill's earliest memory was suitably martial, of his grandfather unveiling a statue to Lord Gough, the Anglo-Irish imperial hero, in Phoenix Park in 1878. The Duke made a speech which included the phrase 'And with a withering volley he shattered the enemy's line,' which Churchill claimed he understood even at the age of three.²² With his grandfather representing Queen Victoria and discharging her ceremonial duties in Ireland, Churchill acquired a profound reverence for monarchy that was to stay with him for the rest of his life. His next memory came the following March, in 1879, when he was riding a donkey in the Park and came across what his governess feared was an Irish republican demonstration, but which was probably in fact only a march by the Rifle Brigade. 'I was thrown off and had concussion of the brain,' he later recalled. 'This was my first introduction to Irish politics!'²³ His next came in 1882 when Thomas Burke, the Under-Secretary of Ireland, who had given Churchill

* Áras an Uachtaráin, where the president of Ireland lives today.

a toy drum, was stabbed to death in Phoenix Park by Irish republican terrorists along with the newly appointed Chief Secretary, Lord Frederick Cavendish, profoundly shocking the household.

Churchill's younger brother Jack was born – also prematurely – in February 1880, while the family was still in Ireland, but that April Lord Randolph's social exile came to an end and he returned to set up house at 29 St James's Place in London. Churchill's next political memory was the death of Disraeli in April 1881, when he was six. 'I followed his illness from day to day with great anxiety,' he recalled, 'because everyone said what a loss he would be to his country and how no one else could stop Mr Gladstone from working his wicked will upon us all.'²⁴ The Liberal William Gladstone had won a general election in the month the Churchills returned to London, becoming prime minister for the second time. In 1883, Lord Randolph founded the Primrose League, a grass-roots Tory political organization, named after Disraeli's supposed favourite flower. It existed principally to promote his father's career and the Tory Democracy political programme, and Winston joined its Brighton branch when he was twelve.

'My dear Mamma, I hope you are quite well,' he wrote from Blenheim Palace in his first surviving letter, in January 1882, after his parents had celebrated Christmas elsewhere. 'I thank you very very much for the beautiful presents those Soldiers and Flags and Castle they are so nice it was so kind of you and dear Papa I send you my love and a great many kisses, Your loving Winston.'²⁵ Many boys had toy soldiers, but one of Churchill's cousins later recalled that 'His playroom contained from one end to the other a plank table on trestles, upon which were thousands of lead soldiers arranged for battle. He organized wars. The lead battalions were manoeuvred into action, peas and pebbles committed great casualties, forts were stormed, cavalry charged, bridges were destroyed.'²⁶ These battles were 'played with an interest that was no ordinary child game'. The enormous lead army implies generosity from his parents for the boy whom his grandmother was by then describing as 'a naughty, sandy-haired little bulldog.'²⁷ Yet the fact that his parents had spent Christmas away from him was indicative of a persistent physical as well as emotional distance that would today be regarded as verging on the abusive. His brother Jack's son Peregrine was possibly correct in his belief that his uncle had not been neglected by his parents more than most upper-class Victorian children of the period, but that his sensitive nature rebelled against it more than most.

Lord Randolph Churchill's political career and Jennie's active social life meant that they had relatively little time for their son. On one occasion Lord Randolph gave a speech in Brighton without bothering to visit Winston at school less than 2 miles away in Hove. After a dinner in the late

1930s, Winston was to say to his own son, 'We have this evening had a longer period of continuous conversation together than the total which I ever had with my father in the whole course of his life.'²⁸ Jennie noted in her diary each of the thirteen occasions that she saw her sons during the first seven months of 1882, such as 'Found the children pretty well' or 'Saw the children'.²⁹ She also went shopping eleven times, painted twenty-five times, had lunch or tea with her friend Lady Blanche Hozier twenty-six times and had tea with the Conservative MP Arthur Balfour ten times. She went out in the evenings so often that she mentioned instead the very rare occasions when she 'did not go out to any parties, too sleepy'. Otherwise she hunted, spent weekends in house parties in the country, had 'tremendous chaff' with the famous beau Captain Bay Middleton at tea and 'mostly frivolous larking' with friends at lunch, played the piano, dined at the Café Royal, played billiards, lunched at St James's Palace, watched Sarah Bernhardt and Lilly Langtry on stage, 'stayed in bed till 2 p.m.', played tennis and generally lived the crowded life of a much sought-after Society beauty.³⁰

'Went to the Salisburys' party', reads a typical entry in Jennie's diary, 'afterwards to Cornelia's ball. The Prince and Princess there. Not wildly amusing.'³¹ Since she could hardly have found 'Little Win' wildly amusing at seven, he had to take his place in the long queue for her attention and affection, as she lived the socially accomplished if somewhat vacuous life of the wife of a Victorian aristocrat and politician. On a single occasion she went out with Consuelo, Duchess of Marlborough, 'to give away blankets, etc' to the poor, two days after she had 'Shopped all morning'.³² Winston was later famously to write of his mother, 'She shone for me like the evening star. I loved her dearly – but at a distance.'³³

Much of Churchill's well-documented naughtiness at the various schools to which he was sent seems to have stemmed from the desire to draw attention to himself, for unlike the archetypal child of the Victorian era he was determined to be both seen and heard. It is rare for anyone to depict themselves as less intelligent than they genuinely are, but Churchill did so in his autobiography *My Early Life* in 1930, which needs to be read in the context of his colourful self-mythologizing rather than as strictly accurate history. His school reports utterly belie his claims to have been an academic dunce. Those from St George's Preparatory School in Ascot, which he entered just before his eighth birthday in 1882, record him in six successive terms as having come in the top half or usually top third of the class.³⁴

Churchill was regularly beaten at St George's, but this was not because of his work – his History results were always 'good', 'very good' or 'exceedingly good' – but because his headmaster, H. W. Sneyd-Kinnersley, was

a sadist described by one alumnus as ‘an unconscious sodomite’, who enjoyed beating young boys on their bare bottoms until they bled.³⁵ Ostensibly the reason for these fortnightly beatings derived from Churchill’s bad conduct, which was described as ‘*very naughty*’, ‘still troublesome’, ‘exceedingly bad’, ‘very disgraceful’ and so on.³⁶ ‘He cannot be trusted to behave himself anywhere,’ wrote Sneyd-Kinnersley in April 1884, but in the very next sentence: ‘He has very good abilities.’³⁷

‘Dreadful legends were told about Winston Churchill,’ recalled the writer Maurice Baring, a near-contemporary at St George’s. ‘His naughtiness appeared to have surpassed anything. He had been flogged for taking sugar from the pantry, and so far from being penitent, he had taken the headmaster’s sacred straw hat from where it hung over the door and kicked it to pieces. His sojourn at this school [was] one long feud with authority. The boys did not seem to sympathize with him. Their point of view was conventional and priggish.’³⁸ (This lack of friendly support from conventional and priggish contemporaries was to dog Churchill for almost the rest of his life.)

At this distance of time it is impossible to tell whether Churchill’s bad behaviour had genuinely warranted punishment, or whether Sneyd-Kinnersley’s craving to hurt children was more to blame, but before Churchill was ten years old the beatings had so damaged his health that his parents took him away from St George’s and sent him to a far kinder school in Hove, run by two sisters both called Miss Thomson.

In *My Early Life* Churchill calls St George’s ‘St James’s’, perhaps out of tact, but more likely because he had sensibly put the place out of his mind for nearly half a century.³⁹ The person who had first spotted the lashes wrought on the young boy by Sneyd-Kinnersley was Churchill’s fifty-two-year-old spinster nanny, Elizabeth Everest. ‘My nurse was my confidante,’ Churchill later recalled. ‘It was to her I poured out my many troubles.’⁴⁰ One doesn’t have to embrace Freudianism to find his nicknames for her – ‘Woom’ and ‘Woomany’ – poignant in a child looking for a mother-surrogate while his real mother was dazzling the Prince of Wales’s Marlborough House Set* with her beauty, high spirits and sexual allure. Other maternal figures sometimes stepped in: his grandmother often had him to stay at Blenheim, and his aunt Lady Wimborne, Lord Randolph’s sister, hosted him at Bournemouth during school holidays, but the woman who was by far the closest to him was Mrs Everest. ‘Lots of love and kisses from your loving WOOM,’ she would write to ‘My darling Winny’ when they were apart.⁴¹ The Churchills unceremoniously sacked

* So called because they met at the Prince’s London residence, Marlborough House.

her when he was nineteen and Jack thirteen, leaving the elder boy distraught. When she fell ill from peritonitis a short while later, he paid for her nursing and rushed to her bedside when she was dying, aged sixty-two. ‘She had lived such an innocent and loving life of service to others and held such a simple faith’, he later wrote of her death, ‘that she had no fears at all, and did not seem to mind very much. She had been my dearest and most intimate friend during the whole of the twenty years I had lived.’⁴² Subsequently he paid for the upkeep of her grave for the rest of his life.* Close friends were to predecease him throughout his life, but few were closer to him than Elizabeth Everest.

Aside from a lacerated bottom, Churchill took away from St George’s a photographic and phonographic memory, perhaps as a means to avoid floggings by memorizing things by heart that he did not properly understand. He claimed in his autobiography that, because he could not master the first declension of Latin, ‘there was one thing I could do: I could learn by heart.’⁴³ His capacity for memorizing huge amounts of prose and verse stayed with him for life, and would continue to astonish contemporaries well into old age. Many were the occasions that he would quote reams of poetry or songs or speeches half a century after having learned them. He was omnivorous in what his mind’s ear chose to retain, which included long Shakespeare soliloquies, but also much of the repertoires of music-hall performers such as Marie Lloyd, George Robey, ‘Little Tich’ and George Chirgwin (‘the White-Eyed Kaffir’).⁴⁴

At Hove, Churchill read voraciously, especially epic tales of heroic, often imperial, adventure, such as *Treasure Island*, *King Solomon’s Mines* and the works of G. A. Henty.⁴⁵ He came first in Classics, third in French and fourth in English in 1885, further belying his later claims to have been an academic failure, while he continued to be either near or at the bottom of the entire school for conduct.⁴⁶ His unpunctuality was to be a lifelong trait; even as prime minister he would arrive late or with only minutes to spare for meetings with Cabinets and monarchs and for debates in Parliament. As his exasperated wife was to say, ‘Winston always likes to give the train a sporting chance to get away.’⁴⁷

Churchill knew from an early age that his father was famous, and he asked him for autographs to sell to his classmates.⁴⁸ When he was taken to a pantomime at Brighton where an actor playing Lord Randolph was hissed by the audience, he burst into tears and turned furiously on a man behind him, shouting, ‘Stop that row, you snub-nosed Radical!’⁴⁹ In the summer of 1883, when Churchill was eight, his father took him to Paris.

* The Churchill Family Graves Trust undertakes the task today.

As they drove together through the Place de la Concorde, Churchill noticed that one of the monuments was covered with black crêpe and he asked his father why. 'These are monuments of the provinces of France,' replied Lord Randolph, but 'Alsace and Lorraine have been taken from France by the Germans in the last war [that is, the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71]. The French are very unhappy about it and hope some day to get them back.' Churchill remembered 'quite distinctly thinking to myself, "I hope they will get them back."⁵⁰ It was his first introduction to what he was to call 'the long feud between Teuton and Gaul'. His Francophilia was to remain long after Alsace and Lorraine had been restored to France by the Versailles Treaty in 1919.

Hove was kinder than St George's, but there were two dangerous incidents there. The first came in December 1884 when the ten-year-old Winston was stabbed in the chest with a penknife by a boy whose ear he was yanking. It turned out to be merely a flesh wound. The second came in March 1886 when he contracted pneumonia, his temperature reached 104.3 degrees Fahrenheit (40.2 Celsius), and he became delirious, an illness so serious that it even persuaded his parents to visit him.⁵¹ Part of the cure was the regular administration of relatively large doses of brandy, both orally and rectally.⁵² 'My boy at school at Brighton nearly died of inflammation of the lungs* last week,' his father informed the 3rd Marquess of Salisbury, the Conservative Party leader.⁵³ Overall, however, Churchill was happy at Hove, where he could pursue the activities that interested him, primarily French, History, riding, swimming and learning reams of poetry by heart.⁵⁴

In June 1885, Lord Salisbury appointed Randolph Churchill secretary of state for India. It was in recognition of his talents and his ability to cause trouble rather than for any loyalty he had shown. As the leader of the tiny so-called Fourth Party of Tory MPs, Lord Randolph had often rebelled against the Conservative Party leadership in the Commons, making jokes at its expense. Salisbury hoped that an important Cabinet office might discipline him.

In February 1886 Lord Randolph annexed Upper Burma, a country five times the size of England, to the British Empire (which was already thrice the size of the Roman Empire at its height).⁵⁵ He had earlier opposed Gladstone's bombardment of Alexandria in 1882 as too much of a 'Forward' imperialist policy, yet only four years later he went further. Similarly, he had given assurances to Charles Stewart Parnell, the Irish nationalist leader, in 1885 that he would endorse Irish Home Rule, assurances which

* In fact, it was only his right lung.

in 1886 he completely reneged upon, declaring that the northern Protestants would start a civil war sooner than join a united Ireland. 'Ulster will fight,' he said provocatively in a public letter of 7 May 1886, 'and Ulster will be right.' Lord Randolph also made private remarks in favour of 'Fair Trade' – then a code for Imperial Protectionism – before publicly advocating Free Trade. His principles may have been flexible, but audiences that turned out to hear him speak were enormous, sometimes numbering in their tens of thousands, because he was an electrifying orator. His obvious ambition and opportunism, however, made him distrusted by Lord Salisbury and the Tory Establishment.

In the summer of 1886, when Winston was eleven, Lord Randolph and Jennie became estranged, and rumours spread of a formal separation.⁵⁶ She was spending even more of her time with the Marlborough House Set, pursuing an affair with the dashing Austrian Ambassador to London, Prince Karl Kinsky, which lasted at least until 1892, when she began another with the handsome Freddy, Lord Wolverton.⁵⁷ Lord Randolph meanwhile, when he was not in the Commons or the Carlton Club, spent a good deal of time in Paris, where people presumed he was womanizing. 'Tell Mary she is a fool not to forgive Billy,' he once wrote to Jennie about two of their friends. 'What does one occasional cook or housemaid matter?'⁵⁸ It was indicative of his attitude, but nonetheless surprising to express it in a letter to his wife.

The general election of July 1886 saw the Conservatives and their anti-Irish Home Rule allies the Liberal Unionists (henceforth together the Unionists) win an outright victory. In recognition of Lord Randolph's key role in enthusing massive audiences around the country and attacking Gladstone with wit and eloquence, Lord Salisbury, the Prime Minister, appointed him both chancellor of the Exchequer and leader of the House of Commons. As Salisbury was almost twenty years older, and sat in the Lords rather than the Commons, Lord Randolph seemed to be the heir apparent for the premiership. He was also in a key position to promote the Disraelian concept of Tory Democracy which he had adopted as his political philosophy. When asked by a friend to explain what it meant in 1885, he only half joked, 'I believe it to be principally opportunism.'⁵⁹ Forced to define it publicly three years later, he waffled, 'It invokes the idea of a Government who . . . are animated by lofty and liberal ideas.'

After only five months in office, Lord Randolph threatened to resign from the Cabinet over the military budget (the Estimates), which he considered too high, despite having supported higher defence expenditure in opposition. Behind this was an attempt to wrest power inside the Cabinet from the Prime Minister. Instead of backing down, as he had done several

times in the past, Lord Salisbury simply accepted the resignation. Lord Randolph was never to hold public office again. He had behaved like a prima donna for years and ridden roughshod over his colleagues, and not a single Cabinet minister supported him.

In the biography of his father that Churchill was later to write, he connected the resignation with the onset of the mysterious disease that was to kill Lord Randolph within a decade: ‘That frail body, driven forward by its nervous energies, had all these last five years been at the utmost strain. Good fortune had sustained it; but disaster, obloquy, and inaction now suddenly descended with crushing force, and the hurt was mortal.’⁶⁰ The boy was profoundly affected by his father’s entirely self-inflicted disaster, from which he learned several important lessons. The most important was not to threaten to resign unless one is prepared to go into the wilderness. If one is not so prepared, then only threaten to resign along with several other people capable of bringing down the Government.

The attempted power-grab having spectacularly failed, Lord Randolph did indeed start to decline politically, mentally and personally. There were still some social occasions where the Churchills performed together in public – despite their informal separation, they still lived in the same house – although these grew fewer and fewer. On 8 August 1887, the diary of Prince George of Wales (the future King George V) records that at the time of Queen Victoria’s Golden Jubilee ‘the Randolph Churchills & Winny & Jack’ went aboard the Royal Yacht *Osborne* at Spithead.⁶¹ The twelve-year-old Churchill had the thrill of sailing on the Royal Yacht through the battle-fleet of twelve warships commanded by Vice Admiral Sir William Hewett VC, many of them names redolent of British history: HMS *Agincourt*, *Black Prince* and *Iron Duke* among them. That evening they went aboard the newly launched ironclad flagship HMS *Collingwood*.

‘Did you go to Harrow or Eton?’ Churchill asked his father in October 1887.⁶² It seems extraordinary that he did not know his father had gone to Eton, but he himself was destined for Harrow, largely because of the supposed health benefits of Harrow Hill’s sunlit uplands over Eton’s misty lowlands. Founded in 1572, Harrow was one of the great public schools of England, which among ancient buildings provided an elite, largely classical education informed by equally ancient traditions for the future gentlemen who were expected to go on to run the country and Empire. He passed the entrance exam in March 1888, after working through the second book of Virgil’s *Aeneid*.⁶³ In September 1941 he reminisced about Harrow to his private secretary John ‘Jock’ Colville, himself an Old

Harrowian, saying that this was ‘where he had spent the unhappiest days of his life’.⁶⁴ He wrote to his parents in November of this second year, ‘Don’t imagine I am happy here.’ He nonetheless returned to Harrow frequently between 1938 and 1962.

In *My Early Life*, Churchill boasted of how badly he had done in the entrance exam, and one of his school contemporaries, Sir Gerald Woods Wollaston (later Garter King of Arms), recalled that ‘The inconvenience likely to be caused by the rejection of Lord Randolph Churchill’s son’ probably played a part in his acceptance.⁶⁵ Churchill claimed that ‘In all the twelve years I was at school no one ever succeeded in making me write a Latin verse or learn any Greek except the alphabet.’⁶⁶ This was untrue, as his school reports show. He nonetheless recalled his schooldays as ‘a sombre patch upon the chart of my journey’ and ‘a time of discomfort, restriction and purposeless monotony’.⁶⁷ On the day he entered Harrow, 17 April 1888, the boy three above him in the school list was Archibald Campbell-Colquhoun, who lived at Chartwell Manor at Westerham in Kent.⁶⁸

For all his later denials, Churchill was in fact something of a success at Harrow. At fourteen he won a prize for reciting no fewer than 1,200 lines of Macaulay’s *Lays of Ancient Rome* without error, and a contemporary recalled that ‘he could quote whole scenes of Shakespeare’s plays and had no hesitation in correcting his masters if they misquoted.’⁶⁹ He enjoyed Macaulay’s tales of heroism set in the ancient world. ‘If I had to make my literary will and my literary acknowledgements,’ he told an acquaintance in 1946, ‘I should have to own that I owe more to Macaulay than to any other English writer.’⁷⁰ The talented schoolmaster Robert Somervell taught Churchill English grammar at Harrow. ‘Thus I got into my bones the essential structure of the ordinary British sentence,’ Churchill wrote, ‘which is a noble thing.’⁷¹ Less noble was his sole attempt at poetry, an ode entitled ‘Influenza’. The fourth of twelve stanzas goes:

On Moscow’s fair and famous town,
Where fell the first Napoleon’s crown,
It made a direful swoop;
The rich, the poor, the high, the low,
Alike the various symptoms know,
Alike before it droop.⁷²

Churchill kept himself busy with all manner of eclectic pastimes. He was a member of his victorious House swimming team; wrote for the school magazine the *Harrovian*; collected stamps, birds’ eggs and autographs; built a model theatre; played chess; bred silkworms; drew landscapes, and played the cello. In April 1892 he won the Public Schools

Fencing Championship Cup at Aldershot, using a foil. Despite being smaller and lighter than the other competitors, he won, according to the *Harrovian*, ‘chiefly due to his quick and dashing attack which quite took his opponents by surprise’.⁷³

Importantly for later life, Churchill also polished a talent for cheeky repartee. When Mr Mayo, a Harrow teacher, expostulated to a class rhetorically, ‘I don’t know what to do with you boys!’ the fourteen-year-old Churchill retorted, ‘Teach us, sir!’⁷⁴ Later, when the Headmaster, the formidable Dr Welldon, said, ‘Churchill, I have very grave reason to be displeased with you,’ he received the less witty but equally brave reply, ‘And I, sir, have very grave reason to be displeased with you!’⁷⁵ Churchill displayed similar courage when he showed his nanny Mrs Everest all over Harrow, ‘to her immense delight’, as Wollaston recalled, ‘and not content with this, he marched arm-in-arm with her up the high street for all who cared to see.’⁷⁶ The story of Churchill and his nanny ‘went like wildfire through the school, and did not then, I regret to say, add favourably to his schoolboy reputation’, his cousin Shane Leslie remembered. ‘When he walked about with her, a few jeering friends followed him down to the station where he had the courage to kiss her.’⁷⁷ Churchill was not about to allow the sneers of his snobbish contemporaries to mar the happiness of the woman who had showed him unquestioning love all his life. As Leslie noted, ‘He owed much health and probably his life to her devotion.’

Churchill enjoyed lectures on the battles of Waterloo and Sedan (where Germany had sealed France’s fate in 1870 and would again in 1940), on Alpine climbing by the famous mountaineer Edward Whymper of Zermatt, and on natural selection in butterflies, from which possibly stemmed his lifelong love of them. Asked what he intended to do as a profession, he replied, ‘The Army, of course, so long as there’s any fighting to be had. When that’s over, I shall have a shot at politics.’⁷⁸ The Harrow Archives contain an extraordinary document written when Churchill was fourteen, a 1,500-word essay set in the future about a British invasion of Russia, complete with six pages of battle plans. Written in the first person by ‘Colonel Seymour’ and dated 7 July 1914, it is full of military manoeuvres, ‘glittering bayonets’, ‘dark clouds of Cossacks’, heroic derring-do and aides-de-camp charging across limb-strewn battlefields carrying vital orders between commanders. ‘The fields which this morning were green’, Churchill wrote, ‘are now tinged with the blood of seventeen thousand.’⁷⁹ A quarter of a century before the Great War, he understood that as a result of advances in military technology ‘The front line was no place for cavalry now.’ Like Churchill’s hero Napoleon, ‘Colonel Seymour’ was nonetheless kept busy on horseback. ‘As I galloped off to obey the order,’ he writes, ‘I

looked over my shoulder at the spot on which General C— was standing, even while I was looking a nine-pound shell burst within three paces of him, exactly where I had been standing for half an hour. “Chance,” you say, but that was more than chance.⁸⁰

A brave cavalry charge in which the 17th Lancers and the 10th and 11th Hussars attack the Odessa and Dnieper regiments sees the British lose one-third of their men, especially once ‘A crackle of musketry mixes with the cannonade.’⁸¹ There are lots of military commands such as ‘With case shot at a hundred yards, fire’, ‘Action right’, ‘Independent firing’ and other orders he had learned from the Harrow School Rifle Volunteer Corps. Seymour is captured, but, in the chaos of battle, ‘Seeing my opportunity I jumped on a stray horse and rode for my life.’⁸² In the rest of the campaign, ‘The enemy retreated slowly and deliberately at first, but at the River Volga they became broken and our cavalry, light and heavy, executed a most brilliant charge which completed the confusion’ and showed ‘the superiority of John Bull over the Russian Bear’.⁸³ The hero of the story was thus able ‘to sleep tonight under the influence of victory which is the best narcotic in the world’. Churchill finally notes that ‘Colonel Seymour’ died gallantly on 21 September 1914, ‘endeavouring to hold a fortification on the heights of Woronzoff’.⁸⁴

Churchill’s teenage juvenilia might not seem worth recording except that later in life he took part in a cavalry charge of the 21st Lancers (which later amalgamated with the 17th Lancers of the story), was captured by an enemy but later escaped, oversaw the fate of a British Expeditionary Force to Russia and nearly died after a shell landed where he had been standing moments earlier, during a war that broke out within a month of Churchill’s speculative dating of such an event twenty-five years earlier. Stalingrad, where the German invasion of Russia was broken in 1943, lies on the River Volga. ‘Chance, you say . . .’

This was not his only moment of extraordinary prescience. On a Sunday evening in July 1891, in a basement room of Dr Welldon’s house after evensong in chapel, he was discussing his life plans with his friend Murland Evans. ‘I can see vast changes coming over a now peaceful world,’ Churchill told Evans,

great upheavals, terrible struggles; wars such as one cannot imagine; and I tell you London will be in danger – London will be attacked and I shall be very prominent in the defence of London. I see further ahead than you do. I see into the future. This country will be subjected somehow, to a tremendous invasion, by what means I do not know, but I tell you I shall be in command of the defences of London and I shall save London and England from disaster . . . dreams of the future are blurred but the main objective is clear. I

repeat – London will be in danger and in the high position I shall occupy, it will fall to me to save the capital and save the Empire.⁸⁵

Evans went on to work in the War Office and was a man whose powers of recollection can be depended on.

‘I am always ready to learn,’ Churchill was to say in 1952, ‘although I do not always like being taught.’⁸⁶ He continued to be beaten at Harrow, because, as a contemporary recalled, ‘He consistently broke almost every rule made by masters or boys, was quite incorrigible, and had an unlimited vocabulary of backchat.’⁸⁷ On 25 May 1891, for example, he was ‘swished’ (caned) seven times on the backside for ‘breaking into premises and doing damage’ in a disused factory in Harrow. This did not make him unusual; according to the Harrow punishment book, fourteen boys received seven swishes that month. Churchill kept a bulldog, against school rules, and used to walk him with one of the townspeople. He did odd jobs for Nugent Hicks, the head boy, who gave him a ‘whopping’ for failing to perform his duties. ‘I shall be a greater man than you,’ Churchill told him during one of these swishings, with spectacularly poor timing. Hicks, who later became bishop of Lincoln, replied: ‘You can take two more for that.’⁸⁸

Little would induce his parents to visit him at school. ‘Please do do do do do come down to see me,’ he begged in February 1891. ‘Please do come I have been so disappointed so many times about your coming.’⁸⁹ They did not. ‘Dearest boy, don’t be so lazy and neglectful about writing,’ Jennie wrote to him in a typical letter. ‘You only seem to do so when you want something – and then you are very prolific with your pen!’⁹⁰ Her hypocrisy can be measured precisely: in the seven years from 1885 to 1892, Churchill wrote to his parents seventy-six times; they to him six times. The huge majority of Churchill’s letters were not asking for anything, except, between the lines, for love and attention. Their letters to him on the other hand contained constant remonstrations. ‘I would go down to you – but I have so many things to arrange for the Ascot party next week that I can’t manage it,’ Jennie wrote in June 1890. ‘I have much to say to you, I’m afraid not of a pleasant nature . . . your Father is very angry with you’ (for using a typewriter).⁹¹ Of his schoolwork, ‘Your father and I are both more disappointed than we can say . . . I daresay you have a thousand excuses . . . You make me very unhappy . . . your work is an insult to your intelligence . . . It is that thoughtlessness of yours which is your greatest enemy . . . I must say that you repay his kindness to you badly.’⁹²

When the seventeen-year-old Churchill tried to get out of being sent to a French family to learn French over Christmas 1891, Jennie wrote, ‘I have only read one page of your letter and I send it back to you as its style does

not please me.’⁹³ ‘My darling Mummy,’ he replied, ‘never would I have believed you would have been so unkind. I am utterly miserable . . . I can’t tell you how wretched you have made me feel . . . Oh my Mummy! . . . I expect you were too busy with your parties and arrangements for Christmas. I comfort myself by this.’⁹⁴ As a postscript he added, ‘I am more unhappy than I can possibly say . . . your loving son, Winny.’⁹⁵

There were many more such letters. On 18 December he wrote, ‘I am so wretched. Even now I weep. Please my darling Mummy be kind to your loving son. Don’t let my silly letter make you angry. Let me at least think that you love me – Darling Mummy I despair. I am so wretched. I don’t know what to do. Don’t be angry I am so miserable.’⁹⁶ ‘I can’t tell you what trouble I have had with Winston,’ Jennie wrote to her husband, neglecting to bother with a reply to her son. ‘Of course it is a great disappointment to him not being home for Xmas but he makes as much fuss as tho’ he were going to Australia for two years . . . I think I have arranged everything satisfactorily.’⁹⁷ Jennie did not want her son in London as it would have inconvenienced her in her affair with Count Kinsky. The only person who comforted Winston and supported his bid to spend Christmas with his family was Mrs Everest, who of course had no say in the matter.

The Harrow School Songs, sung by the houses each term and by the whole school annually, were written by masters to encourage pupils to identify with the school, its famous alumni and Britain’s glorious past. One of these, ‘Stet Fortuna Domus’, first performed in 1891 when Churchill was at the school, includes the stanza:

Tonight we praise the former days
In patriotic chorus,
And celebrate the good and great
Who trod the Hill before us;
Where Sheridan and Peel began,
In days of Whig and Tory,
Where Ashley vow’d to serve the Crowd
And Byron rose to Glory.

Another song, ‘When Raleigh Rose’, connected the school, which had been founded during Queen Elizabeth I’s reign, to the heroes who defeated the Spanish Armada. In ‘Giants’, Harrovians were enjoined to remember that ‘the hero-race may come and go, / But it doesn’t exactly die! . . . For all of we, / Whoever we be, / Come up to the giants of old, you see.’ The most famous of the Songs, ‘Forty Years On’, written in 1872, had a stanza that ran:

Routs and discomfitures, rushes and rallies,
 Bases attempted and rescued and won,
 Strife without anger, and art without malice –
 How will it seem to you, forty years on?
 Then, you will say, not a feverish minute
 Strained the weak heart and the wavering knee,
 Never the battle raged hottest, but in it,
 Neither the last nor the faintest were we!⁹⁸

‘Listening to those boys singing all those well-remembered songs,’ Churchill told his son after he had visited the school during the London Blitz in 1940, ‘I could see myself fifty years before singing with them those tales of great deeds and of great men and wondering with intensity how I could ever do something glorious for my country.’⁹⁹ His son believed that ‘The stirring patriotism these verses evoked abided with him for ever and were the mainspring of his political conduct.’¹⁰⁰ The message of the school and of these songs was strong and clear: it was incumbent on Harrovians to try to become great men. After Churchill had pushed his diminutive fellow pupil Leopold Amery into Ducker, the school swimming pool, not realizing that Amery was in fact in the senior year, Churchill apologized by saying, ‘My father, who is a great man, is also small.’¹⁰¹

Churchill had a long run of illnesses and accidents throughout his time at Harrow, with a toothache, biliousness (cured by Eno’s Salts), a concussion from falling off a bicycle, ‘severe fever’, measles and an incipient hernia in the groin.¹⁰² In January 1893, playing a game of chase with his cousins at their estate in Wimborne aged eighteen, he jumped off a footbridge, hoping the branches of the trees below him would snap off and break his descent, which they did not. He fell nearly thirty feet on to hard ground, was concussed for three days and confined to bed for nearly three months with a ruptured kidney and a broken bone in his mid-back that was only discovered in an X-ray in 1962. ‘For a year I looked at life round a corner,’ he wrote.¹⁰³

While convalescing, Churchill visited Parliament. He listened to and occasionally had a chance to meet the leading figures of late Victorian politics, including Arthur Balfour, Joseph Chamberlain, Lord Rosebery, Herbert Asquith and John Morley, introduced by his father. ‘Politics seemed very important and vivid to my eyes in those days,’ he reminisced.¹⁰⁴ On 21 April 1893, he was in the gallery to witness perhaps the most climactic parliamentary debate of the era, when William Gladstone presented the Second Irish Home Rule Bill to the House of Commons. As a great parliamentary occasion, the drama was only to be exceeded half

a century later, and then by Churchill himself. Churchill's plan was to distinguish himself as a soldier, before entering the House of Commons to further his father's Tory Democrat legacy.

When Lord Randolph agreed to let his son join the British Army after Harrow, Winston believed that 'my father with his experience and flair had discerned in me the qualities of military genius.'¹⁰⁵ He continued in this delusion for several years, until he was told that his father had in fact merely thought he was not clever enough to become a barrister, let alone a help in his political career. 'If ever I began to show the slightest idea of comradeship,' Churchill recalled, 'he was immediately offended, and when once I suggested that I might help his private secretary to write some of his letters, he froze me into stone.' He recorded that in the autumn of 1892 'I had one of the three or four long intimate conversations with him that are all that I can boast.' He found his father captivating, though Lord Randolph ended the conversation in a characteristically self-absorbed way, 'Do remember things do not always go right with me. My every action is misjudged and every word distorted . . . So make some allowances.'¹⁰⁶ His son later regretted that he had not been able to leave Harrow early. 'I should have got to know my father,' he wrote, 'which would have been a joy to me.'¹⁰⁷ But it was not to be.

Churchill took the exam for the Royal Military College at Sandhurst in June 1893, helped by a crammer because his higher mathematics was so bad. He passed on his third attempt, but came ninety-fifth out of 389, meaning he would have to join the cavalry rather than the infantry. 'My dear Winston,' his father wrote to his eighteen-year-old son on 9 August,

There are two ways of winning an examination, one creditable and the other the reverse. You have unfortunately chosen the latter method, and appear to be much pleased with your success. The first extremely discreditable failure of your performance was missing the infantry, for in that failure is demonstrated beyond refutation your slovenly happy-go-lucky harum scarum style of work for which you have been distinguished at your different schools. Never have I received a really good report of your conduct in your work from any master or tutor . . . Always behind-hand, never advancing in your class, incessant complaints of total want of application . . . With all the advantages you had, with all the abilities which you foolishly think yourself to possess . . . this is the grand result that you come up among the second rate and third rate who are only good for commissions in a cavalry regiment . . . You imposed on me an extra charge of some £200 a year. Do not think that I am going to take the trouble of writing you long letters after every failure and folly you commit and undergo . . . because I no longer attach the slightest weight to anything you may say about your own

accomplishments and exploits. Make this position indelibly impressed on your mind, that if your conduct and action is similar to what it has been in the other establishments . . . then . . . my responsibility for you is over. I shall leave you to depend on yourself giving you merely such assistance as may be necessary to permit of a respectable life. Because I am certain that if you cannot prevent yourself from leading the idle useless unprofitable life that you have had during your schooldays and later months, you will become a mere social wastrel, one of hundreds of the public school failures, and you will degenerate into a shabby, unhappy and futile existence. If that is so you will have to bear all the blame for such misfortunes yourself.

Your affectionate father, Randolph SC¹⁰⁸

By then, Lord Randolph's judgement was badly clouded by mental degeneration.¹⁰⁹ He was experiencing problems with his speech, hearing, balance and concentration, resulting in depression and violent outbursts, from an as yet undiagnosed illness.¹¹⁰ Yet his son was able to quote from that letter from memory thirty-seven years later, showing how much its message of distrust and contempt from the man he worshipped had seared him. Nor was it tossed off in a rage, for Lord Randolph had also written to his mother the Duchess four days earlier in similar terms: 'I have told you often and you would never believe me that he has little [claim] to cleverness, to knowledge or any capacity for settled work. He has great talent for show off exaggeration and make-believe . . . I will not conceal from you it is a great disappointment to me.'¹¹¹ Jennie also wrote to say, 'Papa is not very pleased at your getting in by the skin of your teeth and missing the Infantry by eighteen marks. He is not as pleased with your exploits as you seem to be!'¹¹² Years later, Churchill's closest friend was to observe that Lord Randolph 'discerned nothing remarkable, nothing of singular promise in a very remarkable and original boy'.¹¹³

That summer, before Winston entered Sandhurst, he and his brother Jack went on a walking tour of Switzerland with a tutor. Staying in Zermatt, they climbed the 15,000-foot Monte Rosa in sixteen hours, as well as the Wetterhorn. They travelled widely before Winston again cheated death in Lake Geneva, when he and someone he described as a 'companion' went swimming alone off a boat in the middle of the lake, and a light breeze started to blow the boat away from them. 'I saw Death as near as I believe I have ever seen him,' he wrote in *My Early Life*. 'He was swimming in the water at our side, whispering from time to time in the rising wind which continued to carry the boat away from us at about the same speed we could swim. No help was near. Unaided we could never reach the shore . . . I now swam for life . . . I scrambled in, and rowed back for

my companion who, though tired, had not apparently realised the dull yellow glare of mortal peril that had so suddenly played around us.¹¹⁴ The younger companion was in fact Jack, but Churchill presumably did not want his readers to know that he had put his younger brother in such mortal peril.

Churchill entered Sandhurst on 1 September 1893. He was 5 foot 6½ inches tall and had a chest measurement of only 31 inches. He had delicate skin, slightly protruding very light blue eyes and a handsome face. He enjoyed his time at Britain's premier military academy, especially the study of tactics and fortifications, and the constant riding, at which he became highly proficient, taking up steeplechasing, polo and occasionally amateur horse-racing.¹¹⁵ The pathos of his correspondence with his parents continued. 'I am awfully sorry that Papa does not approve of my letters,' he told his mother on 17 September. 'I take a great deal of pain over them and often rewrite entire pages. If I write a descriptive account of my life here, I receive a hint from you that my style is too sententious and stilted. If on the other hand I write a plain and excessively simple letter it is put down as slovenly. I never can do anything right.'¹¹⁶ When he accidentally dropped into a stream a pocket watch that his father had given him, he was so terrified of confessing the loss that he launched a desperate salvage operation. This involved mobilizing twenty-three men from an infantry company to search for it, then hiring a fire engine to dredge the stream, before he diverted the headwaters and was finally able to retrieve it. When Lord Randolph discovered what had happened from the watch-repairer, he was predictably furious and scornful.¹¹⁷

By 1894, Lord Randolph was starting to die of what much medical opinion today believes to have been a rare and incurable brain disease, but which, because it shared some symptoms with syphilis, was diagnosed as that by his doctors. Lord Randolph left with Jennie on a round-the-world tour in June. Churchill later recalled, 'I never saw him again, except as a swiftly fading shadow.'¹¹⁸ After he had spoken to his father's doctors, Robson Roose and Thomas Buzzard, and was given the probable diagnosis, he wrote in early November 1894 an alarmed letter to his mother, who was by then in Singapore: 'I asked Dr Roose and he told me everything and showed me the medical reports. I have told no one . . . I need not tell you how anxious I am. I had never realised how ill Papa had been and had never until now believed there was anything serious the matter . . . Do, my darling mamma when you write let me know *exactly* what you think.'¹¹⁹

Churchill understandably did not speak or write about the possible cause of his father's illness, and only on a single occasion did he ever mention it.

In 1951 or 1952, he told his private secretary, Anthony Montague Browne, 'You know my father died of Locomotorataxia, the child of syphilis.'¹²⁰ In fact Locomotorataxia is a general descriptive term for a neurological disturbance and is certainly not unique to syphilis. It is likely that Churchill laboured for a lifetime under the shame of his father's death of a disease from which he did not in fact suffer. Yet it never lessened his hero-worship of this proud, aloof, disdainful man. 'He embodied that force, caprice and charm which so often springs from genius,' Churchill wrote of him.¹²¹ As Churchill's great friend Violet Bonham Carter (née Asquith) was to put it: 'He worshipped at the altar of his unknown father.'¹²²

While his parents were on the other side of the world, Churchill gave his first public speech, on the most unlikely of platforms. That summer Mrs Ormiston Chant, a member of the London County Council, led a social purity campaign directed against the promenade of the Empire Theatre in Leicester Square, a bar area behind the dress circle where young men drank and met unchaperoned young women, some of whom were ladies of easy virtue. The outraged Mrs Chant had managed to get wood and canvas partitions put up to keep the sexes apart, which on 3 November 1894 a crowd that included Churchill rowdily destroyed. A witness recalled that Churchill and his friends 'broke down the palisades separating them from the ladies of the town and addressed the rioters. He and a future general drove off in a hansom [taxicab] waving trophies.'¹²³ The speech he made on top of the debris was sadly not recorded, but began with the pun, 'Ladies of the Empire, I stand for liberty!'¹²⁴ Someone else present recalled him 'dodging about in the foyer', slapping women on their bottoms, with a bouncer in hot pursuit.¹²⁵ It was an unlikely inauguration to the public-speaking career of the greatest orator of the coming century.

Churchill graduated from Sandhurst in December 1894 ranked twentieth out of 130 cadets,* and second in the arduous riding competition. By then Lord Randolph was too ill to notice, let alone congratulate his son. 'My father died on January 24 in the early morning,' Churchill recalled thirty-five years later. 'Summoned from a neighbouring house where I was sleeping, I ran in the darkness across Grosvenor Square, then lapped in snow. His end was quite painless. Indeed he had long been in stupor. All my dreams of comradeship with him, of entering Parliament at his side and in his support, were ended. There remained for me only to pursue his aims and vindicate his memory.'¹²⁶ Half a century later, he told his daughter that his father's death had left him utterly prostrate with grief for a whole day and night.¹²⁷

* Not eighth out of 150 'with honours', as he claimed in *My Early Life*.

Despite being largely separated, Jennie had nursed Lord Randolph faithfully in his final illness, resolutely if absurdly blaming his death on the Tory leader, Lord Salisbury. 'There is not the slightest doubt that worry and overwork started the disease,' she told a friend, 'and I know you will agree with me that Lord S. has a lot to answer for. There was a time a few years ago when a generous hand stretched out would have saved everything and R would now be with us as he was. But Lord S. and the others were too jealous of him – I feel all this deeply – and hope one of these days it will be known.'¹²⁸ Churchill was fortunate that his father died while still an MP. Had he lived long enough to retire from the House of Commons after the election that came six months later, he would almost certainly have been awarded a peerage, which would soon have devolved upon his eldest son – meaning that Churchill could not have had the career he did in the Commons, with a correspondingly small chance of his becoming prime minister in 1940.

The funeral was held at Blenheim Palace's parish church in the neighbouring village of Bladon. The congregation sang 'Rock of Ages' and 'Now the Labourer's Task is O'er', and heard the words 'Man that is born of a woman hath but a short time to live, and is full of misery.'¹²⁹ The 5th Earl of Rosebery, who had become prime minister in March 1894, delivered the eulogy. Afterwards, Churchill, Jennie and Jack stood at the snow-covered grave and scattered lilies-of-the-valley on the coffin. 'Over the landscape, brilliant with sunshine, snow had spread a glittering pall,' he later recalled.¹³⁰

The neglect and emotional cruelty at the hands of his parents that could have crushed a lesser person instead gave Churchill an unquenchable desire to succeed in life, not only in general but in his father's chosen profession of politics. His father-worship extended to learning several of Lord Randolph's more famous speeches by heart; visiting his father's friends such as Lord Rosebery and Lord Justice Gerald FitzGibbon principally to listen to stories about him; adopting his characteristic speaking pose of putting his hand facing down on his hip. As we shall see, he also wrote a filial two-volume biography; mentioned him regularly in speeches; wore his father's chancellor of the Exchequer robes when he assumed the same office; named his only son Randolph and wrote about a daydream in which he met his father over half a century after his death.

Churchill told the parliamentary lobby correspondent A. G. Gardiner that he had copied his father's practice of using pauses while speaking, even of deliberately fumbling in his pockets for a note he did not want or need, in order to concentrate his listeners' attention.¹³¹ It might have been understandable if he had rebelled against his harsh, distant father, but

part of his greatness of character is that instead he regarded his life's work as promoting his father's Disraelian and Tory Democrat ideas, based on *Imperium et Libertas*. 'I took my politics almost unquestioningly from him,' he wrote in 1931, saying that although his father lived and died a loyal Tory 'He saw no reason why the old glories of Church and State, of King and Country, should not be reconciled with modern democracy; or why the masses of working people should not become the chief defenders of those ancient institutions by which their liberties and progress had been achieved.'¹³² Winston wanted, if possible, to wreak a terrible revenge on what he regarded as the Tory Establishment cabal whom he blamed for bringing his father down.

It was said of Emperor Napoleon III that he bore a name that was simultaneously his making and his undoing. Winston Leonard Spencer-Churchill similarly carried a name that marked him out among his contemporaries and created expectations that only a very remarkable person could fulfil. 'A medal glitters,' he once wrote, 'but it also casts a shadow.' That was also true of his name. It is notoriously hard to be the child of a famous parent, yet among his many achievements Churchill succeeded at that too.

Churchill believed he had only a short time to live, and regularly referred to his father's death at forty-five as the explanation for his own thrusting nature. His contemporaries thought him pushy, and so he was, but there was a cold actuarial reason behind it. Three of his father's siblings had died at ten months, two years and four years old, and his father's sisters were to die aged forty-five and fifty-one, and their brother the 8th Duke of Marlborough at forty-eight. His ever-present fear of an early death suggests that Churchill believed that it might have been a non-sexual form of Locomotorataxia that had killed his father. Whatever it was, he felt he did not have long to make his mark.

If there were ideal conditions for the creation of a future hero of the Empire, by the end of January 1895 Churchill had fulfilled all of them. A famous name, selfish and unimpressed parents, a patchy but patriotic schooling that taught him how great men can change history by great feats, a first-class military education, a schoolboy ambition to save the Empire, not enough money to become indolent, appreciation of English prose and a reverence for the British history that he felt ran through his aristocratic veins. Above all, an aloof, famous father who had annexed Burma aged thirty-six and was dead at forty-five. Now twenty and freed from his father's stultifying influence, Churchill was about to make his own name. Few have set out with more cold-blooded deliberation to become first a hero and then a Great Man.

2

Ambition under Fire January 1895–July 1898

Solitary trees, if they grow at all, grow strong: and a boy deprived of a father's care often develops, if he escape the perils of youth, an independence and vigour of thought which may restore in after life the heavy loss of early days.

Churchill, *The River War*¹

His school was the barrack-room; his university the battlefield.

A. G. Gardiner on Churchill in *Prophets, Priests and Kings*²

‘To understand a man,’ Napoleon once said, ‘look at the world when he was twenty.’ When Churchill was twenty, the British Empire covered more than one-fifth of the earth’s land surface, and its Navy – easily the largest in the world – dominated its oceans. London was a great seaport and financial capital, the British constitution was unchallenged domestically, and although there were international disputes in the offing – principally with America over commerce and France and Russia over faraway colonial borders – these were not considered life-threatening. To Churchill the late Victorian imperial world seemed secure, permanent and benevolent, so long as people like himself dedicated themselves to its service. He was shaped by a frame of mind that saw a lifetime of duty as the price to be paid for historically unprecedented greatness.

‘I was now in the main the master of my fortunes,’ Churchill wrote of the period immediately after his father’s death. In *My Early Life* he claimed that his father’s estate ‘almost exactly equalled his debts’, but that was untrue. Once all outstanding debts had been paid off, the family was left with £54,237 (around £5.5 million in today’s money) in trust, with the income going to Jennie for her lifetime and the capital belonging to Winston and Jack. If Jennie remarried, the trustees had discretion to divert half the income to her sons.³ In the short term, therefore, Winston was

dependent on his mother. Now that he was no longer a boring child, the distance between them shrank and their relationship became, as he put it, ‘more like brother and sister than mother and son’.⁴ Cash was a problem: his Army salary was a mere £120 per annum, scarcely enough to cover his mess bills; at least another £500 per annum was needed for other essential military accoutrements such as his magnificent uniform, a second charger, saddlery and polo ponies.

‘I have had a very sad time of it these last six weeks or so,’ he wrote to a Sandhurst friend in early February 1895, ‘but now that is all over one can turn to the business of living again and try and leave one’s sorrows behind.’⁵ On 1 April, Second Lieutenant Churchill was gazetted to the 4th Queen’s Own Hussars, then under the command of the charismatic Colonel John Brabazon, a friend of his mother’s. Founded in 1685, the regiment had fought in the Peninsular War and taken part in the Charge of the Light Brigade in 1854. In the various favours for access and advancement he was to ask of people over the next couple of years, it did Churchill no harm that since his father’s death he had become the direct heir to the dukedom of Marlborough, and would remain so until the future 10th Duke was born in September 1897.

Soon after joining up, Churchill strained his sartorius muscle running down the length of the thigh and on which a rider’s grip on a horse depends. ‘In consequence I suffered tortures,’ he recalled later. ‘One simply had to go on tearing at a lacerated muscle with the awful penalty of being thought a booby if one begged off even for a day.’⁶ In another accident, Churchill was thrown while steeplechasing, nearly breaking his leg and obliging him to rest in bed for three days. He promised his mother he wouldn’t race again, but five days later ‘Mr Spencer’ finished third in the Sandhurst Challenge Cup, on a fellow subaltern’s horse.⁷ Churchill loved the life of a cavalry officer, even the ostensibly tedious parts. ‘The stir of the horses, the clank of their equipment, the thrill of motion, the sense of incorporation in a living machine, the suave dignity of the uniform,’ he wrote, ‘all combine to make cavalry drill a fine thing in itself.’ He took part in parades of the 25,000-strong Aldershot garrison, marching past Queen Victoria in her carriage at the saluting point. On one occasion he was drilled by a Captain Douglas Haig.

Although Churchill enjoyed the Army, it was only ever a means to an end: he wanted to make his name as a soldier prior to becoming a great statesman, as he thought his father had been. After Lord Salisbury had won the general election of 1895, he told his mother, ‘It is a fine game to play – the game of politics – and it is well worth waiting for a good hand before really plunging.’ He thus prescribed himself ‘four years of healthy

and pleasant existence . . . The more I see of soldiering the more I like it, but the more I feel convinced that it is not my *métier*.⁷⁸ Sure enough, four years after sending that letter he was standing for Parliament. But in the meantime what could he do to win medals and distinction when his regiment was stationed in Aldershot, rather than on active service?

In the summer of 1895, with ten weeks' leave looming, and insufficient funds to buy the quality of horse necessary to spend the fox-hunting season in England, Churchill looked to see where he could take part in a war. He systematically scoured the world map for a place where he could have as high profile an adventure as possible. The Cubans were then fighting a guerrilla war against their Spanish imperial masters, so he persuaded Lieutenant Reginald 'Reggie' Barnes, a brother-officer in the regiment, to go there with him, securing the accreditation necessary to accompany the Spanish forces from his father's friend Sir Henry Drummond-Wolff, then Ambassador in Madrid. Before they left, Colonel Edward Chapman, the Director of Military Intelligence, asked Churchill and Barnes to discover anything they could about the penetration and striking power of the Spanish Army's new type of bullet. This was Churchill's inauguration into the world of secret intelligence.

Jennie paid for the transatlantic ticket, but to help finance the rest of the expedition Churchill persuaded the *Daily Graphic*, for which his father had written five years earlier, to hire him as a war correspondent at five guineas an article. As long as the individual's commanding officer agreed and his military duties were not impaired, officers were permitted to write about campaigns for the newspapers, although it was not actively encouraged.

Relatively penniless, Churchill was already learning how to dun creditors or make them wait inordinately long for payment, in the long-established aristocratic manner. Despite being only a ducal heartbeat away from the ownership of Blenheim, he needed an alternative form of income to maternal generosity. Journalism provided it – which was just as well as Jennie had started extensively redecorating a new apartment on the Champs-Élysées and a seven-storey leasehold house at 35 Great Cumberland Place, near Marble Arch in London, where she had a discreet lift installed to take her lover, the obese Prince of Wales, from the street level to her boudoir.

Churchill was under no illusions about his mother's extravagance, and the absolute necessity of providing for himself independently as soon as possible. 'Except for my name, all the rest I had to work for, to fight for,' he reminisced years later. 'When I was twenty-two, with my small Army pay not covering expenses, I realized that I was . . . unable to live my life

as I wanted to. I wanted learning and I wanted funds. I wanted freedom. I realized there was no freedom without funds. I had to make money to get essential independence; for only with independence can you let your own life express itself naturally. To be tied down to someone else's routine, doing things you dislike – that is not life – not for me . . . So I set to work. I studied, I wrote. I lectured . . . I can hardly remember a day when I had nothing to do.”⁹

The key was the ‘noble’ English sentence. Once Churchill had discovered that he was capable of writing vividly to the right length under tight deadlines in war zones, he demanded ever higher rates and within five years he was the world's best-paid war correspondent. From that, together with his books and related lectures, he had by 1901 amassed a fortune equivalent to £1 million today, enough to allow him to enter politics. Journalism taught him to be pithy and to hold his readers' attention. Such clarity and liveliness were to be as evident in his political speeches as in his highly readable articles. But for most of his life money continued to be an issue and he wrote regularly for the press until 1939.

In early November 1895 Churchill sailed for New York, the city of his mother's birth, on his way to Cuba in the first of fourteen visits he made to the United States over the next sixty-seven years. He was met off the boat by Bourke Cockran, a forty-one-year-old congressman and admirer of Jennie's, who put him and Reggie up in his luxurious home on Fifth Avenue. Cockran played an important role in Churchill's life over the next ten years, as father-figure and as political role-model, but more importantly as the man who profoundly affected both his conversational and his oratorical styles. ‘I have never seen his like,’ Churchill wrote in the early 1930s, ‘or in some respects his equal . . . He was pacifist, individualist, democrat, capitalist and a “Gold-Bug”’ (advocate of the Gold Standard). Above all he was a Free Trader, and, as Churchill added, ‘Thus he was equally opposed to socialists, inflationists and Protectionists, and he resisted them on all occasions. In consequence there was in his life no lack of fighting.’¹⁰ Churchill was never a pacifist, but he would adopt all the rest of Cockran's stances during his own political career. Cockran changed parties four times, even more inconsistent in his affiliations than Churchill himself would be.

Cockran represented New York as a congressman for five non-consecutive terms between 1887 and his death in 1923, and was famed for his witty retorts against hecklers. His biographer described his speeches (he sometimes spoke to audiences of over 20,000 in Madison Square Garden) as those of ‘a finished literary craftsman’.¹¹ Although Churchill never heard Cockran speak in public, he read all his speeches and learned

his oratorical techniques. 'He taught me to use every note of the human voice as if playing an organ,' Churchill wrote. 'He could play on every emotion and hold thousands of people riveted in great political rallies when he spoke.'¹² And Cockran's private conversation, 'in point, in pith, in rotundity, in antithesis and in comprehension, exceeded anything I have ever heard'.¹³ His use of classical and historical allusions, his extravagant vocabulary, facial expressions and occasional dramatic gestures, were imbibed by the young Churchill, who quoted his phrases for decades afterwards. 'Never before in the history of the English-speaking people', Cockran had said of the Irish Home Rule Bill two years earlier, 'has there been a victory which was so great a triumph as that attained by Mr Gladstone.'¹⁴ Cadences and phrases such as these were filed away in Churchill's already astoundingly capacious memory. In 1955, the American politician Adlai Stevenson was amazed when Churchill started to quote long excerpts from Cockran's speeches of sixty years before, and told him, 'He was my model.'¹⁵

'What an extraordinary people the Americans are!' Churchill wrote to his mother on 10 November. 'Their hospitality is a revelation to me and they make you feel at home and at ease in a way that I have never before experienced.'¹⁶ He and Barnes dined at the Waldorf Astoria, visited West Point, watched a murder trial, saw a staged fire being put out by the New York Fire Department especially for them and attended the opening of the New York Horse Show. 'This is a very great country my dear Jack,' Churchill told his brother. 'Not pretty or romantic but great and utilitarian. There seems to be no such thing as reverence or tradition. Everything is eminently practical and thus is judged from a matter of fact standpoint.'¹⁷

'Picture to yourself the American people as a great, lusty youth,' Churchill continued, 'who treads on all your sensibilities, perpetrates every possible horror of ill-manners – whom neither age nor just tradition inspire with reverence – but who moves about his affairs with a good-hearted freshness which may well be the envy of older nations of the earth.'¹⁸ It could have been a description of Churchill himself at this stage of his life.

On 17 November, Churchill and Barnes left New York by train for Tampa, Florida, and took a boat to Havana the next day. 'Here was a place where something would certainly happen,' Churchill later wrote of Cuba. 'Here I might leave my bones.'¹⁹ They met the Spanish Commander-in-Chief, General Martínez Campos, who permitted them to visit the front, first by train to Sancti Spiritus and then with a military column, arriving at the fortified outpost of Arroyo Blanco on the 28th. Churchill was later critical

of the way the Spanish Army ‘moved like Napoleon’s convoys in the Peninsula’, which is to say, very ponderously. Both Napoleon and Martínez Campos were fighting guerrillas, and outside Arroyo Blanco were the same near-jungle conditions that still exist there today.

‘You might call it tomfoolery,’ Churchill later wrote of the expedition. ‘To travel thousands of miles with money we could ill afford, and get up at four o’clock in the morning in the hope of getting into a scrape in the company of perfect strangers, is certainly hardly a rational proceeding.’²⁰ Yet they were seeing action while their brother-officers back home were fox-hunting. Churchill won in Cuba the first of his thirty-seven decorations, the Red Cross of Spain for Military Merit First Class, a courtesy decoration which he later wore in blithe contravention of War Office regulations.²¹

Churchill sympathized with the Cuban rebels, although he could not do so openly considering the Spanish were his hosts. He used the evocative simile that Cuba was for Spain ‘like a dumb-bell held at arm’s length’.²² Although his claim to have heard his first shots fired in anger on his twenty-first birthday was untrue, he did hear them the very next day, 1 December, en route from Arroyo Blanco to La Reforma.²³ ‘A ragged volley rang out from the edge of the forest,’ he later wrote. ‘The horse immediately next to me – not my horse – gave a bound.’²⁴ It had been shot in the ribs, and ‘I could not help reflecting that the bullet which had struck the chestnut had certainly passed within a foot of my head. So at any rate I had been “under fire”. That was something. Nevertheless, I began to take a more thoughtful view of our enterprise than I had hitherto done.’²⁵ He was under heavy fire for more than ten minutes and more sporadic fire for a day and a half. ‘There were sounds about us sometimes like a sigh, sometimes like a whistle and at others like the buzz of an offended hornet,’ but effective counter-measures were impossible because of the impenetrability of the jungle.²⁶

It was during this campaign (if eighteen days of military tourism can be dignified with such a term) that Churchill demonstrated an adeptness for sketching, which much later developed into a love of painting. It was not true, as Lord Mountbatten was later to claim, that ‘He left Cuba with three great predilections for the whole of his life – active service, siestas, and cigars.’²⁷ Churchill already smoked cigars* and did not start taking regular afternoon naps until 1914. Yet the trip did encompass his first time outside Europe, his first experience of espionage, his first nationally published articles (signed ‘W.S.C.’) and his baptism of fire. In an interview

* He considered cigarettes ‘atrocious things’, although he did occasionally make an exception for Turkish cigarettes (Murray, *Bodyguard* p. 87).

on the dockside in New York before recrossing the Atlantic on 14 December, he amused pressmen with his banter, saying of the rebels, 'They are not good soldiers but as runners would be hard to beat.'²⁸

Before the 4th Hussars were posted to India in September 1896, Churchill spent what he later called 'the only idle spell I have ever had' – playing polo, living with his mother, meeting senior politicians socially and extracting a promise from General Sir Bindon Blood, the commander of a recent expedition to the Malakand Pass on India's North-West Frontier, that if he ever led another one he would allow him to join it.²⁹ Otherwise, he did the social rounds expected of a young, upper-class Englishman with a famous name. 'I realized that I must be on my best behaviour,' as he later put it, 'punctual, subdued, reserved; in short, display all the qualities with which I am least endowed.'³⁰

Churchill's sense of sheer thrust was evident in a letter to his mother of 4 August 1896, written from his Army base at Hounslow in west London, while he was preparing to go out to what he called 'useless and unprofitable exile' in 'the tedious land of India'.³¹ He did not want to waste his life on garrison duty in Bangalore, and having discovered that the 9th Lancers might be sent to quell an uprising in Matabeleland in southern Africa, he applied to join them as a supernumerary (that is, unpaid) subaltern. Otherwise, 'I am guilty of an indolent folly that I shall regret all my life. A few months in South Africa would earn me the SA medal and in all probability the [British South African] Company's Star.* Thence hot foot to Egypt – to return with two more decorations in a year or two – and beat my sword into an iron dispatch box . . . It is useless to preach the gospel of patience to me. Others as young are making the running now and what chance have I of ever catching up.'³²

The Matabele inconveniently surrendered too soon for Churchill's plan to materialize, so he set sail instead with his regiment from Southampton on 11 September on the twenty-three-day journey to Bombay (modern-day Mumbai). As his launch came alongside the Sassoon Dock there, he reached out for an iron ring set in a stone wall, just as a 5-foot wave swung the boat down, severely dislocating his right shoulder. 'I scrambled up all right,' he recalled, 'made a few remarks of a general nature, mostly beginning with the early letters of the alphabet, hugged my shoulder and soon thought no more about it.'³³ It turned out that he had sustained a lifelong injury, which meant that he had to play polo with the upper part of his arm strapped to his body. He was still able to hit the ball, but without

* He got his Medal, but not the Star.

reaching the highest point forwards or backwards. ‘When you make some great mistake,’ he philosophized, ‘it may very easily serve you better than the best-advised decision. Life is a whole, and luck is a whole, and no part of them can be separated from the rest.’³⁴ That would turn out to be true of his accident in Bombay.

Arriving at Bangalore, the military headquarters of the Madras (today’s Chennai) Presidency, on 3 October 1896, Churchill, Barnes and their fellow officer Hugo Baring pooled their resources and took a comfortable bungalow with valets, grooms and butlers. It was Churchill’s first time in the Empire, and he quickly fell hopelessly in love, imbuing it with a veneration that stayed with him for the rest of his life and was profoundly to influence his career again and again. It was in Bangalore that he learned to admire what he later called the ‘great work that England was doing in India and of her high mission to rule these primitive but agreeable races for their welfare and our own’.³⁵ He told a friend that, although imperialism was sometimes a burden to Britain, ‘It is justified if it is undertaken in an altruistic spirit for the good of the subject races,’ which he had no doubt it was.³⁶ The 150,000 or so Britons in India could not maintain their Raj (literally, ‘rule’) without the active cooperation of vast numbers of the more than 300 million Indians, and Churchill understood that this could be done only through maintaining the prestige and power of the rulers. ‘Nothing is so remarkable as the ascendancy which the British officer maintains over the native soldier,’ he was to write a year later. ‘The dark *sowars* [cavalrymen] follow the young English soldier who commands them with a strange devotion . . . To save his life they will sacrifice their own.’³⁷

Today, of course, we know imperialism and colonialism to be evil and exploitative concepts, but Churchill’s first-hand experience of the British Raj did not strike him that way. He admired the way the British had brought internal peace for the first time in Indian history, as well as railways, vast irrigation projects, mass education, newspapers, the possibilities for extensive international trade, standardized units of exchange, bridges, roads, aqueducts, docks, universities, an uncorrupt legal system, medical advances, anti-famine coordination, the English language as the first national lingua franca, telegraphic communications and military protection from the Russian, French, Afghan, Afridi and other outside threats, while also abolishing *suttee* (the practice of burning widows on funeral pyres), *thuggee* (the ritualized murder of travellers) and other abuses. For Churchill this was not the sinister and paternalist oppression that we now know it to have been. Instead, he took the firm and irrevocable decision to dedicate his life to the defence of the British Empire against all its

enemies, at home and abroad. Time and again throughout his political career, he would put his allegiance to his ideal of the Empire before his own best interests.

‘As a young subaltern in India,’ one of Churchill’s secretaries recalled him saying in 1944, ‘he found himself often at a loss to understand references in conversation. He decided to be better informed. He began to spend after-siesta time lying on his *charpoy* [bed] reading.’³⁸ Harrow had left him with large gaps in his education, so in the winter of 1896 he embarked upon a supremely ambitious reading programme which within two years was to leave him easily as well read as those of his contemporaries who had gone to Oxford or Cambridge. ‘I pity undergraduates,’ he was later to write, ‘when I see what frivolous lives many of them lead in the midst of precious fleeting opportunity. After all, a man’s life must be nailed to a cross of either Thought or Action.’³⁹ His own life was to prove that someone could comprehensively cover both.

Churchill’s reading programme began with Edward Gibbon’s 4,000-page *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* – which he was to re-read twice more over the course of his life, and parts of which he could quote from memory. He followed it with Gibbon’s autobiography and then read Macaulay’s six-volume *History of England*, which he loved (except for the attacks on the 1st Duke of Marlborough) and the *Lays of Ancient Rome*.⁴⁰ After that he read Jowett’s translation of Plato’s *Republic*, and the key texts of Schopenhauer, Malthus, Darwin, Adam Smith, Henry Hallam, Samuel Laing, William Lecky, the Marquis de Rochefort and very many others – though no novels. The sheer breadth of his reading matter was astonishing, and it gave him enormous intellectual self-confidence, to add to the other kinds he already had. A friend recalled lending Dr Welldon’s translation of Aristotle’s *Ethics* to Churchill. It was very good, he rejoined, ‘But it is extraordinary how much of it I had already thought out for myself.’⁴¹ Churchill told his mother that he wanted his reading to give him ‘a scaffolding of logical and consistent views’.⁴² She replied to say that his bank had bounced a cheque for £11, which she would nonetheless honour. Churchill’s autodidacticism meant that there were inevitably gaps in his knowledge. As late as 1906 he had not heard of Keats’s ‘Ode to a Nightingale’, and he confused the poet William Blake with the admiral Robert Blake. But once this was pointed out, a friend recorded, ‘the next time I met him, he had learned not merely this, but all the odes of Keats by heart – and he recited them to me mercilessly from start to finish, not sparing me a syllable!’⁴³

Churchill also spent a good deal of his time in Bangalore learning about

politics. He asked his mother to send him as many copies as possible of the political almanac *The Annual Register*, which today are at the Churchill Archives at Cambridge University, complete with his very extensive annotations which show us something of how he schooled himself in the subject. He chose the volumes that covered Benjamin Disraeli's 1874–80 premiership and read them extremely carefully, covering them with marginalia and occasional underlinings, which highlighted aspects of imperialism, foreign policy and the Conservatives' social-reform agenda. In the three volumes for 1874, 1875 and 1876, which covered all the legislation debated in Parliament at the time of his birth and infancy, he even wrote out the speeches that he would have delivered had he been in politics at the time, which he then pasted into the books.⁴⁴ The Scotch Church Patronage Bill, the Endowed Schools Act Amendment Bill, the Judicature Amendment Act: nothing was too obscure for Churchill's considered reactions. Of the Indian famine of 1873–4, for example, he imagined his support for the then Viceroy of India, Lord Northbrook, in not halting the export of grain: 'I am astounded that such a prohibition should have ever been advised. I should have thought that famine prices would immediately attract the grain without any law being necessary. I am opposed to any interference by Government with private trade.'⁴⁵ Churchill even critiqued the *Register's* language. Where it likened a statement of Gladstone's to 'a thunderbolt falling from a calm empyrean', he wrote in the margin: 'Why not say a bolt from the blue?'⁴⁶ In the 1874 volume are marks of emphasis in pencil, sometimes as many as five strokes for important passages, such as Disraeli's attack on Lord Salisbury as 'a great master of gibes and flouts and jeers' – and references to his grandfather the Duke of Marlborough.⁴⁷

In the 1875 volume, the speeches of R. A. Cross, the social-reforming Home Secretary, were annotated, as well as Samuel Plimsoll MP – the reformer who campaigned for a line to be painted on ships' hulls indicating the maximum safety draught – telling the Speaker, 'I will unmask the villains who sent brave men to death,' and 'Never will I withdraw; I will expose them all.'⁴⁸ Churchill's comment was: 'I can imagine no finer or more glorious memorial of a noble life devoted [to] the benefit of the human race than "the Plimsoll Mark".'⁴⁹ The attraction of politics through dramatic parliamentary engagements was being drummed into him by his own diligent reading.

In foreign policy, Churchill annotated an essay outlining 'the Buffer State idea', which argued for the wisdom of having several states separating the British and Russian Empires.⁵⁰ Disraeli's phrase about Britain's 'determination to maintain our empire' was noted approvingly, while the

Liberal Robert Lowe's questioning of Britain's right to rule over India was crossed out with the words 'A most nefarious speech, W.S.C.' written right across the page.

The notes he pasted into these volumes provide an acute insight into his views as a neophyte political thinker. 'Progress is the principle of the human race,' he wrote in the 1877 volume of the proposal to extend the franchise to the working classes.⁵¹ Of the Artisans' Dwelling Act, by which slums had been compulsorily purchased for redevelopment, he asked, 'Who would not lend assistance to put out a neighbour's conflagration? Neither charity nor pity can inspire the acts of a Government. The interests of the community as a whole must direct them.'⁵² He supported capital punishment because 'In this imperfect world it is necessary to do many hard and unchristian things.' He believed in its deterrent effect. 'Because the door of hope is definitely shut,' he nonetheless admitted, 'the idea of killing a man in cold blood by machinery appeals with horror to the human race.'⁵³

In the 1880 volume he noted that his father had been described as an 'extreme freelance' in the Irish land question, who 'spoke sarcastically', was involved in 'angry discussion' and made an 'incisive speech' to give a bill 'grudging support'.⁵⁴ In the 1882 volume he extensively annotated the pages covering Boer complaints against the British before the First Anglo-Boer War of 1881 and marked up the speeches of Joseph Chamberlain heavily in the margins, and in the 1885 volume he noted the way that the Conservatives' Housing of the Working Classes Bill and Medical Relief Bill had 'indicate[d] the bias of the new Toryism towards State Socialism'.⁵⁵

Churchill was working out for himself, very soon after his father's death, that social reform was not the exclusive preserve of the Liberals but could be appropriated by what he called 'the Tory democracy'.⁵⁶ To that end, he was in favour of a progressive income tax, with total exemptions for the poor and a higher rate for unearned than for earned income. His beliefs were not entirely inherited from his father, growing also out of a close reading of recent political history.

Flashes of what was to become a characteristically Churchillian sense of humour were occasionally evident here too. The Royal Titles Bill, by which Queen Victoria had become Empress of India, had been attacked in 1875 for appealing to 'the lovers of novelty and high-sounding titles', prompting Churchill to note, 'I must array myself with those who "love high sounding titles", since no title that is not high sounding is worth having . . . There would not be much satisfaction in being styled "Your Insignificance" or "Your Squalidity".'⁵⁷ On the issue of women voting, the young Churchill was profoundly chauvinist, arguing that 'only the most undesirable class of women are eager for the right,' and that 'Those

women who discharge their duty to the state viz. marrying and giving birth to children, are adequately represented by their husbands,' therefore 'I shall unswervingly oppose this ridiculous movement.' This was partly because 'If you give women votes you must ultimately allow women to sit as members of Parliament,' after which inevitably 'all power passes to their hands.'⁵⁸ These were not his views later on, and he notably married a woman who supported female suffrage, but it would have been surprising if an aristocratic Victorian Army officer had had different ones a decade before female suffrage came to the forefront of the political agenda.

The *Annual Register* volumes show us that already his heroes were Gibbon as writer and moralist, Disraeli as statesman and orator, and Lord Randolph Churchill, whose speeches were marked up diligently. Another author whose work had a powerful effect on Churchill, for both good and ill, was Charles Darwin. Like so many of his contemporaries, he extended the implications of Darwin's ideas into the human sphere, and came to believe that different races evolved at different speeds, just as animals and plants had over the millennia. Where he fundamentally differed from other Social Darwinists is that he believed that the stronger and more 'advanced' races – in which he included the Anglo-Saxons and the Jews – had a proportionately more profound moral responsibility towards what he saw as the weaker and less advanced ones. This fitted well with his strong sense of *noblesse oblige* and his Tory Democrat principles.

Unlike many other imperialists of the day, Churchill's sense of the moral responsibility of the rulers towards the ruled had little to do with Christianity. Although he did occasionally hint in later life that he believed in the existence of an Almighty – whose primary duty seems to have been to protect Winston Churchill – he did not acknowledge the divinity of Jesus Christ. Of all the five million words he uttered in his speeches, he never said the word 'Jesus' and only said the word 'Christ' once, and then not in a context acknowledging him as Saviour. His views on religion were influenced by his reading of Gibbon and by Winwood Reade's *Martyrdom of Man*, published in 1872, which argued that all religions were essentially the same.

Churchill did have a belief-system, which was acquired in – of all unlikely places – the officers' mess of the 4th Hussars at Bangalore. 'In the regiment we sometimes used to argue questions like "Whether we should live again in another world after this was over?" [and] "Whether we have ever lived before?" . . .' he recalled in *My Early Life*. 'There was general agreement that if you tried your best to live an honourable life and did your duty and were faithful to friends and not unkind to the weak and poor, it did not matter much what you believed or disbelieved. This

would nowadays I suppose be called “The Religion of Healthy-Mindedness”.⁵⁹ This has been described as a form of Gibbonian deism, and it was certainly not in any sense Christian.⁶⁰

Although Churchill had no belief in any revealed religion, he was a lifelong nominal Anglican, as almost all Conservative politicians of the day were, and he made regular references to the Almighty in his Second World War speeches.⁶¹ But as he told his private secretary in the 1950s, ‘I am not a pillar of the church but a buttress. I support it, from the outside.’⁶² He was certainly not opposed to others having Christian (or any other kind of) faith, and he fully acknowledged Jesus Christ as having been the finest moralist of history, but his own core beliefs were of a different kind. ‘For orthodox religion,’ wrote one astute biographer, ‘Churchill substituted a secular belief in historical progress, with a strong emphasis on the civilizing mission of Britain and the British Empire.’⁶³ Central to many key decisions of his life was this belief that Britain and her Empire were not just political entities but also spiritual ones; imperialism was in effect a substitute for religion. He imbibed, largely from his extensive reading of Macaulay and the Whig historians, a theory of historical progress that put the English-speaking peoples’ adoption of Magna Carta, the Bill of Rights, the American Constitution and parliamentary institutions at the apex of civilizational development. These advantages were slowly and carefully being imparted to those parts of the world over which they ruled. In the absence of Christian faith, therefore, the British Empire became in a sense Churchill’s creed.

There was more to Churchill’s life at Bangalore than self-education, political reading and spiritual pondering: he played a great deal of polo. The 4th Hussars won the prestigious Golconda Cup in Hyderabad within two months of their arrival and they set their heart on winning the Inter-Regimental Cup, even though it had never been won by a cavalry regiment from southern India. He also collected butterflies. ‘My garden is full of Purple Emperors, White Admirals and Swallow Tails and many other beautiful and rare insects,’ he told Jack – before his collection was eaten by a rat.

It was at Secunderabad on 3 November 1896 that Churchill met Pamela Plowden, the twenty-two-year-old daughter of Sir Trevor Chichele Plowden, a senior member of the Indian Civil Service and former MP. ‘I must say that she is the most beautiful girl I have ever seen,’ Churchill wrote to his mother the next day. ‘We are going to try and do the City of Hyderabad together on an elephant.’⁶⁴ The courtship continued to a point in August 1899 when he felt able to tell his mother that, despite her other active titled suitors, ‘Now she loves me.’⁶⁵ He had no money to marry, however, and

although he got unofficially engaged to her, Jack learned that no fewer than three other men considered themselves to be in the same position.⁶⁶

It was regularly claimed during the Indian self-government debates of the 1930s that Churchill did not properly know India. While it was true that by then he had not visited for thirty years, he certainly travelled around it extensively when he was there, writing letters from Bangalore, the Upper Swat Valley, Poona, Trimulgherry in the Deccan, the Mamund Valley, Seoni, Guindy, Dhond, Itarsi, Nawagai, Umbala, Inayat Kila, Bajaur, Hyderabad, Raichur, Meerut, Peshawar, the Bara Valley, Bombay, Ootacamund, Madras, Jodhpur and Calcutta. ‘You could lift the heat with your hands,’ he wrote of its hot season, ‘it sat on your shoulders like a knapsack, it rested on your head like a nightmare.’⁶⁷

It was also in India that Churchill learned how to drink (mostly whisky, diluted with very large amounts of soda) and in particular how not to get drunk. Throughout his life he enjoyed depicting himself as a heavy drinker, but it is remarkable on how few occasions anybody else thought him to have been drunk. (There is only one occasion during the whole of the Second World War, with all its strains and stresses.) ‘I have been brought up and trained to have the utmost contempt for people who got drunk,’ he wrote, ‘except on very exceptional occasions and a few anniversaries.’⁶⁸ For all the later Nazi propaganda, and his own jokes about his drinking, Churchill had an extraordinary capacity for alcohol and it rarely affected his judgement. ‘A single glass of champagne imparts a feeling of exhilaration,’ he was to write. ‘The nerves are braced; the imagination is agreeably stirred; the wits become more nimble. A bottle produces a contrary effect. Excess causes a comatose insensibility. So it is with war, and the quality of both is best discovered by sipping.’⁶⁹ The overwhelming evidence is that Churchill loved alcohol, drank steadily by sipping, had a hardy constitution and was only very rarely affected by it.

Accidents continued to befall him. In March he fell from a pony and injured his left shoulder on rock-hard ground – but continued to play polo with his reins fastened to his wrist – and the following month a bullet misfired leaving shards in his hand. By May, when he sailed to England on three months’ accumulated leave, he was keen to get away, describing India as ‘this godless land of snobs and bores’.⁷⁰ In between bouts of ‘fearful’ seasickness on the boat home, he befriended Colonel Ian Hamilton, who was in charge of musketry training in India, and visited Pompeii and Rome (luckily for the latter, as he refused to countenance its bombing in 1944).⁷¹

On 26 July 1897, Churchill made his first official public speech, to an audience of about a hundred members of the Primrose League at Claverton Down, near Bath. After a brief reference to Queen Victoria’s Diamond

Jubilee the previous month, he spoke of the Workmen's Compensation Bill. 'The British workman has more to hope for from the rising tide of Tory Democracy than from the dried-up drain-pipe of Radicalism,' he said with flair.⁷² He got both laughter and cheers, and then made a few jokes at the expense of the Radicals and Liberals, ending with a peroration about the Empire:

There are . . . those who say that in this Jubilee year our Empire has reached the height of its glory and power, and that now we shall begin to decline, as Babylon, Carthage, Rome declined. Do not believe these croakers, but give the lie to their dismal croaking by showing by our actions that the vigour and vitality of our race is unimpaired and that our determination is to uphold the Empire that we have inherited from our fathers as Englishmen, that our flag shall fly high upon the sea, our voice be heard in the councils of Europe, our Sovereign supported by the love of her subjects, then shall we continue to pursue that course marked out for us by an all-wise hand and carry out our mission of bearing peace, Civilization and good government to the uttermost ends of the earth.⁷³

It was a classic statement of pugnacious late Victorian imperialism. Churchill recalled in *My Early Life* that the audience 'cheered a lot in all the right places when I paused on purpose to give them a chance, and even at others which I had not foreseen. At the end they clapped loudly and for quite a long time. So I could do it after all!'⁷⁴ The Tory-supporting *Morning Post* had sent along a reporter, and published a short leader announcing a new arrival on the political scene, although the *Eastern Morning News* sniffed that 'political talent is the least hereditary of our tendencies'. In fact, Churchill turned out to be far more politically talented than his father had ever been, and the Claverton speech made him confident that, with practice, he could become adept at public speaking.

Lord Salisbury, who had been re-elected in August 1895, adopted a 'Forward' policy designed to protect the Empire by proactively defending its borders wherever threatened. Churchill was soon in a position to carry out a mission for the Empire at 'the uttermost ends of the earth'. In August 1897 he heard that a Pathan revolt on the North-West Frontier had led to Sir Bindon Blood being given the command of a three-brigade Malakand Field Force (MFF). He immediately asked Blood for a place on it, despite the fact that the 4th Hussars were not to be included, only to receive the reply, 'Very difficult; no vacancies; come up as a correspondent; will try to fit you in.'⁷⁵ So Churchill asked for six weeks' further leave of absence from his regiment, took a train over 2,000 miles in five days of sweltering heat

from Bangalore to Nowshera, the MFF railhead, and reported for duty. He also bought a grey – that is, white – horse, a conscious act of self-advertisement, and a potentially suicidal one. ‘I am more ambitious for a reputation for physical courage than for anything else in the world,’ he told his mother, who helped negotiate a contract for him with the *Daily Telegraph* that paid £5 a column.⁷⁶ He was nonetheless a soldier first, wearing his 4th Hussars uniform, and a journalist second.

On 16 September 1897, the 12,000-strong Malakand Field Force marched into the Mamund Valley. It was a punitive expedition to burn the enemy’s crops, chop down trees, fill up wells, destroy reservoirs and raze villages in retaliation for repeated raids on British-controlled areas. ‘Of course it is cruel and barbarous,’ wrote Churchill, ‘as is everything else in war, but it is only an unphilosophic mind that will hold it legitimate to take a man’s life and illegitimate to destroy his property.’⁷⁷ The tribesmen made occasional sudden and lethal counter-attacks, and to be captured meant being tortured to death. Churchill personally disapproved of the expedition, though not on humanitarian grounds. Although he liked and admired Blood, he blamed the enterprise on Lord Salisbury’s imperial ‘Forward’ policy. ‘Financially it is ruinous,’ he told his mother. ‘Morally it is wicked. Militarily it is an open question, and politically it is a blunder. But we can’t pull up now.’⁷⁸

Churchill fought bravely, and was mentioned in dispatches for ‘courage and resolution’ and for having ‘made himself useful at a critical moment’, but he did not win the gallantry medal for which he longed.⁷⁹ ‘I rode on my grey pony all along the skirmish line where everyone else was lying down in cover,’ he boasted to his mother. ‘Foolish perhaps, but I play for high stakes and given an audience there is nothing too daring or too noble. Without the gallery, things are different.’⁸⁰ Years later he took a more fatalistic view of the expedition. ‘They wanted to shoot at us and we wanted to shoot at them. So a lot of people were killed, and on our side their widows have had to be pensioned by the Imperial Government, and others were badly wounded and hopped around for the rest of their lives, and it was all very exciting and, for those who did not get killed or hurt, very jolly.’⁸¹ Less jolly for him at the time was the death of his friend Lieutenant William Browne-Clayton, of the Royal West Kent Regiment, who was ‘literally cut to pieces on a stretcher’, he told his mother. ‘I must rank as a rare instance the fact that I cried,’ he wrote.⁸² In fact, in later life, Churchill was to cry extraordinarily easily.

Back in Bangalore in October, he started to write his first book, *The Story of the Malakand Field Force: An Episode of Frontier War*, furious to discover that his articles had been published in the *Telegraph* under the

byline 'A Young Officer' rather than his own name. He complained bitterly to his mother that they had been written with the intention 'of bringing my personality before the electorate. I had hoped that some political advantage might have accrued.'⁸³ She replied that an Army officer writing press articles was 'very unusual and might get you into trouble'.⁸⁴ 'If I am to avoid doing "unusual" things it is difficult to see what chance I have of being more than an average person,' he wrote back. 'I was proud of the letters and anxious to stake my reputation on them.' Fear of becoming an average person amounted almost to a terror for the young Churchill, who desperately needed to be seen as remarkable if he was going to woo parliamentary constituencies: at that time political associations had autonomy over who stood for them and well-heeled Tory candidates who could promise to contribute to the association's coffers would otherwise have an advantage over him.

In November 1897 the twenty-three-year-old Churchill wrote an article entitled 'The Scaffolding of Rhetoric'. Although he had so far given only two speeches, one of which had been to an audience of rakes and prostitutes during a semi-riot at the back of a music hall, it showed that he had completely mastered the theory of public speaking if not yet the practice. Much of what he wrote at this early age was to prove true time and again in his life:

Of all the talents bestowed upon men, none is so precious as the gift of oratory. He who enjoys it wields a power more durable than that of a great king. He is an independent force in the world. Abandoned by his party, betrayed by his friends, stripped of his offices, whoever can command this power is still formidable . . . A meeting of grave citizens, protected by all the cynicism of these prosaic days, is unable to resist its influence. From unresponsive silence they advance to grudging approval and thence to complete agreement with the speaker. The cheers become louder and more frequent; the enthusiasm momentarily increases; until they are convulsed by emotions they are unable to control and shaken by passions of which they have resigned the direction . . . It appears there are certain features common to all the finest speeches in the English language . . . Rhetorical power is neither wholly bestowed nor wholly acquired, but cultivated. The peculiar temperament and talents of the orator must be his by nature, their development is encouraged by practice. The orator is real. The rhetoric is partly artificial . . . The orator is the embodiment of the passions of the multitude . . . Before he can move their tears his own must flow. To convince them he must himself believe. He may be often inconsistent. He is never consciously insincere.⁸⁵

Of no one was that to be truer than Churchill himself.

‘Sometimes a slight and not unpleasant stammer or impediment has been of some assistance in securing the attention of the audience,’ Churchill wrote in his essay, ‘but usually a clear and resonant voice gives expression of the thoughts.’ From early youth he had pronounced the letter ‘s’ as ‘sh’. He had received treatment from the royal physician, Sir Felix Semon, who told him that only practice and perseverance could cure it, as there was no organic defect to his mouth or tongue. He therefore repeated the phrase, ‘The Spanish ships I cannot see for they are not in sight,’ over and over again.⁸⁶ In 1905 he asked Semon to cut out what he thought was an extraneous ligament on his tongue, which thankfully the doctor refused to do.⁸⁷ For many years thereafter his sibilant ‘s’ was clearly noticeable; even as late as 1913 a lobby journalist wrote, ‘That defect of speech alone would have destroyed most men. Mr Churchill makes you forget it by the sheer energy of his mind and manner.’⁸⁸ As his essay shows, Churchill recognized the impediment but did not consider it a hindrance to a political career.

Churchill believed there were five ‘elements’ to great oratory. First was the ‘exact appreciation of words’, that is, ‘the continual employment of the best possible word’. He instanced ‘dour’ to describe the Scots. He believed in using ‘short, homely words of common usage’. Although the words should be short, sentences did not need to be, provided they had an internal rhythm. The second element of oratory was sound: ‘The influence of sound on the human brain is well known,’ he wrote. ‘The sentences of the orator when he appeals to his art become long, rolling and sonorous. The peculiar balance of the phrases produces a cadence which resembles blank verse rather than prose.’⁸⁹ His reference to blank verse reflects his lifelong love of Shakespeare, whose works had a profound effect on his oratory, written style and sense of British exceptionalism, and influenced his later practice of writing out his speech notes in blank-verse form. (He also playfully developed a line in cod-Shakespeare, which often fooled those less familiar with the plays than he was.)

The third element in oratory was the steady accumulation of argument. ‘A series of facts is brought forward all pointing in a common direction,’ he wrote. ‘The crowd anticipate the conclusion and the last words fall amid a thunder of assent.’⁹⁰ Fourth was the use of analogy, which can ‘translate an established truth into simple language’, and of which he gave examples from the speeches of Lord Salisbury and Macaulay, as well as his own father’s remark that ‘Our rule in India is, as it were, a sheet of oil spread over and keeping free from storms a vast and profound ocean of humanity.’⁹¹ Churchill used analogy constantly in his speeches, seemingly naturally, but, as this essay shows, it was all part of a highly considered artistry.

‘A tendency to wild extravagance of language – to extravagance so wild that reason recoils – is evident in most perorations,’ Churchill wrote of his fifth and last element. ‘The emotions of the speaker and the listeners are alike aroused and some expression must be found that will represent all they are feeling. This usually embodies in an extreme form the principles they are supporting. . . . The effect of such extravagances on a political struggle is tremendous. They become the watchwords of parties and the creeds of nationalities.’⁹² He cited speeches by William Pitt the Elder and the great American orator William Jennings Bryan, arguing that the orator cannot ‘resist the desire to express his opinions in an extreme form or to carry his argument to the culmination’.⁹³

Throughout his political career, Churchill was criticized for using exaggerated, extreme language in his speeches. Few people appreciated that this was entirely intentional, indeed an integral part of his oratorical technique. These ‘extravagances’, as he termed them, were designed to win him fame and attention, and to keep him at the centre of debate, but they were also to lead him into controversies and to inspire bitter distrust. By the time the Second World War loomed, the rise of Hitler at last fully justified the hyperbole that he had been employing on different, lesser issues for decades.

He also liked using deliberately old-fashioned words. He ended a letter to his mother in 1898, ‘I end ere I weary you . . . Adieu’ – which was archaic language even for the late Victorian period. Anachronistic vocabulary was often used to great effect in his wartime speeches, employing words like ‘foe’ instead of ‘enemy’ and phrases like ‘as in the olden time’.

It was fortunate for Churchill that ‘The Scaffolding of Rhetoric’ was never published, as it would have undermined his future deliveries. Yet it is extraordinary how many of his greatest Second World War speeches conform to each of the five elements of this seminal essay, written more than forty years earlier. Well-chosen words; carefully crafted sentences; accumulation of argument; use of analogy; deployment of extravagances: those were the five scaffolds of the rhetoric of the greatest orator of his age. Churchill ended his article with a Gibbonian sentence: ‘The student of rhetoric may indulge in the hope that nature will finally yield to observation and perseverance, the key to the hearts of men.’⁹⁴

There is a constant sense in Churchill’s letters to his mother and others at this time that he was already writing for posterity. ‘Bullets – to a philosopher my dear Mamma – are not worth considering,’ he told her from Bangalore just before Christmas 1897. ‘Besides I am so conceited I

do not believe the Gods would create so potent a being as myself for so prosaic an ending. Anyway it does not matter . . . Fame, sneered at, melodramatised, degraded, is still the finest thing on earth.⁹⁵ As so often in Churchill's correspondence it is important to remember that he was at least half joking; detractors have frequently ignored the fact that much of what he said and wrote was intended to charm and amuse rather than be taken at precisely face value. But there was a self-mocking quality to his vanity that kept it from being unattractive. As he put it in another letter to his mother, 'Of course – as you have known for some time – I believe in myself.'⁹⁶

'I shall devote my life to the preservation of this great Empire and to trying to maintain the progress of the English people,' he wrote in the same December 1897 letter. 'Nor shall anyone be able to say that vulgar consideration of personal safety ever influenced me. I know myself pretty well and am not blind to the tawdry and dismal side of my character but if there is one situation in which I do not feel ashamed of myself it is in the field.'⁹⁷ Cowardice in battle was 'vulgar'.

In January 1898 Churchill took ten days' Christmas leave in Calcutta, where he stayed with the Earl of Elgin, the Viceroy of India, and used the time to lobby for a posting on a new expedition on the North-West Frontier in the Tirah Valley, pulling every string he could, up to and including the Commander-in-Chief. He was helped most by Ian Hamilton and the expedition commander's aide-de-camp, Captain Aylmer Haldane, but to Churchill's great chagrin the expedition ended in negotiation with the tribesmen. There was to be no *Story of the Tirah Field Force*. 'It is a pushing age and we must shove with the best,' he told his mother.⁹⁸ Perhaps not surprisingly, contemporaries were beginning to regard him as a thrusting self-advertiser and medal hunter. 'I often saw a fresh-faced, fair-haired subaltern of the 4th Hussars who talked a great deal,' recalled Captain Hubert Gough.

It was Winston Churchill. He had just returned from the fighting north of Peshawar . . . He used to take his stand in front of the fire . . . and he would lecture all and sundry on the conduct of operations with complete confidence . . . Brought up in the 16th Lancers, I did not at all approve of this somewhat bumptious attitude. Such style would never have been tolerated in our mess, but in the Gunners' mess at Peshawar neither the many generals who gathered there nor anyone else attempted to check him. I used to wonder how the generals stood it, but even then I was dimly aware that they were rather afraid of him and his pen.⁹⁹

Gough and his other military detractors gave Churchill little credit for the fact that he was always thrusting his way towards places of mortal danger rather than away from them.

Churchill returned to Bangalore in late January to troubling financial news. In order to restructure her finances, Jennie wanted to take out a loan of £17,000 (approximately £1.7 million today), which required his consent – Jack was still under-age – as it would be guaranteed against Lord Randolph's trust. 'Speaking quite frankly on the subject,' Churchill told her, 'there is no doubt we are both you and I equally thoughtless – spendthrift and extravagant. We both know what is good – and we both like to have it. Arrangements for paying are left to the future . . . The pinch of the matter is we are damned poor.'¹⁰⁰ He nonetheless signed the documents, writing Jack a despondent letter saying, 'The only thing that worries me in life is – money.'¹⁰¹

On 15 March, *The Story of the Malakand Field Force* was published to excellent reviews, earning the author the equivalent of two years' pay. It had been shockingly badly proofread by Moreton Frewen, Churchill's uncle, whom he subsequently nicknamed 'Mortal Ruin', but nonetheless its Augustan style contained plenty of Churchillian epigrams and generalizations, such as 'Courage is not only common, but cosmopolitan,' and 'Every influence, every motive, that provokes the spirit of murder among men, impels these mountaineers to deeds of treachery and violence,' and 'It is better to be making the news than taking it; to be an actor rather than a critic,' and 'Nothing in life is so exhilarating as to be shot at without result.'¹⁰²

The book covered more than just the tactics of the Malakand campaign, and contained Churchill's thoughts on wider strategy and the nature of the enemy the British Empire faced on what is today the Afghan–Pakistan border. It was critical of British generalship, though not of Bindon Blood himself. 'The general who avoids all "dash",' he wrote, 'who never starts in the morning looking for a fight and without any definite intention, who does not attempt heroic achievements, and who keeps his eye on his watch, will have few casualties and little glory.'¹⁰³ He was also highly critical of the Talibs, the tribe from whom the modern Taliban derive their name; they were, he wrote, 'as degraded a race as any on the fringe of humanity: fierce as a tiger but less cleanly; as dangerous, not so graceful'.¹⁰⁴ He believed their insistence on a rigid form of Islam kept the Afghan people in 'the grip of miserable superstition'.¹⁰⁵ His view was that their 'religion, which above all others was founded and propagated by the sword . . . stimulates a wild and merciless fanaticism'.¹⁰⁶ Islam, he further stated,

increases, instead of lessening, the fury of intolerance. It was originally propagated by the sword, and ever since its votaries have been subject, above the people of all other creeds, to this form of madness. In a moment the fruits of patient toil, the prospects of material prosperity, the fear of death itself, are flung aside. The more emotional Pathans are powerless to resist. All rational considerations are forgotten. Seizing their weapons, they become Ghazis [anti-infidel fanatics] – as dangerous and as sensible as mad dogs: fit only to be treated as such.

‘Civilization is confronted with militant Mahommedanism,’ he concluded. ‘The forces of progress clash with those of reaction. The religion of blood and war is face to face with that of peace. Luckily the religion of peace is usually the better armed.’¹⁰⁷ On the North-West Frontier and soon again in the Sudan, Churchill saw Islamic fundamentalism up close. It was a form of fanaticism that in many key features – its sheer implacability, contempt for Christianity, opposition to liberal Western values, addiction to violence, demand for total allegiance and so on – was not unlike the political fanaticism that he was to encounter forty years later. None of the three British prime ministers of the 1930s – Ramsay MacDonald, Stanley Baldwin and Neville Chamberlain – had ever personally encountered such extremism in their personal lives, and they were tragically slow to discern the nature of Nazi ideology. Churchill had fought against fanaticism in his youth, and recognized its salient features earlier than anyone else.

Far from India, a conflict was brewing between the British Empire and an Islamic power that would not be settled by negotiation. At its height in 1898, the Mahdist Empire under Abdullah al-Taashi, known as the Khalifa, covered the Sudan and South Sudan and some parts of Ethiopia and Eritrea. A full thirteen years after the Khalifa’s predecessor, Muhammad Ahmad (the ‘Mahdi’), had captured Khartoum and killed the British general Charles Gordon, Lord Salisbury’s government was finally ready to send an Anglo-Egyptian expedition under Major-General Sir Herbert Kitchener to exact revenge and protect the southern part of British-controlled Egypt.

Churchill was desperate to fight in the coming Sudan campaign. ‘Redouble your efforts in this direction,’ he instructed his mother. ‘My plans for the future will be much influenced by this.’¹⁰⁸ He could be caustic to his mother, who put considerable effort into promoting his career and negotiating his contracts, but after her death he admitted that ‘In my interest she left no wire unpulled, no stone unturned, no cutlet uncooked.’¹⁰⁹ Her appreciation of his talents and ambition had finally ignited her maternal instincts. Their problem was that both Kitchener and Douglas Haig,

his staff officer, were totally opposed to having journalists on the expedition, especially one as thrusting and high-profile as Churchill, with a reputation for criticizing generals in print.¹¹⁰ 'It was a case of dislike before first sight,' Churchill later wrote.¹¹¹ Yet the decision was not really personal. Kitchener told a *Times* correspondent that the fact that Churchill had no intention of staying in the Army and 'was only making a convenience of it' meant he should not go 'in place of others whose professions were at stake'.¹¹²

Back in Britain on leave, Churchill received a letter from Lord Salisbury's private secretary asking him to visit the Prime Minister in his rooms at the Foreign Office. 'He met me at the door', Churchill later recalled, 'and with a charming gesture of welcome and salute conducted me to a seat on a small sofa in the middle of his vast room.'¹¹³ Salisbury had destroyed Lord Randolph's political career overnight, but he said he would like to help his son. This might have been a mere pleasantry, but it was one upon which Churchill immediately took him up.¹¹⁴ Salisbury wrote to Lord Cromer, the High Commissioner in Egypt, asking him to write to Kitchener on Churchill's behalf – yet still Kitchener proved unwilling. It was eventually through Lady Jeune, the wife of a family friend who was in turn a friend of Sir Evelyn Wood, the Adjutant-General, that Churchill got a post as a supernumerary lieutenant attached to the 21st Lancers, and then only because a Lieutenant P. Chapman had died, creating a vacancy. It was the only British cavalry regiment in Kitchener's Anglo-Egyptian Army.

Churchill was ordered to the regimental headquarters at Cairo post-haste. 'It is understood that you will proceed at your own expense,' the War Office letter stated, 'and that in the event of your being killed or wounded in the impending operations, or for any other reason, no charge of any kind will fall on British Army funds.'¹¹⁵ Churchill arranged through his friend Oliver Borthwick, whose father owned the *Morning Post*, to be hired at £15 per column, three times his Malakand rate. He got to Cairo in six days, taking a tramp steamer from Marseilles for part of the journey in order to be incommunicado from the Indian Army, from which he had asked for yet more leave. Once he reached Egypt, he reasoned, he could not easily be recalled.

3

From Omdurman to Oldham via Pretoria August 1898–October 1900

You would rise in the world? ... You must work while others amuse themselves. Are you desirous of a reputation for courage? You must risk your life.

Churchill, *Savrola*¹

A great sight. It made me weep and my heart throbbed wildly. The rugged, dirty, begrimed troops looked tanned and hard as steel, and the defenders with trim uniforms and wan pale faces.

Churchill to Sir George Riddell on the entry
of the British troops into Ladysmith²

By 2 August 1898, Churchill was on parade in his khaki uniform, gaiters and Sam Browne belt, with his revolver and field glasses, at the Abbassia Barracks in Cairo. From there he made his way to Kitchener's headquarters outside Khartoum by way of Luxor, Aswan, the Temple of Philae and Wadi Halfa, crossing 400 miles of desert on the railway built expressly for the campaign. A fortnight later he was at Khartoum, 175 miles from where 'the waters of the Atbara flow into the mighty Nile.'³ The journey was not without its dangers: the officer who had taken a troop of lancers from Cairo just before him was ambushed and killed along with all his men.⁴ Churchill spent a miserable night without food or water lost in the desert in mid-August when he got separated from the convoy. He wandered for 70 miles before finding it again through the use of 'the glorious constellation of Orion. Never did the giant look more splendid,' he later wrote. It had directed him towards the Nile, and probably saved his life.⁵

On 28 August, the Anglo-Egyptian Army set off on its advance. 'One felt the sun leaning down upon one and piercing our bodies with his burning

rays,' Churchill recalled.⁶ After only four days, he was sent by Colonel Rowland Martin, the regimental commanding officer, to report to Kitchener that the Khalifa's army of slightly more than 50,000 Dervish warriors was advancing quickly towards them in a column 4 or 5 miles long.

Churchill cantered over 6 miles of desert in forty minutes and found Kitchener's army advancing in battle array. Kitchener asked him how long he thought he had before the two forces met. 'You have got at least an hour,' Churchill estimated, 'probably an hour and a half, sir, even if they come on at their present rate.'⁷ Instead the Dervishes halted and waited for morning at Omdurman on the outskirts of Khartoum, as Kitchener's 25,800-strong force took up position with their backs to the Nile.

Churchill returned to his regiment, and was hailed by Lieutenant David Beatty, an officer commanding a gunboat on the river, who threw a bottle of champagne to him. 'It fell in the waters of the Nile,' Churchill recalled, 'but happily where a gracious Providence decreed them to be shallow and the bottom soft. I nipped into the water up to my knees, and reaching down seized the precious gift which we bore in triumph back to our Mess.'⁸ The following year he told an American acquaintance how that night the young officers had amused themselves reciting nursery rhymes, of which Churchill himself had 'a large assortment, which he would quote in a very witty manner when the occasion called for them'.⁹

'The sun no longer seemed hot or the hours long,' Churchill wrote the following year. 'After all, they [the Dervishes] were there. We had not toiled up on a fruitless errand. The fatigues of the march, the heat, the insects, the discomforts – all were forgotten. We were "in touch"; and that is a glorious thing to be, since it makes all the features of life wear a bright and vivid flush of excitement, which the pleasures of the chase, of art, of intellect, or love can never excel and rarely equal.'¹⁰ Thirty years later, he would write, 'Talk of Fun! Where will you beat this! On horseback, at daybreak, within shot of an advancing army, seeing everything, and corresponding with Headquarters.'¹¹ It was small wonder, writing sentences like these, that Churchill was to acquire a reputation for loving war, even though he was always at pains to point out that the fighting he had been describing was a world away from the industrialized horrors of the First World War. In the only other known first-hand account of the period immediately before the action, that of Captain Robert Smyth, Churchill was called 'The Correspondent' and blamed for exposing himself by remaining mounted while others got off their horses during a reconnaissance mission. 'Riflemen in the centre see this and fire two volleys,' recorded Smyth. 'Bullets whistling and splashing on rocks very close.'¹² Luckily they were ordered to retire at once, and when the regimental

adjutant upbraided Smyth for unnecessarily exposing himself he correctly said, 'It was The Correspondent's fault.'

The charge of the 21st Lancers at the Battle of Omdurman on Friday, 2 September 1898, was the largest British cavalry charge since the Crimean War forty-four years earlier. Although there were a few afterwards in the Boer War and Great War, it was the last significant cavalry charge in British history. Churchill, riding 'a handy, sure-footed, grey Arab polo pony', commanded a troop of twenty-five lancers. Many of the Dervishes they attacked were hidden in a dried-out watercourse when the regiment set off, and it was only after the charge had begun that the regiment realized they were outnumbered by approximately ten to one.¹³ 'We were going at a fast but steady gallop,' Churchill wrote later. 'There was too much trampling and rifle fire to hear any bullets. After this glance to the right and left and at my troop, I looked again towards the enemy. The scene seemed entirely transformed. The blue-black men were still firing, but behind them there now came into view a depression like a shallow sunken road. This was crowded and crammed with men rising up from the ground where they had hidden. Bright flags appeared as if by magic.'

As Churchill got closer, he quickly saw what needed to be done.

The Dervishes appeared to be ten or twelve deep at the thickest, a great grey mass gleaming with steel, filling the dry watercourse. In the same twinkling of an eye I saw that our right overlapped their left, that my troop would just strike the edge of their array, and that the troop on my right would charge into air. My subaltern comrade on the right, Wormald of the 7th Hussars, could see the situation too; and we both increased our speed to the very fastest gallop and curved inwards like the horns of the moon. One really had not time to be frightened or to think of anything else but these particularly necessary actions . . . They completely occupied mind and senses.¹⁴

As he rode down into the watercourse, having lost the momentum of the charge by his necessary change of course, Churchill reached his moment of maximum personal danger. 'I found myself surrounded by what seemed to be dozens of men,' he recalled.

Straight before me a man threw himself on the ground . . . I saw the gleam of his curved sword as he drew it back for a ham-stringing cut [to Churchill's horse's legs]. I had room and time enough to turn my pony out of his reach, and leaning over the offside I fired two shots into him at about three yards. As I straightened myself in the saddle, I saw before me another figure with uplifted sword. I raised my pistol and fired. So close were we that the pistol itself actually struck him. Man and sword disappeared below and behind me.

On my left, ten yards away, was an Arab horseman in a bright-coloured tunic and steel helmet, with chain-mail hangings. I fired at him. He turned aside.¹⁵

Churchill saw that the other three troops of the squadron were re-forming close by. 'Suddenly in the middle of the troop up sprung a Dervish . . . I shot him at less than a yard.'¹⁶ In the close and confused fighting he killed four men with the ten-shot Mauser automatic pistol that he was fortunately using instead of his sword, as a result of his shoulder injury in Bombay.¹⁷ Soon afterwards the Khalifa's men disengaged. 'Now,' Churchill recalled, 'from the direction of the enemy there came a succession of grisly apparitions; horses spouting blood, struggling on three legs, men staggering on foot, men bleeding from terrible wounds, fish-hook spears stuck right through them, arms and faces cut to pieces, bowels protruding, men gasping, crying, collapsing, expiring.'¹⁸ It was a scene he was later to invoke when he wanted to remind people of the horrors of war.

'I never felt the slightest nervousness and felt as cool as I do now,' he wrote to his mother of the charge two days later.¹⁹ The importance of staying calm and retaining high morale in the face of heavy odds was brought home vividly at Omdurman. After the charge he found over twenty lancers 'so hacked and mutilated as to be almost unrecognizable'.²⁰ In the two or three minutes of the action, the regiment had lost five officers and sixty-five men either killed or wounded – almost a quarter of those who had charged – as well as 120 horses. 'There was nothing *dulce et decorum** about the Dervish dead,' Churchill later wrote; 'nothing of the dignity of unconquerable manhood; all was filthy corruption. Yet these were as brave men as ever walked the earth . . . destroyed, not conquered, by machinery.'²¹

The Battle of Omdurman saw the Khalifa's army routed by the highly disciplined Anglo-Egyptian Army's modern weaponry, including no fewer than fifty-two Maxim machine guns, against the Dervishes' spears and swords. In the first edition of his book about the campaign, *The River War*, Churchill denounced Kitchener for having ordered the desecration of the Mahdi's tomb after the battle, which was blown up after the body (except for the skull) had been thrown into the Nile. Churchill confided his suspicions to the poet Wilfrid Scawen Blunt in 1909, saying, 'Kitchener behaved like a blackguard in that business. He pretended to have sent the [Mahdi's] head back to the Sudan in a kerosene tin, but the tin may have contained anything, perhaps ham sandwiches. He kept the head, and has it still . . . I always hated Kitchener, though I did not know him personally . . . he blew up the body and kept the head.'²² When he discovered

* In Horace's *Odes*, 'Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori' translates as 'It is sweet and noble to die for one's country.'

that Kitchener had banned his staff from providing him with any information to help him write the book, Churchill described the general to his mother, with unusual snobbishness, as 'a vulgar common man'.²³

The memory of the brutal treatment of the enemy wounded after Omdurman, when several thousand were killed in cold blood, was to stay with Churchill for a long time, although he himself took no part in it. Three years later, he told a friend that he had seen the 21st Lancers 'spearing the wounded and leaning with their whole weight on their lances after the charge to get the points through the thick clothes the wounded Dervishes wore as they lay on the ground. As the points went in, the Dervishes would kick up their feet and hands. One trooper had boasted of his kindness at putting only four inches of steel into his man. "He ought to be thankful", he had said, "to find himself in the hands of a good-natured chap like me."^{24*}

On 5 September, the 21st Lancers started their march home. In Cairo, Churchill found that Major Richard Molyneux, the son of the Earl of Sefton, had been seriously wounded by a sword cut to his wrist and urgently needed a skin graft. Churchill volunteered to give his skin to save his brother-officer. 'Ye've heered of a man being flayed aloive?' Churchill recalled the Irish doctor saying to him in his strong brogue. 'Well, this is what it feels loike.'²⁵ He took flesh about the size of a modern ten-pence piece from Churchill's left forearm without any anaesthetic and grafted it straight on to Molyneux's wound, which healed up. 'My sensations as he sawed the razor to and fro fully justified his description,' he later recalled. When Molyneux died in 1954, Churchill remarked, 'He will take my skin with him, a kind of advance guard, into the next world.'²⁶

On his return to London he continued his wooing of Pamela Plowden, asking to see her before he left to rejoin his regiment in India. 'Why do you say I am incapable of affection,' he asked her in a letter from his mother's house in Great Cumberland Place on 28 November. 'Perish the thought. I love one above all others. And I shall be constant. I am no fickle gallant capriciously following the fancy of the hour. My love is deep and strong. Nothing will ever change it.'²⁷ As he had earlier in the same letter written, 'I met a young lady the other day who is – I think – I judge only from the standpoint of reason – nearly as clever and wise as you,' he was clearly trying to make her jealous. It did not work.²⁸ 'I have lived all my life seeing the most beautiful women London produces,' Churchill wrote in March 1899. 'Then I met you . . . Were I dreamer of dreams, I would

* To set against that, Churchill also saw the twenty-seven-year-old Lord Tullibardine, heir to the dukedom of Atholl, extract a bullet from the leg of a Dervish 'through the agency of a buttonhook', as he told a dinner that Tullibardine was chairing in 1941 (CS II p. 2221).

say . . . “Marry me – and I would conquer the world and lay it at your feet.” Marriage, however, requires two conditions to be met. Money and the consent of both parties. One certainly, both probably are absent.²⁹ Although the date of his formal proposal to her is contested, it is agreed that it took place in a punt while they were staying at Warwick Castle, and that she refused.³⁰ She married the 2nd Earl of Lytton instead in April 1902, and she and Churchill remained good friends for the rest of his life.

No sooner was the Sudan campaign over than Churchill started work on *The River War*, writing in Egypt, in London and on the boat to rejoin his regiment in India, where he went largely to play in the Inter-Regimental Polo Tournament before he left the Army in April. Writing to Captain Haldane on the train between Bombay and Bangalore in mid-December, he worried that his India General Service Medal with its ‘Punjab Frontier 1897–98’ clasp had still not arrived. ‘I naturally want to wear my medals while I still have a uniform to wear them on,’ he complained. ‘They have already sent me the Egyptian one. I cannot think why the Frontier one has not arrived . . . Do try and get mine for me as soon as possible. Otherwise it will never be worn . . . Will you try to get the medal sent me – there is only the general clasp – so that there should be no great difficulty.’ He signed off: ‘Write to me at Bangalore and do what you can about the medal.’³¹

Churchill arrived in Jodhpur on 8 February. Not long afterwards, on the night before leaving Jodhpur for the championships at Meerut, he fell down a flight of stone stairs, dislocating his right shoulder again and spraining both his ankles. ‘I trust the misfortune will propitiate the gods,’ he told his mother, ‘offended perhaps at my success and luck elsewhere.’³² He was to dislocate his right shoulder for the third time in a hunting accident, and nearly again while making an expansive gesture in the House of Commons.³³ He played in the game on 24 February with his upper right arm strapped, and the 4th Hussars won the Inter-Regimental Polo Tournament for the first time in the match’s sixty-two-year history. Despite his injury, Churchill scored three of the four goals that secured the 4–3 victory.

Churchill resigned his Army commission at the end of April and returned to London to pursue a political career. On board the steamer *SS Carthage*, he met a pretty young American woman, Christine Conover, who recalled:

The gangplank was about to be raised when down the wharf ran a freckled, red-haired young man in a rumpled suit carrying an immense tin cake box. Although he had nearly missed the boat, he seemed utterly unruffled . . . At lunch, or tiffin as it was called then, we found ourselves sitting directly opposite Mr Churchill. Hardly had he been seated when he bent across the

table and said, 'You are American, aren't you?' When we said he was right he exclaimed, 'I love Americans. My mother is an American.'

Remembering the occasion much later, she wrote, 'Though far from handsome, he had a charming smile and a slight hesitation in his speech.'³⁴ The cake box contained the manuscript of *The River War*, on which he continued to work during the journey. 'Perhaps his one fault at this time was being a little too sure about everything,' thought Miss Conover, 'which the other young people did not always appreciate.'³⁵

The River War: An Historical Account of the Reconquest of the Soudan would be published in two volumes by Longmans seven months later, on 6 November. All told it was over 950 pages long. The book was dedicated to Lord Salisbury, who had not required him to delete any of the negative references to Kitchener.³⁶ Churchill had chosen as the epigraph of his Malakand book a line from one of Salisbury's speeches about frontier wars – 'They are but the surf that marks the edge and the advance of the wave of Civilization' – an analogy he had chosen to illustrate his fourth element of the art of oratory in 'The Scaffolding of Rhetoric'.

The influence of Gibbon on Churchill's writing is clear in the aphorisms and generalizations that pepper *The River War*. 'At once slovenly and uxorious,' he wrote of the Sudanese soldier, 'he detested his drills and loved his wives with equal earnestness.'³⁷ Or this on the joy of the Khalifa's wives at his downfall: 'Since they were henceforth to be doomed to an enforced and inviolable chastity, the cause of their satisfaction is as obscure as its manifestation was unnatural.'³⁸ There were also some poetic moments such as his description of the African night: 'We are left sad and sorrowful in the dark, until the stars light up and remind us that there is always something beyond.'³⁹ Churchill wrote of how in a Sudanese school 'The simplicity of the instruction was aided by the zeal of the students, and learning grew beneath the palm trees more quickly perhaps than in the more magnificent schools of Civilization.'⁴⁰ Sometimes the application of eighteenth-century idiom to events on the eve of the twentieth century became slightly ridiculous, as when in the smoke of a steam engine 'The malodorous incense of Civilization was offered to the startled gods of Egypt.'⁴¹ Churchill's frequent references to Civilization in his writings underlined his belief that in these imperial frontier wars the Muslim tribesmen represented barbarism, whereas the British Empire stood in direct succession to the great civilizations of Greece, Rome and Christendom.

In the first edition of the book, Churchill damned Kitchener with faint praise, saying that he deserved 'certainly the third, and possibly even the second place' in the list of Britons responsible for destroying the Dervish

Empire, after Salisbury and Lord Cromer. In the second edition, published in one volume in 1902, Kitchener was promoted to the second place and one-third of the book was excised, including the line, 'By Sir Herbert Kitchener's order, the [Mahdi's] Tomb had been profaned and razed to the ground.' The first edition garnered generally excellent reviews – although the *Saturday Review* commented that 'the annoying feature of the book is the irrepressible egoism of its author.' In the Army the book was referred to as 'A Subaltern's Hint to Generals'.⁴²

Churchill praised the courage of the Dervish enemy in fighting for their way of life. 'I hope that if evil days should come upon our own country,' he wrote, 'and the last army which a collapsing Empire could interpose between London and the invader were dissolving in rout and ruin . . . there would be some – even in these modern days – who would not care to accustom themselves to a new order of things and tamely survive the disaster.'⁴³ Churchill would express precisely the same sentiments to his ministers when discussing a possible Nazi invasion of Britain on 28 May 1940. Another passage that he removed from the condensed 1902 edition, as he was by then hoping to hold office in an empire comprising tens of millions of Muslims, was one which read,

How dreadful are the curses which Mohammedanism lays on its votaries! Besides the fanatical frenzy, which is as dangerous in a man as hydrophobia in a dog, there is this fearful fatalistic apathy. The effects are apparent in many countries. Improvident habits, slovenly systems of agriculture, sluggish methods of commerce, and insecurity of property exist wherever the followers of the Prophet rule or live. A degraded sensualism deprives this life of its grace and refinement; the next of its dignity and sanctity. The fact that in Mohammedan law every woman must *belong* to some man as his absolute property – either as a child, a wife, or a concubine – must delay the final extinction of slavery until the faith of Islam has ceased to be a Great power among men. Individual Moslems may show splendid qualities . . . but the influence of the religion paralyses the social development of those who follow it. No stronger retrograde force exists in the world. Far from being moribund, Mohammedanism is a militant and proselytising faith. It has already spread throughout Central Africa, raising fearless warriors at every step; and were it not that Christianity is sheltered in the strong arms of science – the science against which it had vainly struggled – the civilisation of modern Europe might fall, as fell the civilisation of ancient Rome.⁴⁴

Back in London, Churchill was preoccupied about his future. On 3 May he wrote to the Society palm-reader Mrs Robinson of Wimpole Street,

sending her a cheque for two guineas and complimenting her on her 'strange skill in palmistry'. She had told him that 'He would pass great difficulties but reach the top of his profession,' which prompted him three days later to tell her, 'I would rather not have my hand published to the world: although I trust you may be right in your forecast.'²⁴⁵ Two days later the Scottish Tory MP Ian Malcolm, Chief of the Clan Malcolm and 17th Laird of Poltalloch, organized a lunch for some other MPs of the 1895 intake to meet Churchill. One of their number, David Lindsay, later the 27th Earl of Crawford, wrote in his diary, 'Here is a coming man: pugnacious, obstinate and nervous – he cannot sit still. A curious halting shuffle in his voice which must make it difficult for an audience to hear him . . . There is a bumptiousness about him which will soon wear off . . . If he will consent to be humble and obscure for a few years there is no reason why he should not become a power in the land. In some ways he resembles his father closely.'²⁴⁶ He was certainly not content to be either humble or obscure for a moment, let alone for a few years, but the MP's prediction otherwise turned out to be no less accurate than the palm-reader's.

The political situation that Churchill found on returning to Britain was complicated. The Conservative Party led by Lord Salisbury was in a permanent alliance with the Liberal Unionists led by Joseph Chamberlain and the Duke of Devonshire. The Liberal Unionists had left the Liberal Party in 1886 to oppose Gladstone's Irish Home Rule Bill. Gladstone had died in 1898 and the Liberal Party itself was informally split between the Liberal Imperialists, led by the former Prime Minister Lord Rosebery, and the Radicals.

By 20 June, Churchill had agreed to an approach from the Oldham Conservative Association in Lancashire to fight the seat in a by-election for the Unionists. The constituency had been represented by two Conservatives in the previous Parliament, one of whom had died and the other had retired. Churchill fought hard in the constituency, giving three or four speeches a night, despite having to spray an inflamed left tonsil with a special mixture sent from Dr Roose. He was keenly aware of walking in his father's footsteps and spoke of him in several speeches. 'The present Government owe more than they always remember,' he said of his father's legacy on one occasion, 'or at any rate more than they confess.'²⁴⁷ 'No doubt the Radicals will say I am trading on my father's name,' he conceded at the Cooperative Hall in Oldham. 'Well, and why should I not? Did not you think it is a good name to trade with?'²⁴⁸

The pressing issue at Oldham was the Clerical Tithes Bill, which benefited Anglican clergy at the expense of the Nonconformists and Methodists who made up a good proportion of the constituency. Three days before

the poll, Churchill stated that had he been in the Commons he would have voted against it. This was an act of pure opportunism, but not one that persuaded the Nonconformists to vote for him. It did lead Lord Salisbury's nephew and Jennie's old friend Arthur Balfour to quip, 'I thought he was a young man of promise, but it appears he is a young man of promises.'⁴⁹ Churchill recognized that he had made a mistake. 'It is not the slightest use defending governments or parties', he was later to say, 'unless you defend the very worst thing about which they are attacked.'⁵⁰

On 6 July, Churchill won 11,477 votes, losing by a narrow margin to two Radical Liberals, Alfred Emmott and Walter Runciman, who won 12,976 and 12,770 respectively. 'Everyone threw the blame on me,' he later wrote wryly. 'I have noticed that they nearly always do. I suppose it is because they think I shall be able to bear it best.'⁵¹ He returned to London, as he was to put it in his memoirs, 'with those feelings of deflation which a bottle of champagne or even soda-water represents when it is half emptied and left uncorked for a night'.⁵² Christine Conover, with whom he stayed in touch for some months, confided to her diary that 'Although he was greatly disappointed, he told me he intended to try again and hoped someday even to be Prime Minister of England.'⁵³

'He might have been defeated,' reported the *Manchester Courier*, 'but he was conscious that in this fight he had not been disgraced.' Churchill fully agreed, thanking the newspaper proprietor Lord Northcliffe for his support in the *Daily Mail* and saying that he thought his career would not be 'seriously damaged' by the defeat.⁵⁴ He made his excuses to Balfour who responded encouragingly, 'This small reverse will have no permanent ill effect upon your political fortunes.'⁵⁵ He was still only twenty-four.

As was so often the case in Churchill's life, what looked like a reverse at the time turned out in retrospect to have been good fortune. Had he squeaked into the House of Commons in 1899, he would not have gone to South Africa and would not have had the opportunity to make not just a local or national reputation for himself, but a truly international one.

There was a strong air of unfinished business to Lord Salisbury's 'Forward' policy in Africa. Britain had been defeated in the First Boer War of 1880–81 in South Africa at the hands of the Dutch-descended Afrikaners, who controlled the independent Transvaal and Orange Free State republics to the north of the British-controlled Cape Colony and Natal. Joseph Chamberlain, the British Colonial Secretary, and Lord Milner, the High Commissioner of Cape Colony, had so encroached on the Afrikaner republics by October 1899 that Paul Kruger, their leader, suddenly invaded Cape Colony and Natal, hoping to capture them before the British Empire could respond.

'He has the reputation of being bumptious,' Chamberlain warned Milner, after an interview with Churchill at the Colonial Office. 'Put him on the right lines.'⁵⁶ If Churchill was going to cover this, his fourth war in four years, he would need money. He secured from the *Morning Post* the huge salary of £1,000 for the first four months of the war, followed by £200 a month plus expenses, and booked himself on to the Royal Mail Ship *Dunottar Castle* which was also taking General Sir Redvers Buller, the British Commander-in-Chief, to Cape Town. Like most other commentators, Churchill did not believe that the quarter-million Boers could last long against the 350-million-strong British Empire, and he expected to be back in time for the Derby horse-race at the end of May.

On 14 October, three days after war had been declared, Churchill set sail, taking six cases of claret, champagne and spirits with him. (This was not all for personal consumption: alcohol was a useful currency in war zones.) Also on board was John Atkins, a *Manchester Guardian* journalist, who described him as 'slim, slightly reddish-haired, pale, lively, frequently plunging along the deck "with neck out-thrust", as Browning fancied Napoleon . . . when the prospects of a career like that of his father, Lord Randolph, excited him, then such a gleam shot from him that he was almost transfigured. I had not before encountered this sort of ambition, unabashed, frankly egotistical, communicating its excitement, and extorting sympathy.'⁵⁷ 'It was not that he was without the faculty of self-criticism,' added Atkins. 'He could laugh at his dreams of glory, and he had an impish fun.'⁵⁸ This kind of unabashed ambition might have extorted sympathy from Atkins, but in a culture that promoted the cult of the inspired amateur it would often arouse resentment.

On 29 October the *Dunottar Castle* passed a small tramp steamer that had left Cape Town three days earlier. The news chalked on a long blackboard as they sailed past read, 'Boers Defeated – Three Battles – Penn Symons killed'.⁵⁹ Despite the mortal wounding of General Sir William Penn Symons at the Battle of Talana Hill, and the retreat of his forces to the town of Ladysmith in Natal, the main anxiety of Churchill and his fellow passengers was that the war might be over before they disembarked at Cape Town two days later. Churchill wasted no time on landing and immediately tried to get to Ladysmith, 140 miles north-west of Durban. By then the Boers had cut the rail link on the Tugela River, and on 2 November they laid siege to the town. Once again Churchill had been fortunate in his misfortune: had he succeeded in getting into Ladysmith he would have been incarcerated there and unable to file dispatches until its relief nearly four months later. Churchill decided to travel to Estcourt in Natal to wait for an opening to get into Ladysmith, where General Sir

George White and Churchill's friend Colonel Ian Hamilton were besieged. He shared a tent in the Estcourt railway yard with Atkins. He showed him his *Morning Post* articles, and asked, 'Is the interest due to any merit in me or is it only because I am Randolph's son?' Atkins replied that he did not think they would have excited so much interest if he himself had written them. 'A fair verdict,' Churchill replied. 'But how long will my father's memory help me?'⁶⁰ Atkins thought another two to three years, whereupon Churchill said, 'My father died too young. I must try to accomplish whatever I can by the time I am forty.'⁶¹

In the same discussion, Churchill argued that military strategy and tactics were 'just a matter of common sense'. 'Put all the elements of a problem before a civilian of first-rate ability and enough imagination, and he would reach the right solution, and any soldier could afterwards put his solution into military terms.'⁶² This belief, combined with the gross errors he witnessed at first hand by British generals in the Boer War, was profoundly to affect his thinking about civil-military relations in the far greater twentieth-century wars to come.

On Wednesday, 15 November 1899 one such idiotic military decision was to change Churchill's life. Shortly after dawn, Colonel Charles Long, the British commander of the Estcourt garrison, sent Captain Aylmer Haldane out on an armoured train on patrol, manned by a company of Dublin Fusiliers and Durham Light Infantry in three trucks, along with a 7-pound naval gun. They were not accompanied by mounted troops, a decision Buller later ascribed to 'inconceivable stupidity'.⁶³ Churchill need not have gone on the expedition, but, as he admitted later, he was 'eager for trouble', telling Atkins, 'I have a feeling, a sort of intuition, that if I go something will come of it. It's illogical, I know.'⁶⁴ Atkins passed up the opportunity for himself, as did the *Times*'s chief war correspondent in South Africa, Churchill's Harrow contemporary Leo Amery.

The train was an absurdly easy target for Louis Botha, the Boer commando leader, who allowed it to steam north to Chieveley before putting rocks across the track as it was approaching a bend close to the Blauuw Krantz River on the return journey.⁶⁵ Although they had spotted Botha's men on the way to Chieveley, Churchill persuaded Haldane not to turn back, so he was in part responsible for giving the Boers enough time to lay their ambush.⁶⁶ He later told Major-General H. J. T. Hildyard a story that emphasized his and Haldane's hubris that day, admitting that 'They ran confidently on to within range of the Boers, being unaware that they had [artillery] guns with them, and hoping to give them a lesson.'⁶⁷ When it hit the rocks the train's engine somehow remained on the rails, but the three trucks were derailed and the front one knocked entirely off the line.

Boer artillery and snipers fired shells and bullets into the overturned trucks, and soon silenced the naval gun.

Churchill displayed great bravery and initiative in leading some survivors out on to the track and then spending half an hour heaving the two overturned trucks off the line so that the badly damaged engine with fifty survivors could escape back to Estcourt, most of them wounded, while he stayed to rally the rest of the trapped and outnumbered troops.⁶⁸ In all he spent about ninety minutes under almost continuous fire. The Boers were famously accurate snipers, and he was lucky to have survived. Back in Estcourt, Atkins met a dozen of the escaped fugitives and pieced together what had happened. 'We heard how Churchill had walked round and round the wreckage while the bullets were hitting against the iron walls, and had called for volunteers to free the engine; how he had said "Keep cool, men," and again, "This will be interesting for my paper!"; and again how, when the train driver was grazed on the head and was about to run off, he had jumped in to help him and had said, "No man is hit twice on the same day."⁶⁹ (Eleven years later, Churchill recommended the driver and his stoker for the Albert Medal.) Those who made it out alive on the engine gave Churchill, who stayed behind with the majority of the troops, much of the credit for their escape.

With the engine gone, six men dead and thirty-five wounded out of the complement of 120 (a casualty rate of over one-third, even higher than at the charge at Omdurman), there was nothing for the remaining men to do but surrender. Churchill later told Atkins that the Boers had rounded up the prisoners 'like cattle! The greatest indignity of my life!'^{70*} Churchill subsequently claimed that he had been captured by Louis Botha, who was elsewhere at the time, but it was a tiny embellishment on an otherwise extraordinarily commendable performance. He was fortunately unarmed when he was captured, as he had left his Mauser in the engine during the effort to dislodge the trucks. Even so, there was some debate among the Boers about whether he should be shot as a spy, whereas he told Louis de Souza, the Boer War Minister, that as a journalist he should be freed.

The Afrikaner State-Attorney who interrogated him, the Cambridge-educated lawyer Jan Christian Smuts, initially opposed his release. 'I

* In December 1902 he wrote a short story, 'On the Flank of the Army', for the Boston publication *Youth's Companion*. It was an exciting fictional tale about an upper-class Old Harrovian Lancer, Lieutenant Henry Morelande, who was captured by a Boer Commando but escaped with the help of a Boer whose son's life he had nobly spared. Morelande/Churchill was appalled at being captured. 'Shame, disgust, and anger plunged the subaltern in the deepest gloom . . . And then to lose all the opportunities of the campaign – to be a miserable prisoner! He groaned aloud' (*Windsor Magazine*, March 1903).

remember when we met,' Churchill said over half a century later. 'I was wet and draggle-tailed. He was examining me on the part I had played . . . a difficult moment.'⁷¹ Since Churchill had instinctively behaved like a combatant army officer rather than a non-combatant war correspondent, he was imprisoned.

The first of Churchill's sixty-six telegrams and thirty-five letters from the war was published in the *Morning Post* on 16 November, but there were to be no more in the immediate future as Churchill was on his way to the State Model School Prison in Pretoria, housed in a hastily converted school. On 18 November, in a postscript to a letter written to his mother when he arrived there, he wrote: 'Cox's [Bank] should be instructed to cash any cheques I draw.'⁷² He saw no reason why imprisonment should interfere with his creature comforts.

It was during this period of his captivity that Churchill came to understand why the Boers had such an aversion to British rule, which he put down to 'the abiding fear and hatred of the movement that seeks to place the native on a level with the white man'.⁷³ Churchill had no sympathy for the aggressive white supremacism of the Afrikaner, from which his own paternalistic instincts were entirely different. He wrote of a future South African society in which 'Black is to be proclaimed the same as white . . . to be constituted his legal equal, to be armed with political rights,' a prospect that infuriated Afrikaners no less than would be 'a tigress robbed of her cubs'.

As might be expected from someone so desperate to achieve as much as possible in life as quickly as possible, the prospect of spending time behind bars drove Churchill to despair. 'I am twenty-five today,' he wrote to Cockran on 30 November. 'It is terrible to think how little time remains.'⁷⁴ He later wrote, 'Hours crawl like paralytic centipedes. Nothing amuses you. Reading is difficult, writing, impossible. I certainly hated every minute of my captivity more than I have ever hated any period of my life.'⁷⁵ He exercised in the compound, and indulged his burgeoning interest in butterflies.* He was also permitted to write letters, and started at the top.

'I venture to think that Your Royal Highness will be interested to receive a letter from me and from this address,' Churchill wrote to the Prince of Wales, on very thin, prison-issue paper, 'although of course the censorship excludes me from writing freely . . . I consider myself unfortunate in having been captured so early in the operations, and I would have liked to have written some general account of the war. However it is something to be alive and well and when I saw so many soldiers and volunteers torn with such

* The butterfly expert Hugh Newman later described Churchill as 'If not a fully-fledged lepidopterist, at least a disciple in the field' (*FH* no. 89 p. 35).